

Making a Powerful Impression at Interview

By BNET Editorial

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So you've written a great résumé and cover letter, and they've landed you an interview. You've earned yourself the opportunity to make a powerful impression on your prospective employer. This article provides pointers to help you prepare mentally and emotionally for your interview.

What You Need to Know

What common interview questions should I prepare myself to answer, regardless of the type of job I am seeking?

There is no single set of questions that all interviewers ask, of course. But there are some fundamental questions you should think through in the course of your interview preparation:

- What interests you about this position?
- Why do you think you're the best person for it?
- What has attracted you to this organization?
- Who will interview you and what do you know about them?
- What is the appropriate dress and/or image for this organization?

What to Do

Review Your Application

First, reread your résumé or application form (this is why it is a good idea to keep photocopies of anything you send to a prospective employer) to be sure you are familiar with all the information on it. It may have been some time since you submitted the forms, or you may need reminding about which details, out of the whole of your life and career, that you provided. Think about what questions you might be asked based on your education or work history. Some questions that might be difficult to answer include, "Why drew you to study this subject?", "What made you leave your last job?", or "Why were you unemployed during this period and what did you do during that time?" Make a few brief notes about how to tackle these questions and then practice your answers with a friend. Remember that your responses shouldn't sound too "scripted," however.

Look at the Organization in More Depth

You have probably already done a certain amount of research on the company you are interviewing with. Now it is time to dive into the research to discover all you can about the company. You need to know if it really is the sort of organization you want to work for, but you also need to know everything you can about the business it does and the challenges it faces. Being well-informed about the company, and being able to demonstrate that knowledge, will signal your interviewer that you are enthusiastic and committed, as well as informed about the market.

Kick off your research at the company Web site. Look at their annual report, news, press releases, and biographies of key members of staff. This will give you a feel for the organization—its values, its successes, and its people. If the company doesn't have an extensive Web site, call them and request this information along with their most up-to-date catalog. It will be worth your while to go the extra step and research what challenges face the organization. Look into industry trends, find out about competitors both big and small, and think for yourself about what strategic direction the company might take.

At the very least, find the answers to these five essential questions before the interview:

- What is the organizational structure?
- How many employees are there?
- What is its main business focus?
- Who are its major competitors?
- What is the organization's work culture like?

Think About What *You* Want from the Interview

Interviews produce a lot of anxiety in an interviewee, and candidates are liable to forget that there are two sides to the process. Not only does the prospective employer want to evaluate you, but you also have the responsibility of evaluating the employer. You may feel that you want *any* job, but you are wise to remember you are seeking the *right* job. With this in mind, prepare a list of questions that will allow you to determine if this job is a good fit for your background, personality, and career goals. You will want to uncover what prospects for advancement the eventual jobholder can expect, what the values and culture of the company are, or what the professional development policy is. Avoid getting into questions of benefits and salary at the first interview. Save those questions for after you receive an offer.

Going back to the first side of the interview process, think through the impression you want to make on your interviewer. Know the key points you want to make about your strengths and skills. Look for openings in the interview to highlight those strengths and skills. When you prepared your résumé, you listed the principal strengths and skills that you thought an employer would be looking for. Choose a

couple from your résumé and think of a recent situation that will demonstrate that strength or skill to an interviewer. If possible, include any concrete results you achieved through using it.

Even though you may feel under pressure at points, always focus on the positive in your answers. Everyone has weaknesses, and you may be asked to talk about them. Prepare yourself ahead of time by thinking about what you learned from difficult situations or ways that you are working to improve your weaknesses. That way, you'll come across as someone who rises to a challenge and looks for opportunities to improve and develop.

Visualize Success

A proven method for preparing mentally for a challenging situation is visualization. In visualization, you mentally picture a successful result. Before you interview, spend time imagining yourself at the interview. See yourself being professional, articulate, well-informed, and enthusiastic. Include visualization of yourself leaving the interview with a good feeling about how you did.

Try a Little Role Play

The visualization exercise mentioned above will work best if you have something concrete to back it up. This is where practice comes in. You will need a friend, family member, or career counselor if you have one, to help you role-play the interview. Give the other person a list of possible questions you might be asked, and encourage them to think up their own so can practice thinking on your feet. Role-play the interview, asking your friend afterwards for honest but constructive criticism. A valuable tool to use, if you are able, is to videotape the role-play. Seeing yourself can be very telling.

Begin by tackling some of the “classic” interview questions you may be asked:

- Where do you see yourself in five years' time?
- How would your current manager describe you?
- What is your greatest strength?
- What is your biggest weakness?
- What has been your biggest work achievement so far in your career?
- Can you tell me about a time when you had to motivate a team?

Start Right with a Positive First Impression

Be punctual; or better still, be early to your interview, in order to give yourself some preparation and relaxation time. Unless you are very familiar with the location of the company, you might want to do

a practice run of your trip so you can be sure to leave yourself enough time. Do not forget to take commuting traffic into account. Once you arrive, try to get a feel for the atmosphere, as this will help you to decide if it's the sort of place you can see yourself being happy working in. If he or she isn't too busy, take some time to talk to the receptionist. They are often asked by recruiters to act as an extra "screen" during the recruitment process; if candidates are rude to the receptionist, they often don't get much further.

Express Your Enthusiasm

Interviewees who are excited about the organization, and demonstrate it, are often the ones to get job offers. Only you know what drew you to apply to this company, and you need to convey that interest to your interviewer.— While you may be eager to get the job because of its salary, do not include that in your answers. Keep yourself, and the interviewer, focused on what you can offer the company, how the position will expand your skills, and why this kind of work would be satisfying and meaningful to you. Avoid excessive displays of enthusiasm, as this may make you seem insincere or overconfident.

Be Honest

A firm handshake, a friendly smile, and good eye contact are the keys to creating the powerful impression you are striving for: that you are of an enthusiastic, professional, positive, and sincere person. Never lie in the interview or attempt to bluff your way through difficult questions.. Good preparation, an essential interview stratagem in any case, should ensure that you do not have to resort to dishonesty.

Wherever possible, back up your responses to questions with evidence-based replies. Start by giving a brief general response and then focus on a specific example from your recent work history. Illustrating your answers with real examples gives you the opportunity to focus on your personal contribution, and will be more impressive than giving a vague, hypothetical reply.

Look and Sound the Part

At the risk of emphasizing style over substance, the fact remains that studies continue to show that appearance matters. It should go without saying that you should be dressed and groomed appropriately for your interview. If you do not know what is customary, try to find out, but remember it is always better to dress more formal than necessary than to dress too casual. People will take you seriously if you dress respectably. If you're applying for jobs in media or the arts a suit may not be necessary, but dressing smartly will always give the impression that you care about getting this job.

In the best of circumstances, you arrive at your interview location perfectly groomed and poised, with time to spare. In the real world, the unexpected happens: more traffic than usual, a late bus, all the lights going against you. (More reasons to give yourself plenty of time to get to your destination.) If you arrive feeling flustered, take a moment to freshen up before the interview. You might even pack along some emergency grooming tools, such as a comb, a spare tie or pair of nylons, or even antiperspirant if you are very nervous.

What to Avoid

You're Too Casual

Do not make the mistake of gauging the formality of the interview by the friendly chitchat your interviewer may use to break the ice. Some interviewers might even send false signals on purpose to catch you off guard. If you find yourself using a more casual approach than is appropriate, change your behavior as soon as you notice. Interviewers are more likely to remember your behavior at the end of the interview than at the beginning, so you have time to rectify things if you're a little off-key early on. If, on the other hand, you find a more casual environment than expected, do not worry. It is expected that you will look and act in a professional and formal way in an interview.

You Tell Jokes Because You're Nervous

Humor is often used to defuse a tense situation, and interviews can make any prospective employee tense. Humor can be charming, but it can also go wrong, so beware. If you have said something you think is funny and received a negative reaction, it's best not to call attention to the situation by apologizing. Try to act as if nothing happened and go back to behaving professionally. Do not exacerbate the situation by following inappropriate humor with more humor.

You Don't Do Any Research

It should be crystal clear by now that researching your prospective employer before the interview is vital. If, for whatever reason, you get to the interview and realize that you really know nothing about the organization, you can try to rescue the situation by doing some impromptu waiting room research. Booklets and leaflets found in reception areas may provide useful information about the company, its industry, and its products and services. Read and memorize everything you can. Talk to the receptionist and ask him or her questions that may be helpful to you in the interview. Nothing works better than doing your homework, but do not give up if you haven't. Do your best to learn what you can in the time you have.

You Badmouth Your Current or Previous Employer

You will accomplish nothing but making a bad impression if you are critical of your former employer. Even if you have grounds for complaint, criticizing your former employer will only make you look petty, as if you are putting blame on someone else. If you are asked why you are leaving (or have left), focus on the positive experiences you had there and your eagerness to take on challenging new career opportunities.

Where to Learn More

Book:

Bolles, Richard. *What Color is Your Parachute? A Practical Manual for Job-Hunters and Career-Changers*. Revised ed. Ten Speed Press, 2006.

Web Site:

Monster.com: www.monster.com