



SOCIETY OF ACTUARIES

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# Hit a Home Run in Every Interview

By John West Hadley

*This article is part one of a three-part series. This first part gives practical tips for hitting a home run in interviews, whether you are seeking a promotion, a new position at your current employer, or a new job. Part two will discuss critical issues to consider when starting a new job. Part three will focus on navigating the roadblocks to achieving your career potential.*

Interviews are critical to career success, whether you are looking for a new job at a new company, or simply seeking a promotion at your current employer. In fact, the internal interview can sometimes be the trickiest, because we are lulled into a false sense of security by the fact that it's "among family," when in fact, a poor performance in that situation can reduce your long term career potential with your employer.

Many people feel that an interview is a minefield, where one must take careful steps to avoid the pitfalls that could sabotage their chances of getting a job offer. This is the wrong attitude, one of desperation that often sabotages you all by itself. It is important to come into an interview with an air of confidence, which comes from proper preparation.

The first step in a successful interview comes long before the actual meeting, perhaps even before you are thinking of making a change. This step is to develop compelling accomplishment stories that sell your achievements. The key to a compelling story is twofold: challenges and results. You need to tell what challenge you were faced with, how you overcame it and what you managed to accomplish to reach your goal. And you need to show the result you achieved for your employer. This is where many job seekers fall down. They talk about how they developed a new VUL product, or reported the financial results or designed the illustration system. While this may be important, it's not what interests the hiring manager. What an employer WANTS to know is whether you can produce results: that you developed a VUL product that increased revenues, or reported results in a way that enabled more effective decision-making or de-

signed an illustration system that saved the cost of purchasing and installing an expensive vendor system. And perhaps just as important, communicating results demonstrates that you understand the broader implications of your work. I teach my clients a template for developing these stories that I call TO CARE, because the goal of the story is to get the hiring manager to care about your achievements.

Even if you don't plan to look for a new position any time soon, you should get in the habit of preparing accomplishment stories for every significant project you work on. It's much easier to write a compelling story shortly after the fact than to try to remember and reconstruct it months or years later. They can also help you make a great impression at a company cocktail party, when a senior officer asks what you've been working on lately.

Now that you have your compelling accomplishment stories in hand, boil the key ones down into one or two line bullets for your resume. After all, you need to have a resume that is a strong sales brochure to back you up. Often, it's that resume that will make the difference in getting you the interview. And it's the leave-behind that reminds the hiring manager after the interview of what set you apart from the other candidates. Many times people forget about putting the attention to a high quality resume for an internal interview. This is a critical mistake. If you really want the best shot at that internal promotion, you should prepare a professional resume for that situation as if you were seeking a job with a different employer. And since so many neglect to do so, this can set you head and shoulders above the internal competition.

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Next, you need to research the opening. Read the company's annual report to get familiar with its market and the issues it is facing. Use your networking contacts to try to find out everything you can about the company and its culture, the position, the department and issues facing that particular area of the market. Get any materials you can from the employer or recruiter in advance of the interview, particularly a job description and organizational chart. Review the job description carefully to see what specific skills, qualities and areas of experience they are most interested in. Then, think about which of your accomplishment stories will best illustrate them. Make a mental checklist so that you can be sure to find ways to weave all of the key stories into the interview.

Now, for the interview itself. The opening salvo should always be your 2 minute pitch, your strong answer to the standard initial request "Tell me about yourself." You should have practiced a good answer to that until it practically rolls off your tongue in any interview situation. This should be a quick summary of the skills, qualities and experiences you bring to the table, and the highlights of your job history. It should never be more than two minutes long, just enough to get across the highlights without boring your interviewer. And if your interviewer doesn't happen to ask right away, ask it yourself. Say something like, "Would it be helpful for me to tell you a little bit about my background?"

Many candidates make the mistake of treating the interview like a Q&A session. The interviewer asks a question, they answer it and repeat. This goes on until some point near the end of the allotted time, when the interviewer asks if the candidate has any questions. The candidate then mentally pulls out his or her carefully prepared list of insightful questions, and now the Q&A reverses directions. This is a very uninspired interview process that rarely impresses the hiring manager.

What you want to do is to turn the interview into a conversation. While you don't want to monopolize that conversation, you do want to ask questions every so often to convert the interview into a comfortable give and take. This

will develop rapport with the hiring manager, and will give you a much more complete picture of the company, position, relationships and priorities. A powerful way to do this is by occasionally giving a short answer, followed by a question to solicit guidance about what is most important to the interviewer. For example, the interviewer asks you "What is your greatest strength?" You respond, "I consider myself particularly adept at project management, building an effective team and mentoring my employees to enable them to perform at their best. Which would you like me to talk about first?" The response helps you understand better which is the most important hot button for the hiring manager. You can even do this right after your two minute pitch, ending it with a question like, "Is there a particular area you would like me to go into in more depth?"

Finally, don't forget the all-important thank you. Even if you meet six different people during the interview process, make sure to write individual notes to each of them, ideally within twenty-four hours after your visit. This is a simple professional courtesy, and since many candidates don't bother, it again differentiates you from the competition. The "thank you" is also an excellent chance to reiterate specifically what you bring to the table, or to bring up a talent you forgot to mention or highlight in the interview what occurs to you which might be important to that employer.

If you follow all of these steps, you will have a successful interview every time, and get more than your share of the job offers!

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