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Interviewing Techniques

by Pauline Reimer

As an actuary and a professional actuarial recruiter with over 25 years of experience in the industry, I was approached to share some thoughts on basic interviewing techniques. While many of the observations below may be obvious to the candidate, many of these are not focused upon when the time comes. Keep this article as a handy checklist to use for your next interview.

BEFORE THE INTERVIEW

Connectivity

Timing is everything. As a result, you must be as accessible as possible to take advantage of an opportunity. If you can't be reached, the company may interview the next qualified person who is available. If you do not own a mobile phone, borrow or rent one. Set up a private e-mail address, even if you have one at work. Frequently check your voice mail and e-mail messages and respond promptly. If possible, avoid leaving a message with a third party. Always make phone calls personally—do not delegate them to your parents, spouse, etc.

Resume

Prepare a polished resume. Here are my recommended categories, in order:

1. Professional designations and associations: List all designations and committee memberships with dates. If still sitting for exams, this category is called "Actuarial Status." List all exam parts passed and associateship dates, if applicable.
2. Professional experience: In reverse chronological order, list in bullet form all company names, locations, dates of employment, last title and job description.
3. Education: Include degree(s), institution(s), location(s), graduation date(s), major and minor, honors/awards (including GPA/SAT scores, if impressive and relatively recent).
4. Computer skills: Include software, languages and operating systems.
5. Miscellaneous (optional): Include foreign languages, hobbies, interests (if diversified), etc.

Note: Including an "objective" is unnecessary and, even at times, disadvantageous.

Research

Research the company. Interviewers expect candidates to have done their homework. Use the company's Web site and Internet search engines. Review the company's history, lines of business, the number of offices, its financial statements, etc. Be careful not to ask the interviewer a question whose answer is stated on the company's Web site.

Letters of reference

Because it is difficult for employers to get references of any sort, it is a big plus to have a letter, or letters, from prior employers or past performance appraisals. Letters should include superlatives like "best" or "most" and words like "hardworking," "ethical," "trustworthy" and "dependable." The letter should also state that they would hire you again or welcome the chance to work with you again. Include their name and phone number on it for further contact if needed. Also, make copies of any type of awards or certificates of achievement that may play a role in a prospective employer gaining some insight into you.

Other information

Prepare the information needed for completing the application at the interview. You will likely need the names of your references, dates of graduation and schooling, employment history (including dates) and names of former/present supervisors, your contact numbers and Social Security number. Notify your references in advance that they may be contacted.

Appropriate, professional attire

You never get a second chance to make a first impression!



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Interviewing Techniques • continued from prior page

The ideal way to dress for an interview is business formal, even if the interviewing company is business casual, unless there is a specific request by the hiring company to dress business casual. If dressing formally poses a problem (e.g., you are going/coming directly from your current employer), it is acceptable to wear very nice business casual (e.g., for males: a light colored, long sleeve cotton button-down shirt and dark slacks, and maybe a sports jacket or vest, but no tie), as long as you address the issue immediately at the beginning of the interview and apologetically explain to each interviewer why you had to dress casually and that you appreciate them being so understanding about the situation. The one thing NOT to do is attempt to compromise by mixing business formal and business casual—this results in an unprofessional appearance.

Here are my recommendations for business formal attire:

Male—Business formal

- Business suit (navy blue or charcoal grey faint pinstripe preferred)
- Starched white shirt
- Silk tie, color-coordinated print
- Jewelry, any worn visibly besides a watch should be limited to professional items (e.g., college ring or wedding band)

Female—Business formal

- Business Suit (two- or three-piece dark skirted suit preferred)
- If blouse is worn, white is ideal
- Jewelry, appropriate to the outfit (e.g., pearls or refined necklace/earrings, and avoid multiple earrings)
- Makeup, applied in a professional manner

Etiquette

Refrain from smoking, drinking alcohol (even at a lunch interview), chewing gum or wearing excessive perfume or colognes. Turn off all your electronic devices (phone, Palm, pager, Blackberry, etc.) before you enter the interview.

Preparation

In *The Art of War*, Sun Tsu indicated that the battle was won before it was fought—in the preparation. Practice is the key to success in anything you want to accomplish (remember the first

time you learned to ride a bike). Many people find that using a tape recorder or video recorder is a very helpful tool in preparation for the interview. Get a good night's sleep and make sure you eat before you go on an interview. Do not take any medications or drink alcoholic beverages that will impair your behavior. You want to be alert and show your best side.

Bring a professional-looking leather folio, which should include a nice pen and note pad, which will keep the multiple copies of your resume neat and crisp. Plan to arrive a few minutes early, but no more than 10 minutes early. You may want to make a trial run before you go if you are not sure where it is, and don't be afraid to ask for directions when you set up the appointment. Never be more than two minutes late. If you are running late, call the company to let them know; if you are using a recruiter, give the recruiter the "heads up" that you are running late. Make sure to apologize for your tardiness in the phone call and immediately again in person.

DURING THE INTERVIEW**Application**

Complete the application with the same level of care that you would a work assignment. Neatness is important when filling out the application. Make sure you complete all the necessary information accurately and completely, even if you have a resume. Honesty is essential. Since 9/11, most companies use outside firms to verify information, including dates, salaries, education, diplomas and degrees. A potential employer will most likely not hire someone who has written false information on his/her resume or application, even if the candidate was ideally suited to the position. If you are using an agency, it's just as important to be totally honest with them, too. Most applicants fill in the "salary desired" box with "open." Avoid rambling, wordy responses. Stick to the point and make your answers clear and crisp. Try not to use improper language, slang or esoteric abbreviations or acronyms.

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Interviewing Techniques • continued from prior page

Greeting

Greet the interviewer by offering your firm handshake, while maintaining good eye contact.

Body language

When you sit (upon invitation), sit erect and give the interviewer your undivided attention. Do not fidget with jewelry, your hands or knick-knacks on the interviewer's desk. Maintain good eye contact, which shows sincerity, high self-esteem and good interactive people skills.

Attitude

A "what's in it for me?" attitude can be a turn-off. Stating that money is your primary motivation is never well-received. Your interviewer will get the impression that you will probably leave them as soon as you are offered more money elsewhere. Refrain from discussing sick leave, vacation, time off, benefits, etc., before you are offered the position. When the subject of salary comes up (and always wait until it is brought up), the best way to handle the very delicate, and sometimes uncomfortable, subject of money is to ask if they have a range they are considering. "I would like to be paid whatever the position is worth" is also a good answer if you're asked for a specific response. If you are really pressed for an expected salary, simply state your current salary and bonus (mention if you expect a performance review or promotion soon), and leave the rest open. Be very positive and enthusiastic on the interview. Never ask a question or make a statement that implies a negative feeling or doubt regarding the position or company, its stability, future, etc. Bragging or appearing as a "know-it-all" is also a turn-off. Do, however, stress achievements. Avoid jokes, especially off-color ones and never speak "ill" of a former employer.

Dining

If the interview process includes breakfast, lunch or dinner, keep the menu simple and avoid messy or hard to eat foods, such as fried chicken or a set of ribs. Don't order the most expensive item on the menu. Refrain from alcoholic beverages, even if the interviewer orders one. Watch your table manners and don't forget to be polite to the server, as well as the members of your party.

Exiting and follow-through

At the conclusion of the interview, ask the interviewer for his business card so you can follow up with a thank-you card. Always smile and end the interview with a good, firm handshake, thanking them for the opportunity. It is also appropriate to ask the interviewer what his timeframe is for filling the position. If you went through a recruiter, call him or her immediately afterward to review the process. Share with the recruiter any problems that occurred. The recruiter will be able to conduct a more beneficial follow-up call to the hiring authority if he or she has all the information as to how the interview progressed. Once the recruiter obtains feedback, he or she will guide you on whether or not writing a thank-you note is necessary.

AFTER THE INTERVIEW**Thank-you notes**

A thank-you note is sometimes not necessary, e.g., if the company calls you back immediately for the next stage or if you are using a recruiter who advises it's not necessary. However, if you do write one, make sure it is timely, comprehensive and specific to that interview, not simply a "quick and dirty" or off-the-shelf version. Thank them for taking the time with you and mention the day of the interview. You might also want to mention something they will remember about you, especially if they interviewed a lot of people or are going to interview more. Mention why you think you are qualified for the job and how you could contribute to their organization. Use this note to say all the things you wished you had said on the interview, but may not have had the opportunity.

Closure

I hope these suggestions will help make the interview process more successful for you. If the interview does not go as well as you hoped, don't dwell on it. Let it go, but always try to improve your style for future interviews. Try to obtain as much feedback as possible as to how you performed on the interview and in what areas you need improvement. Remember, there are no failures, just baby steps to success. □

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