

Yet Another Theory on Interviewing

By Ilan Man



Ilan Man is an actuary with Ernst & Young in New York. You can e-mail him at ilan.man@gmail.com.

Caveat: If some of my advice is unconventional, it's because I'm giving you my slant on things. Below is a small list of what has worked for me and for the students I've hired. The best advice I can give, however, is to use your own judgment when preparing for an interview, rely on no one but yourself and don't look for excuses to bail you out. Enjoy.

D-DAY ...

You've been studying for SOA exams, midterms (as if they matter right now!) and preparing for interviews. Two of your friends already accepted positions and three others received more interviews than you, so you know your margin for error is slim.

Upon entering the interview room you are greeted by your interviewers. They look reasonably young, a good sign. You introduce yourself, first by saying your name too loudly, and then by shaking their hands too firmly, which doesn't go well with your clammy palms. Strike one. You make an awkward joke about something generic such as the weather or your busy exam schedule—it's awkward because of the silence that follows it. Strike two. The interviewers begin by asking you about yourself, and like a pre-recorded tape, you run straight through your work experience and some of your interests, both of which bear little relevance to the position in question. You do, however, have stellar grades and you make a point to let them know of your many scholastic achievements (see above comment re: lack of relevance).

The interviewers ask you to describe a project that you worked on in your last job in which you demonstrated your problem solving and creativity skills; you try to think of something that will blow their minds. You can tell, however, that the only thing that's getting blown is this interview. Strike three. At this point you either tense up tremendously or lose what little confidence you once had; the interview goes downhill in a hurry. As the interview ends, you shake their hands and their parting words are the classic, "Good luck on your exams and the rest of the school year." It's obvious to any keen observer that

you failed the interview. This time however, rather than sulking in your sorrow, you decide to be proactive and do something about it. You will no longer stand for simply accepting that you don't interview well, despite all of your by-the-book preparations. But where do you start? Where did you go wrong? Can you pinpoint precisely what you could have done better?

The above scenario is not an uncommon occurrence during the interview process for many actuaries-to-be, looking for their first co-op term/internship. Like you learned in your introductory economics course, it all boils down to supply versus demand. There are many strong and competent students applying for the same, few positions at large life insurance, pensions, investments and P&C companies.

Granted, while many students who don't get their top choices may fall back on something else and thus will still be employed, a majority of students aim for the more coveted positions that offer the best professional experience and, of course, salary. Naturally not everyone can get the job they desire and so candidates need to separate themselves from the rest of the pack. This can be done through gaining (and leveraging) past work experiences, passing SOA exams, achieving high marks in school, showing interest in extracurricular activities and simply interviewing well. While what follows is by no means an exhaustive list, I'd like to offer some advice and insight as someone sitting on the other end of the interview table.

BEWARE THE BUTTERFLIES FLAPPING IN YOUR STOMACH ...

Don't get me wrong—being nervous is only natural, even expected, but if you become overwhelmed by nervousness, your true personality will not shine through. Job interviews are analogous to first dates. Many first dates don't go as well as you'd like for a variety of reasons. Often nerves can get the better of you, which translates into lame jokes, overexcited-ness, the inability to control sweat glands, etc... And naturally many people make their second date decisions based on how the first went.

Interviews are no different. The moral is: being nervous is okay, and can even be beneficially humbling, as long as you control how it's projected and are still comfortable enough to allow your true self to be displayed.

THESE AREN'T THE OSCARS...

Don't pretend to be someone you're not. Depending on the requirements for the position, it's not terribly difficult for the interviewer to tell whether or not you're a fit within the first few minutes. While I fully endorse the idea of slightly pandering to your audience, your interviewer will know if you're being genuine or not. For example, say you're interviewing for a reinsurance pricing or consulting role, both of which require a lot of communication with internal/external clients. If communication is not your strong suit, don't try to convince the interviewer that your favorite pastime is public speaking. It'll be obvious that either (a) you're lying; or (b) you're terrible at your favorite pastime, in which case it's not a stretch to imagine that you'd be terrible at work.

Play to your strengths: if the job requires a lot of communication with others, but you happen to excel technically, then blow the interviewers away with examples of your technical prowess and how you can use that to help them with their day-to-day tasks. Provide examples of your willingness to learn the necessary skills and work hard in improving the areas in which you struggle, all while adding value, say, by making processes more efficient through the use of your strengths. At the very least, they may even mention you as a candidate for a different position in which you can excel. Bottom line—don't lie about who you are; be proud and confident in your abilities, because confidence, not cockiness, is what will impress the interviewer.

HOW DO YOU DEFINE 'RELEVANT'?

Most jobs require problem solving and quick thinking. For example, say you worked as a bank teller. This is a stressful environment where people trust (or many times, distrust) you to count their money and ensure the amount deposited or withdrawn is exactly what they requested. And heaven help you if you miscount their money. Occasionally customers come in asking for obscure requests, ones you may struggle with because they happen infrequently. You aren't dealing with someone on the phone or over the internet—they are right in front of you, looking at you, waiting for you to act. And if you stumble, if you need to ask for assistance from your manager, their



confidence in you is lost and they begin questioning your every move. Maybe you begin questioning yourself as well. Then the stress kicks in because you just forgot one key step in a long procedure that is necessary to complete the transaction. You have to restart the process, explain to the customer what happened, and hope they don't blow up on you because this shouldn't be taking as long as it has; especially when they could've gone to the next teller who would have been finished by now. However, you catch your breath and regain your composure. You politely apologize to the customer saying it's your first time processing this type of transaction and that you want to make sure everything is done correctly and properly. You reiterate what the customer requested, ensuring that you don't forget anything and they understand what you're doing, thereby becoming more comfortable with you and your work. You gain confidence in knowing that you're doing the job correctly. Now that you've composed yourself, you wish the customer a great day and welcome the next in line.

After working in the service sector as both a coffee server and bank teller, among other jobs, I can tell you that working as an actuary is not nearly as stressful. If you can handle customers, complaints, the occasional scolding and thinking quickly on your feet, then you can handle

CONTINUED ON PAGE 20

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the inner workings of an actuarial office. While I undoubtedly look at relevant work experience when searching for a candidate, it's a breath of fresh air when an interviewee can draw upon, learn from, and articulate clearly, past experiences in which they can find parallels to a current situation.

ARE YOU TRULY FASCINATED BY THE INSURANCE INDUSTRY?

When I ask you what you like to do for fun, please don't tell me it's solving actuarial problems or reading up on the insurance industry, unless that's actually the case. If it is, then I will proceed to grill you on the topic and see if you know your stuff, or if you just browsed the headlines that morning. On the other hand, if you tell me you like sports, and we get into a five-minute conversation about the Toronto Raptors, leave it there. Don't carry the conversation into sports-related topics for too long, because while I may go along with you just to be polite, I'll see it as taking away from the point of the interview.

The key is striking a balance between professionalism and personality. I want someone who is personable, but understands that I'm looking for a hard worker. Someone I'll enjoy spending 8-10 hours a day with, and who I can trust to do a good job and make my life easier. I would much

rather have a strong student who I can get along with, and therefore see future potential in, rather than someone in the top one percentile whom I am very impressed with academically, but adds little value other than being able to create quick macros in Excel or Access. Those skills can and will be learned and improved while on the job. If your personality comes across as intriguing as a doorknob, then the door is exactly what I'll be showing you.

Extracurricular activities are a differentiator, especially if your entire personality doesn't come out in a 45-minute interview. Knowing you have a social life outside of school will make me appreciate the fact that you can juggle exams, school and lead an interesting life. Don't underestimate the power these activities have on your resume—especially if you participate in unique activities that may catch my attention or prompt a conversation topic.

SO, WHAT YOU'RE SAYING IS...

Unfortunately, there isn't a list I can tell you to follow to ace your interview. And if I did, then it would be a list which would help you only in my interviews for the particular position I'm looking to fill, and you probably wouldn't apply it in the way that I've described above. That's because we're all different in our interpretation and application of other people's opinions. Your best bet is to take the little nuggets of wisdom I've laid out above, and combine them with other resources such as your friends, professional connections, and your most important and underused asset—your own common sense. Good luck! ☆