

PREPARING FOR AN INTERVIEW

You should always prepare for an interview. No matter how good you are at “winging it,” your interview will go better if you prepare. Ideally, you will have several days to prepare, but even if you have 24 hours, sit down and work through the following steps.

1. RESEARCH THE COMPANY

Know as much as possible about the company you are interviewing with. Search newspaper and business publication archives for recent articles. Check out the company’s financial information through the SEC’s EDGAR program (vital if you are applying for a financial job). If the organization is a non-profit, take a look at the 990. Review the company’s website carefully. Chat with people who work for the company to get a sense of culture, organization, key issues. Google the person with whom you will be interviewing, and review their LinkedIn profile.

2. KNOW WHERE THE INTERVIEW IS

Many interviews are now done via video call. But whether it’s a Zoom link or a building in an office park, know exactly where you need to be and how long it will take you to get there. Sounds simple, but do some research. How long will it take to get there at the time of day your interview is scheduled? What’s the parking situation? Allow time for transportation delays, traffic and security checks. Arriving breathless, or worse, late, for an interview is a bad idea. That includes showing up late to a Zoom because you couldn’t find the link that they sent you two weeks ago.

3. RESEARCH THE PERSON/PEOPLE INTERVIEWING YOU

Will it be one person, or a panel? Will it be one meeting, or will you be there for several hours, going from person to person? Are you meeting with human resources or a line manager? Find out the answers to these questions when the interview is set up. Get names, with correct spellings and titles ahead of time. Write them down in your portfolio or notebook—under the stress of the interview, you can forget the name of the person you are speaking with.

Research the people you know you will be speaking with. A client once realized only after the interview was over that she was speaking with THE industry expert in her field. Google the person, review their LinkedIn profile, check out any recent articles that quote or reference the person.

4. HAVE YOUR PERSONAL STATEMENT READY

The first question in many interviews is “Tell me about yourself.” Do not wing this. Sit down and map out what this interviewer most needs to know about you in reference to this position. Craft an appropriate 60-90 second statement, and practice it. It should flow smoothly, and it should NOT be memorized.

5. BE READY FOR BEHAVIORAL QUESTIONS

Many interviewers are trained in “behavioral interviewing.” They will ask you to provide specific examples from your work experience: “Tell me about a crisis you handled”, “Give me an example of your leadership style in action.”

Answering these questions well requires preparation. Before the interview, sit down and write out at least seven stories using the PAR (problem, action, result) formula:

PROBLEM: A client wanted a complicated analysis done with an almost impossible deadline.

ACTION: I consulted the analysts responsible for this topic, identified what would need to happen in order to meet the client’s deadline, and took the problem and my proposed solution to my boss. I needed her support to move another assignment off the analysts’ plate and to get additional administrative help. We assembled a five-person team to do the analysis and prepare a report.

RESULT: We delivered a quality report to the client with time to spare. The client loved the report, and used the information that same day at a meeting of top management.

Preparing your PAR stories in advance allows you the time to recall that the project you put together never got implemented, or actually flamed out. It lets you check facts and figures so that you can fully claim all of your accomplishments. It gives you time to pare the story down to its essential facts, so you don’t overwhelm the interviewer with a long and rambling response. It ensures that you don’t keep citing the story over and over again in the interview.

6. PREPARE FOR THE TOUGH QUESTIONS

Some questions are standard, others will be specific to your situation. Remember that not all tough questions are negative ones. People are often thrown by the question “What is your greatest success?”

Issues Specific to You

Be assured that if there is a question you don't want to be asked, it will be asked. So prepare a response. Do you have great credentials but didn't finish your B.A.? Then be prepared to explain why: "I have been taking courses to finish up my degree, but I have been promoted three times in the last four years, and I have wanted to put the emphasis on doing a great job. I continue to work towards my BA, and expect to have it by x date."

Were you fired? Didn't get along with your last boss? Had a long break between jobs? Took a backward step somewhere along the line? Whatever the problem, prepare a truthful but positive response. It is your response to the question that matters. If you seem open, confident and untroubled by whatever has been raised, your interviewer will likely move on. If you are evasive, or worse, lying, the interviewer is likely to sense this and bore in on the sensitive spot.

Generic Questions

Other questions are generic, but no less deadly.

The Four Horseman of the Interview Apocalypse

I want every client to have an answer to these four questions. It is unlikely that all four will appear in a single interview, but if you can't answer these questions, the interview could be hard to rescue.

What is your greatest...

- ...Strength
- ...Weakness
- ...Success
- ...Failure

Strengths: List 5-7 strengths. They should be a combination of process and content skills (what you can do and what you know). Have a PAR story (see above) to illustrate each strength.

Weakness: Don't trot out the tired "I'm such a perfectionist" response. Be honest about what your weakness is. It is very often the flip side of a strength (Decisive people can be impatient, detail-oriented people can miss the big picture). Assess whether acknowledging this weakness will hurt you in the interview. If it will, find another weakness.

Once you have decided what weakness you are willing to admit to, focus on discussing how you have learned to work with or compensate for that weakness. "I am decisive and work quickly. But early on, that often translated as impatience. I have learned to be more patient, and to take the time to listen and gather facts before making important decisions." Have a PAR story ready to demonstrate that evolution.

Success: Most of my clients are utterly stumped when asked what their greatest professional success is. You should be talking about your greatest career success even if you aren't asked this question in the interview.

Failure: As with the response to the question about weaknesses, you want to discuss something that is either already known or not a dealbreaker for the position. Select a story that happened a while ago. Make sure it is something that you did, not a large problem that you weren't responsible for. Quickly describe the situation, then describe what you have learned from that failure. "In my first job, I provided incorrect information for an important client report. It created a huge problem for my boss and my company. Now I fully understand the critical importance of accurate data, and I have created systems of checks for me and my staff to ensure that never happens again."

Here are some other likely interview questions:

Why are you looking?

Where do you see yourself in five years?

Will you take a drug test?

How do you feel about psychological testing?

How do you define success? How successful have you been?

Why do you want this job?

What was your last performance appraisal?

Why are you interested in this company?

What would your current supervisor describe as your strengths and weaknesses?

In responding to these questions, follow a few rules:

1. NEVER say anything negative about your previous company, boss, coworkers, or subordinates, no matter how toxic they were. There are no exceptions to this rule. If it is known that your former company/boss is struggling, focus on the business challenges that your former employer faced, not on the personal flaws of those involved.

2. Keep it short. You can hurt yourself by talking too much. Answer quickly, truthfully, and move on.
3. Focus on the question behind the question. If you are asked about your relationship with your last boss, they are looking to see if you will take an opportunity to go negative.
4. Keep it personal. Do not just repeat “canned phrases,” even the ones in this handout. Personalize your responses.

7. DON'T TALK MONEY

Until you have an offer, it is too early to talk money. Do not ask about compensation in the interview. Get an idea from your research about what the job pays. If the interviewer mentions the salary range, simply say “That’s good to know” and move on.

Be prepared to deflect salary questions, and be prepared to finish your deflection with a question to move the conversation on to other items: “I think it’s too early to discuss salary. I need to know more about the specific responsibilities of this job. So may I ask how many people would be reporting to me, and what their functions are?”

If you are asked about salary history, try to respond to the real question, which is usually “Can we afford you?” So you might say “If your question is whether the pay for this position is acceptable, let me assure you that, based on everything I have learned about this company, salary won’t be an issue.”

If they ask what your salary requirements are, you could say “Based on my research, the compensation for this position is quite competitive. I don’t anticipate that salary will be an issue.”

If you are absolutely pushed to the wall, then give a broad range. Use this formula(credit to John Lucht for this formulation): “In recent years, my **compensation** has ranged from \$45,000 to \$95,000.” The lower number is several years old, and represents only your salary, not other benefits. The higher number is your highest salary, with all the bells and whistles calculated and added in. This gives them a wide range that is likely to bracket the salary they are considering for the position.

8. CLOSE STRONG

Try to leave the interview with a neat summing up of what you have learned about the position and how you fit the bill. The following close is a strong way to finish out the interview:

“Is there anything you have heard today that would keep me from being your top candidate for this position?”

If there’s a problem, you’ll know before you leave the interview, and you have an opportunity to address it.

9. KNOW WHAT COMES NEXT

Leave every interview with a clear idea of what happens next, Ask “What are the next steps?” or “When do expect to make a decision?” or “When can I expect to hear from you?”

10. SEND A THANK-YOU NOTE

No exceptions. Send a thank-you note to EVERYONE you spoke to. If it was a panel, that means a separate note for each person. And make the notes different—they will likely compare them to see if you did a form letter.

Because so much chance is involved, you will likely go on a number of interviews before you land a job. Judge your success in the interview by how well you prepared and how well you handled the interviewer’s questions. Do a gentle post-mortem, noting down any questions that threw you and anything you would do differently. This helps prepare you for the next interview. But whether or not you get this particular job, congratulate yourself for handling each interview well.