

Attending a job interview can be a stressful experience, but if you follow the advice given by Peter English your chances of succeeding should increase.

# how to succeed at an interview

■ **The bad news about job interviews is that the job doesn't always get offered to the best candidate: it goes to the candidate who is best at being interviewed. The good news is that anyone can significantly improve their interview performance, and this article tells you how.**

## preparation

Most people underestimate the amount of preparation that is needed for an interview. In addition to the obvious (researching the organisation, reading up on 'hot topics' etc) you need to do the following:

- identify examples of your previous experience and achievements that demonstrate how you meet the person specification for the job. It's vital that you have real-life examples or anecdotes which you can describe to the panel. It's not enough to say "I have good communication skills" – any half decent interviewer will recognise this as nothing more than a candidate's opinion about themselves. Experienced interviewers look for solid evidence (what sort of communication skills? In what context have they been used? What was the result?)
- once you have identified your examples you need to think carefully about how you will describe them. My advice is to prepare for the interview as if you were preparing for a presentation, which means *rehearsing* how you will talk about your examples. This advice may seem strange, but most of us find interviews stressful, and when we are under stress we can be less fluent than normal. The points we could make with confidence and fluency in front of our friends in a social setting don't come to our lips as easily when our palms are sweating and our hearts thumping. If you rehearse (out loud and in your mind) there is much more chance of your words coming out in the way that you intended.

- finally, list all the questions that you might be asked, how you will answer them, and which questions will provide you with an opportunity to talk about your strengths and achievements. Many candidates feel nervous because they think (wrongly) that they cannot predict what they will be asked. In fact, a five minute brainstorm will probably uncover 75% of the questions that the panel will be using.

## be nice to everyone

If one of the secretarial team collects you from reception, remember to treat them with the same courtesy and respect that you will show the other panel members (introduce yourself, shake their hand). You'd be surprised at the number of interview panels that ask the opinion of the person who is escorting candidates to and from reception. An NHS director recently confided to me that he always asks the chief executive's PA to predict who the successful candidate will be – *and she has never been wrong*.

## how to enter the room

The research shows that there are three things you can do when you enter the room that will make the interview panel rate you more highly at the end of the interview: smile, make eye contact with the panel members, shake hands.

Some candidates have difficulty getting the handshake right. It is possible to over-do it by bounding into the room and thrusting your hand, martial arts fashion, towards the startled interviewers. It's better to simply raise your hand slightly from your side as you walk towards the panel members. Hopefully they will pick up the cue and will shake your hand. If they don't you can let your hand fall back unnoticed. One thing to remember is that briefcases etc should be carried in your left hand so your right hand is free.



### interview etiquette

Some etiquette is obvious: not chewing gum during the interview, for example. One, often overlooked, pitfall concerns your eye contact. It often happens that one member of the interview panel appears more friendly than the others. This is rarely a conscious 'good cop/bad cop' ploy on the part of the panel, but you still need to be careful about how you react.

The natural human response, particularly in a stressful situation like an interview, is to make eye contact with people who seem to be interested in us. If you are not careful you can find yourself directing *all* your answers at the kindly faced panel member who made the mistake of giving you an encouraging nod and smile as you stumbled through your answer to the first question. Before long you will be clinging to the kindly interviewer's gaze like a non-swimmer to a rubber ring, with the result that they start to feel uncomfortable and the other panel members feel snubbed. So share your eye contact around.

### answering the questions

The wrong way to view interview questions is as a series of traps which you have to avoid falling into. From this perspective the great fear is not being able to answer a question and success having reached the end of the interview without having made a fool of yourself. A more positive and helpful way of viewing questions is as opportunities to sell yourself. A good candidate is able to use each question as a basis for talking about one of their key points.

For example, if you are asked the (common) question, 'tell us about your current job', you should avoid simply listing every aspect of your job. Start by briefly summarising the role: "I provide financial advice and support to one directorate," then go on to talk about one of your (prepared) key points: "one of the things I've really enjoyed about the job is that it has enabled me to work closely with other managers and clinicians. I've developed my understanding of the kind of information they need.

I've also enjoyed helping them think through ways in which they can get the most from their budget."

### 'Do you have any questions for us?'

Towards the end of the interview, the panel often invite you to ask any questions you might have about the role. The way you end the interview is important, as this is often the impression that you leave with the panel. There are three types of questions:

**Bad questions:** "Do you operate a flexi-time system?"

**OK questions:** "What training and development opportunities are there within the organisation?"

**Good questions:** "I've really enjoyed my experience of managing projects in my last job – would there be scope for me to take on a specific project in this role?"

Remember that you should view every part of the interview as an opportunity to put over your key points; your questions to the panel are just another opportunity to show the panel what qualities you have. If you do have genuine questions about terms and conditions or training opportunities it may be better to wait until you have actually been offered the job then say something along the lines of: "I'm very excited about the job - there's just a couple of points I want to clarify..."

### finally: remember it's a mutual interview

The most impressive interview performers are usually those candidates who treat the interview as a two-way process: it is an opportunity for you to explore the job that is on offer, and decide whether it is right for you. ■

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