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Seven Keys to Interview Preparation

It's been said that Napoleon won his battles in his tent; that is, he did all the planning the night before the battle was joined, so that every contingency could be adequately covered. Interview preparation is similar. You never know exactly what will happen on the battlefield, but by being ready, you can eliminate a lot of the uncertainty, and know how to react to different scenarios. Later, we'll look at ways to effectively conduct the interview itself; but for now, let's focus on the list, each item at a time.

One: The Resume

Of course, bring a couple of copies, and be sure to read your resume before the interview, so you're completely familiar with everything you've written. Nothing is more embarrassing (or potentially fatal to your candidacy) than being quizzed on some aspect of your background that appears on the bottom of page two -- and not being able to remember the details.

You might also bring materials which would be particularly good at illustrating an important aspect of your work, such as creative designs, writing samples, and so forth. Just remember to use your better judgment. Be careful to not provide any information that might be considered proprietary or confidential from your past employers.

Be careful, though, not to overdo it with the props. College diplomas, letters of commendation, and company bowling trophies should be left at home. When in doubt, just bring your resume and your business card -- they're the most important props you'll ever need. It's a good idea to carry a leather folder with you so you can take notes or store written materials the company might hand you during the course of your interview. A briefcase is also fine, although I prefer a folder, which is lighter to carry, and less cumbersome. Always remember to bring a pen.

Two: Appropriate Dress and Appearance

We would all like to think we are being judged on our qualifications, skills, and character. But the truth is, when it comes to interviewing, in most cases, clothes make the person. To think any other way is to ignore reality.

The Interview Outfit

For Men

The Look – clean and neat. Haircut, clean nails, no visible body art or piercing. Use little or no fragrance. No odors in clothes. Don't smell like smoke.

The Suit - A two-piece matched suit is always the best and safest choice. Navy and dark gray are the most conservative. Choose a solid color or very subtle pattern or plaid (the kind that looks solid across a room). Wool and wool blends are the only acceptable fabrics for a conservative men's suit.

The Shirt – Long-sleeved shirts, even in summer. Choose white or light blue solid or conservative stripes.

The Tie – Select good quality silk ties. Choose something that coordinates with the color of your suit in a simple pattern or a solid color. Avoid fashion extremes, like character ties, in interviews.

The Shoes – Well polished leather, lace-up or slip on business shoes, preferably black or cordovan. Wear dark socks, mid-calf length so no skin is visible when you sit down.

The Belt – Black or cordovan leather, to match your shoes.

The Accessories – Leather notebook, portfolio or briefcase. Notebooks must be large enough to hold your resume without folding it. Wear a conservative watch. If you choose to wear other jewelry, be conservative. For conservative industries, don't wear earrings.

For Women

The Look – clean and neat. Not overdone. Haircut, clean nails (avoids extremes of nail length and polish color), no visible body art or piercing. Perfume should be used sparingly or not at all. No odors in clothes. Don't smell like smoke.

The Suit – A two-piece matched suit (jacket and skirt or pants). Navy, dark gray, brown and black are safe. Women generally have more options with suit color than men. Choose a solid color or very subtle pattern or plaid (the kind that looks solid across a room). Wool, wool blends, and high quality blends and synthetics are appropriate for women's suiting.

The Blouse/ Shell – White tailored blouse or a color that coordinates nicely with your suit. It should not be low cut or sheer. A fine gauge, good quality knit shell is also appropriate underneath your suit jacket.

The Shoes – Well polished leather shoes or fabric/micro fiber. Shoe styles and heel heights come and go. Avoid extremes, closed-toe pumps are a good choice. Make certain you can walk comfortably in your shoes.

The Accessories – Leather notebook, portfolio or briefcase. Notebooks must be large enough to hold your resume without folding it. If you carry a purse, keep it small and simple, especially if you also carry a briefcase. You may choose to carry a briefcase or business-like tote bag in place of a purse. Wear a conservative watch. Jewelry and scarf styles come and go. Avoid extremes. Keep your choices simple and leaning toward conservative. No arms full of clanging bracelets.

What Not to Bring to the Interview

Don't bring a friend or child along.

Anything that makes noise ---Do not forget to turn off your cell phone.

iPod

If you have lots of piercings, leave some of your rings at home (earrings only, is a good rule).

Gum---Instead, have a breath mint before entering the building for your interview.

Coffee/soda/water ---Do not come to an interview carrying your own beverage.

Three: Directions to the Interview Location

Try to get directions at least a day before your interview, so you don't get lost and arrive late.

And here's a tip: Always bring some cash to pay for parking. Never ask an employer to validate your parking stub, or reimburse you for parking. Not only is it impolite, you'll create a negative impression, since it's considered common courtesy to pay your own expenses for a local interview.

If you're coming from out of town, then it's especially important to get directions. Naturally, if the expenses for your interviewing trip are going to be covered by the employer, wait until the interview has concluded (or better yet, the next day) to settle up. Usually, the company will prepay the air fare, or other major expenses, and will reimburse you for the rest, such as your car rental, cab fare, hotel room, and meals. It's customary that you pick up certain non-essential expenses, such as long distance phone calls or the bar tab from the lounge in the hotel lobby.

The best time to arrive for an interview is precisely when you're scheduled, not early or late. It can irk an employer to be told that the candidate for a 2 o'clock appointment is waiting in the lobby at one thirty-five. The employer will either become distracted knowing there's someone hanging around waiting to see him, or he'll scramble to rearrange his schedule to accommodate the candidate, which disrupts the rest of his day. If your appointment is at two, then arrive at two.

If for some reason you're running late, call ahead to ask if you can reschedule for later the same day, or if not, later in the week. If something unexpected happens that you have no control over, simply explain the situation to the employer when you arrive and move on.

Four: Name and Title of the Interviewer(s)

When you arrange the interview, find out who you'll be talking to, and what their function is within the company. Will you be speaking with the hiring manager? The manager from another department? The personnel director? The internal recruiter? A peer level employee or subordinate? A staff industrial psychologist?

You might already know the person. If that's the case, you're ahead of the game. If not, send out feelers among your own contacts within your industry, or research to see if the person you're going to be meeting is distinguished in any way.

It's also helpful to find out whether you and the person you'll be meeting have any commonalities or interconnecting points of interest, in the way of origins ("Hey, you're also from Wisconsin?"), schools ("My brother went to Duke, too. How did you like it?"), professional achievements ("My article appeared in Ad Week a month after yours did."), or personal interests ("I heard you were the Nebraska state ping pong champion. We'll have to get together sometime for a match."). These tidbits can break the ice when an interview begins, and create a bond with the interviewer.

Five: Understanding the Company's Hiring Procedure

To correctly gauge the sequence of events surrounding or following your first interview, ask this question:

- Can you describe to me the hiring procedure for this position?

This is important to ask, because you want to find out if (and when) the company needs to schedule a second or third level interview. Some companies will make hiring decisions on the spot; others will take months of meetings and endless signatures to process a simple request for a second interview.

Six: Background Information on the Company

While the amount of background information you can gather about a company is practically endless, it would be ludicrous to try to become a walking encyclopedia of corporate trivia. However, knowing something in each of these categories should significantly improve your odds of getting hire:

- **The company's personnel** -- who the major players are, who was recently hired or let go. It's also a good idea to know something of the history of the company, and who the founders were. For example, if you were interviewing for IBM, it might be considered a *faux pas* to look puzzled and ask, "Who?" at mention of the name Thomas Watson, Sr.

- **The company's basic structure** -- what products or services they provide to which customers, what the various divisions are, and whether they're privately or publicly held.
- **The company's vital signs** -- how the company is doing financially. Are they solvent or struggling? Are they involved in a hostile takeover, or merging with another company? How's their stock faring? You get the idea.

Seven: A Complete List of Questions You Want to Ask.

During the course of an interview, your dialogue with the other person will spawn a number of questions spontaneously. However, there may be important issues to discuss which will never come up unless you take the initiative. For that reason, you should bring a list of questions with you that will address these issues, so that you don't leave the interview uninformed.

Premeditated questions can be grouped into four different categories:

1. Company questions deal with the organization, direction, policies, stability, growth, market share, and new products or services of the prospective company or department;
2. Industry questions deal with the health, growth, change, technological advancement, and personnel of the industry as a whole;
3. Position questions deal with the scope, responsibilities, travel, compensation policies, and reporting structure of the position you're interviewing for; and
4. Opportunity questions deal with your own potential for growth or advancement within the company or its divisions, and the likely timetable for promotion.

You may have specific interests or concerns surrounding topics in each category. For example, if you're interviewing with a computer manufacturer, you may want to ask about the future growth of the industry. Or, let's say you're interviewing for a position with a company that's known for its high rate of personnel turnover. You might want to prepare a carefully worded question that deals with that issue.

Leave Your Laundry List at Home

Naturally, you need to be careful not to come on too strong by asking too many questions -- it may turn the interviewer off. Presumably, if there's mutual interest, you'll get all your questions answered at a subsequent interview. The general rule of thumb is to limit the number of premeditated questions to about a dozen or less. While it's true that you'll be interviewing the company as much as they'll be interviewing you, the last thing you want to do is turn a dialogue into an inquisition, or come across as a walking encyclopedia of corporate trivia.

You should also be aware that there's one specific taboo to first-level interviewing, in terms of the questions you should ask. Never, ever bring up the issue of salary or benefits. If the employer initiates a dialogue surrounding these issues, and asks if you have any questions, fine.

But if it appears to the employer that your primary motivation for changing jobs is the new company's compensation or benefit package, you'll be out the door quicker than a bolt of lightning. Employers get chills of fear and loathing when they think you're only on the job market to feather your nest at their expense. They visualize your employment with them as a short term, non-committal, career leveraging maneuver, and understandably, want to avoid being victimized.

My suggestion is to take the John F. Kennedy approach to interviewing: "Ask not what your company can do for you, ask what you can do for your company." This way, you can present yourself as a loyal, hard-working, virtuous, and dedicated candidate, rather than as an opportunistic job-hopper who'd prefer to live off the fat of the land.

While it's unthinkable to accept or even consider a job without first knowing the financial rewards (or the details of the benefit package), there are better and more timely ways to broach the subject, without endangering your candidacy.

Interview preparation is perhaps the single most overlooked aspect of the job changing process. A candidate who's fired up and ready to go at the time of the interview has a tremendous advantage over a candidate who's not.

**The more carefully you prepare for your interview,
the better your chances of getting hired.**