The Art of the Interview

The art of interviewing is not about getting a job; it's about getting the right job - making sure you are as well suited for the job as the job and organization are for you.

There are three categories of interviews you will likely run into during your job search - Informational, Screening, and Selection or Hiring Interviews.

**Informational Interview** - This is a key research and networking technique when you are exploring potential organizations, possible positions, or even a new career path. These interviews are about getting information, not getting a job. They are about networking and making contacts. Typically, they are held with just one other person, rather than a group of people.

**Screening Interview** - This is used to determine the match between your skills and expertise and the available position. This type of interview is often used to screen people out of consideration for the position, rather than to select the perfect candidate. You might find yourself talking with several people; all working together to determine if you are a good fit for the job, but it is more likely that an early screening interview will happen on the phone, again to establish that you are NOT the perfect candidate. Avoid negative or superfluous information as it can be distracting and make it difficult to get beyond this interview. You may have more than one screening interview, especially if the first interview was via phone, and if the position is particularly strategic or high-level.

Selection or Hiring Interview - This is the interview you will face if you have determined that an organization and job are right for you, and the organization representatives have determined that you are an excellent candidate. You will be one of a select few to go through this interview. You will typically be interviewing with the person who will be your manager, as well as others. Your goal, naturally, is to demonstrate via brief vignettes or success stories your accomplishments, and your fit for the position. It is also an opportunity to express your personality and fit for the organizational or departmental culture.

**GENERAL INTERVIEWING STRATEGIES**

* Keep in mind what the interview means to the employer. They are taking time away from their regular tasks. Be on time, express your appreciation for their consideration, and keep your conversation on point.
* Focus on the needs of the interviewer. This is the time to show what you can do for them. You are here to solve their problems; they are not here to address yours. This is not the time to talk about the salary you want, the flex time you need, or your eventual goals. Instead, focus on the organization's goals, vision, and how you can help the organization succeed.
* Help the interviewer out. Is the interviewer having trouble coming up with the right questions? Help him/her by asking, "Would you like examples of my mentoring style?" If the interviewer is glancing at his/her watch, make your answers shorter, or ask if he/she has another appointment.
* Be truthful. Neither undersell nor oversell yourself. Both are dishonest. Your goal is to find the perfect fit for where you will most successful.
* Express interest in the organization. This seems obvious, but consider it from the interviewer's perspective. Make sure you have researched the organization well in advance, and have intelligent questions prepared about the organization and the areas in which they work.
* This is neither a test nor a jury. View the interviewers as friends with whom you are discussing something of interest to all of you. Do not be either defensive or submissive. Remember, you are offering as much to the organization as they are offering you.
* Your "homework assignment" during and after the interview is to discern the top two or three criteria the successful candidate needs to have to be selected for the job. Be sure to include this in your follow-up thank you letter.

**Interview Types May Include:**

**Traditional** - These use broad, open-ended questions such as "Tell me about yourself", "Why do you want to work for this organization?" etc. Success in this interview is based more on your ability to communicate and answer succinctly than on the content of your answers, or even your skill set. The goal here is primarily to establish rapport with the employer.

**Action or Audition** - Places the job candidate in a real world situation to determine how he/she would actually perform on the job.

**Group** - When you are interviewed simultaneously with other candidates competing for the same position. In this format, all candidates appear to be equally qualified, but the employer wants to get a sense of your leadership potential and style, as well as your personality. To perform well in this setting, observe the interviewer carefully and try to determine what he or she is after. Treat all participants with respect, but try to take the lead without seeming bossy or argumentative. Don't enter into any power battles, which will make you seem uncooperative and immature.

**Stress** - This is a deliberate attempt to test how you handle yourself under difficult or even unpleasant situations, used to determine if you "have the mettle" to join the company or organization. You may be kept waiting, or be greeted by long silences during the interview. The interviewers might be sarcastic or argumentative. These are all attempts to make you lose your cool. Remain calm and patient. Keep in mind that it's a game, rather than personal.

**Behavioral** - These days, many employers are recognizing the drawbacks of a traditional interview, so behavioral interviews are continuing to gain popularity. A behavioral interview is based on the premise that past behavior is the best indicator of future performance. A behavioral interview will seek to probe your answers carefully, getting deeper into the story than you might expect.

You will recognize a behavioral interview when you hear questions beginning with: "Give me a specific example of a time when you...", "Describe a situation when you...", "Tell me about a..."

When answering these questions, describe the situation, discuss the actions you took, describe outcomes from your actions, and explain what you learned from the ordeal. Be specific and detailed in your responses. Expect several follow up questions during this type of interview. Preparation is essential for these interviews. Prepare several narratives about situations in which you excelled, had significant impact, or else had a negative experience from which you learned important lessons.

Finally, if you are not selected for the job, send a follow-up letter or call, thanking them for their consideration and bringing them into your network.