

Talk your way through a stellar interview

By Elizabeth McKinley

Preparation is Key!!!!

Give yourself several days before the interview to think about what you're going to say and to make sure you're prepared.

Research the company and develop intelligent questions about the organization. Check out the company's Web site for press releases and other announcements, or search the Internet for industry news (try google.com or yahoo.com). "You've got to show me you know about the company and the industry, as well as our clients," says Sitrick And Company's Dana Coleman, who has interviewed more than 20 people for jobs. "You need to be able to speak articulately about it."

Make a clear outline of your ideal work environment, says Leslie Bonagura, managing consultant with Drake Beam Morin, a professional and corporate development company. Know what management style you prefer and which job duties you enjoy most, she says. Use this outline to help determine whether the job is right for you.

Identify key examples of when you overcame obstacles at work to succeed. "I'm looking for concrete examples. I want to know specific details of how they fixed the problem or how they dealt with the problem," says Laura Cavender, a policy analyst at the American Red Cross National Headquarters in Washington, D.C., who has interviewed dozens of candidates. "I'm looking for the interviewee's interpersonal skills. He or she may not have solved the problem, but it's important to know how he or she interacts with others."

Practice your answers in front of a mirror or with a friend. The more you practice, the more comfortable and confident you'll be during the interview.

Appearance matters

You never get a second chance to make a first impression, and employers will judge you on your professionalism and how you present yourself. Your appearance is very important," Bonagura says. "It gives you the confidence to know that you look good and feel good, and that will help during the interview."

Begin a checklist a few days before your interview. Do you need to take your suit to the dry cleaner? Choose your best suit, appropriate for the season. Go with minimal jewelry, accessories and perfume or cologne.

Whatever you wear, make sure you're comfortable. You don't want to be distracted by a wayward bra strap or a sports coat a size too small.

During the interview

Every interviewer is unique: Employers will ask different questions and approach the interview from different angles. Be prepared for the unexpected. But you can expect to talk about your skills, knowledge and experience, and how your talents fit into the organization.

When you arrive for the interview, you'll probably be a little nervous. That's natural. Take a deep breath and relax. Remember, you're on equal footing with the interviewer, Bonagura says. After all, she adds, you're trying to determine whether you'd be happy at that company.

Approach the interview as a conversation. Your resume can guide you - expand on key points, emphasizing how your skills will complement the organization. Ask about the employer's expectations, and describe how your skills will serve and exceed what they expect.

Most interviewers will ask why you are looking for a new job. Be ready to answer in a positive light. Are you looking as a result of new management, or are you exploring other opportunities for your career growth? "I want to hear why the person is looking," Coleman says. "In general, I know it's because you want new responsibility, more money or were unhappy. How you talk about it is important." Tell the truth about your experience and position with confidence. Be mindful of your body language and how fast you're talking; make sure the interviewer can understand you.

When you need to think about a question, take time to fully understand it. You might take a deep breath, repeat the question "If I understand what you're asking, you want..." Or ask for clarification. It's important to maintain the flow of the conversation, so try to avoid periods of awkward silence.

Maintain your professionalism. Some interviewers might try to make you comfortable and relaxed, but it's important to remain formal. You're there to discuss your professional skills, not your social schedule. Stick to what you can bring to the company.

Illegal questions

Interviewers are not supposed to ask questions that could discriminate against you. This includes questions about your lifestyle, children, age or race. If you're asked a question that makes you uncomfortable, remain composed. For example, you are asked whether you have children. Don't appear shocked. Instead you can answer: "I've never been asked that before. Is that a question you normally ask?" In the process, you will turn the question around. You don't have to volunteer personal information. But how you handle inappropriate questions is crucial. Refocus the interview to your skills and strengths.

Follow up

After your interview, take a few minutes to write a thank-you letter. Use plain, conservative stationery and write a few lines in blue or black ink to thank the interviewer for his or her time. For example: "Thank you for meeting with me. I enjoyed talking with you about the position." Make sure to reiterate how your skills would benefit the organization. Reinforce employers how you would exceed their expectations. Mail the letter within 24 hours.

You'll probably want to follow up on your interview. Use what you learned about the interviewer to decide when. Though you want to remain on the company's radar screen, avoid seeming pesky. One to two well-phrased phone calls are generally appropriate. Wait a week before calling, and be prepared with a reason to talk. "I wanted to check in to see whether there is any more information I can get you," or "I enjoyed talking with you and I wanted to see where your company is in the process of filling the position."

Being professional will keep you in touch with the interviewer, which can help build your network as well. If you've impressed the interviewer but aren't right for that particular job, he or she might keep you in mind for another position.

Once you've finished the interview, take a few minutes to review your performance and look for ways to improve next time. After all, practice makes perfect.