

15 MINUTES TO A BETTER INTERVIEW

If you are a regular reader of this site, you'll notice that I write these articles with a mix of job hunting tactics combined with general career advice that will help you move up the ladder. I've avoided a continuous diet of job-hunting advice because the average scientist or engineer needs such information only once every three or four years. And yet, our reader response consistently indicates a demand for articles that take a fresh look at job search basics. This is one of those columns that will help reinforce issues that many of us believe we know -- but that it doesn't hurt to go over again. With that in mind, here is a list of do's and don'ts for the job interview. It is not intended as an exhaustive treatise on the interpersonal dynamics of an interview -- use it solely as a 15-minute refresher course. It is possible to be over-prepared for an interview, which can be just as damaging as being under-prepared. By studying those books that detail canned responses to interview questions, for example, you may find yourself looking a bit too "plastic" to the professional on the other side of the desk. Human resources people are usually quick to spot this sort of over-preparation; yet, despite this, some consultants continue to recommend rehearsed responses to interview questions. Instead, I believe that the best advice anyone can give you is to be yourself. Please avoid any canned or phony responses. If for some reason you end up in a position based on a false premise, you may find that it ends up being a career disaster. Good interviews are the ones you walk away from feeling that the company is a place where you can stretch and grow -- all of that built upon a solid personal chemistry with a team to which you can contribute. An interview is an opportunity for you to learn as much about the company and its team as they will want to learn about you. Taking this opportunity seriously means that you will do adequate research on the company and go into the meeting prepared to talk about how your skills and abilities can benefit the company (see my articles on self-analysis). With today's capabilities for information gathering via the Internet, it is ridiculous to go into an interview without a great deal of knowledge. Even small, private firms have web sites, or you will find other places with discussion about what it is that they are doing. So we'll assume that you will be going into the interview well armed with information about what it is that you can do for them. Now, study this list of items and read them again right before your interview. This 15-minute refresher includes some items that you will see as very basic. Take every suggestion seriously. Each has been known to make or break a potential **career opportunity**. You would be surprised at how many 10- and 20-year veterans leave interviews without an offer because they stumbled over one of the basics! **Interviewing Do's and Don'ts** Do be alert but comfortable. Use animation with hands, eyes, and head. Lean forward slightly in your chair while listening and maintain a healthy share of eye contact. Don't be a statue -- your body should have a general attitude of "attentive interest." Do smile and laugh when appropriate. Keep in mind that smiling people are seen as individuals who are human and who have confidence in themselves. Don't make extensive notes during an interview unless the interviewer suggests that you write something down. By constant note-taking, you may violate unspoken laws dealing with eye-contact. Do treat everyone in the company with the same high level of courtesy. One fellow snubbed a "technician" who was cleaning glassware. Later in the day, he found himself interviewing with that "tech" -- the company's founder and director of research. Do walk into the interview with a confident, upright posture. Shake hands firmly, giving your name first. Don't joke. Telling a joke during an interview, no matter how hilarious it might be, is rarely in good taste. One sales manager reported to us that his favorite joke was so well received that the marketing vice president had him repeat it three times to others. When he didn't get an offer, we learned that the interviewers didn't believe he would take his responsibilities seriously. Do find out early what the interviewers are interested in and then talk about it. If they start asking questions about your ability with expression in yeast, don't continue talking about your favorite non-yeast expression system. Your job is to spark interest -- and then to maintain it! Don't speak in a monotone. Try to vary the tone and volume of your voice during the interview. Do remember that the interviewer may be just as uncomfortable as you are. Rather than concentrating on your own insecurities, try concentrating on the person in front of you. Make the interview go smoothly for him or her and you will find that you've conducted a great interview. Honest smiles and a friendly approach can make a great deal of difference. Do write a synopsis of the interview immediately after you leave. You'll refer to it often. Do provide prompt feedback to the recruiter or Human Resources person who set up the visit. Remember that the person who put the interview together is involved throughout the entire process, and deserves your respect. Do get the names, with proper spelling, of all the people you interview with over the course of the day. Better yet, get their business cards Do avoid controversy. Do remember that a well-placed pause after an important question is worth its weight in gold. This "thinking pause" doubles the value of whatever your answer might be. Obviously you know what your five-year goals are before going into the interview; still, it is better to pause and reflect briefly before responding. Don't ever say anything negative about a previous employer or a former colleague. Everyone knows this, and yet it is a crutch that many people fall back upon when asked why they left a company, etc. Don't hide facts. If you have some sort of skeleton in your closet, get the answers to these questions sorted out in advance. Resumes always have some sort of glitch to be probed -- for example, the graduate degree that took eight years to complete or the job change after 11 months. Do assume that everyone you talk with on interview day will be involved in the decision to hire, no matter how they are introduced. Many times you will have an opportunity to meet future peers in an organization. Answers to the "candid" questions you're asked in these circumstances often make it back to the hiring manager. Consider yourself as "interviewing" no matter where these conversations take place - in the hallway, lunchroom or while walking the plant. Don't be overly concerned with details (such as how many weeks of vacation you'll get) when the H/R department starts to rattle off the company benefits. You can get specific answers to these questions when an offer is made. These benefits are not the focus of your day. **Salary Questions** Salary usually comes up twice, once when the company asks (because it needs to know) your current salary, and again when the talk gets serious and the discussion turns to your salary expectations for the position. When you hear that question on expectations, or something similar, you'll know that the negotiation has begun. If it feels too early for that sort of conversation, tell them that. If they are only asking for clarification of your current salary, help them out. Because even one small lie will disqualify you, don't even consider pumping up your salary! On the other hand, don't leave out pertinent information. Be sure to provide details about your total compensation package, including any bonus or stock options. The value of your entire package is the figure they need to consider before making you an offer. **10 Ways to Disqualify Yourself** Here are 10 self-induced "knockout" factors that can disqualify an applicant. Obviously, the number one reason a candidate might be knocked out of the competition for a particular job is a lack of technical qualifications to do the work. However, many people leave interviews having brought negative results upon themselves. Here are some knockout factors we most often hear from client companies:

- Asking questions with negative overtones, indicating attitude problems, or a persistent "What can you do for me?" posture. (This is quite common for younger interviewees).
- Failing to ask appropriate questions about the job responsibilities -- or to ask any questions at all. (Make sure your notebook is full of fallback questions to ask during "dead air").
- Showing too much concern about money or raising salary questions early in the interview, indicating availability to the highest bidder.
- Making negative comments about past employers or colleagues.
- Indicating willingness to discuss proprietary areas of prior work. (They will respect you more if you indicate that you can't talk about the details!).
- Lacking a definite set of **career goals** or seeming to lack direction for the future.
- Failing to express thoughts or communicate clearly. (Often, a lack of eye contact can result in "poor communication skills" comments).
- A lack of enthusiasm and interest in the interviewing company. (Although no one bases a hiring decision solely on enthusiasm, it is the "glue" that holds the personal chemistry of candidate and company together).
- Appearing afraid to admit to an area of weakness. (This often shows up as a tendency to inflate knowledge about a particular subject).
- An obvious lack of preparation by revealing a limited knowledge of the company, or by delivering a poorly prepared seminar.

In Closure Preparing well lets you approach an interview feeling confident and comfortable. When you've done your homework, you'll know that you've got all the information you need to make the right decision about an offer when it comes. Preparation also allows you to show how your skills and abilities will fill the company's specific needs. That's the key point -- you've got to apply all the focus you can muster to show them how well you fit into their organization and how quickly you can begin to contribute. *This article is sponsored by [EmploymentCrossing](#).*