

TEN STEPS TO A SUCCESSFUL INTERVIEW

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You have a variety of values, traits, skills and experiences that make you the perfect match for a new career opportunity. But to reach your potential, you must demonstrate in a job interview your ability to help the organization achieve its goals.

The best job candidates prepare for interviews by following these 10 steps to success:

#1. Learn about the organization.

Use the Internet and contact appropriate referral sources to learn as much as you can about the organization. Use what you've learned to determine whether you'd like to work for the company. Then, during the interview, mention what you have learned about the company's products and services as a springboard to an in-depth conversation.

#2. Learn about yourself.

Develop a list of your own career successes and the greatest challenges you have overcome. Prepare a "contribution statement" that focuses on how you can assist an organization in implementing its business plan. Know the kind of position you want, and what you expect in terms of compensation, benefits, work schedule, environment, location, responsibilities and opportunities. Your personal preparation will help make you focus on appropriate content for the interview.

#3. Learn what to ask.

Develop a list of insightful, probing questions to ask the interviewer. The level of questions will reflect your own depth and what's important to you. Revise your list as you go through the interview process, which may include telephone calls and face-to-face interviews. For starters, you may want to ask: What is the organization's strategic plan? How do you know when individuals are successful? What will have they accomplished? What's the approval process for getting things done? What's the best reason to work here? What type of people aren't a good "fit" for the organization?

What employers want

Today's employers want these traits and skills. How many do you have?

- Ability to build key internal/external relationships
- Share knowledge/power with others
- Strong management ability
- Intellectual leadership
- Exceptional interpersonal skills
- Commitment to diverse constituents
- A passion for mission/vision
- Commitment to professionalism, integrity and excellence
- Financial/budgetary aptitude
- Advocacy skills and political insight
- Sense of humor
- Entrepreneurial spirit
- Ability to change the organization's culture
- Enthusiasm and optimism
- Effective negotiation skills
- Team building
- Strategic planning
- Trust building
- Timely decision making

4. Prepare answers to common questions.

Interviewers typically ask a variety of standard questions, so prepare answers to those about your educational background, character traits, management ability, suitability for the job, salary history and requirements, experience and hobbies. Position your answers to enhance your positives. If you believe your experience is weak, then promote your experiences that match the employer's needs. Use a case-history approach that explains a problem, how you overcame it and the results you achieved. Many individuals fail to quantify their successes effectively. Provide specific dollars, figures and percentages.

#5. Rehearse your delivery.

Conduct a mock interview with a friend or mentor. Videotape your responses and review the result. Then, work to improve your performance. Some candidates rehearse before a mirror and check their facial expressions and body language. However you do it, give yourself time to rehearse for success.

#6. Make a good impression during the interview.

People want to hire people they like. Be likeable, friendly, outgoing and maintain good eye contact. Be on time (being too early can be distracting) and dress professionally. Being positive, uplifting, dynamic and interested in the interview is crucial. Do your best to carry on a real conversation. Use direct action words as part of your vocabulary. Tell how you coach, analyze, excel, innovate, solve, lead and listen. People remember stories better than specific details so tell a story about your successes. Focus on how you develop positive working relationships and the action steps you take to build them.

#7. Stick to your message.

Before every interview, choose major points you want to communicate, and stay on target. Be flexible to adapt to a normal conversation. But always bring it back to the ways in which you can communicate persuasively, make decisions in a timely manner, adapt quickly, innovate, lead and articulate the organization's vision. These are desirable skills to employers, so weave them into your interview.

#8. Know your weaknesses.

Nearly every interviewer will ask: In which areas are you weakest? Everyone has weaknesses, but it's important to answer this question carefully. You don't want to appear so weak that no one will hire you, but not owning up to your growth areas is a red flag. Be self-reflective and candid in describing areas for growth and how these negatives also can sometimes be positives.

#9. Plan to excel and avoid common mistakes.

If you expect to do well during the interview, you will. Always speak to the future. You didn't leave a job because it offered little growth; rather, you've moving on in search of new opportunities. Don't blame others, show conceit, chew gum or look at your watch. Do find out what the next step is in the placement process. Always say "thank you," and send a thank-you note, strategic letter or e-mail immediately after you finish the interview.

#10. Win the job.

As you work to close the deal, negotiate the terms of employment and clarify your job description. While it's common to secure a starting salary about 20% above your current one, consider other variables such as commuting, enhanced benefits or greater stability. Discuss benefits and bonuses. Before you accept the job, make sure to get the offer in writing, and review it. If you follow the steps in this article and prepare to win the job, chances are you will. Never give up because your life's work is at stake.