

## **JOB SEEKERS :**

### **PREPARE FOR RECRUITMENT INTERVIEWS IN 5 EASY STEPS**

#### **Step One : Researching the Company and Interviewer**

The first step in preparing for an interview is to research the company and, if possible, the interviewer. We suggest that you create a sample fact sheet on each company that interests you.

Remember that researching the company includes researching more than just the growth trends, products, profitability, etc. It means the culture, the dress code, level of informality, and communication habits too. Use your network to obtain this kind of information in addition to the other research sources you investigate. Obtaining information on the interviewer, however, is more difficult. A possible source may be the person who arranges the interview. If the third party is a search firm or Human Resources representative, you will often get the information you ask for.

#### **Step Two : Matching Your Strengths to the Company Profile**

Once you have the relevant company information, you will need to prepare your story to convey what you can do and to demonstrate how you will add value.

The best way to convince the boss that you can solve the problems and do the necessary work is to illustrate how you have solved similar problems and done similar work in the past. Based on your research of the company and interviewer, pick the achievements you want to emphasize and decide on the way you want to present them. To be effective you cannot use vague terms or cliches. Notice the difference in impact as you compare the following responses :

#### **COMPANY'S JOB CRITERIA**

#### **STATING YOUR STRENGTHS**

##### **AVOID**

##### **APPROPRIATE**

Leadership and  
Problem Solving Skills

“I am strong in  
leadership and  
problem solving.”

“I redirected a task force to  
accurately diagnose and solve  
the XYZ technical problem,  
saving the company \$ 300,000  
annually.”

Communication  
Skills

“I get along with  
people.”

“By going to the XYZ  
department personally several  
times, asking what concerns  
they had, and encouraging an  
exchange of ideas, they became  
our greatest ally in the  
marketing process.”

## **Step Two : Matching Your Strengths to the Company Profile**

(Continued)

The process of recalling and actually writing down your accomplishments will be very valuable in your job interviews. You will have opportunities to weave your accomplishments into interviews in a graceful, natural way. For example, as you get your interviewers talking about their problems, you can respond, “That reminds me of how we tackled a similar problem at Acme.” Then you give them Problem+Action+Result. That’s why it’s important to write many more accomplishment statements than you actually use on your resume – to provide a store of well-thought-out, specific illustrations of how you added value for you to draw from in an interview when you need them.

Of course, for the interview discussion you may need to elaborate on some aspect of the accomplishment statement. Be ready to expand appropriately once the interviewer indicates further interest in a particular action that you took.

## **Step Three : Preparing Questions to Ask**

Take the time to develop relevant and insightful questions for each particular interview. You may want to stimulate your thinking by reviewing the list of “Sample Questions” on the next page. But don’t rely on generic questions such as : “What are your company’s future plans ?”

Until you get the job offer or the decision to pass you on to the next interview, all of your questions should be about the job and about the company.

### **Sample Questions For The Interview**

1. Why is this position open ?
2. How often has it been filled in the past five to ten years ?
3. What have been the primary reasons for persons leaving ?
4. Why did the person who held this position most recently leave ?
5. What would you like done differently by the next person who fills this job ?
6. What are some of the objectives that you would like accomplished in this job ?
7. What is most pressing ? What would you like to have done within the next two or three months ?
8. What are some of the longer-term objectives that you would like completed ?
9. What decision freedom would I have in determining my work objectives, deadlines, and methods of measurements ?
10. What kind of support does this position receive in terms of people, finances, etc ?
11. What are some of the more difficult problems facing someone in this position ? How do you think these could best be handled ?
12. Where could a person go who is successful in this position and within what time frame ?
13. In what ways has this organization been most successful in terms of products and services over the years ?
14. What significant changes do you foresee in the near future ?
15. How is one judged ? What accounts for success ?
16. What are the most critical factors for success in your business ? (Notice if he/she mentions that people matter)
17. Where do you see the company (or function) going in the next few years ?
18. How do you go about winning support from top management for your new projects ?
19. How would you describe your own management style ?
20. What are the most important traits you look for in a subordinate ?
21. How do you like your people to communicate with you ? Orally, in writing,

informally, in meetings, only when necessary ?

**Step Four : Preparing Answers to Difficult Questions**

In addition to asking insightful questions, you'll want to be prepared to answer questions. Although many of your interactions will be quite informal and seemingly unstructured, there will be some interviewers who are quite incisive in their style, asking penetrating and often difficult questions. Search consultants tend to be this way; they have limited time and are skilled at getting to the point. Even your good friends and business contacts can ask questions that you will find difficult, if you haven't practiced ahead of time.

You cannot anticipate every question. But if you prepare your responses and practice answering the difficult questions listed on the next few pages you will be ready for almost anything that comes along.

## Sample Answers to Difficult Questions

Although there may be multiple purposes underlying some of the questions asked by an interviewer, we have listed each question under only one of them.

### Interviewer's Questions and Purpose

### Consider When Answering

*Is the person prepared ? Organized  
and concise ?*

**1. Tell me about yourself**

Be on guard against the interviewer who gives you free rein. Don't spend too much time answering (1-2 minutes).

Avoid details, don't ramble. Touch on four areas :

- Born and Raised
- Education, Military Background
- Work Experience
- Current Situation

**2. Did you bring your resume ?**

Yes. (Be prepared with 2-3 extra copies)

**3. What do you know about our organization ?**

Highlight products, services, revenues, problems, people, and history. "But I would love to know more particularly from your point of view. Do we have time to cover that now ?"

**4. According to your definition of success, how successful have you been so far ?**

Be prepared to define success for yourself and then respond.

*Is this person mature and self-aware ?*

**5. In your current or last position, what were your most significant accomplishments ? In your career so far ?**

Refer to accomplishment statements that you have written down under Step 2

**6. Had you thought of leaving your present position before ? If yes, what do you think held you there ?**

No job is perfect. Yet, there are pluses to each position. Refer to positive aspect of job, learning experience.

Interviewer's Questions  
and Purpose

Consider When Answering

*Is this person mature and self-aware ?*

**7. Would you describe a few situations in which your work was criticized ?**

Give only one, and tell how you have corrected or plan to correct your work.

**8. If I spoke with your previous boss, what would he or she say are your greatest strengths and weaknesses ?**

Be consistent with what you think they would say as a reference. Position the weakness in a positive way (refer to # 11).

**9. How would you describe your personality ?**

Keep your answer short, and relevant to the position and the organization's culture.

**10. What are your strong points ?**

Present three. Relate them to that particular company and job opening.

**11. What are your weak points ?**

Don't say you have none; give only one. Position it in a positive answer like, "I am sometimes impatient and do the work myself when we are working against tight deadlines."

**12. How did you do in school ?**

Emphasize your best and favorite subjects. If grades were average, talk about leadership activities or jobs you took to finance your education.

*Is the person motivated ? What are his/her values, attitudes ? Is there a fit ?*

**13. In your current or last position, what features did you like most ? least ?**

Refer to your satisfiers for likes. Be careful with dislikes. Give only one and make it brief.

**14. What do you look for in a job ?**

Developed satisfiers/dissatisfiers and ideal job characteristics and relate it to the job opening.

**15. How long would it take you to make a meaningful contribution to our firm ?**

"Not long, because of my related experience, transferable skills, and ability to learn and adapt."

**16. How long would you stay with us ?**

"As long as the situation is mutually satisfactory, and the job is interesting and challenging. As long as I feel that I'm contributing and that my contribution is recognized."

Interviewer's Questions  
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Consider When Answering

*Is the person motivated ? What are his/her values, attitudes ? Is there a fit ?*

**17. If you have never supervised, how do you feel about assuming those responsibilities?**

Be honest. If you don't want to supervise, emphasize that you can contribute more as an individual player. If you want to supervise, say so, and be enthusiastic.

**18. Why do you want to become a supervisor ?**

"To grow and develop professionally, to help others develop, to build a team, and to share what I have learned.

**19. What do you see as the most difficult task in being a supervisor ?**

Getting things planned and done through others.

**20. Why are you leaving your present job ?**

Refer to a difference in style or opinion. Never personalize. Never be negative. Keep it short. When possible, give a "group" answer (e.g., "Our office is closing; the whole organization is being reduced in size.") Stick to one response... don't change answers during the interview.

**21. Describe what would be an ideal working environment.**

Refer to your ideal job and satisfiers and relate them to that particular company.

**22. How would you evaluate your present firm ?**

Be positive. Refer to the valuable experience you have gained.

**23. Do you prefer working with figures or working with words ?**

Be aware of what the job requires and position your answer in that context.

**24. How would your co-workers describe you ?**

Refer to your strengths and skills if you have developed a list.

**25. What do you think of your boss ?**

If you like her or him, say so and tell why. If you don't like her or him, find something positive to say.

**26. Why do you want to work in a company of this size ? Of this type ?**

Refer to ideal job and satisfiers. Explain how this size or type of company works well for you.

Interviewer's Questions  
and Purpose

Consider When Answering

*Is the person motivated ? What are his/her values, attitudes ? Is there a fit ?*

**27. If you had your choice of jobs and companies, where would you go ?**

Refer to ideal job. Say that this job and this company are very close to what best suits you.

**28. Why do you want to work for us ?**

You would like to be part of a company project, and solve a company problem.

You like what you've learned about the company, its policies, goals, and management.

**29. What was the last book you read ? Movie you saw ? Sporting event you attended ?**

Think this through ahead of time. Select one of the books you've read that matches the company culture.

**30. What are you doing, or what have you done to reach your career objectives ?**

Talk about formal studies, workshops, seminars. Also talk about reading, professional memberships, mentors, advisors.

**31. What was wrong with your last company ?**

Choose your words carefully. Don't be negative. Say that no company is perfect; that it had both strengths and weaknesses.

**32. What kind of hours are you used to working ?**

"As many hours as it takes to get the job done," then ask : "What's an average working day or week here ?"

*Does the person match job criteria ?*

**33. What would you do for us ?**

Relate past experience which represents success in solving problems and which may be similar to those of the prospective employer.

**34. What has your experience been in supervising people ?**

Give examples from accomplishments.

**35. Are you a good supervisor ? Give an example. Why do you feel you have management potential ?**

Draw from your successes. "Because I have been told that I have management potential during evaluations; because I know what skills are necessary to be a manager, and I know that

Interviewer's Questions  
and Purpose

I have them.”

Consider When Answering

*Does the person match job criteria ?*

**36. Did you ever fire anyone ? If so, what were the reasons, and how did you handle it ?**

If you haven't, say so, but add that you could do it if necessary.

**37. How have you helped to increase sales or profits ? Reduce costs ?**

Refer to accomplishments prepared in Step 2

**38. How much money did you ever account for ? Largest budget responsibility ?**

Refer to accomplishments. (Refer to Step 2)  
If you haven't had budget responsibilities, say so, but refer to an accomplishment that demonstrates the same skill.

**39. Describe some situations in which you've worked under pressure or met deadlines.**

Refer to accomplishments. (Refer to Step 2)  
Everyone has had a few of these pressure situations in a career.

**40. In your present position, what problems have you identified that had previously been overlooked ?**

Refer to accomplishments. (Refer to Step 2)

**41. Give an example of how you have been creative.**

Refer to accomplishments. (Refer to Step 2)

**42. Give examples of times when you were a leader.**

Draw examples from accomplishments (Step 2)

**43. What are your goals in your career ?**

Talk first about doing the job for which you are applying, then talk about longer-range plans.

**44. What position do you expect to have in two years ?**

“A position similar to the one we're discussing or possibly by that time, the next step up.”

**45. What are your objectives ?**

Refer back to question 43 on goals.  
Long range : Keep long range answers fairly general.

Short range : Be more specific; talk about a position like this with growth opportunities, maybe having more responsibilities or moving into management.

Interviewer's Questions  
and Purpose

Consider When Answering

*How does the person handle stress ?  
What is their confidence level ?*

**46. Why should we hire you ?**

Relate past experience which represents success in solving problems and which may be similar to those of the prospective employer.

**47. You may be over-qualified or too experienced for the position we have to offer.  
Possible answers :**

“A strong company needs a strong person.”

“Experienced people are at a premium today.”

An employer will get faster return on investment because you have more experience than required.

**48. Why haven't you found a new position before now ?**

“Finding the right job takes time. I'm not looking for just any job.”

**49. Any objections to psychological tests ?**

“No, I don't mind.”

**50. If you could start again, what would you do differently ?**

No need to be too self-revealing. “Hindsight is 20/20; everyone would make some changes, but I've learned and grown from all my decisions.”

**51. How would you structure this job ?**

“Not easy to answer without knowing more than I do about the job. I'd move carefully in making changes.”

**52. How much do you expect, if we offer this position to you ?**

Be careful. If you don't know the market value, return the question by saying that you would expect a fair salary based on the job responsibilities, your experience and skills, and the market value of the job. Then ask what salary range has been set for the job.

If you know the market value of the job, that may be the key answer. “My understanding is that a job like the one you're describing may be in the range of €/THB/\$ ..... Is that in the ball park for you ?

Interviewer's Questions  
and Purpose

Consider When Answering

*What is this person's market value ?*

**53. What kind of salary are you worth ?**

Actively probe the interviewer about the job and specific responsibilities and problems. In time you should acquire ideas of how important the job is to the company and its willingness to pay. Sum up and evaluate. Then when the interviewer opens the discussion of salary, you will be in a much better position to determine what the job is probably worth to both the employer and you.

Strive to delay all mention of money until the end of the interview. If your minimum requirement is sought early, try to counter with the "need to learn more about the scope of the job" since the service you can provide is the principal question, not income. If they insist, provide a range or broad area.

**54. What other types of job or companies are you considering ?**

"I'm looking at similar positions in several companies." You don't have to be specific.

**55. How have you kept up in your field ?**

Discuss reading, seminars or courses in or out of work, discussions with co-workers.

## **Step Five : Practicing Aloud**

Start by writing rough notes of how you would introduce your background, ask your questions, and answer the interviewer's questions. Whenever possible, put your practice interview on tape. Remember rehearsing in your head isn't very helpful, as your thoughts race ahead of the answers you are currently reviewing. When reviewing your practice interview, pay attention to what you said and how you said it.

In any interview, you communicate on at least three levels :

- \* **Nonverbals :** Body language, inflections, tone of voice
- \* **Verbals :** Information conveyed by your words
- \* **Meta-Messages :** The message conveyed by your choice of words (and by those you omit), as well as by the sequence of your ideas when giving your answers.

For example, do you focus on what you didn't like in past jobs and by being defensive in your answers to questions, or do you emphasize what you would like better and find more fulfilling in a new opportunity ? (If someone makes a point of saying, "It's not that I hated what I was doing, it's just that I found the 9:00 to 5:00 routine tedious and boring." That person conveys a negative emphasis. If someone says instead, "I discovered that the flexibility required in such-and-such kind of work is much more stimulating to me," that person is conveying a positive emphasis. Which one do you want to convey ?

If you want to portray yourself as an independent, hard working, positive self-starter, choose the appropriate words to convey that image.

## **For Job Interviewers : Being as well prepared as your candidates.**

For many organizations, interviews are still the only or most important tool used to make selection decisions. HR professionals and consultants have gone a long way to increase the validity of interviews, in first instance by training themselves and line managers in interpersonal communication, listening and questioning skills. When these efforts proved to generate unsatisfactory results, they were followed by a movement towards detailed job analysis and resulting competency based and structured questionnaires. In the context of the article under “Job Seekers : Prepare for job interviews in 5 easy steps” we should continue to ask ourselves the question : are HR and line managers equipped and skilled enough to see through the well prepared candidate? If the answer is “No” or “More or less” ,this may in some cases result in missing out on hiring the best person for the job and in extra costs and personal grief afterwards.

### **What can go wrong ?**

**Let ‘s be clear : structured interviews were a the outset a substantial improvement over the ad hoc, gut feel conversations.**

But by structuring the questions and answers and by continuously recycling them, we have also made them readily available to any candidate who takes the initiative to properly prepare. These questions are usually targeted to the transferable skills and traits that make up over 50% per cent of each job (e.g., problem solving, decision making, planning, initiative, conflict handling, team work, communication, etc.)

Applicants can now obtain questions and ideal responses for these skills from a variety of sources: internet, books, as well as, the career counseling centers whom teach applicants how to respond to these questions.

This has led to a wave of well-prepared job seekers who may in fact, not hold all of the true knowledge/skills/abilities required on the job but are good at recognizing competency questions and responding with memorized answers.

If the candidate has followed the “5 easy steps to prepare..”, (s)he will have a list of relevant accomplishments handy, well practiced and strongly related to the applicant’s stated satisfiers for good motivational and cultural fit.

In other cases we have experienced that managers don’t stick to “the rules of the game” of competency interviewing as they just ”feel” that the questions

and answers aren't giving them a reliable prediction of how well each applicant will perform on the job for the reasons explained above.

In response many managers return in true fact to a form of gut feel interview, often disguised as competency interview for legal or company political reasons.

What happens? Managers use the structured answers as some sort of checklist to prompt and to more or less unwittingly lead the candidates to a desired score.

The questions that really matter to the interviewing manager have no structured but rather a contextual answer, relative to what the manager thinks will lead to successful performance.

A good shortlist of these type questions can be found in the Job Seekers article and they cover a broad array of personality and character features : motivation, attitudes or values, maturity levels, stress resistance. From interviewing managers, you will hear feedback comments like "it( the job, the department ..) really clicked with the experience of this candidate" , "drove home all the right points...", "I remember when I was in such and such a situation, I precisely did the same thing .."

With similar reactions in mind, can we proclaim that interviewers are fully aware that applicants have learned and practiced to answer questions as, "What are your weaknesses?" with a list of perceived strengths in disguise ("Oh, I'm a workaholic, a stickler for detail, etc.")???

Probably not and "in fine" the person hired may not be the top performer you are looking for but rather the most prepared.

## **What can be done ?**

**The structured interview over-engineered the confrontation of job requirements with past accomplishments. We should again invest more energy and time in the investigation of the capacity of the whole person: intelligence, skills, experience, knowledge and the ability to apply all these on the job and the talent or potential to expand on what is already there.**

The objective of using a selection process and not just picking somebody from the street or from the golf course, applies to all levels of positions : to investigate each applicant's "capacitas" to apply their knowledge and experience to the performance required on the new job. The Latin noun "Capacitas" , a capacity , in this context, is not pre-determined, fixed or static; rather it is a potential which is only realized in use. Many other English words are related to it and can in some cases substitute partially for

the “Capacitas” of an individual: competence, skills, but also capability, intelligence and talent. We prefer the use of “Capacitas” to express the breadth of the investigation a selection process is to conduct, but in an economically acceptable way.

A first step can be to confront candidates with real life problems that are taken from the job. Applicants are asked to do “work” and/or verbally resolve problems that would be typical of the new job. These questions can be quickly developed because they come directly from the job. Although the approach might evoke similarity with the well-known “inbox exercises” used in assessment centers, these confrontations are essentially different from it as they only cover critical components of the actual job and not of a carefully written-up business case.

The pre-requisites for the interviewer(s) are however a complete understanding of the essential qualifications of the job vacancy and some preparation time of questions and ideal responses.

When interviewing the candidate and later on evaluating answers given, particular attention should be given to the way the accomplishment of the assignment is achieved. Indeed by probing answers and testing for the “why” of a preferred direction or action, we explore systematically the content and limits of the candidates’ frame of reference.

Mostly for cost reasons, we would then limit further testing to applicants who passed the job activity based interview, with an emphasis on factors that facilitate or limit development like : IQ and EQ, character, motivation and certain personality traits. A variety of resources are available on the market to accomplish this phase in an ethical and professional manner. Look for well-established, validated methodologies rather than for the exotic five minute question and answer tools.

We are convinced you can come away with the better candidate for your vacant position by using this approach. Relevant scientific grounding for this can be found in the research conducted by Schmidt and Hunter and published in the Psychological Bulletin as referenced below\*.

For good order, we have assumed that interviewers are trained to avoid the well-known but training-resistant communication errors as described above.

And lastly, it will pay off if your interviewers are aware of the best answers to so-called difficult questions described in books and practiced in career centers.

Let’s not forget : probe once , probe twice for understanding” how” and probe thrice for getting to the “why”.

\* Schmidt, F.L. & J.H. Hunter (1998). The Validity and Utility of Selection Methods in Personnel Psychology: Practical and Theoretical Implications of 85 Years of Research Findings. *Psychological Bulletin*, 124, pp. 262-274.