# Successful Interviewing:

## What A-List Candidates Need to Know

**An in-depth interview preparation e-book to help job candidates take ownership and shine in any interview. The A-List approach assures you stand out from the crowd.**

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A-LIST SOLUTIONS
Where Great Talent Meets Great Opportunity

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## Introduction

A job interview should be thought of a conversation in which valuable information is exchanged for making a selection amongst candidates. Like many decisions, the quality of the information exchanged dictates the quality of the decision. As an interviewee, you must set a goal to provide the best information possible to help the interviewers decide you are the best one to fill their open position.

In this white paper, candidates can learn how to do their part to ensure that the interviewer learns much about their personality and fit with the company. The key is for the candidate to do this regardless of the capabilities of the interviewer and the questions asked. Candidates can indeed own the process and be a standout interviewee compared to their peers. All they need to do is follow a simple steps leading up to the interview and follow good etiquette during and after the interview.

## How to Approach Interviewing

Interviewing does not have to be an intimidating experience. Certainly there may some excitement about the prospect of landing a great new job, but in the end, if you are the right fit for the job (and the job is a good fit for you), the pieces will fall into place. Of course, this only can happen if you provide the right information to convey what a good fit you really are. To do this, you need to master the two keys to good interviewing.

### *Prepare*

Make sure you do your homework on the company and the position. You want to clearly convey that you have an interest in the job. Just showing up and answering their questions is not enough. You will be measured by your enthusiasm and interest in what they are offering. By showing you have invested some of your own time learning about the company and being prepared for the interview will convey as much about you as the answers to their interview questions.

Incidentally, good preparation leads to less nervousness during the interview. As you will see, with a preparation methodology, your interview materials are your security blanket to rely upon during the interview. Sometimes, without a safety net, you can feel unsure of yourself or more prone to rush into a less optimal answer.

### *Take ownership of the interview*

There are many good interviewers representing companies out there. And, there are many who are not so good. Keeping in mind that the goal of an interview is an efficient, comprehensive review of all relevant facts about the candidate, you would be surprised how many interviewers miss the mark. Many don't even know they're missing mark until the try to decide which candidate they want to hire (some don't even realize it then).

Interviewers don't always ask all the right questions or probe deeply enough to get the optimal information out of the interview. It's best to assume that YOU will have to ensure all the *pertinent* information gets shared. You will take ownership of the interview even though they are asking the questions. There are many ways to do this.

## How to Prepare

Although most candidates know that preparation is essential to an interview, many only do half the work. Some try to predict what will be asked, and build their "canned" responses. This is not what we call "taking ownership of the interview" as discussed previously. Preparation needs to include building a checklist of topics YOU want to cover during the interview. This checklist will have all the essential items that will convince the interviewer you have the proper skill set for the job. Just like going to the grocery store, having a list focuses you on what you need and do not need. In the interview, it ensures you cover the items you want and do not go on tangents or rush to answer with less than optimal examples. During an interview, it is easy to panic a little and say the first thing that pops into your head. A checklist is your "safety net" to reference if you get stuck. You keep it handy during the interview and check off items as they are shared with the interviewer (this is covered in detail in a subsequent section).

I joke with candidates that building a checklist is “child’s play.” It is simple and has three steps:

1) On the left side of your desk, put the job description and any other company information you may have the job description. Put your resume to the right. Then put a blank sheet of paper next to the resume.

2) Literally connect requirements and company info on the left with the resume experiences and skill set on the right. It is like connecting the dots with a crayon—child’s play! Hopefully, you create a complex web of connections as you may connect a requirement to several spots on your resume. And several requirements on the left may link to the same experience on the right. These connections are checklist items.

3) Build your checklist by listing the requirements (and related company info) along with the best examples of your ability and experience. You should include boxes to check off as you interview. You need not write out details, as all you will need is some code words to remind you of the example(s) you want to share. For example, you list might include:

   - ☐ ASP.NET experience: Project Ginger at Company XYZ; using since 2004
   - ☐ Web Graphics: Project JoJo at Company ABC; Won the Peanut Award for outstanding design
   - ☐ Teamwork: Worked on several teams (X, Y, Z); led effort of team at Company XYZ on project for Client123.

You get the idea. The list becomes a super-concentrated version of your resume. By the way, it’s alright if your interviewer sees your checklist, as this just makes you look prepared for the interview. And, in reality, it makes their job easier. Make sure checklist items are in **priority order** so you can visually spot items near top that still are not covered towards end of interview.

Of course, preparation also includes learning as much as you can about the company (items from the “left side” in the exercise above). You might make a connection with your interviewer from this research (common clients, associations, schools, similar projects and/or processes). Don’t stop with just the company web site. Leverage on-line search engines, LinkedIn and other relationship marketing tools. Archived articles on the company can be a wealth of information. If you are working with a recruiter, make sure he or she has given you more than a job description. They should know about the corporate culture and team, recent history, and position requirements that are not posted.

## How to Take Ownership and Use Your Checklist

As discussed earlier, it is imperative that you assume you are responsible for sharing all the best information you have. Although the interviewer is asking the questions, you are providing the answers. How you do this dictates how much "ownership" you have in the process. Your goal is to get as many of the items on your checklist shared as possible. This requires some quick thinking during the interview. The different kinds of questions you are asked allow you to cover a lot of ground. Here are some examples of questions and how to answer, while leveraging your checklist along the way.

### *The Direct Question*

This is one where the interviewer asks you a very specific question that you have a very specific example/answer from your checklist. A simple example of this question: "How much experience do you have in sales?" You should not only have those facts on your checklist, but also a few key achievements in this area.

### *The Indirect or Generic Question*

Some interviewers ask questions like "tell me about yourself or your experiences?" They do not want to hear where you grew up or what high school you attended. They want to hear examples of work and skills that pertain to the job. Use your checklist! If the interviewer really does want more on your personal background, they will probably ask a slightly more direct question in that direction. Another generic question is "what is your favorite work experience or position held?" Again, your checklist has the answers—you certainly listed some of your best work. The key to this type of question is to talk about experiences that are relevant to the job for which you are interviewing, not just anything that comes to mind (that's why you have a checklist to reference throughout the interview).

### *The "Classic" Question*

These are the ones that you know they are going to ask or you have heard many times in interviews. Examples include "where do you see yourself in five years?" and "what is one of your pet peeves?" Even these questions can be links to your checklist. For these types of questions, don't be shy about practicing the answers with a friend first. The test is to see if what you wanted to convey in your answer is what is perceived by your friend. Sometimes answers are so convoluted that the true essence of your answer is lost in a long-winded, multi-faceted answer.

One of my favorite Classic Questions is "why should I hire you?" Instead of telling the interviewer why you want the job (which tells them little about why they should hire you), tell them more from your checklist, specifically: (1) your skill set; (2) your knowledge about the company, industry, processes they use, challenges they face, clients, and their learning curve; (3) your manageability (you are not a "problem child," but low maintenance); (4) your value and their return-on-investment (you bring more to the table than they requested for the same salary); (5) your tendency to go above and beyond a job description (you work hard and contribute in unique ways).

### *Bridging*

Sometimes you'll be asked a direct question where you'll want to "bridge" to a secondary answer to the question. There are two scenarios to do this: (1) when you have a good answer, but also have a second answer that is on your checklist; (2) when you have a weak answer, but have a related experience or skill that will improve the overall impression. Here are truncated examples of both.

> ***Question:*** "What is your experience in using Tool XYZ?"
>
> ***"Strength to Strength" Bridged Answer:*** "I have used Tool XYZ for several years on five different projects and consider myself an expert user. During those projects, I also used Tool ABC which I consider to be equally useful and sometimes faster to use."
> ***"Weakness to Strength" Bridged Answer:*** "I have used Tool XYZ sparingly during the last year. Typically, I use Tool ABC for the same purpose and have found both easy to use. I'm sure I could become an expert in XYZ, too, if I was to use it as often in the future."

The key to bridging is the two topics should be related somehow so it is a natural connection between the two items. Also, it is essential to answer your first part of the question concisely. If you take up too much time with the first part of the question, it's probably not wise to bridge to another time-consuming topic.

Another aspect of taking ownership of the interview is to control the flow of information. Good interviewers are trained to let interviewees talk and talk and talk. There's no harm in this as long as the right information is shared. How does one gauge this? It's essential to stop for clarification or watch your interviewer. While answering questions, see if they are taking notes or checking boxes on their list. As they say in sales, once you get your "yes," stop talking. You've done enough. If there is no note taking, is your interviewer still paying attention or is he/she glassy eyed? If you're not sure if you've answered the question, then ask. Simply asking, "does that answer your question?" or "is that the kind of information you were looking for?" helps verify you are ready to move to the next question.

Keep in mind that many interviews are on a timetable. You only get so much time to answer questions. You want to answer as many as possible—taking too much time with one can be a time waster.

## How to "Shine" During the Interview

With all the work put into preparing for an interview, knowing what you want to cover, and having key strategies for answering questions, you are guaranteed to have a great interview, right? Wrong! The interview can still be poorly executed due to the *"smaller things"* that occur during an interview. There are many do's and don'ts for the day of the interview. A comprehensive list from Virginia Tech's Career Resources Department is included below. I have added some additional comments within the list in italics.

## Interview DO's

- Dress appropriately for the industry. Err on the side of being conservative to show you take the interview seriously. Your personal grooming and cleanliness should be impeccable.
  *Even if this means adding a tie and coat on the way to the interview, you should do it. Even companies with a casual dress code want to see you know how to present yourself well when the occasion calls for it. Although, with casual companies, don't go over the top (i.e., cuff links).*
- Know the exact time and location of your interview; know how long it takes to get there, park, and find a rest room to freshen up.
  *Don't forget about bad traffic. Even if it is your reason for being late, it sounds like a lame excuse.*
- Arrive early; 10 minutes prior to the interview start time.
  *Have a contact number with you in the car in case you are running late. It is a good idea to call ahead if you are running late so your interviewers can use their time wisely.*
- Treat other people you encounter at the company (i.e., receptionist, nurse) with courtesy and respect. Their opinions of you might be solicited during hiring decisions.
- Offer a firm handshake, make eye contact, and have a friendly expression when you are greeted by your interviewer.
  *Keep that eye contact and friendly demeanor throughout the interview. People want to hire candidates who seem like they would be easy to work with (and friendly). Smiling and politely laughing at the appropriate times conveys more about you than you might think. The key is not to be stiff or nervous. Have a comfortable and conversational tone.*
- Listen to be sure you understand your interviewer's name and the correct pronunciation.
- Even when your interviewer gives you a first and last name, address your interviewer by title (Ms., Mr., Dr.) and last name, until invited to do otherwise.
- Sit still in your seat; avoid fidgeting and slouching.
  *A simple way to avoid slouching is keep your lower back pressed against the seat. Doing this keeps you from leaning forward (appearing a little too intense) or slouching (and looking a little too comfortable). Keep your hands in your lap to avoid fidgeting; only hold on to your pen when taking notes. Candidates who click or tap their pen can be annoying during the interview.*
- Respond to questions and back up your statements about yourself with specific examples whenever possible.
  *When discussing your experiences, do not be afraid to use the word "I." Sure, everyone looks for a team player and you can say "we" whenever appropriate (i.e., "we brainstormed on the solutions, and I executed on the plan"). Ultimately the interviewer wants to know what YOU did versus the team.*
- Ask for clarification if you do not understand a question.
  *You need to be an excellent listener. Half of being an "excellent communicator" is being able to*

*listen and understand what you are being told. Certainly ask for clarification if you do not understand a question, but if you have to do this too much, you will send a signal that you might not listen well (and therefore, not take direction well).*

- Be thorough in your responses, while being concise in your wording.
  *Remember, being concise ensures your intended message is not lost and allows you to bridge to related, important experiences as discussed in an earlier section.*
- Be honest and be yourself. Dishonesty gets discovered and is grounds for withdrawing job offers and for firing. You want a good match between yourself and your employer. If you get hired by acting like someone other than yourself, you and your employer will both be unhappy.
- Treat the interview seriously and as though you are truly interested in the employer and the opportunity presented.
  *You can always decide the job is not for you after you have had a chance to consider all your options and reflect on the decision. While in the interview, consider this job your BEST option.*
- Exhibit a positive attitude. The interviewer is evaluating you as a potential co-worker. Behave like someone you would want to work with.
  *Positive attitude stretches beyond the workplace. They might even comment on the rainy weather to see how you respond. "Our lawns really need this water" is a POSITIVE response.*
- Have intelligent questions prepared to ask the interviewer. Having done your research about the employer in advance, ask questions which you did not find answered in your research.
- Evaluate the interviewer and the organization s/he represents. An interview is a two-way street. Conduct yourself cordially and respectfully, while thinking critically about the way you are treated and the values and priorities of the organization.
- Do expect to be treated appropriately. If you believe you were treated inappropriately or asked questions that were inappropriate, reconsider working with this organization.
- When the interviewer concludes the interview, offer a firm handshake and make eye contact. Depart gracefully.
  *Realize that the interview starts and ends right as you enter and exit the parking lot. You never know who might be watching from the windows as you exit your car and finish getting dressed/drop your papers and chase them around the parking lot/finish a heated argument on your cell phone. The receptionist, admin, and anyone you meet are all a part of the team critiquing your soft skills. Do not assume the interview turns on and off during your stay. Anything you do or say is part of the interview—even small talk.*
- After the interview, make notes right away so you don't forget critical details.
  *You can jot a few notes during the interview, too, especially when getting answers to your questions. It sends a signal that you are listening and very interested in what they have to say. Just be careful about losing too much eye contact when putting too much detail in your notes. The details can be added later—just write down enough for recalling the conversation.*

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*Interview DON'Ts*

- ☒ Don't make excuses. Take responsibility for your decisions and your actions.
- ☒ Don't make negative comments about previous employers or others.
  *No exceptions. It sends the message that you might have an issue eventually with the interviewing company if they hire you.*
- ☒ Don't falsify application materials or answers to interview questions.
- ☒ Don't treat the interview casually, as if you are just shopping around or doing the interview for practice. This is an insult to the interviewer and to the organization.
- ☒ Don't give the impression that you are only interested in an organization because of its geographic location.
  *Or continuing education program, or company stability, or health club benefits, or… you get the picture.*
- ☒ Don't give the impression you are only interested in salary; don't ask about salary and benefits issues until the subject is brought up by your interviewer.
- ☒ Don't act as though you would take any job or are desperate for employment.
  *On the contrary, act confident, but not arrogant.*
- ☒ Don't make the interviewer guess what type of work you are interested in; it is not the interviewer's job to act as a career advisor to you.
- ☒ Don't be unprepared for typical interview questions. You may not be asked all of them in every interview, but being unprepared looks foolish.
  *The typical interview questions can be found all over the Internet.*
- ☒ A job search can be hard work and involve frustrations; don't exhibit frustrations or a negative attitude in an interview.
- ☒ Don't assume that a female interviewer is "Mrs." or "Miss." Address her as "Ms." unless told otherwise. Her marital status is irrelevant to the purpose of the interview.
- ☒ Don't chew gum or smell like smoke.
- ☒ Don't allow your cell phone to sound during the interview. (If it does, apologize quickly and ignore it.) Don't take a cell phone call.
- ☒ Don't take your parents, your pet (an assistance animal is not a pet in this circumstance), spouse, fiancé, friends or enemies to an interview. If you are not grown up and independent enough to attend an interview alone, you're insufficiently grown up and independent for a job. (They can certainly visit your new city, but cannot attend your interview.)

A few other points to remember:

- Make sure you bring a notepad for note-taking, your checklist developed during your preparation, and your list of questions. Confirm if you should also be bringing copies of your work if applicable (although it doesn't hurt to bring it regardless).
- Emphasize what you can do for them, not what they can do for you. This idea ties back to an earlier topic of answering the question of "why should they hire you."
- A convenient way to remember many of these do's and don'ts is drawing little icons at the side or bottom of your note pad. Having a little eye for reminding you to maintain eye contact or a chair to remind you of your posture might be handy.

## Asking the Right Questions the Right Way

There are several different times throughout the interview to ask questions and several types of questions to ask.

### *The Introductory Question*

Towards the very beginning of the interview, it is a good idea to pose one question before getting started: "As the hiring manager for the position, I'd love to hear your perspective on what you're looking for in a candidate and what you expect the candidate to accomplish soon after being hired." By asking this up front, the interviewee gets the chance to understand directly from the hiring manager what they consider to be key attributes for the hired applicant. You can put stars on your checklist next to these items (to prioritize the list even further) or add new items to cover.

You may have to take initiative to get this question on the table first. You will have to find a convenient time to ask. When getting ready to sit down at the table, you might say you would like to ask one question before the interview begins. You may also want to ask how much time has been allocated for each interviewing session (if you have several in their schedule), so you can use the time wisely.

### *The Obligatory Question*

In almost all interviews, the interviewer will ask the candidate if they have any questions for them. If it does not appear as if they are going to offer this, be sure to ask them if you can take a little more of their time to learn more about the team and company by asking a few questions.

When given the floor to ask questions, candidates should realize this is another time to shine. It is imperative that a candidate ask some questions that do three things:

1) Show you did a little research about the company.

2) Mention something else (related, but interesting) about you.

3) Will have an interesting answer.

Just asking, "when will you make a decision?" is not a good question. Ask about the company, the technology, the vision for the future, or something insightful. Questions about the hiring process can be asked through a recruiter or in a follow-up after the interview.

Candidates can also opt to ask some of the more generic questions, but these should still have useful and interesting responses. There are many lists of questions available to choose from on the Internet. A short list is below.

- What are the most attractive aspects of this job? What are the worst parts?
- What are the biggest challenges facing this department/company in the next six months?
- What makes this company a great place to work? Are there entities outside the company who would concur with rankings or awards?
- What would I see if I stood outside the front door at 5 o'clock? Would everyone be smiling? Staying late or leaving early?
- What are some examples of the decisions I could make in this job? What is the degree of autonomy and control I would have in this position?

Be sure to put your questions in writing so you do not forget them after a long interview. It is also a good idea to put the questions in **priority order**. This ensures that, if you run out of time, you have asked the more important ones. While asking questions, candidates should watch for cues that the interviewer is running out of time or wants to move on. If interviewing with different levels and roles, present different questions to each of the interviewers based on their responsibility.

## *The Validation Question*

After you have had a chance to ask your questions, you will want to validate that you are an ideal candidate for the job. To do this, you should probe into the minds of the interviewers and see if there are any concerns they have about you. The key question to do this can be along the lines of:

> "After discussing this job, I feel as if I would be a perfect fit for it. I'm curious to know if there is anything I said or DID NOT say that would make you believe otherwise."

The answer you get to this question may open the door to mentioning something you did not get to talk about during the interview or clarify any potential misconception over something that was covered. You may not get a chance to address shortcomings in a follow-up interview—it is imperative to understand what was missing from the discussion while still in the interview.

## *The Closing Question*

As you sense the interview is over and all the questions have been asked, you will want to leave on a high note with great enthusiasm. You will want the interviewer to know that you are excited about the potential of working there and would like to know the next steps towards this. A simple way to convey this is with the comment and question:

"I must say that I am even more excited about the prospect of working here than I was when I walked in the door. It seems like this would be a good fit for both of us. I am excited to know what the next steps are in the process."

## Last Thoughts and the Follow-up

### *Interviewing the Interviewer*

There is one other consideration the candidates sometime forget during the interviewing process: ***Make sure you like them as much as they like you.*** Keep in mind during the process, that you have to ask good questions, make observations, and conduct research (through employees that work there, internet articles and discussions, financial data) so that you are well-educated on the company.

Just be sure to maintain your enthusiasm while collecting this data. Sometimes the information you have can slant your thoughts on the company, but you need to weigh out all the pro's and con's before deciding if this is the company for you. In the meanwhile, assume it is your ideal job and keep in mind, you cannot turn down an offer you do not have. You goal is first to get an offer, and then to decide if you should take it based on the information you gathered during the process.

### *Follow-up*

Sending thank you notes is still appreciated by hiring managers. It sends the signal that you are truly thankful for their time and interested in the job. If the process is going to execute quickly, you may have to send an email. Even with an email, you can construct a short note as an attachment that seems a little more personal than putting your text in the body of the email.

Based on the timeline you were given, there is no harm in following up with the appropriate contact to see how the process is going. However, there are more creative ways to touch base with the hiring manager to keep you at the front of his/her mind:

- Send an interesting article that ties back to something you talked about during the interview or pertains to the company's industry. You can also offer a sample of your work (often times, a link to your own web site is a more convenient method for this).
- You can write a white paper, eBook, or blog post that would be of interest to the manager and send a link. You might even mention that the conversation you had inspired you to write about the topic.
- Connect using Social Media like LinkedIn, Facebook, and Twitter. Even if you do not get the job you interviewed for, you might be called back down the road if you stay on the radar. Plus, you can tap into the manager's network and find other opportunities.

The idea is to have something to say when revisiting the manager other than, "What's the status of decision?" Updating on your status can be risky as you don't want to appear to pushy, unless you truly have a time-sensitive decision to make.

## *The Last Thoughts*

The interviewing process does not have to be intimidating. It is much like going to a party and introducing yourself to new people and telling them all about you. An interview is just a little more formal and takes a lot more preparation. In both cases, you exchange information to convince each other you are a good fit to continue a relationship.

As long as you follow the outlined steps in this white paper, you should be in a great position to have a successful exchange of information. Whether or not you are the right fit, your interviewers will have all the right information to make an educated decision about you. And you will have all the right information to make an educated decision about them.