

## Interview Tips

# Interview Tips That Will Help You Win the Job



McCall & Lee - Plano, Texas (800) 335-3211 [www.mccallandlee.com](http://www.mccallandlee.com)

I know, from many years of experience, that the people who “win” interviews are not always the best qualified, but in many cases are the ones who interview best. My purpose, in sending you this overview, is to review some ideas that could help you win the interview and get the job offer, assuming it is the job you want.

I'm a firm believer that there is no magic involved in winning the interview. Rather, it's a skill that most people can develop and fine tune, with practice. The good news is that there are some basic techniques and mind-sets that are helpful to think about and become familiar with before you show up for the interview. You may very well be a polished interviewee, and may not need a great deal of assistance from me, so bear with me if I cover things you may have already experienced or thought about.

In my many years of search experience, I've observed and talked extensively with people who have successfully developed a routine that helps them win interviews, and ultimately get job offers. We're going to discuss a few of the basic techniques that make up that routine.

### The Primary Goals:

First and foremost, I want you to have a meaningful meeting, wherein one of three things occur:

- 1) The company offers you a position on the spot. Believe it or not, it does happen.
- 2) Both you and the interviewer make a decision to go to the next step.
- 3) You decide this isn't your cup of tea.


When the meeting is over, you and I will review what happened during the interview and I'll expect to hear which of the three occurred. I expect to hear the same thing when I speak with the company. The important thing is that you and the company agree on one of those decisions. A "maybe" response is unacceptable. During our debrief, I'll want to understand all of the details concerning what took place, as you remember them. I also conduct the same debrief with the hiring authority. Once I understand what happened from the perspective of both parties, I'll call you again and together we'll develop a strategy for the next step, if in fact that commitment has been gained.

### Three Assumptions:

In the successful interview, three basic assumptions exist:

- 1) Hiring authorities surround themselves with people they like.

- 2) You have to thoroughly understand the job before you attempt to tell them why you're the right person for it, and at some point you'll need to get them to agree that you are the right person for that position.
- 3) If the meeting progresses positively, it's critical that they know you want the job, if in fact you do.



It's always to your advantage to be in the position of having the option to accept or reject an offer, or to advance to the next step in the process at a time when their positive image of what you have to offer is high, and when they seem convinced that you can meet their expectations for the position.

It's important that you buy in to these assumptions because they relate directly to the degree of success that you'll attain in the interview.

### **Keys To A Successful Interview:**

Most interviews are comprised of three phases. The first is the getting-acquainted phase, the second, or middle of the interview, involves exchange of information, and the third is a commitment to action by both parties. Let's review some key things to be aware of in each phase.

**1) Getting Acquainted** - It's a known fact that many interviewers mentally decide whether to hire or not in this make-a-friend step of the interview. What you can't underestimate is the degree to which this reality can be an asset or a liability. What I simply want you to do is devote some thought to this phase prior to the interview, so that you can quickly and effectively build some degree of rapport with the interviewer before (emphasize, before) the transition to the second phase. Remember, people hire people they like, and most people generally like other people who are like themselves. Simply stated, 55% of the hiring decision is based on a random combination of non-verbal and verbal clues that make a statement about the type of person you are. What you say or don't say during the first five minutes of the interview can be more important than what occurs during the entire balance of the meeting.

What can you do to turn this phase into an asset? One way is to make yourself conscious and aware of mannerisms you employ naturally when you're with friends or associates, like the way you shake hands, how you maintain eye contact, how you make the effort to fit into the visual and verbal style and culture of your conversational partner. Another way is to take the time to choose your wardrobe carefully. Try not to over kill. Showing up dressed like Herb Tarlick, smothered with Hi-Karate will definitely leave a lasting impression. Another way is to make a concerted effort to emphasize certain body language. It's a technique called mirroring. Conceptually, without looking like a parrot or chimpanzee, consciously try to mirror the hiring authority's body language. If he/she leans forward when talking, you lean forward when you speak. If he/she tends to lean to the left or right, you do likewise. In other words, you want to look like, sound like, move like, and even think like the interviewer. The more thought and attention you devote to the first five minutes, the higher the level of rapport you'll establish with that person.

To summarize, prepare yourself mentally before the interview to be on your toes with regard to:

- How you dress
- Body language
- Physical contact
- Eye contact
- Mirroring language (verbal and non-verbal)
- Voice tonality

It's not hard to do, and the dividends are **worth the effort**.

**2) Exchange of Information** - Information you gather prior to the interview can be critical to the successful outcome of the meeting. Remember, one pound of research is often more important than ten pounds of resume! A serious candidate will walk in knowing some basics about the company, like the make up of their product line, their sales volume, the number of employees, recent stock market history if they are a public company, their chief competitors, and any publicized good or bad news. Armed with a minimal amount of information, you have the potential to establish instant credibility with the interviewer because, in some cases you may know some things about the company that even he/she doesn't. He/she will sense that your level of interest in the company is high and will likely be more receptive to answering your questions.

When we discussed the opportunity, I suggested that you do some homework on the company. Has your research uncovered any strengths and/or weaknesses? What do you see as their opportunities; and what situations exist that may be potential problem areas? Based on what you know, how do you feel you would complement their weaknesses and/or build on their strengths? What is your evaluation of them in today's marketplace? From what you know so far, is this the kind of company you'd like to work for?

You'll know you're in the second phase of the interview when the hiring authority begins to ask questions. How you respond reflects how well you mentally prepared yourself beforehand. Basic, underlying questions that they will want answered may not take the form of direct questions to you. However, the bottom line is that they will try to learn three things about you during this meeting: Can you do the job? Will you fit the culture of the organization? Will the hiring authority's superiors see you as a positive hire? Simply be aware that your responses to the direct questions they do ask will inevitably provide them with the answers they're looking for. Their direct questions might sound something like these:

- 1) Why are you here? Why this organization?
- 2) What kind of person are you? What is your business/management style?
- 3) Based on what you know so far, what do you think the duties and responsibilities of the position should be?
- 4) If you were able to measure your own success in this position, how would you go about it? What would determine your personal success or failure?
- 5) What do you think the production goals should be for this position?
- 6) What kinds of obstacles would you foresee that could stand in the way of obtaining those goals?
- 7) Do you feel as though you have the skills and experience to do this job? Why is that?
- 8) Will this position take you where you want to go in your career?


There is no easy way to prepare responses to these questions beforehand. Just be aware that they may be asked, and construct your answers in such a way that you are subtly providing answers to the three underlying questions I mentioned earlier.

There are, however, some questions that will no-doubt come up that you can and should be prepared for. For example, if the statement, "Tell me about yourself," is made, I suggest you respond with a question of your own. You might reply, "Where do you want me to begin?" This is called a flip, and, in effect, momentarily reverses the roles and makes you the interviewer. The side benefit here is that you eliminate the redundancy of a complete life history, and hone in on the information that he/she wants to hear.

The **key** to making it work in your favor is to arm yourself beforehand by preparing three or four **Short Stories** about your last two or three jobs (and successes within those jobs that could relate to the proposed position) and possibly your formal and/or technical and professional education. If prepared and rehearsed properly, these short stories can quickly and effectively demonstrate what prior success you've had, and what you can immediately do for this company. If you're aware of any current needs they have, you may even be able to translate this into specific benefits to the company.

Let's dwell for a moment on the format I'd like to see you follow for these stories. Think about a responsibility you held. Briefly describe it. Point out the accomplishments you achieved. Then focus in on the benefit or payback to the company, your customer, or yourself that was measurable, or quantified. Let's try one quick short story to get the feel for how it works. What is your most recent responsibility? What was the number one accomplishment you attained while holding that responsibility? What was the measurable payback or benefit to the company, or how were you recognized for that accomplishment?

**Responsibilities/Accomplishments/Resulting Benefits**; a simple but **very effective technique**.



I would suggest that you prepare 2-3 short stories prior to the interview, and become comfortable with presenting each of them in one or two minutes. If possible, develop stories that highlight your trouble-shooting or problem-solving skills or that highlight specific skills that you know are applicable to the prospective employer and/or position.

I want to backtrack for a moment to the point where you respond to "Tell me about yourself." After quickly (30 seconds to one minute) covering the broad basics of what you've done, and telling any stories relevant to what the interviewer wants to hear, do another flip by following with another question. It's important here to recognize that you have the opportunity now to ask for more specific information about the position, where it fits in the company, or exactly what the hiring manager is looking for in the right person to fill the position. You momentarily have the upper hand. Use it to your advantage. The purpose of using this technique is to specifically define in your mind what the company is looking for so that you can present those things in your background that prove you've got the skills, ability, and desire to perform the job. Think of the technique in terms of this statement: "Tell me what you want to hear, so I can tell you what you want to hear." Please understand that I **do not mean**, "Tell me what you want to hear so I can make up stuff that isn't true to get this job." The truth is that you have several if not dozens of skills, desires and abilities that this particular hiring authority may find very attractive. But you may never know what those key "hot-buttons" are unless you **ask!**

Remember that you can't sell what you have until you understand exactly what the company wants. Once you have a clear picture of the duties and responsibilities, you can continue to trade information with the interviewer by answering his questions with statements of proof why you are the right person, and at the same time ask him/her questions important to your determination of this being the right move for you at this time. Remember, you're in that interview to evaluate a position that could enhance your career. Learn as much as possible, and above all, **STAY FOCUSED!**

Also, consider the reality that the questions you **ask** are often more impressive to a hiring authority than those you answer. Below are several that you may want to consider and include:

- 1) What attracted you (the hiring authority) to this company? What keeps you here?
- 2) What will determine success in the position? How is it measured?
- 3) Where does the position fit in the hierarchy of the company?
- 4) Is this a new position, a change in position, a different approach?
- 5) What happened to the last person to hold this job? How? Why?
- 6) What is the strategic plan for the company/division/organization, and how will it affect this position over the next 24-36 months?
- 7) What new products or programs are being developed/introduced by the company or its competition that will have an impact on the marketplace, or the status of the company?
- 8) If I were the successful candidate, what would be my top three priorities?

Notice that most of these questions draw the focus away from the "duties and responsibilities" type of information, and may tend to open up other possible avenues for you to gain additional information about the company and their business style philosophy.

Now let's talk about "money/salary" issue as it relates to the interview. Since this is a first interview, it is best that you not ask questions or discuss compensation and/or benefits, unless it's absolutely mandatory. You're there to learn everything you need to know about the company and the job so that you can determine if it's a good career move. At this point in the process, money issue discussion will only muddy the water. However, should you be asked, understand that there's no pat answer. Let me bring up some plausible responses: "Money is certainly an important part of my career decision, but right now I'd like to know a bit more about the company and how this position fits into the organization." or "At this point, I can't put a value on my value to your company until we both know more about how I can fit into the organization." You might answer a money question with one of your own; "What is the range you have scheduled for this position?" or "Do you have a specific figure in mind for this position?"

My favorite response to, "What are your salary expectations?" is this simply this: "I am not going to tell you that money is not important, because it is. However it is not the most important consideration for me. I am looking for a great fit with a great organization. And from what I see so far this could be that great fit. I feel that I can be a great asset to your team and make an immediate contribution. As such, I'm sure I'd be fairly compensated." Then look them directly in the eye and smile. With this response, you are complimenting them on being fair, in advance. This will actually put a subtle pressure on them to make a more-than-fair offer, if they want you.

If you feel more comfortable in doing so, you can indicate that you were told by me that I (your recruiter) would be handling that discussion, by saying, "Greg (my recruiter) told me the general compensation range for this position, and indicated that if we both agree I am a good fit for you, that he would handle the salary discussions. Is that fair?" If they continue to press the issue, you may ultimately have to respond; but first try to tactfully draw attention away by re-stressing how you can benefit the company, and that it's more important, at this point, that you both agree on the fact that you can do the job. If that key point is not determined and agreed upon, what your expectations are or what you are currently making is incidental.

If all of these avoidance techniques fail, you may have no other choice but to respond directly. You might say, "Last year, I made \$XX, and like anyone I'd certainly like to make as much as possible in my next move."

**3) Commitment To Advance To The Next Step** - The third and final phase of the interview is, hopefully, to come to a mutual decision on advancing to the next step, whatever that might be. You need to realize that if mutual interest exists, the person interviewing you wants to be closed, and wants to know that you want the position. If, in fact, you do want the job, it's critical that he/she **knows** that you want it, and why you want it. Since this is the first of what could be a series of further interviews, you need to take the initiative and gain the "buy-in" of each person you meet. Ideally, you want to leave them with the impression that you've got the skills to do the job and that you would enjoy doing it with them. You want to come away from the meeting with the satisfaction of knowing you can count on their support in advancing to the next step. The easiest way to do this is to ask them in a very direct way; "Do you feel as though I have the skills and the ability to do the job?" Assuming the response is positive, then ask, "Can I count on your vote when everybody has a chance to compare notes?" If their response indicates that they have any concerns, this is your opportunity to gain an understanding of those concerns and address them, **there and then**.

Finally, as the interview is drawing to a close, be sure to gain a commitment to further action in the process, unless, of course, you're hired on the spot! You should ask, "What is the next step, and when do we take it?" If possible, try to tie down some specifics, such as, when? Where? Who will be there? What is the goal? etc. Be tactful and sensitive to their willingness to share this information with you.

If they seem evasive or unsure about the next step, try to gain an understanding of what they perceive their timeline to be in concluding this search and extending an offer to the successful candidate.

Above all, have fun and keep it light but professional. It bears mentioning that you should avoid the age-old topics of "politics and religion". And no matter how comfortable you feel with an interviewer, avoid delving too deeply into personal issues related to spouses, children, personal problems or challenges. It is OK, however to draw them out if you see pictures of their family, a ski vacation, trophies or awards on their office walls. It's OK to ask about these and show interest in them personally. Remember, people hire people who they like. Find commonalities with the interviewers and find something to like about them, and then show them that you like them.



### **Follow-up Can Make the Difference!!**

Not only does it make good business sense, it's a simple and effective display of common courtesy and professionalism to respond to each individual you meet with a short note, thanking them and confirming your continued interest in the position. The key to a follow-up thank you note is **two-fold: be sure to send one to each person you met & be brief.** Hand written, or typed notes are both appropriate however I prefer a handwritten note (if they can read your writing), as it's more personal. During the interview be sure to ask for business cards. If it's an assistant or secretary, have him/her write their name on the back of the boss' card.

### **Last, but not least: Call me immediately after the Interview.**

The Hiring Authority will be calling me to review your meeting. It is vital that you beat his/her call back to me. I need to get four important pieces of information from you:

- 1) How the interview went.
- 2) Whether you're interested in pursuing the job. If you are, I will help you get it.
- 3) What other information, if any, that you need in order to make the decision to move forward.
- 4) Your understanding of the next step.

When you are prepared, you will be more "present," you will also be more comfortable and better able to access your full mental capacity. The key is preparation and practice. It is time well spent, regardless of the outcome.

Good luck.

## **Andrew McCall**