



Brush Up on Your Interview Skills

Are you considering changing jobs? You may think that with an updated resumé and rehearsed answers to standard questions such as “What are your strengths and weaknesses?” you are ready to interview for that next opportunity.

Not so fast. Today, employers are less interested in the skills listed on your resumé and practiced answers, and more concerned about your ability to solve problems and fit into their company’s culture. “Everyone who comes in to interview has a technical degree, so I expect them to be able to contribute on a technical level. What I’m looking for is, do I like this person? I have to connect with them on a deeper level,” says Rob Jickling, President of the Toronto-based consulting firm Element6 Solutions, which he founded in May 2016. He is the former Vice President of Business Development at Oneira, a consulting engineering firm in Oakville, Ontario. During his tenure at Oneira, which spanned over two decades, Jickling was responsible for interviewing and hiring individuals with the skills and desire to learn the firm’s way of doing things. “We looked for someone who was enthusiastic about working with clients and providing an excellent customer experience,” he says.

Jickling expected interviewees to use proper engineering terms, to show that they had technical knowledge. “During an interview, we had a free-flowing conversation so that we could talk shop. I didn’t have a set list of questions to ask,” he notes. “I also looked for a level of curiosity and outside-the-box thinking. I wanted an engineer who was interested in understanding the client’s business as much as the pump system he or she was working on.”

If you want a job within a specific company, consider preparing like Lauren Gelmetti did. She recently landed a business development position at Hampton-Clarke, Inc., an environmental consulting firm based in Fairfield, NJ, by asking for an informational interview first. With this type of interview, your goal is not to interview for a position, but to learn as much as you can about the company and its products. “I will ask someone in my network to refer me to a manager in the target company. Then I’ll contact that person and ask if we can meet, just so I can ask them questions about their company and industry,” says Gelmetti. Her informational interview at Hampton-Clarke eventually led to a meeting with an executive there who was hiring. Because she had learned so much about the company from other members of its management team, Gelmetti was well prepared for the job interview.

A side benefit of informational interviews, says Gelmetti, is that you become much more comfortable talking to people you don’t know. “I’m much more confident in interviews,

and I no longer find interviewing intimidating. Often, I find that I learn a lot from the decision-maker during the interview, because I am more open to it.”

Some pointers to keep in mind when you’re interviewing:

Make a positive first impression. If your current work environment is business casual, you need to invest in interview clothes. Don’t try to get away with an outfit you wore even five years ago. It will scream “Outdated!” Get a neat and stylish haircut so that you look as polished and professional as possible. Arrive early for your interview and greet the interviewer with a firm handshake. If you are uncomfortable making eye contact while shaking hands, practice with several friends beforehand to get more comfortable.

Be authentic. “You have to sell yourself and your abilities on multiple interviews, but you can’t do it in a fake manner,” says Gelmetti. “Although you are constantly ‘ON,’ you need to be yourself. It’s too exhausting otherwise.”

Ask questions. Express your interest in the company by asking questions and listening to details about the organization. Read Emily Frangenberg’s YPOV column (*CEP*, March 2016, p. 24) for an excellent discussion of what to ask — and what questions to avoid — during an interview.

Watch your body language. Interviewers pay close attention to your body language before and during your interview, as well as when you are exiting. Do you come across as confident, with relaxed, natural gestures? Are you looking the interviewer in the eyes with a friendly, open expression? Avoid behaviors that can come across as aggressive or defensive, such as pointing or crossing your arms over your chest.

Use specific examples. Interviewers are looking for you to demonstrate your knowledge by giving specific examples from your past work experience. You could, for instance, tell your interviewer how you helped increase profit margins at your previous company, successfully led a major project, or overcame a difficult work challenge. “When I hear stories from an interviewee’s experience, it shows that the candidate knows what they’re doing,” says Jickling. Use examples to emphasize the value you would bring to the hiring firm.

Follow up after the interview. A thank-you note is a great way for you to reinforce the value you can bring to the hiring company. It also demonstrates your initiative and follow-through. It is appropriate to send your note by email, especially if you are applying for a high-tech, fast-paced job.

And finally, realize that interviewing is a two-way street. It is just as important that you like the interviewer and company and believe that you can do well in the position. “This is an important step, and you owe it to yourself to be selective,” counsels Gelmetti.

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