



How to Prepare for an Interview

Prepping for the interview is important, regardless of how many interviews you have had. Well-prepped candidates are more confident and provide more thorough answers. If you know how to give complete answers, you worry less and are able to ask better questions. Thoughtful preparation improves the odds that you will be assessed fairly, especially if the focus of the interview is on detailed discussions about your major accomplishments.

Following are some key points you should consider when prepping for the interview:

Step 1: Make sure you can articulate your strengths and weaknesses.

Write down what you see as your four or five key strengths. For each strength, support it with an example of an accomplishment. Be able to tell a story that illustrates this strength.

Now write down two areas of weakness that you see in yourself. With the weaknesses, explain how you are trying to overcome that weakness or write up a specific situation where you've turned that weakness into a strength.

Step 2: Learn the "Universal Answer"

Most answers during interviews should be about one to two minutes long. If you talk for more than three minutes, the interviewer may lose interest. You may be ranked as boring, long-winded, or too self-centered. If you talk for less than a minute, you may be too superficial or vague. Practice your answers using the "Say a Few Words" acronym (SAFW):

S: make an opening Statement

A: Amplify that statement

F: provide a Few examples

W: Wrap it up

Providing the example is the most important part of the exercise. This is the demonstrated proof behind the opening statement. Interviewers will use these examples to form their judgments about your competence. Most candidates talk in generalities. Specific examples are much more convincing. For instance, a marketing manager could give a specific example to describe how she launched a new product rather than saying she's strong in advertising and new product promotions.

Step 3: Prepare write-ups for your two most significant accomplishments.

Write down a paragraph or two that includes some details about your major accomplishments. For each job you've held, you should be able to talk about what you accomplished – be it big or small. Most candidates get a little nervous in the opening stages of an interview, which can result in temporary forgetfulness. The pre-thinking and write-ups/notes will allow for better recall of this important information should this happen to you.

Step 4: Come to the interview with prepared questions and evidence you have researched the company.

Discussions about major accomplishments should dominate the interview session. Since most interviewers don't ask about these naturally, you can get them started. To do this, ask this question early if you feel the interview is going nowhere, "I want to check my understanding of your job needs. Although the recruiter from reviewed this with me, would you please give me an overview of what the job entails and describe some of the key challenges in the job in your own words? Then I can give you some examples of work that I've done that are comparable."

Something like this will allow you to then describe some important related projects you have worked on. Managers generally like candidates who are more forceful and who ask good questions, so make sure you have a list of other insightful questions to ask, such as: "What does the person in this job need to do to be considered successful?" "What's the biggest problem that needs to be addressed right away?" "What types of resources are budgeted already?" "How have you developed your team members?"

Research the company on the internet by using Google or Yahoo. Hoovers (www.hoovers.com) offers company information with detailed business reports and industry profiles. Weave the information you gain from your research into the interview to demonstrate your interest level and thoughtful preparation.

Step 5: Ask for the job if you want the job.

At the end of the interview, tell the interviewer that you are interested in the job, and would like to know what the next steps are. If the next steps seem evasive or unclear, ask the interviewer if your accomplishments seem relevant to the performance requirements of the job. Understanding a potential gap here allows you to fill in with an example of a related accomplishment. Make sure you do the best job possible of presenting your strengths. Sometimes you have to ask for the job to understand what points you need to emphasize with the interviewer.

Other Important Items to Note:

Expect the unexpected

Don't assume that you will interview with a single person. Anticipate group interviews and consecutive one-on-one interviews.

Be enthusiastic if you feel enthusiastic

Many interviewers get tired of the process and lose their energy. Be careful, as this can be contagious.

Write a Tailored and Timely Thank You Note

Last but not least, either via email or snail mail, expressing your appreciation for the interview. Be careful to proofread your note before sending it on its way. Do this as soon as you return from the interview.