



Master your Domain.

Hire Accordingly.

## Preparing for a successful interview

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**Goal:** The goal of the interview process is to find the opportunity that is “right” for you at this stage in your career.

The goal is **NOT** to test whether or what kind of offer you can command, or to see how many offers you can get.

In order to facilitate this process, we recommend and adhere to a criteria-based model for decision-making. The professionals we work with take an honest inventory of what they bring to the table and develop an objective set of criteria from which to evaluate any career opportunity.

Our job is to facilitate those decisions by prompting you to be clear about your criteria and to make sure that you have all the information you need to make your decision at each step of the process. The decision is always, “Do I move forward from here or do I end the exploration of this opportunity?” Sometimes that decision requires more information. We work with our candidates to help prepare them to ask for the information they will need to make decisions as well as to obtain additional information they may need.

Utilizing this approach to your career search will save you countless hours of second-guessing yourself and being strung out over what you should do. It empowers you to say, “Yes, I want to move to the next step,” “No, I don’t want to move to the next step,” or “I need the following information in order to make my decision.” No longer does “I’m not sure” render you impotent. You are now in control. Start now if you haven’t already made your list of criteria for the next step of your career, even if you don’t plan to take that step anytime soon. Update as necessary. You’ll be very glad you did!

- Objectives:**
1. Assess whether this is the right opportunity for you by finding out what you need to know about the company, culture, and position and by gaining a full understanding of their needs.
  2. Accurately represent to the company what your skills, background, and characteristics are in light of what they are looking for. (*Keep these two objectives in this order*)

**Strategy:** You are on a “quest” for the most appropriate next step in your career and you can reach your goal and fulfill the objectives above by letting **QUEST** be a guide:

## Questions:

You will demonstrate that you are an excellent candidate for consideration if you ask good questions. Good questions demonstrate critical thinking abilities and communicate interest. Candidates who ask good questions are the ones who are remembered and are the ones who get hired.

Here are some sample questions:

1. What are the special challenges facing the company/department?
2. What is the main thing you absolutely need to see accomplished by the person you hire for this position? In what time frame does it need to be accomplished? How will you measure/evaluate their performance?
3. How would you describe the ideal employee for this position?
4. Based upon what you know about me so far, what is it about my background and qualifications that you believe would be of most use to your organization? (This last question could give you tremendous insight into the opportunity)

You get the idea. Think of some questions that demonstrate a sincere interest in this opportunity **AND** will give you the information you will need in order to assess whether this is the right opportunity for you.

## Understanding:

Too many people are selfish these days. They want to find out what the company has to offer them and then “sell” the company on themselves. Never ask about the opportunities for advancement and the benefits package on the front end of an interview. One of the worst things you can do as a candidate is give the impression that it is “all about you” and what the company can do for you. Always begin by sincerely seeking an understanding of *their* needs. Once you have an understanding of what they need, you will know 1) whether you have the skills necessary to fulfill their needs, and 2) whether you have a basic interest in meeting their needs. Then and only then will you be able to convince them that you are the person *they* are looking for.

## **E**nthusiasm:

Other things being equal, the person who shows the most enthusiasm will get the job. Energy sells. Related to this is chemistry. The match between candidate and employer can be as much as 60% chemistry, (the other 40% would be qualifications).

1. Always present yourself as someone who has a genuine, positive, and enthusiastic interest in the opportunity and each person you interview with. There are no second chances to make a positive first impression. You may be skeptical of the opportunity for a number of reasons. You may be interviewing only to give it a chance. But, if you communicate skepticism instead of enthusiasm and interest, then even if you become genuinely interested in the process of interviewing, you can kiss the opportunity good bye. You will have been perceived as someone who was not enthusiastic or interested and it won't matter how well qualified you are. You will be viewed as an unnecessary risk.

At the end of each and every interview in the process, if you truly like the opportunity you are learning about do not take it for granted that they will assume you are interested! Even if you are smiling a lot and acting interested, this is NOT enough. You **must** come right out and say, **“Based upon what I am (have been) learning about your company and the opportunity, I want you to know that I am very interested!”** You can tell them why also. Everyone likes to hear good things about themselves (and their company), so tell them what appeals to you about them. If you can link what you like about them to what you would be able to do for them, all the better!

## **S**uccinctness:

You want to answer questions and make your points with as few words as possible to give a complete and effective answer. This requires that you listen carefully to what they are asking you and you respond only to the question asked. If you go into a lot of different things or introduce many additional topics every time you are asked a question, you will run the risk of raising unnecessary questions in their minds. Don't open any Pandora's boxes.

### **Suggestion for being succinct:**

Prepare some “vignettes” to tell (do this ahead of the interview)

What do we mean by “vignette”? This is a brief, descriptive story you create for the purpose of illustrating what you have accomplished in the past and how your experience would be useful to this employer. You prepare a vignette by first thinking about the job you are going to interview for and the things you know, going into the interview, are important to that employer. So, think about what is important to this employer in terms of the position you are

interviewing for. Then, think about your career and remind yourself of challenges you have faced that relate to those anticipated “hot buttons” of the employer. When you have identified approximately 3 issues, you will create a vignette for each of them. You will then practice telling them concisely, without reading them, to someone who will let you practice on them.

**Possible topic for a vignette:** One of my strengths is working with missing data and I think this would benefit a new employer (this particular employer).

Use the following format to prepare each vignette:

1. State a challenge you faced (in an area that you know is relevant to the position you are interviewing for, e.g. handling missing data).
2. Explain how you addressed the challenge.
3. Express the result of your efforts (this can be a solo achievement or an achievement you accomplished as a member of a team – just highlight the part you played in it).

Go to your interview with 3 vignettes prepared. If you are asked questions that relate specifically to a vignette you have prepared, then answer the question with that vignette. If not, then make sure you introduce them yourself during the interview. This tool will ensure that you will be clear, concise, succinct, and very relevant in what you say during the interview due to your advanced preparation.

**WARNING:** At no time **whatsoever** during the interview process should you **ever** communicate any negative information, especially about your current employer, a previous employer, colleagues, industry practices, etc. Again, **NEVER** say anything negative about a previous or current employer! That will be the kiss of death to you as a candidate. Anything negative in your background or attitude needs to be presented in an appropriate and positive manner. If you have any doubts in this area, especially if there is anything negative in your background, speak to your recruiter about how to best handle this during the interview process. It is possible that a piece of negative information about you will cause your recruiter to recommend your discontinuation with a particular client. If so, keep in mind that this is a good thing and much better than the consequences that could result otherwise. Trust and partner with your recruiter fully. An ethical recruiter will serve your best interests just as well as the interests of their client.

### **Tough Questions:**

In any interview you may be asked some tough questions and you need to be ready to effectively answer them.

### **Examples**

#### **“Tell me about yourself.”**

Don’t give them the 20-minute exposition starting with where you were born. Instead, say to them, “Sure. Where would you like me to begin?”

**“What will it take to get you here?”**

This question is aimed at finding out what kind of compensation you want. Remember that whoever talks about numbers first loses. Also, you don't want an employer to think that your main motivation is money.

Money is certainly important, but it should never be the main or only thing motivating an individual. That's a huge red flag!

Your answer should be,

**“I don't want to make a decision based solely on money. I'm looking for the career move that best fits with my background and career goals. If I feel that your opportunity is the best one for me and if you feel that I am right for you, I'm sure compensation will not be an issue.”**

And then **SMILE** real big. This is as important as what you have just said. So, **SMILE** and really look genuinely happy to be there and happy to be thinking about being there full time. Did we mention, **SMILE**? It can't be overstated.

If they press you relentlessly on compensation, you can say,  
**“I am currently making, \$\_\_\_\_. Of course I would like to see an increase. My recruiter has assured me, however, that my expectations fall within the range for this position. So, I want you to know that if it is the right opportunity for me, I will seriously consider your best offer.”**

**Tough Questions, continued:**

**“What is your greatest weakness?”**

1. Come up with a weakness you experienced (or noticed) earlier in your career. Tell what you have done to overcome, improve, or compensate for this weakness. Then describe how your efforts have improved your ability to the point that, although it may be an area weaker than others for you, it is an area in which you feel you perform well. Thus, you describe your weakest area as one that you can do well because of continual attention and effort.
2. Come up with a very common weakness. If you do this, chances are the person interviewing you will have the same weakness or a department full of people that have that weakness. In any case, it will help to diffuse the seriousness of your weakness. Don't try to pretend that you don't have any weaknesses. That isn't true for anyone. :o)

THE CLINCHER...Tell them what you have done to address that weakness. If you do this, the picture you will paint is... here is a person modest enough to admit to his/her weaknesses, and smart enough to do something about them. How refreshing.

**“Why are you looking?” or some variation of this:**

You are a candidate that will cost money for this company to hire. They need to have the impression that you are worth a fee (I sincerely hope that you believe you are – if not, I may have misjudged your value), that they could not have found you without a recruiter, and that you are **not** unhappy, unqualified, or unemployed.

So, even though you may, in fact, have your eyes and ears open to new opportunities, you need to present yourself in the most positive way possible and position yourself as an entity of value with proven and marketable skills that they would be fortunate to be able to bring onto their team. Here’s the form your answer to this question should take (customize it to yourself, but communicate the principle demonstrated in the following answer):

“I’m actually very happy in my position as (\_\_\_\_\_) with (the company). I love the work I do (describe briefly). It is very fulfilling because \_\_\_\_\_. The company has been very good to me (or say something that is true and positive about your current company—Never, ever, ever say anything negative about any employer – NO MATTER WHAT!). **However**, your opportunity really appealed to me (in the following way) when I heard about it. Here you tell them how great their company, product, reputation, etc. seems to be in your assessment. (If you wish you can also tell them how much you respect your recruiter and what a great job the recruiter did in presenting this compelling opportunity to you :0) Therefore, it is something that I really wanted to explore and find out whether it would be a good *long-term* (emphasis on **long-term**) fit both for me as well as you.”

## **T**ake Control Tactfully:

You are a serious professional who is busy and in high demand for your skills and attributes. You are humble and gracious, yet you know your value. You are confident and you don’t waste your time or that of others. If you interview with these people and you let the interview end without 1) knowing what they honestly think of you, and 2) what your status is in their process, then “shame on you”.

Remember the goal? To determine whether this is the right opportunity for you at this stage of your career; to make a decision by matching up the facts of the situation with your criteria. If you call me and say, “I think it went well.” Or “They liked me.” and I ask you “Why is that?” and you say, “Oh, I just felt that way” or “I just got that impression” or “That’s just how it ‘struck’ me”, then you are only reporting a feeling that you had; you have no objective evidence or support for your statement other than a guess based upon your feelings--and

furthermore, “shame on you”. Why do I say, “Shame on you?” Because you can’t imagine the numbers of people who leave an interview situation thinking it went one way based on their feelings and then find out that it didn’t go that way at all. (This is true in both directions, by the way. Some people who think their interview bombed actually were very impressive to the person with whom they interviewed.) I want you to be a cut above other candidates (in fact, I work hard to identify and work only with people who **are** a cut above). And I don’t want

you to have a big surprise later that contradicts a *feeling* you might have had, for example, when Dr. So-and-So smiled at you out of politeness, but doesn’t think you are the right fit for her department, or when the CMO laughed out loud at your jokes, but truly thought you were the most obnoxious person he’d ever interviewed. Get it? If you had asked for objective feedback you would have had the chance to find out what they really thought and the chance to respond, which could potentially change the outcome. Once you leave the interview it’s too late.

You want to communicate your confidence and your ability to get things done. That means that you are strong and confident enough to deal with reality (feedback). You realize there are two sides to this equation and that you and the company are both trying to make the same determination: “Is this the right match?”

So, here’s what I recommend you do. Always close for the next step: Early in the interview ask the question, **“If all goes well in this interview, what will happen next and when will it happen?”** It is reasonable for you to know what their process is, who makes decisions, when, and also what their evaluation of you is. If it isn’t going to be a fit, you will want to know that so that you do not spend time on something that doesn’t justify your time (or theirs).

Then toward the end of the interview, when they have finished asking you questions and you have asked everything you wanted to ask, you say this,

**“I think all my questions have been answered. I have enjoyed talking to you. I really appreciate your time today, and based upon what I’ve learned, I want you to know that I’m very interested. (Pause very briefly)**

**Based upon what you have learned about me during this interview, do you have enough interest to invite me to the next step?”** Then, if the answer is positive (e.g. “yes”) ask this, **“What, specifically, is it about me that causes you to think that I may be a good fit for this position?”** Also, **“Is there any area in which you think I may be lacking?”** (This question separates the “men from the boys”. Are you strong enough to ask it?)

If the answer is negative, (e.g. “No”) ask, **“What, specifically, do you feel I am lacking as a candidate for this position? I ask the question so that I can improve myself, not to challenge your assessment.”** Don’t be afraid to ask

**for feedback. It is information that may be very, very helpful to you in developing your career. And, by the way, you do not have to believe all the feedback you get. Do with it what you want, but get it, as it may really help you in the long run.**

If they hedge, you might ask if they have any concerns about whether you could fulfill the requirements of the position. This could be your only chance to adequately address their concerns if they have any. The alternative is to walk out of an interview without truly knowing how you did and not having had a full opportunity to adequately exchange the information necessary to meet the goal of the interview process (like so many mediocre candidates do all the time, often only to be surprised and disappointed when they get the formal feedback).

Don't make the mistake that so many people make. They are afraid they might hear something they don't want to hear, so they don't ask. Instead, you have the opportunity to leave the interview feeling confident and communicating that you are a powerful person who can hear the truth and not be threatened by it. The question also communicates accountability on your part because a person who asks for feedback is generally a person who will address areas of concern when they are shared. If this isn't a match, that does **not** mean that you are inadequate in any way. It only means that this isn't the right "fit" and that you need to move on to finding the right one, and so does that company. You can both feel like "winners" at the end of the interview, instead of potentially setting yourself up for feeling like you were dumped after getting your hopes up.

Finally, it is our practice to debrief with candidate immediately after all interviews. We ask that you call your recruiter immediately upon completing any interview. Immediately means within 30 steps or 30 seconds after the interview ends, whichever comes first. In other words, don't do anything else until you call to debrief after your interview. Demanding, we know. But we do this for good reason. It will benefit you. :o) Good luck!