**The Ultimate Guide to Job Interview Preparation**

by Louise Giordano

The biggest mistake in interviewing is not being fully prepared. It behooves job-seekers to use every conceivable means possible to prepare for the interview and to allow ample time to fully prepare. Understand that interviewing is a skill; as with all skills, preparation and practice enhance the quality of that skill. Preparation can make the difference between getting an offer and getting rejected.

There is no one "best" way to prepare for an interview. Rather, there are specific and important strategies to enhance one's chances for interview success. Every interview is a learning experience, so learning that takes place during the preparation and actual interview process is useful for future interviews.

Initial preparation requires recent assessment of skills, interests, values, and accomplishments; a re-assessment and updating of one's resume; and research on the targeted company/organization and position. Preparation also includes actual practice of typical and targeted interview questions. Final preparation includes details of dress and appearance, knowledge of the location of the interview, what to expect, and protocols for follow-up.

General preparation before you begin the interview process:

Self-assessment: I recommend self-assessment annually, but most people resist this step. When one is unemployed or fearing lay-off, the time is right for reassessing current skills, talents, abilities, strengths, weaknesses, interests, and work values. In addition, it is clearly time to re-examine accomplishments and achievements, particularly those that may be relevant to a prospective employer. I recommend keeping an on-going accomplishments file in which to maintain such items as articles, congratulatory letters, kudos from the boss or clients/customers, 360 evaluations, and descriptions of successful activities as they occur. In the course of daily business life, one often forgets those notable successes. [Editor's note: To read more about leveraging your accomplishments, see our article, For Job-Hunting Success: Track and Leverage Your Accomplishments.]

Updating your resume: The accomplishments file serves as a springboard to reassessing your resume. The file contains content for selective resume inclusion. If we assume that a resume must be accomplishments-based rather than descriptive of one's responsibilities, then the file serves to jog one's memory about recent notable activities. Bare-bone the resume by removing all superfluous and/or irrelevant material, all articles (a, an, the), and work at getting it onto one page. Use functional headings to help focus the reader on what you have done and what you can do for the prospective employer. Be absolutely certain it is error-free.

Let's now assume you have a specific interview lined up.

Research, research, research: Depending on available time, use every possible means to learn all you can about the company and position. Use the public library or local bookstore to locate and read information about the company/organization. Access books, journals, magazines, newspapers and any reference materials useful for investors -- and job-seekers! Ask the reference librarian about connections to investor online publications or services, such as Valueline, Lexis-Nexis. Read and/or check online resources for major business publications, such as Forbes, Money, Kiplinger's, The Wall St. Journal, or Investors Business Daily. Go online to the company's Web site as well as competitors' sites. Use investor Web sites to learn what's happening now in the news with this company and its competitors. Use bizjournals.com to find business news by industry and/or location.

Use your alumni network to the best advantage: if your college offers a searchable online database, search by company name. Contact any alumni who work for that company. Choose fairly recent graduates (to learn about the interview and hiring process, and early experiences on the job) and older alumni as well (to learn about corporate culture, history, and career paths.) All alumni contacts are valuable for their insights as well their connections. Always come away from any networking meeting with at least two additional contacts.

Re-assessing your resume: Even if you have sent your best-yet resume, which was obviously successful in making the cut, review it thoroughly and know everything that's on it. Be prepared to discuss supplemental experiences that might be important to this employer. Use a Job Interview Prep Sheet to focus on experiences you feel are most relevant and match them to the employer's needs.

Practicing typical and targeted interview questions: Be able to answer the "Basic 3:"

* Why are you interested in this field?
* Why are you interested in this company?
* Why are you interested in this position?

Be prepared to discuss anything on your resume. Be prepared to answer questions/issues you really don't want to answer. For example:

* your greatest weakness
* your lack of related experience
* your low GPA
* your lack of leadership experiences
* your record of job-hopping

Practice with a friend, career counselor or coach, or in front of a mirror. Video or audio-tape your answers for future review. Scrutinize how you look and sound. Note inflection of your voice, mannerisms and gestures, facial expressions, poise, energy and enthusiasm in your answers as well as in your body language. How can you improve, enhance, develop, or revise your answers and/or delivery?

Because interviewing is a skill, you can only improve your style and acumen with practice. College and university career services offices typically offer mock interviews and interview workshops. But you can always prevail upon family or friends to help you prepare. ASK!!! Ask too for genuine feedback that will be helpful in working out the kinks. Practice is important too in assuaging fears and nervousness. However, a degree of tension is beneficial toward maintaining a level of alertness that causes you to sit up straight and forward in your seat, leaning toward the interviewer. The ideal is to strike a balance between poise/calm and energy/enthusiasm.

Prepare questions to ask. These questions should reflect your research on the company and position and should never include questions whose answers are readily available in company literature or Web site. Do NOT ask about salary or benefits!

Final preparations: Select appropriate attire long before the interview day. Know the culture of the organization for which you are interviewing and dress accordingly -- perhaps a notch above that -- especially if the company has espoused corporate casual. A business suit is always acceptable. Be certain that your clothing is clean and well pressed. Do a test run to determine comfort level. Too short or too tight may cause you -- or others -- to be distracted or uncomfortable. Minimize accessories. Remember: less is more. You want to be memorable for the right reasons.

Know the location of your interview. Do a drive-by if possible. Plan to arrive at the designated office 10 minutes in advance. Allow ample time for traffic, the possibility of getting lost, and parking difficulties. Bring extra copies of your resume in a folder or portfolio. Bring a small notebook for notes, but keep note-taking to a minimum.

Collect business cards from every individual with whom you interview. Ask about timeframes for filling the position, how and when you will be notified, and if they would like additional information or materials from you. DO NOT ASK ABOUT SALARY OR BENEFITS!

Follow-up: Send a thank-you note within 24-48 hours of your interview. Send one to every person who interviewed you. Email is OK, but follow protocols for formal business correspondence, which is always more formal than typical email. Use the thank you note to reiterate your interest and to emphasize your specific qualifications for the position. What do you want them to remember about you that is likely to "sell" them on you as a viable candidate? Everything about the job search should be focused on what YOU can do for the company, what YOU bring to the position, and why the employer should hire YOU! The interview may be your one shot -- so make it a good one!