Your Guide to Successful Interviewing

"We have ways of making you talk." -- Waldemar Young, Lives of a Bengal Lancer


After that it seemed rather difficult to go on with the conversation." -- P.G. Wodehouse, Jeeves and the Impending Doom

Introduction

The employment interview is the most critical part of the recruitment process. More than any other phase of recruiting, it also has a tendency to generate anxiety in all people concerned. The interview is basically a conversation; an exchange of information on both a verbal and nonverbal level between two or more interested parties. To be at the interview stage the employer has already determined that you appear to have the intellect and skills that they are looking for in an employee. Now they are trying to determine if their perceptions were correct and whether you will fit into the culture of the organization. Thus, while there are some objective elements to the interview (developed skill level, communication level, etc.) for the most part it is a subjective process. While there are some factors you may not be able or want to change, i.e., your personality, there are a number of things you can do to improve your interview skills. To begin with, there are two cardinal rules to remember when interviewing: Be Yourself and Be Prepared.

What is an interview?

A good interview is like a good conversation. Two people exchange information, ask and answer questions, and, in the process, form opinions about each other, and about whether a relationship is likely to develop. An initial or "screening" interview is generally short (20"--1 hour), and provides an opportunity for the applicant and the employer to make basic decisions about whether they want to pursue their interest in each other. During this interview, the applicant should ask good, to-the-point questions which will convey his or her interest in, enthusiasm for and knowledge of the employer's practice. The follow-up interview is usually longer than the initial interview, allowing time for more probing questions to determine how good the fit will be between the applicant and the firm. For a step-by-step guide to the follow-up or "callback" interview, click here.

Be Yourself:

This means that you need to understand yourself. You need to go through a process of self-evaluation and exploration of your career and life goals. This is an on-going process and should be done at the very minimum once a year. You need to be aware of your weaknesses and turn them into positives. Most importantly you need to be able to effectively communicate who you are and what is important to you to the employer. Remember, if you try to be what you are not in an interview you are being unfair to yourself and the employer. You could also end up in a job that is not right for you because you were not true to yourself.
Be Prepared:

This is a key element of successful interviewing. You need to know all the details of the interview (who you’re talking to, date, time, place). You also need to research the employer and find out as much as you can about the firm or organization. This involves reading firm resumes, NALP Forms, evaluations of firms, talking to professors and Career Services, conducting on-line searches, etc. The more knowledge you have about the nature of work the firm or organization conducts the more likely you will be able to convey to the employer your desire to work there.

How should one prepare for an interview?

Research

Look at the firm’s website for: The firm’s areas of practice, the location of its office(s), any significant lawsuits or legal matters in which it is currently involved, and the presence (or recent absence) of famous/infamous lawyers in the firm (former politicians, law professors, outlaws), and background information about the interviewer.

Talk to people who have worked there, and use your research skills to locate news articles about the firm (see "Researching Employers" in the Guides section of the CSO website).

Appearance

Do not make your looks an issue in interviews. You want to be remembered for your keen, analytical mind and good preparation, not for your short skirt or day’s growth of beard. Dress conservatively: a suit, dress shirt and tie for men; a suit or professional dress for women. Shine your shoes. Wear little jewelry—no more than a watch and wedding ring for men; women may add tasteful earrings and necklace. Make sure that your hair is neat and clean, and do not overdo make-up. Due to possible allergic reactions, consider foregoing scent of any kind. It’s hard to favorably impress someone whom you are making ill. Just presume that you have bad breath and use breath mints.

Why should you dress traditionally and conservatively, when you’re a second millenium kind of guy? Because the employer does not yet know you, in your full complexity and splendor, and will view your clothes symbolically. If you wear your interview suit, he/she will be soothed, and will infer that you know the rules of the game, that you know what is expected of you, that you are a team player, that you know how to behave, and that you can be trusted. The employer will not presume that you will always wear a gray, pin-striped suit with white shirt and rep tie; the employer will presume that you will never disappoint.

Once you have the job and are wowing people right and left with your legal acumen, integrity, unshakeable ethical standards, and tireless laboring in the vineyards of the law, then, by all means, roll out the diamond earring (men) and Harley-Davidson (women) and your colleagues will welcome the opportunity to be broad-minded about your idiosyncrasies.

Questions & Answers

Questions You’re Asked

There is only one question interviewers ask: “Why should we hire you?” It can be phrased many different ways, but it’s the only question the employer has. Keep this in mind as you respond to
the various forms the question takes, e.g.,

- Why do you want to work for us?
- What do you like least about law school?
- Tell me something about yourself.

Law Firm Questions Public Interest Questions Government Questions

Questions You Should Ask

- Why did the interviewer choose this firm?
- Does the firm have a training/rotation/mentoring program for new attorneys?
- How did the interviewer choose his/her practice area?
- Will there be opportunities to obtain experience in a chosen field?
- What does the interviewer like about the firm, the practice of law, or life in the city?
- What are the attributes of the firm's most successful lawyers?

Questions about firm's prominence in various areas of practice.

If hired, will you have a chance to work with the interviewer? If you can remember your questions, it is best not to write them down, but it is better to refer to a written list than to ask no questions. A list of other general, appropriate questions follows this section.

Finally, ask only one question at a time! Many interviewees dump three or four questions at once on the dazed interviewer, instead of asking one question, receiving and discussing the answer, then moving on to the next question.

Questions You Should Not Ask

- "How much money will I make?" NEVER ask this question in an interview. Yes, I said "NEVER." Of course you're not going to accept an offer of permanent employment without knowing the salary, but you can ask about salary when you have the offer firmly in hand. Instead focus on other professional factors, which are of concern to you in choosing a firm. The same advice applies to questions about fringe benefits, health insurance and paid vacation or sick leave.

- "What is the billable hours target for new associates?" If you ask this, the interviewer will assume that you don't want to work hard. There are better ways to get this information. Try to interview at the firm late in the day. Notice if the office is deserted at 6:00 pm or still in full swing. Ask associates about their outside activities. If they have none because of the pressure to put in excessive hours, they'll tell you. If all else fails, ask about the target after you've received an offer.

Things to Remember

Be positive. Focus on your accomplishments and successes. If you feel a need to confess your complete unworthiness, confess to me, not to prospective employers. I'll tell you if you should reconcile yourself to the idea of permanent unemployment.
Be enthusiastic. Yes, even about law school. The person interviewing you knows that no one goes to law school for the parties. What he/she wants to hear from you is what you have enjoyed about and gained from the experience. If you moan and groan, he/she will presume that you will also be a complainer at work. Do not be afraid to show your enthusiasm for the job. If you don’t show that you want it, it won’t be offered to you.

Be energetic. Every employer wants to hire the quick, not the dead. Practicing law is hard work (work is hard work), and requires strength, enthusiasm, energy, and willingness to perform.

Be punctual. If you are late to the interview, the interviewer will presume that you are always late, that you have no respect for other people’s schedules, that you are selfish, that you are irresponsible, that you cannot be trusted to meet deadlines, and a host of other things of which your being late to the interview reminded him/her.

However, if you are late, apologize only once, and then dive into the interview. Everyone has been late sometime to something important. Maybe you’ll dazzle the interviewer so much that he/she will forget how annoyed he/she was at 8:20 when you weren’t there and neither was the coffee.

Smile. Everyone wants to work with pleasant, congenial people, and here’s your first chance to show how good-natured you are. It also makes you appear to be confident, relaxed, and poised.

Shake hands. Everyone shakes hands in the business world. Men with women, women with women, men with men. It sends the signal "This is an interview, not a date." If you need to practice, see me. If your hands sweat, try using hand anti-perspirant (ask your pharmacist).

Make eye contact. It is still true that if you do not look people in the eye, they feel that you are not telling the truth, or that you have something to hide. If you are not in the habit of doing this, you might need to practice.

Be attentive. Because you are so well prepared, you should be able to relax and be attentive to the interviewer. Listen to what he/she says, and respond. Nod your head when the interviewer is making brilliant points. Recognize the interviewer’s attempts at humor (laugh). If the interviewer lights up every time you mention the legal clinic, take the hint and expand on your clinic experience. If something about the interview room (heating, lighting or cooling) or furniture (broken chairs, faulty phones) is causing the interviewer discomfort, offer to report the problem (and do so, to us).

Avoid short answers; avoid long answers. Some questions will lend themselves to short, concise answers, demonstrating your ability to get to the point quickly. Other questions will allow you to show the breadth and depth of your knowledge. Do not fall into a pattern of all short answers, or all rambling dissertations. Mix them up to help the interviewer stay awake.

Be real. Don’t act like someone you’re not; don’t profess interest in areas of the law that bore you. Credibility follows genuineness.

Be honest. Above all else, tell the truth. You are good enough, just as you are, and need no embellishment. In addition to your telling the truth, if it appears that the interviewer has misunderstood something you’ve told him/her, correct him/her at the first opportunity.

FOLLOW-UP
Write follow-up letters within 24 hours of the interview. Write to each and every person with whom you interviewed, and to anyone else who helped you during the process. The letters need not be substantially different, but each should be personalized to the extent possible. The letter should be typed on paper matching your resume (it will probably end up in the same file). The follow-up letter serves many purposes:

* it shows that you have good manners, and know how to behave;
* it is another opportunity for you to get your name in front of the interviewer;
* with it, you can supply any additional information (transcripts, writing samples) that the interviewer has requested; and
* you can remind the interviewer of some aspect of the interview which went well, or repair some damage ("After our conversation I reviewed my transcript, and, upon further study, determined that I am a third-year student, not a first-year student as I had originally thought.")

This is an example of a good follow-up letter

Accepting and Rejecting Offers