10 MYTHS ABOUT JOB INTERVIEWING

by Richard K. Irish

The smart job-seeker needs to be rid of several standard myths about interviewing before pounding the pavement looking for a job. What follows is a list of some of these untruths and some tips to help you do your best at your next interview.

MYTH 1: The aim of interviewing is to obtain a job offer.

Only half true. The real aim of an interview is to obtain the job you want. That often means rejecting job offers you don’t want! Incompetent job-seekers, however, become so used to accommodating employers’ expectations that they often easily qualify for jobs they don’t want. So, before you do back-flips for an employer, be sure you want the job.

MYTH 2: Always please the interviewer.

Not true. Try to please yourself. Giving answers that you think will suit a potential employer, losing touch with your own feelings (in order to get in touch with some other person’s feelings) and, in general, practicing an abject policy of appeasement are certain to get you nowhere. Of course, don’t be hostile—nobody wants to hire someone disagreeable. But there is plainly a middle ground between being too ingratiating and being hostile. An effective interview (whether you are offered the job or not) is like an exciting encounter in a conversation with your seatmate on an airplane.

MYTH 3: Try to control the interview.

Nobody “controls” an interview—neither you nor the interviewer—although one or both parties often try. Then it becomes a phony exchange between two human beings; no business is likely to be transacted. When somebody tries to control us, we resent it. When we try to control somebody, that person resents us. Remember, you can’t control what an employer thinks of you, just as the employer can’t control what you think of them. So hang loose when interviewing. Never dominate the interview. Compulsive behavior turns off your authenticity.

MYTH 4: Never interrupt the interviewer.

No dice. “Never talk when I’m interrupting,” said McGeorge Bundy.

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Good advice.
Study the style of an effective conversationalist: The person interrupts and is interrupted! An exciting conversation always makes us feel free—free to interrupt, to disagree, to agree enthusiastically. We feel comfortable with people who allow us to be natural. So, when interviewing, half the responsibility lies with you. Do you seem uptight? Try being yourself for a change. Employers will either like or dislike you, but at least you’ll have made an impression. Leaving an employer indifferent is the worst impression you can make. And the way to make an effective impression is to feel free to be yourself, which frees your interviewer to be natural as well.

MYTH 5: Don’t disagree with the interviewer.

Another silly myth. If you don’t disagree at times, you become, in effect, a “yes” person. Don’t be afraid to disagree with your interviewer—in an agreeable way. And don’t hesitate to change your mind. The worst that could happen would be that the interviewer goes away saying, “There’s a person with an open mind!” The conventional wisdom says “be yourself,” true enough. But how many people can be themselves if they don’t feel free to disagree.

MYTH 6: Let the employer terminate the interview.

Not necessarily. When interviewing for jobs you want, you’ll inevitably be offered some you don’t want. There’s nothing wrong with courteously thanking the interviewer, explaining why you’re not the right person for that particular job and then explaining what kind of job you do want. That way, an interviewer never rejects you for a job you don’t want or aren’t able to do (something interviewers hate to do—employers would rather say yes than no). And by taking the employer off the hook, you easily enlist the interviewer’s cooperation in finding the job you do want. And that’s the main aim of interviewing. Thus the trick is to terminate job interviews and to convert them to information interviews.

MYTH 7: Never ask for a job; wait for it to be offered.

Another half-truth. Of course, it’s easier to accept a job rather than ask for it. But it’s also bad strategy to be an occupational wallflower. Ask for a job you want. Showing healthy assertiveness demonstrates a strong will and healthy ambition, good qualifications for important jobs. So don’t be a crawfish; be bold.

Of course, the bold, effective approach does mean that sometimes you’ll have to cope with rejection and be turned down for a job you do want. But that’s how you learn to be an effective job-hunter: You learn to bounce back from disappointment; you persist in looking for what you want. Drive and stamina are the hallmarks of people who get ahead.

MYTH 8: Never reveal how much money you want.

Nonsense. “By the way, what’s your ball park figure?” is a frequent question during an interview. Most job-seekers fail to tell the interviewer what they want. But savvy job-hunters do just that (usually the maximum of what’s realistic). And then add, “Of course, I’m flexible.” Translation: I’m ready to listen to any reasonable offer.

The point in asking for the maximum amount is to set a figure high enough so that you can gracefully yield and negotiate downward. This shows you’re a reasonable person. And this approach has the practical advantage of raising what the employer is willing to pay. Thus, both parties negotiate a midpoint salary (between what a job candidate wants and an employer wishes that person would accept). That’s a business transaction. But it won’t work if a job candidate never says what he or she wants or else does it too late in the interviewing process. Otherwise, an employer might regard the candidate’s maximum demands as unreasonable. Moreover, by putting too high a price on your services, you screen out employers who won’t pay what you want.

MYTH 9: Always thank employers for job offers.

Another myth. Thank employers for a job offer you turn down. Never thank employers for jobs you accept. Why? Accepting a job offer is concluding a business transaction. The employer has a job and pays a salary; you are giving the employer your valuable time. A fair exchange. Would you thank someone who bought your used Volkswagen? Would the buyer thank you?

MYTH 10: Never go interviewing after you’ve accepted a job.

Not true. You are never employed until you’re on the payroll. Employers often make mistakes. They don’t budget for jobs they offer, fail to convince their boss about the need for the job in the first place, don’t clear it with the personnel department, and so forth—horror stories. Therefore, protect yourself and don’t cancel appointments to interview even after accepting a job offer you do want.

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CHECKLIST FOR INTERVIEWING

Consider the following checklist to measure how well you interview:

1. Do I always wait until an interviewer is seated before sitting down myself? (Answer: This is a business transaction, not an audience with the King.)

2. Do I always write a nice, short thank-you letter to those who took the time to interview me? (Super, Employers are bound to remember and like you.)

3. Do I maintain good eye contact during an interview? (Swell. But a constant stare is too much of a good thing.)

4. Do I avoid being cute when interviewing? (Good humor is never forced; it’s most effective when it’s spontaneous and authentic.)

5. Do I dress for success? (Yes, but also dress to fit your zany, idiosyncratic, profession, field—call it what you will. Obviously, you don’t dress to interview as the business manager for a rock band the same way you would face a Procter & Gamble campus recruiter.)

6. When an interviewer says, “Tell me about yourself,” do I stress abilities and accomplishments? (Right on! Don’t build on degrees or experiences unless education and past jobs support the job you want.)

7. Do I show genuine curiosity about employers? (That is, do you ask the interviewer numerous questions? If an employer ends up doing most of the talking, it’s clear the interviewer feels comfortable with you and you’ve made a favorable impression.)

8. Do I ask for advice in the job hunt? (Most people love giving advice and it’s often useful.)

9. Do I avoid a too casual interviewing manner? (Phony sophistication is a real turn-off to employers.)

10. Do I have small talk ready to begin an interview? (Yesterday’s Patriot-Redskin game, the devalued dollar, the wretched weather outside, all common-place subjects that are natural items of discourse between strangers.)

11. Do I reveal strong feelings, values and convictions in the interview? (Smart if you can persuasively backstop your opinions with examples in a logical and agreeable manner.)

12. Do I buckle under stress questions? (All of which are meant to see if you can be intimidated. Do you freeze, babble like a child, self-destruct?)

13. If I don’t understand a question or why it’s important, do I say so? (“Why is that question important?” An excellent way to find out what’s really on the employer’s mind.)

14. Am I able to say “I don’t know” without embarrassment? (Who knows the answers to everything?)

15. Do I answer questions concisely? (Many long-winded job applicants are in line at the U.S. Employment service.)

16. Am I sensitive to an employer’s being uninterested in my response? (“Am I giving you the information you want?” A good question to ask when you note an interviewer’s eyes glazing over.)

17. Am I being myself in a job interview? Being yourself is tough. Anyplace. Some people, however, naturally interview better than others. These lucky people are in touch with their feelings, know how to cope with authority, and are self-assured. They’re self-confident because they are authentic and never play a role. Moreover, they are excited about the prospect of finding a job.

Here are some final hints on how to improve your interviewing manner:

1. If you don’t know what you want to do, for heaven’s sake, don’t interview for a job right now. Take two weeks or two months and schedule interviews with people who are working at jobs you might want. Apart from the information you obtain about yourself and the job market, interviewing for information about jobs (rather than asking for jobs you don’t want and which might not be available) is a surefire way to become comfortable in the interviewing game. This strategy is a cinch to improve your ability to obtain interviews, takes pressure off the interviewers (they needn’t offer a job they don’t have), and improves your ability to interview the interviewers.

2. After interviewing for information, you’ll probably know two or three kinds of jobs you’ll want. And that’s a major help in interviewing effectively. The most common

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