

## Chapter 5

### How To Prepare And Conduct Interviews With Confidence

The key to having a successful interview can be boiled down to one word: preparation, as emphasized by Martin Yate, author of the “Knock ‘em Dead Job Interview” book (Yate, 2012). What is a successful interview? You may think a successful interview is one that results in a job offer. While that is the desired result, you can have an excellent interview without getting a job offer. That may sound contradictory and illogical, but let me explain. The fact of the matter is you don’t have much control over the hiring decision. You don’t know how many other people also interviewed for the job or what factors the hiring manager considered in making his decision. You may not receive a job offer even though you felt you did well in the interview. For instance, I had seen in one case where there were two qualified candidates, each with different strengths. The manager ended up choosing one person over the other due to experience level. Or in another case where there were three equally qualified candidates, one female and two male candidates, the hiring manager, wanting to have a more diverse team, decided to offer the job to the female candidate.

However, do not despair. In my mind, a successful interview is one where you were prepared, gave your best effort answering questions, engaged the interviewer fully and were satisfied with the information you learned about the company. Your goal for the interview is to do so well you make it easy for the manager to want to hire you. Managers have to juggle many balls at work. When they need to hire a new employee for their team, they have to squeeze the time into their schedule. It takes a lot of time to conduct hiring process, including writing job description, completing the required paperwork, posting the job opening, reviewing resumes, interviewing candidates and negotiating job offer.

Let’s take an example. A manager has five candidates going through the in-person interviews and it takes a total of three hours to spend on each candidate. That takes almost two work days, not including the time the manager had spent reviewing other resumes or the amount of time the interview team spends interviewing. If the manager is really impressed with you and satisfied that you are an excellent fit, she has a great incentive to hire you quickly because would save her a lot of time. It’s in your best interest to do your best to make it as easy as possible for the manager to make the hiring decision.

However, even if you did not get the job but did well in the interview and left a good impression, the manager will remember you and would likely recommend you to other managers who have openings. I had seen this many times in my career. When I was looking to hire a forecasting specialist, I had two qualified candidates but could only hire one. Even though I did not hire Ted, I kept his resume. When I learned two weeks later that Doug, a colleague, was looking to hire a demand planner –a different position but has similar skillset requirements, I recommended Ted. After interviewing him, Doug offered him the job. This example illustrates the importance of being thoroughly prepared and giving your best effort to impress the hiring manager and interviewers. If you achieve that, be satisfied with your effort, regardless of the outcome.

In this chapter, I will explain how to best prepare for your interview and how to conduct yourself in the interview. I will cover two main areas: what to do before the interview and how to conduct yourself at the interview.

## Before Interview

How you prepare for an interview is extremely important as it determines how well you will perform at the interview.

- **Know the company.** Inevitably one of the interviewers will ask why you are interested in working for this company. If you are stumped by this question, you just hurt your chances of getting a job offer. After all, why should I hire you if you cannot tell me why you are interested in joining my company? Another key reason to know about the company is for you to determine whether this is the company you want to join. Company information is widely available publically. Its website provides most of the relevant information - its products, services, reputation, culture, etc. Other online websites such as indeed.com or glassdoor.com also give good insight about the company’s culture, reviews from employees, etc. Let’s say you find out company ABC is known for offering innovative products, has been growing faster than its competitors and is rated one of the top places to work. When asked, you can tell the interviewer you are impressed with the company’s innovative products, its reputation as a great place to work, its leadership in the industry and you would like to be a part of this growing company. Take a little time to research and learn about the company. It’ll be worth your time investment.
- **Know the job details.** Knowing as much about the position as possible will help you prepare for the interview, both in the potential questions you may get as well as the information you want to find out. Before the interview, you should have a copy of the job description describing the main responsibilities, people you will be working with, your role in the overall organization and the job requirements. Usually the job description is listed on the company’s website. If you don’t have a job description, ask the company representative to email you a copy. Sometimes you can find out useful information by asking the representative for any specific qualities or requirements the hiring manager is especially keen on. Be sure to read the job description carefully to help you anticipate questions about the position and formulate your answers.
- **Know the interviewers.** This is not a must but will help you feel more at ease at the interview. Many companies have a team of people to interview you. These tend to be people you will be working with. Ask for the interview schedule if you did not receive one. It should show each interviewer’ name and their title. This reveals their job level status and the function they work in. Today, many professionals are on social media sites, such as LinkedIn, where you can get relevant information on them. Knowing something about the interviewers helps you think about what questions you want to ask them. For example, if a person has been with the company for several years in a few different positions, you can ask this person about the company’s support in developing employees and providing different opportunities. At the very least, when you meet with the interviewers face to face, your knowledge about them will put you at more at ease and help you establish a rapport with them.
- **Prepare a list of potential questions and your answers.** Different companies may have some differences on what they want to find out about you. However, I find that there are some common categories companies want to focus on.
  1. Job skills.
  2. Problem solving skills and creativity.
  3. Teamwork – how effective you are working with people.
  4. Communication skills – your ability to listen and understand people’s viewpoints as well as express your thoughts clearly and compellingly.

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5. Dedication/commitment – your willingness to take the extra step, to go above and beyond to get the job done.

Many companies use behavioral interview method when they interview you. Simply put, instead of asking you if you have the ability to do something, such as: “Are you good at presenting?” the interviewer gives you a specific situation and asks you to respond. This type of open ended question enables the interviewer to glean greater insight about you because it requires you to think on your feet, consider things thoroughly and give well thought out answers. For example: “Give me an example of a situation where you had to present to a large group of unhappy customers and how you managed it.” Regardless of how the interviewer asks questions, preparing the interview as a behavioral interview will help you do your best.

I will describe these categories in more detail. For each category listed above, think of a few questions and your own answers to them. Also, for each category, think of a couple of specific examples to strengthen your answers and highlight your qualifications. Why examples? Your examples add “meat to the bones” to your answers, personalize you and make you unique. Before we dive deeper into these areas, take an example of two answers to the question: “Are you a good communicator?”

- Answer 1: “I consider myself a good communicator with good verbal and writing skills. I’ve always been able to express myself clearly and persuasively.”
- Answer 2: “I consider myself an excellent communicator with strong verbal and writing skills. For example, during my previous job at XYZ, I lead a major product launch where I developed the marketing materials, provided training to sales people and presented to many customers. I received excellent feedback on my communication skills.”

The second answer is by far a better one. The first answer is so general anybody can give the same answer. It does not distinguish you from other candidates. Answer #2 demonstrates your ability with a specific example.

Now let’s look at the categories in more details.

1. **Job skills.** This is simply to find out if you have the technical skills to do the job. If you are applying for a position in the accounting department, you must have good accounting and finance knowledge. The job description I mentioned earlier should list specific job responsibilities and tasks you will be doing as well as the job’s requirements. This is a fundamental category. If you cannot demonstrate you have the knowledge and technical skills to do the job, you won’t get the job offer regardless of how well you do in the other categories. The questions here are specific to your field. If you are a software engineer, you may be asked to write a short program using a specific programming language. If you are a finance analyst, you may be asked about cost/benefit analysis. If you apply for a job as a marketing analyst, you may be asked about conducting customer survey or return on investment methodology. Make sure to study the job description because it will give you a good idea on how to prepare and brush up on your technical skills.
2. **Problem solving skills.** Practically any job will involve business problems and require the ability to solve them. The problem may include a range of issues, from customer, sales to quality issues. Demonstrating your ability to solve problems will help you stand out among the candidates. While most people can follow instructions, people who take the initiative to solve problems are viewed as high performers and valuable assets to the company.

The question you get could be a general question such as: “How do you go about solving a problem” or you could be given a specific problem situation and are asked to solve it. For example: “You are working in the customer support department and the customer’s level of satisfaction has been declining for the past two quarters, what would you do to improve customer satisfaction?” Many fall into the trap of jumping to solutions. That is a wrong approach. Since you have not worked at the company and don’t have much insight, the interviewer doesn’t expect you to give specific solutions. Whether it’s a generic question or a specific one like this example, the interviewer is looking to understand your approach to problem solving, your thought process on how you would go about arriving at the answer. A smart approach to solving problem is: 1) understanding the problem, 2) finding out the root causes of the problem, 3) brainstorming and identifying possible solutions, 4) weighing the pros/cons and benefits/costs of potential solutions, and 5) deciding the best solution.

For the “customer satisfaction” example above, this is how I would answer the question: “First, I will go about finding out the root causes of the problem by analyzing customer data, customer feedback reports and by talking to customers and salespeople if possible. Once I identify the root causes, I will engage with the appropriate experts inside and outside the company to brainstorm specific ideas to improve customer satisfaction. Then I would analyze the pros/cons and cost/benefits of these ideas to determine the best one for the company and then make the appropriate recommendation.” And if you have time, give an example from your previous experience where you solved a problem successfully. This will strengthen your answer even more.

- 3. Teamwork.** This is to find out how effective you are at working with people or more specifically, how you handle difficult situations working with others. For the vast majority of the time at work you will be working with other people on certain projects. The ability to work well with people to get things done is highly valued and companies examine this quality closely in deciding which candidate to hire. This skill or lack of it determines how effective you will be at your job. Consider this question: “You are a leader working on a project where one of your team members is not meeting his deadline and putting the team’s project at risk. How would you handle this situation with this individual?” With this kind of question, avoid jumping to the answer. When I used this question in interviews, I have heard candidates say they will try to get the person off the team or fired. While removing the person from the team may ultimately be the answer, it’s more important to try to understand why and then come up with the appropriate plan. After all, it’s difficult to address this situation with the team member if you don’t you know why he was not meeting his commitment.

Early in my career I faced a similar situation with Joy, a team member. Fortunately, a more seasoned colleague advised me to go talk to her to find out why. Joy told me she had some recent family medical issues that required her to leave work unexpectedly and early sometimes. As a result, she missed a few team meetings and fell behind her work. Once I heard this, I offered to help take on some of her tasks and she accepted. She was very appreciative and felt bad she didn’t come to me sooner. She was embarrassed about her situation and didn’t want to reveal it.

The moral of the story here is that there could be a number of reasons for this situation and it’s prudent to find out before taking action. If asked this question, this is how I would answer: “First of all, I would let him know the team depends on him meeting his commitment in order for the project to stay on track. Then I would tell him I’d like to

know why so I can find ways to help. Once I know the reasons, he and I can brainstorm potential solutions. If we reach a dead end, I’ll escalate to the manager for help and, at the same time, let him know I’m taking this action to ensure that the project stay on track.” My answer shows that I am a team player who goes out of my way to work with people to resolve issues and get things done. At the same time, I understand the team goal and, if I need to, I would escalate to make sure the project stay on schedule. While the team member may not like my escalation, he would respect me for being straight with him. This also enables me to build trust with him for any future project we may work together.

4. **Communication skills.** This is to probe your ability to listen and express your views clearly and persuasively. Regardless of what the job is, you will likely be working with other people, people from your team, from other functions in the company as well as outside the company. The ability to communicate effectively is critical to your success and that of the company. You will be tested for this skill in the interview. I covered this important skill in details in the “How to communicate effectively” chapter. Think of a couple of examples from your experience where you used your communication skills successfully to persuade a colleague or manager to go with your view, or where you gave a strong presentation to a new audience. The interviewers will judge your ability in this area by watching to see how you come across and listening to your answers. A lot of this is about your style – do you come across confidently, persuasively and engaging? Here are some examples of questions you may get:
  - Your manager gives you an additional project and you feel that your plate is already full. How do you handle this situation and how do you say no?
  - How do you rate your communication skills? Which part of your communication skills needs to be improved the most?
  - Describe a situation where you had to give an important presentation to a new group of audience and how you handled it.
  - The company creates a new exciting project that many people, you included, want to lead. I am in charge of selecting a project manager for this new project. Convince me you are the best person to lead this project.
  
5. **Dedication/commitment.** We want to know about your work ethics and your commitment to get the job done. Think of a time when you took the extra steps and went above and beyond your duties to help out co-workers to ensure the team project is completed successfully and on time. Also think of an example where you identified a need that was not being addressed and took the initiative to work on it. This shows you have the company’s best interest in mind and you are a team player willing to do what it takes to help the team succeed. Possible questions you may get include:
  - Give me an example when the project you worked with other people was at risk of missing an important deadline and describe what you did to get the project back on track and complete on schedule.
  - Give me an example where you show initiative to take on a task important to the company even though that was outside of your job responsibility.
  - You have a situation where your manager asks you to work the next weekend in order to meet project deadline but you already had other personal plans. Describe how you would handle it.
  
- **Prepare a list of questions you want to ask the interviewers.** Think of the interview as a conversation. Although most of the time you will be answering questions, you will have time to ask questions. It’s an opportunity to find out information you want to know about the company, about the job, about people you will be working with. This helps you determine whether this is

the right company and the right job for you. Since time is limited, be selective about which questions you want to ask. Here are some potential questions:

- What would be my specific duties in the first 90 days? This is a specific question for the hiring manager.
- What are the key success factors in this job?
- What are the key challenges in this job?
- What are the key characteristics of successful people at this company?
- What experience and growth opportunities will I be able to gain from this job?
- What do you like about the company and what are the challenges you see for the company in future?
- What are the next steps in the hiring process? This is a specific question for the hiring manager.

### At Interview

You have done your homework in preparing for the interview. Now you are at the interview with the opportunity to show how qualified you are and why the company should hire you. To accomplish this, you need to know how to conduct yourself. The key word here is “how.” A lot of it is about optics - your personality and the way you carry yourself. In all likelihood, the interviewers don’t know you and they’re meeting you for the first time. Therefore, the impression they form of you will be what they remember. Following these guidelines below will help you perform your best and help you come across as confident, energetic and engaging.

- **Speak clearly.** If you have a soft voice, this is an area you need to pay attention to. If the interviewer has to strain to hear you or have to constantly ask you to repeat, it doesn’t make for a good conversation and it brings into question your ability to communicate. Also, when we are nervous, we tend to speak faster than usual. If you need to improve in this area, practice and focus on speaking clearly and loudly enough for the person sitting across the table from you to hear comfortably.
- **Maintain eye contact.** It’s a good way to establish rapport and to show you are engaged in the conversation. Imagine what impression you would create if you’re looking at your feet while answering questions. You give out the impression of being disengaged, timid and not confident.
- **Show energy and enthusiasm.** When I have other people interview my candidates, their initial feedback on the candidate oftentimes is about their energy level – whether the candidate had good energy, showed enthusiasm and was excited to be there. If you maintain eye contact and engage in the conversation, your energy will show. You don’t have to jump up and down to show your enthusiasm.

On one occasion when I was interviewing a candidate, Kelly, for a position on my team over lunch, I asked her when she would like to start. I expected a typical answer of two weeks after offer acceptance. Instead, she answered: “How about after lunch?” I knew Kelly was joking and it made me laugh, but her answer showed her energy and excitement about joining my company.

- **Buy time when you need to.** When you get a question you’re not sure how to answer, don’t get rattled or feel you have to give an answer immediately. You can buy some time to think about it and come back to answer later in the interview. You can buy time by saying: “That’s a good question. Let me give it some thought and get back to you in a little bit if that’s okay?” Then while you’re answering other questions or talking about other topics, you can think about it in the back of your mind and when ready, re-engage the interviewer on the question.
- **Ask for clarification.** If you get a question you’re not quite clear on, don’t hesitate to ask for clarification. It’s important that you understand the question clearly so you can answer appropriately. The interviewer would be happy to elaborate on the question and this may also

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give you some clues on what the interviewer is looking for. You can say something like: “I just want to make sure I understand your question, would you mind repeating it for me?” or “I want to make sure I understand, you’re asking ABC. Is my understanding correct?” After giving your answer, you can also ask a follow up question to determine if you were on the right track of what the interviewer was looking for, such as: “Did I address your question?” or “Is there anything else you would like me to cover?”

- **Turn negative/tough questions to your strengths.** You may get questions such as: “Tell me about your biggest weakness” or “Tell me a major mistake you made.” The weakness question is intended to understand if you are objective in your assessment of yourself and what you are doing to address it. Don’t answer: “I have no weaknesses.” You come across as arrogant and not having self-awareness. The way to answer this question is to give a weakness trait that shows your desire and effort to mitigate it, and at the same time, can be seen as having upsides. One such trait is “impatience.” If you are a “go getter” type of person who drives to get things done right and as soon as possible, you tend to have less patience with other people. However, you recognize that other people may work at a different pace and you are consciously working to give them more space and assistance to get their work done. Moreover, the “impatience” trait also reflects positively on your motivation, dedication and commitment to complete the job. The mistake question is intended to determine what you had learned from your mistake and what you have done differently going forward. Think of a work mistake you made that you learned from and worked to rectify.
- **Get contact information.** Thank the interviewers and ask for their email address at the end of interview. This helps in case you have a question you want to ask but didn’t have a chance during the interview. You may run out of time before you get a chance to ask your question. This also is a good way to build your network of contacts.

### Additional Tips

- Show up five minutes early. Don’t be late. Remember what I said earlier about making a good impression. Also bring a copy of your resume and a pen to take notes.
- Dress business professional unless you are told otherwise. If you’re not sure, ask your contact if the company has a preferred dress code.
- Turn your phone off or put it on silent mode. You want to eliminate any potential distraction during your interview.
- Take notes as needed. This helps you to ask follow up questions and may give you additional clues on what the interviewer is looking for from their questions.
- Don’t ask about salary, vacation days or benefits during interview. When you get a job offer, you will know what the offer includes and then you will have an opportunity to negotiate the terms of the offer. You have limited time in the interview so ask questions that are most relevant and helpful to you. In addition, you want to avoid giving the impression that you care most about the money and benefits.
- Never talk bad about your current/previous company or your manager, whether they deserve it or not. It may create a suspicion in the interviewer’s mind about your professionalism.
- Don’t get rattled by the question. Think about the category of the question being asked and refer to your mental list of answers and examples. Also remember that you can always buy time.
- If you have an interviewer who is not disciplined and rambles on instead of interviewing you, don’t be confused or think you don’t need to say much. If the interviewer finishes the interview without knowing much about your qualifications, it’s a lost opportunity. Find opportunities to ask questions that will help you talk about your qualifications. You can accomplish this by asking, for example, about the qualities that will enable you to be successful. By listening to his answer, you

can then highlight your own qualities with relevant examples. Or you can ask for his opinions on the challenges he sees with this position and prepare to respond appropriately to his answers.

- Be aware of posting things on social media sites. Don’t post things that may reflect negatively on you. I have seen examples of people not getting the job offer because of comments or things they posted on their social media page. On one occasion, I interviewed a candidate for a management position on my manager’s team. She was very qualified and seemed a good fit for the company. As part of the background check, my manager learned of insulting remarks on her Facebook page about a previous manager. This raised a red flag to my manager and made him reconsider his decision.
- Attend the interview alone and don’t take anyone with you to the reception area or worse, to the interview room. You may find this tip unnecessary and amusing, but it had happened. You want to come across as independent and a self-starter who doesn’t need hand holding.
- When you receive a job offer, you have an opportunity to negotiate for the best offer you can. Refer to the “How to negotiate your job offer” chapter for details.

### **Additional Tips For Phone Interviews**

In addition to the discussion above, there are a few specific things to keep in mind when doing your interview over the phone.

- Have the information you want with you to refer to, such as your examples and answers. However, do not read from them. It’s easy to notice if someone is reading instead of talking. Have the materials there as references, but talk normally on the phone.
- Your voice is the only instrument to show your energy and engagement level. It’s even more important to make sure the interviewer can hear and understand you clearly. So be sure to speak clearly and loudly enough. Don’t mumble or whisper. Think of the interview as two-way conversation. Engage the interviewer by asking clarifying questions, asking about the job, and giving examples in your answers.
- Don’t hesitate to ask for clarification if you’re not sure about the question before answering. If you don’t, the interviewer will assume you understand and judge your answer accordingly.
- If English is not the interviewer’s native language, gauge to see if you need to speak slower. Check to see if he has any questions or needs clarification regarding your answers.
- Some companies use a different interview format to screen candidates. For example, instead of interviewing over the phone, the interview is conducted online without a live interviewer. You may be videotaped for this session. Through an online website, you are given a series of questions, one at a time, to answer verbally. After reviewing your recorded interview, the company representative or the hiring manager will decide whether to invite you in for an in-person interview. With this interview format, you need to be even more thorough in your preparation since you cannot ask for clarification or buy time to think about the answers. Even though it may seem awkward talking to a computer screen, you need to make sure you stay engaged as if you were talking to a live person. Smile, stay relaxed and keep your eyes on the screen as you answer the questions. If you’re looking down or away, the reviewer would see your head instead of your face.
- Last but most important, practice your interview and role playing with a friend or someone you’re comfortable with. This will give you confidence and put you more at ease when you’re at the real interview.

### **Potential Interview Questions**

1. You are given a business problem. Our sales this quarter were below target. What steps would you take to increase sales?



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2. Tell me about your last job.
3. What accomplishments are you most proud of?
4. What are your biggest strengths? Biggest weaknesses?
5. Tell me about a major mistake you made.
6. How do you resolve a conflict with a co-worker at work?
7. If you’re working on a team and the project’s going to be late because a member of the team is not meeting his commitment, what would you do?
8. Your manager gives you an additional project and your plate is already full. You can’t take on any more responsibility without jeopardizing your work. How would you handle this situation?
9. What did you like and dislike about your last job? And why?
10. What classes or projects did you like/dislike in school? And why?
11. What drives you? What motivates you? How do we help you do your best work?
12. Where do you see yourself 3 years from now?
13. Describe a difficult challenge you faced and how you handled it.
14. Describe a situation where you had to give an important presentation to a new group of audience and how you handled it.
15. The company creates a new exciting project that many people want to lead. I am in charge of selecting a project manager for this new project. Convince me you are the best person to lead this project.
16. Why are you interested in joining this company?
17. If you had a chance for a do over, what would that be and why?
18. Tell me a time when you were under a lot of pressure to meet a tight deadline and how you handled it.
19. What did you like and dislike about your last manager?
20. Tell me a time you had to multi-task and how you prioritized and handled the tasks.
21. What salary do you expect to get?