

The Interview, Part 3, Interview Strategy

Many will argue that the interview is an art form. It is a business situation unique to itself. Its exclusivity is due to the fact that the buyer or interviewer is not purchasing a product that comes off a shelf. Instead, they are buying a personality, a skill set, an education, an attitude, an intellect, a set of ethics, and a whole host of personal strengths and weaknesses. The challenge is that no matter how good of an interviewer you are, you can't learn it all, even in a series of thorough interviews supported by exhaustive reference checks. As one friend put it, "At some point, you have to decide to get married, sign the papers, and go home together. After a month or so, once you've made it official and lived together, you'll know if it's going to work out". I find little to quibble with here. As a job candidate, you are also buying all of these same things I mentioned earlier, only you are probably buying into a whole team of personalities, etc., rather than just one.

The key concept in the interview process is trust. The hiring executive is evaluating a potential candidate and wondering, "Can I trust this person to do the job the way I want it to be done, with minimal problems and unpleasant surprises?" The candidate is thinking, "Will this company give me the career, security and reward I want, if I give it my best effort?" All that either party can do is to ask enough questions until they are satisfied or until they eliminate each other.

Other key factors influence the hiring process. Chief among them is the chemistry that occurs between two people. Explaining this in depth is best left to psychologists. Suffice to say, I have witnessed hires that occurred due to common physical appearance, common alma maters, common hobbies and common business experiences to name a few. Some argue that the hiring decision is made at the moment two people meet, and that the interview is spent qualifying gut instincts. Some executives have admitted to me that this is the way they hire. They judge a candidate heavily on the basis of posture, image, presence and body language.

It is a total package and a very complex one. A key concept to bear in mind is that the old saw, "The first impression is the last". Do your homework, be prepared and focus on the details.

In last week's newsletter, we covered how to develop the plan to market your resume. If you are at the point where you are getting interviews, you have to prepare for each one on an individual basis. With virtually all of us being Web-enabled there is absolutely no excuse for any executive level job candidate to be unprepared for an interview. S/he should know the company, its products/services, competitors, industry, issues, problems and financial facts (if the company is public). If your computer is down or you don't have one, many public libraries offer free PC usage with Internet access. Any evidence of lack of preparation will end the interview in a hurry, yet there are people who think they can "wing it", much the way they did in high school. A few years ago, I was searching for a Director of Strategic Consulting, to lead the technology practice for a mid-tier consulting

firm in New York City. The client is a major player in business research and competitive intelligence. One of my candidates had many years experience in competitive intelligence, market research and business analysis. I had sent to him by FedEx an entire company brochure including work samples and management/team bios. When he met the Vice President, it quickly became evident that he had not done his homework, though the materials had been handed to him. The interview lasted less than thirty minutes. If you do not have sufficient interest in a company to do the diligence, then it is best to decline the interview than to damage your professional image and reputation.

Other advance information worth having are of course a position description, insight into the company culture, management style and other environmental issues. If you are dealing directly with a company, you may not get much until you arrive for your first meeting. If you are working with a recruiter who is on retainer, s/he should be able to arm you with some fairly in-depth information. Contingent recruiters may not always have the same level of detail available to them, simply because their mode of compensation does not always allow them the time to get it. Also, many companies do not provide contingent recruiters with the same level of detail that they will a retained search firm. Nonetheless, if time permits, you can network with your peers, outplacement colleagues, and other business contacts to get some input on a company. Even if you speak with a marketing or accounting executive, they can at least provide valuable insight on cultural issues and overall corporate management style. Whenever we share leads within The TENG, if you have worked for the hiring company or have other knowledge, you may wish to send me an Email offering to be a resource for interested candidates. I can then place you in touch with them.

The company that interviews you will take a structured approach. It could be formal or informal, conversational or a series of questions. There exist a wide variety of interview methodologies, some of which are purchased from human resource consulting firms, while others are based on nothing more than the interviewer's opinion and past experience. Be ready for either. Many outplacement firms do a fine job of coaching people and role-playing. This may seem trivial, but it is not. One of my best clients will ask executive level candidates questions like these:

- What is the greatest single accomplishment of your career? Explain its impact on your company.
- What was your greatest failure? What impact did it have and how did you correct it?
- Tell us about your present or most recent boss. What are their strong points that you most admire? What are their weaknesses and how do you deal with them? How would you describe your relationship with them?
- Tell us about your most recent performance review. What was your overall rating? What strong points and accomplishments were highlighted? What weaknesses and developmental issues surfaced? How are you working at improving them?
- Let's review your resume together. Please tell us your reasons for joining and leaving each company that has employed you.

Your answers to these and similar questions must be upbeat, factual, credible, complete and honest. With any such serious question, a very brief pause prior to answering is a subtle way of showing that you are analyzing the question, assimilating it and preparing a careful answer. This may be more effective than the rapid response, which may be viewed as an overeager desire to “feed” and please your interviewer the answer you think they want to hear. Some interviewers are careful to monitor your body language and eye contact. One expert told me that if a candidate rolls their eyes up when answering a question, they are trying to pull an answer out of thin air. If they roll their eyes down, they are looking within themselves, which is more desirable. I do not have the experience to elaborate on this. There are many books available on interview techniques and meeting conduct that can furnish these details.

Some experts advise interviewees to observe how the interviewer physically responds to an answer. If the interviewer frowns, shifts position, crosses/uncrosses their legs, etc. while you are answering their question, this is commonly regarded as disapproval of your comments. If the interviewer accepts multiple interruptions while meeting with you, this may be their way of saying they are not interested. If they nod their head, smile, offer encouragement or interrupt with verbal attends (e.g. “that’s great”, “I like that approach”, etc.), then these of course are positive or “buy” signals. If the interviewer attempts to have a colleague meet with you, this act may mean that things are going well, or they may want a second opinion on an area of concern. Finally, there are many interviewers who are skilled at being expressionless.

You also need to interview the company to minimize risk and maximize potential. A structured approach where the candidate asks the following questions to the interviewer, has proven to be valuable to many job-seekers:

- In your opinion, what are the major challenges facing your enterprise. How do you see this position for which I am interviewing, contributing to meeting those challenges? Where does Information Technology in general fit in to meeting these issues?
- Why is this position available? If it is not a new position, how many people have held it in the past five years? What caused their departures? (Important note: if this is a newly-created position, be sure that every interviewer shares a nearly identical concept of what the job is about and what the best credentials are needed to execute it successfully. Newly created positions have derailed a few careers, because top management could not agree on the nature of the job or the best person fit. Compromise hires usually become sacrificial lambs. I have encountered recruiters who will refuse to perform searches for such jobs, because the failure rate is high early on and then they have to perform the search again for free if things go wrong during their guarantee period.)
- What kind of challenges and obstacles will I encounter during my first six to twelve months on this job?
- What specific, definable goals and accomplishments will I have to achieve during my first six to twelve months in order to perform this job successfully?

- If you are my direct superior or team member, how often will we communicate?  
What kind of feedback can I expect from you?

You should ask these questions to every interviewer you encounter within each enterprise. Look for inconsistencies in their answers. For example, if the CFO and the CEO cannot agree on key issues or goals, you could be in for a bumpy ride. Get as many of these issues as possible clarified before you accept an offer. If you follow this or a comparable structured approach, you will find that your interviewers will share a great deal of information with you. As they speak, it is incumbent upon you to assimilate what they say, map it to your previous accomplishments and then strategically insert some feedback. For example, you might say, "When I was CIO at XYZ Widgets, we encountered a very similar problem. This is how our team approached it and solved it..." This entire process should arm you with valuable information. It is also an effective marketing tool, because you are presenting yourself as a thorough, thoughtful and focused executive. By offering vignettes of past experience, you are projecting yourself into their job, you are offering valuable information without expecting compensation and you are showing that you are a team player. I have witnessed many successful hires because the candidate carefully listened to the interviewer, pulled together the details and responded with value added comments and not just verbal attends.

The interview is a very complex meeting involving two competing activities, sales and research. I am recommending an overall approach. There are a number of ways to manage the interview process as well as the job search campaign. Not every one of my ideas will work for you. Seek information from a wide variety of sources and use the techniques that will fit your style and feel comfortable. As always, I am ready to be a resource and advisor, if you need me.

Our upcoming newsletters will be discussing business references and offers. Please contact me if you have allied topics that you would like for me to include in future newsletters.

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