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How to be Successful at Interviews

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How To Be Successful At Interviews

No-nonsense rules that work...

By John Shreeve Plain Words PR Consultant

The job marketplace is full of advice on what you should and shouldn't do at interviews. Some of it is good advice; much of it is trite — reminding you to wash and to refrain from wearing your Viking helmet (yes, I know they love it down the pub...but are you sure it will help you get that technical writing job?). I'm not going to do that. I'm just going to concentrate on a few simple rules that work. They won't get you every job you interview for. But they will help you to "sell" your skills in interview situations more effectively, which will considerably up the odds of getting hired.

I'm also going to assume that you have the wherewithal to turn up at the interview on time, polish your shoes, wear good-looking clothes (smart or casual, depending on the company's dress code), and to go to the toilet before the interview.

Okay, let's look at rule number one...

Rule #1: Tell 'em what's in it for them

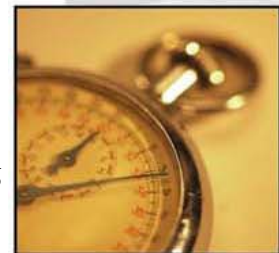
The first rule of being successful at interviews comes from a well-established maxim of the

advertising world: *Tell 'em what's in it for them and keep telling them until they buy.* Translated to the job interview, this entails telling the employer exactly how you will use your skills to make more profit for their company. You need to be specific about this. Research the company in depth and isolate the problems and challenges they currently face.

See the Articles page for a list of search tools to help research the companies you will be interviewing with Could you use your skills to help them solve one of them? They might want to set up a programming application that is generally considered highly complex.

But maybe you could do it? If so, list in detail how you would do it. It takes time and effort. But believe me, it's a sure fire way of getting a job. (In fact, I know someone who did solve a complex programming problem and got themselves a great job).

By focusing on the problems a company needs solving, you swing the emphasis of the interview firmly on your work skills *now* — not on what you've done in the past. While your past accomplishments are relevant (they got you where you are today), they aren't as tangible to a prospective employer as actually showing them how you can make their company more effective and profitable.



Rule #2: Tell 'em you want the job

If you attend an interview for a job, it's obvious you want the job, right? Well, it ought to be. But statistics from head-hunting agencies suggest otherwise. Apparently, many job candidates fail to get hired because the employer isn't convinced the candidate actually wants the job!

Although that sounds crazy, I think I understand what is going on here. I'm an ad man by trade and a rule of advertising is you need to ask your prospect (customer) to buy. You need to close the sale that you've carefully prepared for. So you look the prospect directly in the eye and say: "Would you like to buy our fantastic widget carpet cleaner?" A lot of salesmen do everything to avoid the close of the sale. And with good reason — it's embarrassing and uncomfortable. But to succeed in sales, it has to be done. The customer needs to be asked whether they want to buy or not.

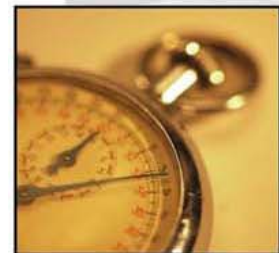
And it's the same with an employer. They need to be told that you want the job. Like it or not, in a job interview, you're a sales person. You're selling your skills and, to a degree, your personality. So, like the salesperson, you need to close the sale. You need to look the prospective employer in the eye and tell them you want the job. Don't pressurise them in any way. Just make it clear that you're not just interested in the job, you actually *want* it.

Rule #3: Be yourself — don't be a zombie

A lot of people who attend job interviews read all the "how to succeed at interviews" guide books. Most people would say it is good to be prepared and to get the right advice. And, yes, I'd go along with that. But I'd also add this proviso: *Be careful who you get your advice from: bad advice will get you nowhere.*

Think on this: three company owners of my acquaintance, all in the IT business, each said something along the following lines to me: "I can always tell the job candidate who has read the book on interviewing. You get the bone-crushing handshake, the zombie-like eye contact, the contrived body language, and the rehearsed "model" answers to every question. They stand out a mile!"

Needless to say, my acquaintances don't hire these types of candidates. The candidates they do hire, however, are those they consider were "being themselves" during the interview. I should add that they don't discriminate against candidates who are nervous (you expect people to be a bit edgy at interviews), just those who put on an act. The bottom line is: so long as you aren't a social deviant, it's okay to be yourself at interviews. And if you get hired, you don't have to keep up an act — because you were taken on for who you are, not for some song and dance act you got from a book. That's got to be better — hasn't it?



Rule #4: Learn to ride the terror

Let's face it, interviews *are* scary. Most people get nervous; some get terrified. And for good reason. There's a lot hinging on interviews. After all, getting hired means you'll be able to continue eating and have somewhere to live. So here's a good way of riding the terror...

- While waiting to be called in to the interview room, do the following: take a deep(ish) breath, then breathe out more slowly than you breathed in. Do this as many times as you like. But if you do it more than ten times, don't take too deep breaths. Keep your breathing as natural as possible, ensuring that the out-breaths take longer. It's also worth trying to breathe from your abdomen, rather than your chest.

The reasoning behind this breathing method is that when you are nervous, your breathing is shallow and rapid. This quickly depletes carbon dioxide levels in the blood, making things worse. Taking deep breaths, and making the out breath slow, brings the carbon dioxide levels back to normal and has a calming effect. Psychotherapists advise people who suffer from panic attacks to use this method of breathing.

Finally...

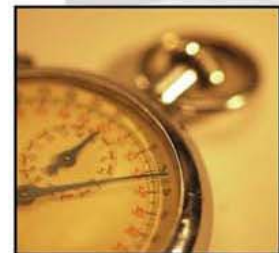
I realise that these rules might not be what you read in the conventional guidebooks on interviews. But nearly everyone reads them. And if you want to get hired, it's clear that you need to stand out from the crowd as a unique individual. The best way to do that is to be yourself. Be warned, though, you must face the fact that not everyone will like you or want you. But, realistically, you're not trying to sell your skills and talents to the *whole* world. You only want one taker. So if one IT mover and shaker isn't impressed by you, another one will be — guaranteed! The art is to never let rejection get you down. Just keep going to interviews and carry on being yourself. The law of averages means you'll tie up with the right company sooner or later — probably sooner if you market yourself well, as described in Rule #1.

Lastly, if you think I've missed out something important, or if you have any comments generally, email me! I'd also love to hear any good stories about interviews that either went particularly well — or particularly badly — and the reasons why.

Disclaimer

Oh, yes, and if you follow my advice to the letter and get hurled bodily out of the interview room — don't blame me. Blame my upbringing, the environment I grew up in, an act of God, *anything*, but me...

Email John Shreeve, Plain Words PR Consultant, at:
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Checklist of things to remember when going to interviews

Preparing for the interview

- Make a list of the points you want to be discussed — your strengths, the job you are going for, the organisation — and the questions you need answers to.
- Take one copy of your CV to the interview for yourself and extra copies in case any of the people you meet doesn't have one.
- Put together samples of your work and copies of references.
- If you are not 100% sure of the location of the interview — building name or number, floor, etc — ask us at Plain Words and we will find out for you.
- If you need to make return travel arrangements in advance, ask how long the interview is likely to last and make sure that you set aside sufficient time. Allow for the fact that interviews may run over planned time. If you have to set a maximum duration tell us in advance so that we can inform the interviewers.

Attending the interview

- Take along the completed "Pre Interview Questionnaire" sent to you by us.
- Don't forget your list of points for discussion, list of questions, copies of your CV, samples, references, directions, and research notes on the company.

Travel expenses

- Companies rarely offer to cover travel expenses to the interview — not as a matter of course, anyway. But it's not a problem to ask politely if there is any provision for reimbursing expenses.



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