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SEVEN KEYS TO INTERVIEW PREPARATION

It's been said that Napoleon won his battles in his tent; that is, he did all the planning the night before the battle was joined, so that every contingency could be adequately covered.

Interview preparation is similar. You never know exactly what will happen on the battlefield, but by being ready, you can eliminate a lot of the uncertainty, and know how to react to different scenarios.

Later, we'll look at ways to effectively conduct the interview itself; but for now, let's focus on the list, each item at a time.

ONE: THE RESUME/CV

Of course, bring a couple of copies, and be sure to read your resume/CV before the interview, so you're completely familiar with everything you've written. Nothing is more embarrassing (or potentially fatal to your candidacy) than being quizzed on some aspect of your background that appears on the bottom of page two – and not being able to remember the details.

You might also bring materials that would be particularly good at illustrating an important aspect of your work, such as a research summary, publications, and so forth. Just remember to use your better judgment.

Many candidates, in order to validate their research to me, will forward not only a publication list but copies of the publication itself.

Be careful, though, not to overdo it with the props. College diplomas, letters of commendation, and company bowling trophies should be left at home. When in doubt, just bring your resume and your business card – they're the most important props you'll ever need.

It's a good idea to carry a leather folder or day runner with you so you can take notes or store written materials the company might hand you during the course of your interview. A briefcase is also fine, although I prefer a folder, which is lighter to carry, and less cumbersome. Always remember to bring a pen or pencil.

TWO: APPROPRIATE DRESS AND APPEARANCE

Much as I find some aspects of the New Dress for Success (Warner Books, 1988) formula as espoused by author and wardrobe consultant John T. Molloy a bit disheartening, there's simply no practical excuse for dressing any way other than the book suggests. Sure, we'd all like to think that we're being judged on our qualifications, skills, and depth of character. But the truth is, when it comes to interviewing, in most cases, clothes make the person. To think any other way is to ignore reality.

THREE: DIRECTIONS TO THE INTERVIEW LOCATION

Try to get directions at least a day before your interview, so you don't get lost and arrive late. And here's a tip: Always bring some cash to pay for parking. Never ask an employer to validate your parking stub, or reimburse you for parking. Not only is it impolite, you'll create a negative impression, since it's considered common courtesy to pay your own expenses for a local interview.

If you're coming from out of town, then it's especially important to get directions. Naturally, if the expenses for your interviewing trip are going to be covered by the employer, wait until the interview has concluded (or better yet, the next day) to settle up. Usually, the company will prepay the air fare, or other major expenses, and will reimburse you for the rest, such as your car rental, cab fare, hotel room, and meals. It's customary that you pick up certain non-essential expenses, such as long distance phone calls from your hotel room or the bar tab from the lounge in the hotel lobby.

I would suggest that the best time to arrive for an interview is 10 minutes prior to the scheduled time. It can irk an employer to be told that the candidate for a 2 o'clock appointment is waiting in the lobby at one thirty-five. The employer will either become distracted knowing there's someone hanging around waiting, or they will scramble to rearrange their schedule to accommodate the candidate, which disrupts the rest of the day. If your appointment is at two, then arrive at 1:50. Upon arrival, I would recommend that you let the attendant know you are a few minutes early, therefore letting the attendant have the discretion of waiting to notify the hiring manager.

If for some reason you're running late, call ahead to ask if you can reschedule for later the same day, or if not, later in the week. If something unexpected happens that you have no control over, simply explain the situation to the employer when you arrive. I would apologize for being late and then get right down to the business of interviewing. Move on from the frustration or misfortune and focus on the task at hand – interviewing.

FOUR: NAME AND TITLE OF THE INTERVIEWER(S)

When you arrange the interview, find out who you'll be talking to, and what their function is within the company. Will you be speaking with the hiring manager? The manager from another department? The personnel director? The internal recruiter? A peer level employee or subordinate?

You might already know the person. If that's the case, you're ahead of the game. If not, send out feelers among your own contacts within your industry, or look in your industry's trade publications to see if the person you're going to be meeting is distinguished in any way. One suggestion, particularly for research candidates is to review the publication record for the hiring authorities that you will be meeting with.

It's also helpful to find out whether you and the person you'll be meeting have any commonalities or interconnecting points of interest, in the way of origins ("Hey, you're also from Wisconsin?"), schools ("My brother went to Duke, too. How did you like it?"), professional achievements ("My article appeared in Ad Week a month after yours did."), or personal interests ("I heard you were the Nebraska state ping pong champion. We'll have to get together sometime for a match."). These tidbits can break the ice when an interview begins, and create a bond with the interviewer.

FIVE: UNDERSTANDING THE COMPANY'S HIRING PROCEDURE

To correctly gauge the sequence of events surrounding or following your first interview, ask these questions:

- Can you describe to me, step by step, the hiring procedure for this position?

This is important to ask, because you want to find out if (and when) the company needs to schedule a second or third level interview. Some companies will make hiring decisions on the spot; others will take months of meetings and endless signature to process a simple request for a second interview.

- Will I be asked to take any tests?

And if so, what are they, and how long will they take to administer? Some companies require a full day of psychological, aptitude, technical skill, and intelligence testing. With most companies, failure to pass the tests means automatic elimination from consideration.

- How long will it take before you reach a decision?

This will help you measure your progress through the hiring process, and could spare you from getting the jitters if you don't hear something immediately.

I once got upset because a new client company was taking a long time to make a decision whether to bring back one of my candidates for a second interview. Later, I found in my original notes that the company was right on schedule; they'd told me up front that it would take them several weeks to reach a decision. As it turns out, I had no reason to complain.

- Do you currently have any finalists?

This question lets you know if you've entered the race late, and your interview with the company is only a formality. In a situation like this, isn't it best to know where you stand?

- Who will be making the hiring decision?

Find out if the decision will be made by a committee. If it is, must the committee come to a unanimous agreement? Or, will the decision be based on the recommendation of a single person? The more information you can dig up about the hiring procedure, the better you'll be able to give a more confident, thoughtful interview. What's more, arriving at an interview armed with a bastion of facts will help you shield yourself from the fear that occurs as a result of feeling out of control. If you are being

represented by a qualified recruiter, he/she should be able to provide you answers to a lot of these questions.

SIX: BACKGROUND INFORMATION ON THE COMPANY

While the amount of background information you can gather about a company is practically endless, it would be ludicrous to try to become a walking encyclopedia of corporate trivia. Today, with the internet, there is much information available about the prospective company that you will be interviewing with. However, knowing something in each of these categories should significantly improve your odds of getting hired:

- The company's personnel -- who the major players are; was anyone recently hired or let go? It's also a good idea to know something of the history of the company, and who the founders were. For example, if you were interviewing for IBM, it might be considered a faux pas to look puzzled and ask, "Who?" at mention of the name Thomas Watson, Sr.
- The company's basic structure -- what products or services they provide to which customers, what the various divisions are, and whether they're privately or publicly held.
- The company's vital signs -- how the company is doing financially. Are they solvent or struggling? Are they involved in a hostile takeover or merging with another company? How's their stock faring? You get the idea. Many of my client candidates like to look through Value Line or Hoover's before they interview, so they can talk intelligently about the company's financial picture.
- The company's divisional or departmental details -- the changes that are taking place that could potentially affect the position you're interviewing for. Is there a new product introduction or marketing strategy in the works? Or, how about an overhaul in the company's accounting methods, capital equipment or computer system?

By arriving for your interview adequately briefed, you'll make a strong impression on the interviewer. Best of all, you can spend your interviewing time discussing your background and the company's needs, not the corporate biography, or company financial report.

SEVEN: A COMPLETE LIST OF QUESTIONS YOU WANT TO ASK.

During the course of an interview, your dialogue with the other person will spawn a number of questions spontaneously. However, there may be important issues to discuss which will never come up unless you take the initiative. For that reason, you should bring a list of questions with you that will address these issues, so that you don't leave the interview uninformed.

Premeditated questions can be grouped into four different categories:

[1] Company questions deal with the organization, direction, policies, stability, growth, market share, and new products or services of the prospective company or department;

[2] Industry questions deal with the health, growth, change, technological advancement, and personnel of the industry as a whole;

[3] Position questions deal with the scope, responsibilities, travel, compensation policies, and reporting structure of the position you're interviewing for; and

[4] Opportunity questions deal with your own potential for growth or advancement within the company or its divisions, and the likely timetable for promotion.

You may have specific interests or concerns surrounding topics in each category. For example, if you're interviewing with a start-up Biotechnology company, you may have concerns about the financing of the company. Or, let's say you're interviewing for a position with a company that's known for its high rate of personnel turnover. You might want to prepare a carefully worded question that deals with that issue.

LEAVE YOUR LAUNDRY LIST AT HOME

Naturally, you need to be careful not to come on too strong by asking too many questions -- it may turn the interviewer off. Presumably, if there's mutual interest, you'll get all your questions answered at a subsequent interview. The general rule of thumb is to limit the number of premeditated questions to about a dozen or less. While it's true that you'll be interviewing the company as much as they'll be interviewing you, the last thing you want to do is turn a dialogue into an inquisition, or come across as a walking encyclopedia trivia.

You should also be aware that there's one specific taboo to first-level interviewing, in terms of the questions you should ask. Never, ever bring up the issue of salary or benefits. If the employer initiates a dialogue surrounding these issues, and asks if you have any questions, fine.

But if it appears to the employer that your primary motivation for changing jobs is the new company's compensation or benefit package, you'll be out the door quicker than a bolt of lightning. Employers get chills of fear and loathing when they think you're only on the job market to feather your nest at their expense. They visualize your employment with them as a short term, non-committal, career leveraging maneuver, and understandably want to avoid being victimized.

How can a candidate make a recruiter shudder in disbelief? Here is an example of a debrief between a client company and a recruiter, which unfortunately, happens all too often. The recruiter calls the hiring manager and asks how the interview went?

"Well, your candidate didn't do so well," the hiring manager says. "Really? I thought he had the perfect background."

"That wasn't the problem. I just didn't like the way he handled the interview." "What happened?"

"I spent over an hour with him, telling him everything about the company, and introducing him to all the key people, I even gave him an extensive tour of the research labs." "And then?"

“And then, I brought him back to my office, and we sat down to talk about what he’d seen. I asked him if he had any questions.” “And did he?”

“Yes. That’s when the interview ended. He looked me straight in the eye and asked, “What are your benefits?” “And?”

“And I got up, and walked him right out the door.”

Don’t misunderstand me. The candidate’s actions in no way reflected on his abilities or his character; his intentions were perfectly honorable. But after that incident, I always caution interviewees not to initiate the subject of salary or benefits.

My suggestion is to take the John F. Kennedy approach to interviewing: “Ask not what your company can do for you, ask what you can do for your company.”

This way, you can present yourself as a loyal, hard-working, virtuous, and dedicated candidate, rather than as an opportunistic job-hopper who’d prefer to live off the fat of the land.

While it’s unthinkable to accept or even consider a job without first knowing the financial rewards (or the details of the benefit package), there are better and timelier ways to broach the subject, without endangering your candidacy.

Interview preparation is perhaps the single most overlooked aspect of the job changing process. A candidate who’s fired up and ready to go at the time of the interview has a tremendous advantage over a candidate who’s not.

The more carefully you prepare for your interview, the better your chances of getting hired