

BETTER CANDIDATE INTERVIEW PREPS

You've worked hard. You've found the perfect candidate, the ultimate "A" Player. Everything the client wished for is about to walk in that interview-room door. But now is not the time to start daydreaming about the ways you might spend your hard-earned fee. Because odds are, if you didn't prepare the candidate well enough to guarantee a successful interview, it's about to blow up in your face.

My experience has taught me that if you put two perfectly suited people together in an interview, they'll find a way to screw it up. Because so many recruiters fail to emphasize thorough preparation with candidates, the interview is, without a doubt, the riskiest time in the entire search process. Statistics show that 94% of all hiring decisions are based on that face-to-face personal interview. It's time to take it seriously.

The Big Billers know this. They don't simply put a candidate and client together and hope that magic happens. They know they must properly prepare both candidate and client in-depth to close the deal. They never leave their hard work to chance.

Interview prep should be a top priority for every recruiter. It is the single most important step on the road to more placements. Preparation makes successful interviews, and successful interviews make successful recruiters.

Pre-Interview Prep

Before the interview, candidates must do some work. There are two reasons for this. One is that they need to show you and the client company they have real interest in the position and the organization – that they've got skin in the game, if you will. The second reason is more direct: they need to acquire useful information for the interview.

Topics to research include the company itself, its goals and objectives, its corporate culture, and any recent news it has made. Today's candidates are lucky because they have so many resources at their fingertips. A company's website is a wealth of corporate information. A candidate can learn about products, services, and offerings. Important news is often posted, including senior-level promotions, customer wins, acquisitions, and new product offerings.

Candidates should Google the company and any interviewer. This is the single best way to learn more about both. It not only establishes a level of confidence and preparedness, but it often reveals valuable personal information about the interviewer as well. The candidate may learn that the interviewer is a championship poker player, or that he volunteers at his kid's school. It will help paint a clearer picture of who will be talking to the candidate, and that means a better chance to build rapport during the interview.

The Interview Phase I: Introduction and Rapport Building

Mom was right: you will never get a second chance to make a first impression. Coach candidates to make sure they know how to impress the hiring authority before they even shake hands. Go over basics such as appropriate dress, what to bring to the interview, and how to greet the interviewer. Don't be afraid to stress the importance of a smile and a positive attitude.

Recruiters and candidates should identify commonalities with the interviewer before their meeting and use them to establish rapport and to create chemistry. Suggest questions to candidates that will get the interviewer talking. It's Psychology 101: people like people who are like themselves, and people love to talk about themselves. I once placed a gentleman with a Fortune 500 company because he was a competitive biker.

Don't get me wrong: he was highly qualified for the position for which he was interviewing. He had a great professional track record. But for some reason he wasn't impressing the interviewer, and he knew it. In desperation, he related a story about his competitiveness as a cyclist, and it resonated with the interviewer. He got the job and gained an important advocate in the company. Why? Because I had mentioned to him in interview prep that the interviewer really enjoyed – you guessed it – cycling. Commonalities sell.

The Interview Phase II: The Resume Review

The best indicator of future success is past success. That's why an in-depth resume review is a given in almost every interview. Prepare candidates to be comfortable in discussing all aspects of their professional life. The interview is going to touch on past duties and responsibilities, challenges and how they met them, accomplishments, and why they left each position.

I interview people all the time. Many candidates have no clue about their professional accomplishments at each organization. The job of a successful recruiter is to make sure our candidates can articulate their strengths and achievements. Go over each position and help the candidate list her accomplishments. Another mistake many job seekers make is the over-explained answer to *"Why are you planning to leave your current position?"* Or the deer-in-the-headlights look in response to *"Why did you leave XYZ company?"* These questions are to be expected and should not come as a surprise. Coach candidates to simply, succinctly state the reason for any job change listed on the resume, never going into details unless asked. They should not badmouth a previous boss or organization. If possible, they should give specific support and examples to illustrate valid reasons for leaving an employer. Tell them to stick with the facts – no personal attacks or excuses. If necessary, they can explain how they would do things differently in the future.

I swear by the benefits of role-playing or practice interviews. Run through questions with your candidates and hear their answers before the interview. The ultimate goal is to help them sound confident and at ease, not scripted.

The Interview Phase III: Question and Answer - Interviewer

Once the resume review is over, the questions really begin. During this phase of the interview, the hiring authority wants to see if the candidate has the skill sets and experience to perform the job, and at what level. If we have done our job right up to this point, we know exactly what the hiring authority is looking for. The job order or needs analysis should tell you everything the candidate needs to know to prepare for the interview. Again, role-playing is critical here.

The salary question is one that most candidates handle wrong. People often feel uncomfortable directly discussing financial issues. We coach our candidates on this question very specifically. Compensation plans for organizations vary greatly, from high salary/small leverage plans to exactly the opposite and everything in the middle. Coach candidates to respond to the salary question with something like *"It's more important to me to find the right fit in an organization. If I am the right person for the job, I am sure you will make a fair offer."* Or *"Most important to me is to find the right position and organizational fit. I am currently compensated with an X base salary and a Y bonus. However, it's more important to me to find the right fit. I am sure you will make a fair and reasonable offer when the time comes."*

Phase IV: Question and Answer – Candidate

At some point during the interview, the candidate will have an opportunity to ask the hiring manager some questions. I recommend taking notes during this phase, but a candidate should first ask permission from the interviewer. (Good manners count.) I coach our candidates to be prepared to ask 10 to 20 questions designed to make them look good. Most questions should be focused on gaining a better understanding of the position, on what it takes to be successful at the job.

It is okay to come up with a question or two that showcases a candidate's strong points. For example, if a candidate is interviewing for a sales position and she has a great track record in establishing new accounts, she might ask, *"How important is selling new accounts to the account executive position?"* Hiring authority: *"Well, it's extremely important. Without new accounts, our company growth would slow and we would not attain our objectives in 2007."* Candidate: *"That's good to hear because over the last five years, I brought in new accounts that resulted in more than \$5 million in new revenue for my employer."*

In a first interview, it is very important for candidates to stay focused on the interviewer and the company. They should avoid at all costs any implied or spoken *"What's in it for me?"* questions. That includes salary, benefits, vacations, and established accounts. I've interviewed people who want to know the dimensions of their office before we've even finished discussing their resume. They don't get the job.

Inappropriate, me-centric questions can kill a thriving interview. If a candidate needs to know anything further after the initial interview, the recruiter should handle it, and only after the hiring authority is thoroughly convinced that the candidate is right for the job.

One thing to keep in mind: sometimes hiring authorities will allow a candidate to ask questions at the beginning of the interview. We coach our candidates to ask something like *"What traits are you looking for in a successful vice president of sales?"* Or *"What are some of the qualities your top executives possess that make them successful in your organization?"* It's like being given the answers to the test. By asking these questions at the beginning of the interview, candidates can focus their responses on any applicable experience and skill sets.

The Interview Phase V: Concerns or Potential Objections

Never underestimate the power of the unspoken word. In this phase of the interview, candidates have the chance to control their own destiny. Coach candidates to flush out any concerns during the interview. If concerns never make it onto the table, they cannot be resolved.

Hiring authorities often remove candidates from the hiring process because of false concerns or impressions that could have been easily corrected. That is why the following question might be the most important one for any candidate to ask: *"Are there any concerns about me that may keep me from becoming a top performer in your organization?"* This pro-active approach gives the candidate the chance to overcome objections. Always address, never dismiss, issues raised and then ask, *"Are there any other concerns?"* until there are none. Then transition to the value proposition.

Even if a concern is valid, the interview needn't be over. The candidate can, in many cases, recover. Coach candidates to focus on skill sets and professional experience to counteract concerns. For example, the interviewer mentions that the position description calls for someone with three to five years' experience, and the candidate has only two.

The candidate could respond, *"You are right. I do have only two years' experience in cost accounting for a distribution organization. However, in those two years I became the lead cost accountant, overseeing three senior cost accountants, on the basis of my performance. I am sure I would quickly do the same for your organization. Are there any other concerns?"*

The Interview Phase VI: Interest Statement, Value Proposition, and Close for the Next Step

After all concerns have been addressed and the interview is wrapping up, the candidate should make an interest statement followed by a value proposition and close. This should start by conveying the candidate's real desire to join the organization. It should also answer the ultimate interview question: *"Why hire this candidate as opposed to all the other alternatives the hiring manager is looking at?"* The interest statement, value proposition, and close for the next step happen at the end of the interview and are presented in one succinct and powerful statement:

"Ms. Hiring Authority, after learning more about you, your organization, and this position, I am even more excited about this opportunity than I was before I walked in the door. Because of my five years in cost accounting and two years in distribution cost accounting leading a team of three individuals, I would be a great fit to help you and XYZ organization reach its goals in the accounting department. What do we need to do to move to the next step in the process?"

Getting ready for an interview is like prepping for the big game. It takes research, coaching, and practice to win. Our job is to make sure our candidates show up prepared, pumped up, and ready for anything. After prepping, role-playing, and then prepping again, I send my candidates into the arena with a few final words of wisdom: turn off your cell phone, focus on the interview, and have fun. Oh, and don't forget, keep your head in the game to win.



About the Author:

Jon Bartos is a premier writer, speaker and consultant on all aspects of human capital and achievement. As president and CEO of Jonathan Scott International in Mason, Ohio, he has achieved industry-leading success. He is one of an elite group of executive recruiters who bill over \$1 million annually. In 10 years Jon has billed over \$10 Million in personal desk level production. Jon has also established Jonathan Scott International as a top 10% executive search and contract staffing firm. The office has won 16 international awards in the MRI Network, including International Billing Manager of the Year and Top 10 SC Office. Jon recently launched the Magnum Program, a personal coaching venue to help business professionals reach new levels of personal and professional success. If you or your organization is ready to achieve their potential, you can reach Jon at www.jonbartos.com.