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Successful Interviews...

The Process

Prepare, Practice, Perform, Follow-up

Use these four words as guides for your interview process, and you will find that it isn't so bad after all. The interview should be looked at as a great opportunity to tell your story. You will be in the driver's seat if you follow these basic steps. Just as we have discussed with writing resumes, there are numerous websites that offer help with tips, hints, and suggestions on every aspect of the interview process. Just like the resume sites, there are many experts that sometimes offer conflicting opinions. For that reason, this document will cut through all of that and give you the basics; a neutral point of view.

After giving some overview information, we will be offering a list of general questions that you might face from a potential employer. In addition, we will include a smaller list with job specific questions designed to give you even more ammunition. Obviously they won't all apply, or all be asked, but if you do your preparation, nothing will come as a surprise. Our job is to help you become as fully prepared as possible, giving you the upper hand.

Just one quick note. Some interviewers will try to draw you into certain discussions to see how you handle yourself. Don't think of this as a negative thing. It's their job. They have to do what is right to select the perfect candidate for the position, and for the company. With that in mind, remember that this will be a very brief experience in the overall scheme of things. Hold your tongue if you start to feel that you are being attacked. Again, don't take anything personally, it's just a process. If you are equally ready for the process, you might even have the upper hand.

Jim VanNatta
Executive Director
Patriots Group

What do employers really want?

1. **Willingness** to share information and ideas
2. **Commitment** to teamwork
3. **Responsiveness** to change
4. **Ability** to work under pressure
5. **Sense of ownership** of work and ideas
6. **Willingness** to take calculated risks, without fear of consequences
7. **Multicultural experience** and/or ability to speak multiple languages
8. **Ability** to communicate clearly and honestly with peers, managers, and customers
9. **Understanding** of business strategy and direction
10. **Commitment** to continuous learning, skill development

Prepare

Being prepared for your interview will give you a better chance of coming across as professional, disciplined, and conscientious. Read through the list just presented on the previous page and get a better understanding of what the typical employer will be looking for. You won't have to possess all of these traits, but keep them in the back of your mind as you put together your notes for the interview.

The first step in preparing for an interview is to have a very short statement that basically sums up your resume, and your career direction. Some refer to this as a "30 second elevator pitch," or a "30,000 foot view." I honestly don't know what the connection to 30 is, but I digress!

The reason for this prepared script is so that if someone asks you something called an "open-ended" question, you will be able to give them your ready response. This should be something that can answer a question like: "Tell me about yourself," which is the most often asked question in an interview.

The other important part of preparation is to do ample research on the industry you are looking at, as well as the company you are going to be interviewing with. This is a simple step, and can be accomplished by "Google-ing" the company or industry.

Practice

Even if your friends and family have been telling you that you are "a natural" in front of people, practice is always essential. It may not make you perfect, as the old adage says, but it will help to give you confidence, making you come off more professional and polished to your potential employer.

Even seasoned sales people, politicians, and others, who rely on their interactions with people to get ahead, practice to some degree. There is nothing weak about wanting to be fully prepared, and in fact, it's the complete opposite. Knowing what to say in response to some tough questions, will reflect on your desire to be efficient and thorough, even if you aren't going for a sales job, or a position that will require you to always be in front of people.

Ask your friends and family to ask you questions from the General Questions list provided, and remember, there are no right and wrong answers. Keep a positive mood as you practice, and that will help you in the interview, because you won't seem distracted trying to come up with an answer. And don't ever become argumentative with the interviewer! They are there to reduce the number of candidates to find the best fit for that position, so your demeanor is very important. Remember, it's only a short time out of your life, so hang in there!

Perform

You will hear all kinds of tips and hints on how to perform in your interview. Some people will tell you all kinds of things to help you to not be nervous. These range from helpful to ridiculous, but you will be able to separate them! Something that I always do is to carefully scan the surroundings, particularly if you are in their private office. Knowing something about the person sitting in front of you might give you something to talk about. Don't engage in things unless you are fully comfortable. As an interviewer, I have had people try to "bond" with me, based on things they saw, and then completely flub up because they really didn't know what they were talking about, such as golf or the military.

The first important rule is to always be on time. Part of your preparation is to know where the interview will be, and know how long it will take to get there. Give yourself an additional 15 or 20 minutes or more, and sit in the lobby going over your notes if you arrive early. If you are going to be late for whatever reason, call early enough to let them know.

If you have done your preparation, and practiced your responses, then you are ready to go. On the day of the interview, make sure you try to avoid distractions so that you can stay "in the zone." Keep a positive attitude, but don't get too loose or casual. Even if you feel a connection with your interviewer, be careful not to let your guard down. Remember that you aren't in the military anymore, so don't be too rigid. That's not to be confused with keeping up with your good manners.

If an interviewer asks you to call them by their name instead of sir or ma'am, do so. If you keep calling them sir or ma'am, it may make them uncomfortable, or possibly lead them to think you aren't very flexible.

Avoid discussions about religion and politics, and depending on where you are or what sports logos they may have around, sports can be shaky! I have friends here in Chicago that hate the Cubs, and that would even cloud their judgment while they are sitting in front of the interviewer. Remember, this will be over quickly, so put aside your emotions and pre-conceived ideas, and simply do your best.

Follow-up

This one is kind of a no-brainer. After you finish with your interview, make sure that you have their contact information, so you can send them a follow email or letter.

In today's digital world, email is the preference, not because it saves you the cost of a stamp, but because it is the quickest form of communication for you and the employer.

Keep it brief, thanking them for the opportunity to interview with their company. If you want the position, and felt comfortable with the company, don't be afraid to let them know you are interested. Sometimes, they may wait to see if you are truly interested before they make their move.

Types of Questions

There are several types of questions that you may be asked. Even being armed with sample questions, having some background and knowledge as to the types of questions will prepare you for those questions that come out of left field. If you learn these and their purpose, you will be able to answer questions with more confidence. Good Luck!

Open or Open-ended Questions:

These are questions that allow you to respond with the appropriate level of detail. If it is something like – “Tell me about...”, then you need to use your practiced skills and answer with information to help “sell” yourself. Keep brief, but make sure you answer the question fully.

Closed, or Closed-ended Questions:

These are questions that are asked when the interviewer wants specific information. Many times, they will be wanting a “yes” or “no” answer. Other times, they may want only an answer to a technical question. Don’t add editorial to these answers.

Hypothetical Questions:

These are questions that will be asked to put you into an imaginary situation. The purpose of these questions is to find out if you are able to think quickly on your feet.

Leading Questions:

For anyone that has ever watched Perry Mason (or Law & Order if you aren’t an antique like me!) when a witness is “tricked” into revealing something, this should not come as any surprise. In a leading question, the interviewer will “tip their hand” within the question itself. They may ask something like: “This position requires good communication skills to be successful. Do you have good skills in this area?” Don’t give a “yes” or “no” answer. Offer details to support your answer.

Multi-barreled Questions:

These are somewhat harmless, but can sometimes leave a question unanswered. They are two or more questions that are linked to the same topic, and are often asked together. Don’t be afraid to ask them to repeat the second question if you don’t remember anything specific.

Behavioral Questions:

These questions use your past experiences to predict future behaviors. As part of your preparation, come up with examples of how your experiences (especially since your military experience may be something the interviewer won’t understand or be able to fully appreciate), and how they fit into the situation.

The S-T-A-R Approach to Answering a Question:

A rule of thumb to answering a question can be helpful if you are asked a question that requires a more complex answer. Try the STAR approach in your practicing, and you will see that it is a useful tool.

S: Situation – describe the situation

T: Task or problem – what dilemma or problem did you face?

A: Action – what action did you take to resolve the issue?

R: Result – what was the final result from your action?



General Questions

Questions start the minute the interview does, and to show that you are an exceptional candidate, you need to be prepared to answer not only the typical questions, but also the unexpected. You can expect questions regarding your qualifications, your academic preparation, career interests, experience, and ones that assess your personality.

1. Tell me about yourself

The most often asked question in interviews. You need to have a short statement prepared in your mind. Be careful that it does not sound rehearsed. Limit it to work-related items unless instructed otherwise. Talk about things you have done and jobs you have held that relate to the position you are interviewing for. Start with the item farthest back and work up to the present.

2. Why did you leave your last job?

Stay positive regardless of the circumstances. Never refer to a major problem with management and never speak ill of supervisors, co-workers or the organization. If you do, you will be the one looking bad. Keep smiling and talk about leaving for a positive reason such as an opportunity, a chance to do something special or other forward-looking reasons.

3. What experience do you have in this field?

Speak about specifics that relate to the position you are applying for. If you do not have specific experience, get as close as you can.

4. Do you consider yourself successful?

You should always answer yes and briefly explain why. A good explanation is that you have set goals, and you have met some and are on track to achieve the others.

5. What do co-workers say about you?

Be prepared with a quote or two from co-workers. Either a specific statement or a paraphrase will work.

6. What do you know about this organization?

This question is one reason to do some research on the organization before the interview. Find out where they have been and where they are going. What are the current issues and who are the major players?

7. What have you done to improve your knowledge in the last year?

Try to include improvement activities that relate to the job. A wide variety of activities can be mentioned as positive self-improvement. Have some good ones handy to mention.

8. Are you applying for other jobs?

Be honest but do not spend a lot of time in this area. Keep the focus on this job and what you can do for this organization. Anything else is a distraction.

9. Why do you want to work for this organization?

This may take some thought and certainly, should be based on the research you have done on the organization. Sincerity is extremely important here and will easily be sensed. Relate it to your long-term career goals.

10. Do you know anyone who works for us?

Be aware of the policy on relatives working for the organization. This can affect your answer even though they asked about friends not relatives. Be careful to mention a friend only if they are well thought of.

11. What kind of salary do you need?

A loaded question. A nasty little game that you will probably lose if you answer first. So, do not answer it. Instead, say something like, That's a tough question. Can you tell me the range for this position? In most cases, the interviewer, taken off guard, will tell you. If not, say that it can depend on the details of the job. Then give a wide range.

12. Are you a team player?

You are, of course, a team player. Be sure to have examples ready. Specifics that show you often perform for the good of the team rather than for yourself are good evidence of your team attitude. Do not brag, just say it in a matter-of-fact tone. This is a key point.

13. How long would you expect to work for us if hired?

Specifics here are not good. Something like this should work: I'd like it to be a long time. Or As long as we both feel I'm doing a good job.

14. Have you ever had to fire anyone? How did you feel about that?

This is serious. Do not make light of it or in any way seem like you like to fire people. At the same time, you will do it when it is the right thing to do. When it comes to the organization versus the individual who has created a harmful situation, you will protect the organization. Remember firing is not the same as layoff or reduction in force.

15. What is your philosophy towards work?

The interviewer is not looking for a long or flowery dissertation here. Do you have strong feelings that the job gets done? Yes. That's the type of answer that works best here. Short and positive, showing a benefit to the organization.

16. If you had enough money to retire right now, would you?

Answer yes if you would. But since you need to work, this is the type of work you prefer. Do not say yes if you do not mean it.

17. Have you ever been asked to leave a position?

If you have not, say no. If you have, be honest, brief and avoid saying negative things about the people or organization involved.

18. Explain how you would be an asset to this organization

You should be anxious for this question. It gives you a chance to highlight your best points as they relate to the position being discussed. Give a little advance thought to this relationship.

19. Why should we hire you?

Point out how your assets meet what the organization needs. Do not mention any other candidates to make a comparison.

20. Tell me about a suggestion you have made

Have a good one ready. Be sure and use a suggestion that was accepted and was then considered successful. One related to the type of work applied for is a real plus.

21. What irritates you about co-workers?

This is a trap question. Think real hard but fail to come up with anything that irritates you. A short statement that you seem to get along with folks is great.

22. What is your greatest strength?

Numerous answers are good, just stay positive. A few good examples: Your ability to prioritize, Your problem-solving skills, Your ability to work under pressure, Your ability to focus on projects, Your professional expertise, Your leadership skills, Your positive attitude .

23. Tell me about your dream job.

Stay away from a specific job. You cannot win. If you say the job you are contending for is it, you strain credibility. If you say another job is it, you plant the suspicion that you will be dissatisfied with this position if hired. The best is to stay generic and say something like: A job where I love the work, like the people, can contribute and can't wait to get to work.

24. Why do you think you would do well at this job?

Give several reasons and include skills, experience and interest.

25. What are you looking for in a job?

See answer # 23

26. What kind of person would you refuse to work with?

Do not be trivial. It would take disloyalty to the organization, violence or lawbreaking to get you to object. Minor objections will label you as a whiner.

27. What is more important to you: the money or the work?

Money is always important, but the work is the most important. There is no better answer.

28. What would your previous supervisor say your strongest point is?

There are numerous good possibilities: Loyalty, Energy, Positive attitude, Leadership, Team player, Expertise, Initiative, Patience, Hard work, Creativity, Problem solver

29. Tell me about a problem you had with a supervisor

Biggest trap of all. This is a test to see if you will speak ill of your boss. If you fall for it and tell about a problem with a former boss, you may well below the interview right there. Stay positive and develop a poor memory about any trouble with a supervisor.

30. What has disappointed you about a job?

Don't get trivial or negative. Safe areas are few but can include: Not enough of a challenge. You were laid off in a reduction Company did not win a contract, which would have given you more responsibility.

31. Tell me about your ability to work under pressure.

You may say that you thrive under certain types of pressure. Give an example that relates to the type of position applied for.

32. Do your skills match this job or another job more closely?

Probably this one. Do not give fuel to the suspicion that you may want another job more than this one.

33. What motivates you to do your best on the job?

This is a personal trait that only you can say, but good examples are: Challenge, Achievement, Recognition

34. Are you willing to work overtime? Nights? Weekends?

This is up to you. Be totally honest.

35. How would you know you were successful on this job?

Several ways are good measures: You set high standards for yourself and meet them. Your outcomes are a success. Your boss tell you that you are successful

36. Would you be willing to relocate if required?

You should be clear on this with your family prior to the interview if you think there is a chance it may come up. Do not say yes just to get the job if the real answer is no. This can create a lot of problems later on in your career. Be honest at this point and save yourself future grief.

37. Are you willing to put the interests of the organization ahead of your own?

This is a straight loyalty and dedication question. Do not worry about the deep ethical and philosophical implications. Just say yes.

38. Describe your management style.

Try to avoid labels. Some of the more common labels, like progressive, salesman or consensus, can have several meanings or descriptions depending on which management expert you listen to. The situational style is safe, because it says you will manage according to the situation, instead of one size fits all.

39. What have you learned from mistakes on the job?

Here you have to come up with something or you strain credibility. Make it small, well intentioned mistake with a positive lesson learned. An example would be working too far ahead of colleagues on a project and thus throwing coordination off.

40. Do you have any blind spots?

Trick question. If you know about blind spots, they are no longer blind spots. Do not reveal any personal areas of concern here. Let them do their own discovery on your bad points. Do not hand it to them.

41. If you were hiring a person for this job, what would you look for?

Be careful to mention traits that are needed and that you have.

42. Do you think you are overqualified for this position?

Regardless of your qualifications, state that you are very well qualified for the position.

43. How do you propose to compensate for your lack of experience?

First, if you have experience that the interviewer does not know about, bring that up: Then, point out (if true) that you are a hard working quick learner.

44. What qualities do you look for in a boss?

Be generic and positive. Safe qualities are knowledgeable, a sense of humor, fair, loyal to subordinates and holder of high standards. All bosses think they have these traits.

45. Tell me about a time when you helped resolve a dispute between others.

Pick a specific incident. Concentrate on your problem solving technique and not the dispute you settled.

46. What position do you prefer on a team working on a project?

Be honest. If you are comfortable in different roles, point that out.

47. Describe your work ethic.

Emphasize benefits to the organization. Things like, determination to get the job done and work hard but enjoy your work are good.

48. What has been your biggest professional disappointment?

Be sure that you refer to something that was beyond your control. Show acceptance and no negative feelings.

49. Tell me about the most fun you have had on the job.

Talk about having fun by accomplishing something for the organization.

50. Do you have any questions for me?

Always have some questions prepared. Questions prepared where you will be an asset to the organization are good. How soon will I be able to be productive? and What type of projects will I be able to assist on? are examples.

You can find many websites designed to help you to prepare and practice for your interviews. One of the top sites that will help you in your transition from the military to the civilian workforce is www.Military.com.

In addition, there are many job sites such as Monster, YahooHotJobs, CareerBuilder, Dice, and others that all offer information to help you in your job search.

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