



Job hunting? Nail your next interview

Confidence, preparedness can help you stand out from the crowd

By Eve Tahmincioglu

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Wouldn't it be great if you could spray a magic potion on a hiring manager during an interview to make him or her fall in love with you? As a job candidate, that is.

Alas, there's no such potion yet, so you'll have to rely on your own charm. But many of you have been off the interviewing bandwagon for years, until now.

The recession is throwing more and more people into the job hunt, people who haven't the slightest idea about how to ace a coveted interview.

Unfortunately, that spells job search doom. If there ever was a time to make yourself stand out during a job interview, this recession is it, because you'll be up against a large pool of talented applicants.

How do you do it?

Endless interview advice exists, everything from having a five-minute elevator pitch about yourself to wearing a crisp white shirt. However, there is no one surefire way to nail the interview, just as there is no one type of interviewer or interviewee.

It often comes down to chance and chemistry. Sorry, folks. What works for one job seeker probably won't work for another. You need to find the technique that's most comfortable for you.

What worked for them

Here are three very different approaches:

* Lots of eye contact and just the right outfit — including a long skirt, suit jacket, high heels and pantyhose — helped Paula Cyrus, who lives in Dallas and was laid off seven months ago, do well during a series of interviews. "I also had a lot of enthusiasm, without being crazy," she added.

She ended up landing a software support job with a mortgage company through staffing agency Randstad, beating out 12 other applicants.

* Fred Lee found approaching the interview as if it were just a get-to-know-you meeting took the pressure off his nerves.

"I make it more of a dialogue, a discussion," he said.

Lee also sent an introductory e-mail to some of the individuals he was going to interview with before he even stepped into the company's building. His confidence got him hired in November as a development manager for Chicago-based CashNetUSA, an online financial services company.

* And Meagan Hayes of Irvine, Calif., handed her interviewers a written plan for what she'd do in the first 100 days if she were hired. "I was nervous about doing it, but I had four interviews with another company and didn't get chosen," she said. "This time I wanted to put 150 percent into it."

Her moxie paid off. She started her new job as director of marketing for accounting firm Haskell & White in October.

While all three of these job seekers had the necessary skills and credentials to do the work, they also were able to set themselves apart from the crowd and connect with the hiring managers.

Perceived similarity is one of the most powerful factors in whether you like someone, said Rachelle Canter, a social psychologist and the author of "Make the Right Career Move."

"In other words, we like people who are like us: who look like us, think like us, etc.," Canter said.

There's also "the halo effect," she added. "If you like certain things about someone, for example, they went to Northwestern just like you or came from Birmingham, Ala., just like you, we tend to perceive other similarities about them and tend to like them more."

You can learn if you have any connections with an interviewer by doing a simple Internet search before heading in for an interview.

If you turn up nada on the we're-soul-buddies front, you can still find ways to hit it off.

Canter counsels her clients to "never leave an interview without volunteering why they are uniquely well qualified to meet an employer's needs."

Instead of saying, "I have great interpersonal and management skills, and I am a quick learner," she suggests hitting interviewers with meaty facts about yourself.

For example, you could say something like this: "I spent five years working for GE, being part of their world-famous Leadership Training program. In every job I've had over the past 15 years, I have retained 90 percent of my top performers (despite an industry average of 50 percent), and my direct reports have been promoted at twice the rate of other managers. And I won the company's 'Best Manager' award twice in five years."

Coming up with a plan for what you want to do once you get hired, just like Hayes did, can also work with certain interviewers, especially in this economy.

“The talent pool is full of highly skilled and very talented people. A candidate should never underestimate their competition in their job quest,” said Susan Howington, CEO of executive outplacement firm Power Connections. “So, coming with a business plan outlining what you would do if you were given the job is a very good idea. Not every candidate is going to go through the trouble and the effort, and the fact that someone did take the time can certainly differentiate them from the other talent going for the same position.”

And don't underestimate confidence.

Here's how Lee, who snagged a job at CashNetUSA, was perceived by one of the managers who interviewed him.

“We were impressed from the beginning by his demeanor. Fred is naturally at home wherever he is,” said Bruce Burdick, director of development for the firm. “This doesn't come across as nonchalance, but a simple, clear confidence. I doubt Fred even viewed the interview as a pressure situation.”

Being a little nervous is normal

Now don't freak out if you come across as nervous when you go into situations like this. This is a normal reaction, and many hiring managers will cut you some slack.

Dan Relton, director of human resources for New York-based Grey Healthcare Group, says he's seeing a lot of applicants at different work levels lately who are rusty at the interviewing process and nervous as a result.

“If they have the skill set, I don't mind,” he said. “And I wouldn't mind if they said to me, ‘This is new to me, so I'm a little nervous.’ I'd be totally sympathetic to that.”

Bottom line: You have to be yourself and find ways you're comfortable with to tell a hiring manager your story.

Sometimes it may be as simple as sharing a bit of knowledge that has nothing to do with the the job you're seeking.

Karen, who lives just outside Nashville, Tenn., recently landed her dream job as a retail sales representative. (She didn't want her last name used because the company recently went through a round of downsizing.) Her years of waitressing helped her ace the interview.

“One of the things that we talked about at the end of the interview was fine dining in the area,” she said. “I also suggested a couple places and wines to try at one of the restaurants. His wife loved the place and I got the job.”

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