

# ***So How Prepared Are You for the Job Interview?***

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There are few meetings in life that are more important or more stressful than a new job interview. OK, maybe the marriage discussion you had with that very "special" person was more important. But, job interviews can certainly be as stressful, if not more stressful. The job interview is when the "rubber meets the road," when you are in a "make or break" situation. Wouldn't it be great if we could just waive a magic wand and get a job offer every time we had an interview? Some people are lucky that way, but normally that only happens in story books, seldom in real life. The rest of us must work hard and prepare.

You have probably heard it said that you are only as good as your résumé. Remember your résumé is only a door opener. A personal interview is what you want and gainful employment is what you need. No matter how good your résumé is, it is still only through the job interview that you will get the new job. The higher you climb on the ladder of success in association management, the tougher the competition and the tougher the interview standards.

In the last 18 months, I have conducted 63 interviews for seven different jobs in my association (some with individuals more than once). I have observed people get "stage fright" and act as if they were almost dying right before my eyes. I have seen eye twitching, the odd or nervous laugh, and the creeping neck rash that went away just as the interview was over. I have seen people come to an interview quite disheveled; people who did not use shoe polish; men who had not seen a barber in months or did not know how to tie their tie, and women with "bad hair days." I have seen people who would not look me in the eye. I have seen people with so much "stuff" in their hands that they either dropped it all on the floor or they could not find that special item they brought to show me. I have seen real stress. I am conscious of this situation and I try to create a relaxing interview environment. But often, no matter what I do, stress is still in the mind of the applicant.

I have coined a word that best describes this self-destructive trait that I have observed. The word is "podiacide." This is the act of shooting one's self in the foot. (Podiacide is an amalgamation of podiatry and suicide.) When I invite five or six people in for job interviews, it is usually very easy afterwards to cut half simply due to podiacide. Most seem unaware as to what they have said or done that lost their shot at the job, even after the interview. You have probably seen co-workers unknowingly commit "podiacide" right in front of their boss or in a staff meeting,

## How prepared are you for the job interview?

where they verbally shot themselves in the foot. I always wanted to tell them that they had just passed up a wonderfully opportunity to have said nothing! Have you ever committed podiacide? I have!

People don't often seem very well prepared for job interviews. In fact, I have come to the conclusion that most people don't feel the need to prepare for an interview except for being on time and dressing properly (both of which still count). The higher up the ladder of success the more important preparation is for the interview. Preparation is confidence building. There are a lot of ways to get prepared for the job interview. I will give you four simple suggestions to start with (not in priority sequence). Let's assume that this is a job in association management.

**First, research the association.** Know what type of association you are interviewing with. One of the first questions normally asked is: "What do you know about our association?" What they really mean is: "Did you care enough to learn about our mission?" This one is easy, and only takes a little time. Go to your local library, and you will find in the reference section four blue volumes on associations. The association index lists all registered associations, both international and domestic. The association index lists the number on staff, the annual budget, the number of association members, date founded, publications, and main focus and activities of the association. Early in the interview look for an opportunity to relate the "factoids" about the association that you have memorized. I assure you, they will be impressed with your homework. More importantly, you will have more confidence in your ability to handle the interview.

**Second, know the rules of interviewing and practice them.** Know what to say and what not to say during the interview. Don't commit podiacide during the interview; don't say something "stupid."

There are a few standard questions asked in almost every interview. You can find out what they are by going to your local book store and buying a paperback book on interviewing techniques. The best one I have found has 50 standard interview questions with potential answers and is titled: "How to Turn an Interview Into a Job," by Jeffrey G. Allen.<sup>1</sup> You should modify the stock answers for your own style and comfort factor. If you have your questions and answers down pat beforehand you will be prepared for virtually any interview question.

You might assume that one of the more difficult questions to respond to would be: "Tell me about yourself." However, this is a great question, a great opportunity. The interviewer has tentatively assumed you are qualified for the job based on your résumé, so spend time outlining your experience from your résumé as it relates to the job ad, reinforcing his/her original assumption. Quantify your

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<sup>1</sup> Jeffrey G. Allen, Fireside Books, Simon & Schuster Publishers, New York, 1983.

## How prepared are you for the job interview?

accomplishments. Explain how you improved things and saved time and money (\$) or %) in your various jobs and how you enjoy working in a team environment.

Another question might be: "Why do you want to leave your current job?" Tell him/her that you are looking for more money, more responsibility, or more challenge; say you want to grow. Never "bad mouth" your current or past employers during an interview, no matter how awful they may have been. Don't talk about past job problems. Some employers may begin to think that "you" are the real problem. Speak positively of the great learning experience in your last job and of the new friends you made there.

Sometimes the more sophisticated interviewer is speaking in "code," asking one thing, but looking for answers to another. For example, the interviewer might get into trouble with the "PC police" if they ask about your personal life style, so they will ask about hobbies and outside activities. What they really want to know about is your personal life. Early on, you should find a way to include a short discussion of your "wholesome" family life and the positive nature of your outside activities. Don't leave the interviewer with any questions about your life style or whether you would "fit in" with the office team.

If you know the questions in advance you can prepare the best answers and feel confident that you are able to handle the interview without stress. Even if you know the answers immediately, be thoughtful in your responses, and don't make your answers seem "canned." Knowing the questions, or variations on the standard questions, in advance will allow you to think of ways to tie in their needs with your skills, instead of mentally groping for answers that sometimes come out wrong. Practice until the answers come naturally to you. That's preparation.

**Third, know what the job is worth.** You should know what the current salary rates are in your geographical area for someone with your skills, education, and experience in these positions. Both ASAE and GWSAE have published salary surveys for association professionals. The surveys are categorized in the same manner as the research outlined above. Salaries vary based on the size and scope of the association. Virtually every association job title is listed and categorized, from entry level to executive director. Visit the ASAE or GWSAE offices or ask a friend in the profession to reproduce the page(s) applicable for the position(s) you are interested in. By matching the factoids from your research you will be able to identify the salary range for each job. You must decide what your minimum salary should be.

**Fourth, know how to negotiate a salary.** Most people do not understand that salaries are almost always negotiable, even when they specifically say they are not. I have seen people accept the first salary offered, not knowing that we were open to negotiating a higher salary. Don't negotiate with yourself. By this I mean,

## How prepared are you for the job interview?

do not hesitate to ask for something just because you think that they might not agree to your proposal.

Don't begin to negotiate your salary too soon. Don't negotiate until a firm job offer has been made. This will probably not happen in the first interview. Be sure you understand when the conversation has moved from the casual discussion into salary negotiation. If you are in doubt, it is OK to ask.

Let us assume the job is a "Program Manager or Coordinator," a person who assists the program director with all aspects of planning and execution and may work on more than one program at a time. The GWSAE salary range for this position is around \$33K to \$38K in 1993, a \$5K spread.

Near the end of the first interview ask what the salary range is for this position. (If you are interviewing for the Executive Director or Deputy [#2] positions, or any position paying above \$50K, do not discuss money until the interviewer brings up the subject.) They may ask what salary you are expecting for this position. What they really want to know is if you know what you are worth and what salary you are willing to accept. What you say could be much lower than they had planned to pay, or you may inadvertently price yourself out of the job. Your answer may determine what salary they will offer. Your answer should always be a question: "What is the salary range you have planned for this position?" Make sure you repeat this answer until they answer the question first. If they insist that you answer their question first, tell them what you found to be the average salary range for this job from your research and where you got the information.

If the person offering you the job states that the salary range is \$32K to \$38K, you now know where you stand. This means that they have budgeted against the top pay rate and expect to hire in the mid range. Once you know the salary range you can mentally calculate the mid range. If your job experience is good, you now know that your minimum salary should be \$35.5K (the mid point) and that you can negotiate upward from \$35.5K to \$38K. Avoid making a counterproposal too soon. Ask more questions about the benefits, future raises, bonus options, parking, *etc.* Later, and only after they have given you the salary range, specifically ask for the top salary mentioned--\$38K, and when they offer \$35.5K, then ask for \$37K, and so on. I think you get the idea. Remember, the objective of the salary negotiation is to achieve an agreement that will work well over time and that both parties will feel right about--the win-win approach.

**Now some final quick tips.** Dress conservatively and neatly. Drink a coke or coffee an hour before the interview. Caffeine is a mild stimulant; it will help soothe your nerves. Go to the interview empty handed and take notes only after the interview, not during. Always arrive not more than 10 minutes early and go first to the rest room. Look in the mirror, check your hair and cloths, and wash and dry your hands. Test your best smile, and use it a lot during the interview. When you are

## **How prepared are you for the job interview?**

introduced, shake hands with a firm grip, look him/her in the eye, smile, and sit in the chair closest to the interviewer. Leave the interview with a smile and a firm handshake, and be sure to get their business card(s). Carry a 3x5 card and immediately after the interview note names and your reactions. Later, write a "thank you for the interview" letter expressing your continued interest and mail it within 24 hours.

Common sense is not as common as commonly believed. Employers today are finding it increasingly difficult to find just the right person for many jobs, for many reasons. Employers are looking for common sense, stability, and hard working team players. Your job in an interview is to leave them with the impression that you are the common-sense team player that they need.

Luck is when opportunity meets preparation! Understand, preparation is a confidence building exercise. When you are prepared you are confident, you will have little stress, and you will leave a good impression. So, if you are prepared, you will make your own good luck on a job interview. On second thought, I'd better say good luck anyway. (Knock on wood!) Good luck and good preparation.

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