

TIPS FOR INTERVIEWEES

By Catherine Steane

So you've perfected your résumé and cover letter, found out about the job you want through your networking and Internet job search skills, and they've called to set up an interview. Now what?

First of all, remember that first phone call is actually a screening interview. Be professional, organized, and ready to go when that call comes. Hopefully, you did preliminary research on each organization you applied to so that you could write an informed, well-targeted cover letter. Have that information readily available when the call comes. Make it clear you know which organization and which position this call is about. "Gosh, I sent out a lot of résumés-which position was this again?" will not make a good first impression. Get the name of the person calling in case you need to call back for more information. Make it clear that you know the address, but ask for directions if you need them. If you have not seen one yet, ask if a detailed job description is available. Confirm the date and time of the interview before you hang up.

Now it's time to go into high gear on your research. Scour the organization's website. Do a thorough Internet search and a GuideStar.org search. Ask around among anyone you know who may be familiar with the organization. Don't be shy about asking the organization itself for information-call the general number and ask if they could send you an annual report, some recent newsletters, or any other promotional materials they may have available. Go into the interview knowing as much as you possibly can about the organization. It will help you answer questions with much greater ease and show your commitment, enthusiasm, and skill.

Next, think about what questions you're likely to face. Be prepared to talk about anything on your résumé-it's all fair game. Study the job description (or the ad if you haven't been able to get a job description) and be prepared to describe how your experience and training qualifies you to perform every aspect of the position. If there are gaps between your experience and the requirements of the job, be prepared to describe how you would go about learning what you need to know in order to perform that aspect of the job. Be prepared to connect the dots for the employer between your skills and this job. Look at books on common interview questions and have answers for them prepared. If you have gaps in employment, an unamicable job separation in your past, or lack a degree the job description asks for, be prepared to address those matters head-on and in a positive light. Have answers ready for the five questions you most expect and the five questions you most dread.

Be sure to also prepare some questions you want to ask. Make sure you leave the interview with a solid understanding of what the job is and what the manager would expect of you. Ask about the organization's culture-what employee characteristics are most valued in the agency? Ask about the organization's funders, its strategic plan, or for particular information on the program in which you'll be working. Ask the manager how he or she approaches supervision. Don't be challenging-be curious in a positive, objective way.

There are many books and articles available on how to dress for interviews, much of which is lost in the nonprofit context. With so many nonprofits emphasizing a casual atmosphere, appropriate interview dress can be hard to gauge. Two thoughts: dress in a way that shows respect for the interviewer, and dress in a way that shows you want to be taken seriously. This, too, is a part of your research on the organization-see what you can find out about their culture and keep that in mind when choosing what to wear for the interview.

Unless there is a major earthquake or the Bridge is shut down, there is virtually no excuse for being late for an interview. There are few faster ways to get off on the wrong foot than to be late for an interview. You know your own punctuality habits. Plan accordingly. Plan to get where you're going at least half an hour ahead of time (longer if the interview is far away) to allow for traffic, transit, and parking delays. Carry a cell phone (borrow one if you don't own one) and the interviewer's number so you can call if something truly major keeps you from arriving on time. If you do succeed in arriving half an hour early, don't go into the office until ten minutes before the interview-find a park bench or café where you can cool your heels until then.

The most important thing to remember when answering questions in an interview is to be unrelentingly positive. Never, ever speak ill of a past employer, especially if it's another nonprofit in the community. If you've had a bad parting of the ways in your past, talk about lack of fit between you and the company, take responsibility for your part in the job not working out, and focus on lessons you learned from the experience. If you badmouth a past employer, the interviewer will wonder what you'll be saying about his or her organization in two years. And for all you know, the interviewer's partner may serve on the board of your former employer.

Of equal importance, be honest in every answer. Don't try to bluff about what you don't know or to cover up a weak spot in your past. It rarely works. An intuitive interviewer will sense that something is awry. The employer you want to work for will be more impressed with your integrity. Besides, if you get the job through bluffing about your knowledge or experience, you'll hit a day of reckoning before you know it.

Be sure to ask for the business card of everyone participating in your interview. When you get home, write a thank-you letter to each of them. It can be brief, but each should be individualized. These letters are a great opportunity to provide further information you didn't have handy in the interview, or to recover from a question you fumbled (who hasn't thought of the right answer to a tough question on the way home from an interview?). These notes can be either posted or e-mailed.

Once the interview is over and you've got your thank-yous out, relax and reward yourself for a job well done. Job searching can be very draining. You need to take care of yourself to maintain your stamina and positive attitude. Go out to dinner, get a massage, allow yourself an afternoon on the couch with a novel. Then get back in the saddle and prepare for the second interview. Good luck!

-- Catherine Steane, JVS Director of Operations. JVS Information provided by Jewish Vocational Service, a non-sectarian, not-for-profit corporation founded in 1973. JVS brings people and work together through a comprehensive range of career and employment counseling and job development services. Visit JVS at <http://www.jvs.org> for more information about their services.