



Acing Your Interview and Landing Your Dream Job

Written by: Sonja Forrer

Consider for a moment all the time and preparation that go into planning a vacation. You need to research your travel destination, book a flight or get the car ready, pack your bags, develop an itinerary, prepare for contingencies and make your connections on time. Similar planning must go into job interviews. Consider each interview an important outpost on the journey to a new position.

How do you prepare for this important journey? There are many steps to take. First, make sure your resume is professional and up to date. Second, complete your “five-star assessment”, which ensures that you know your goals, strengths and weaknesses as well as the type of company and culture that you are seeking. Within that framework, you should also be aware of the type of boss you want and the day-to-day responsibilities of the job. Next, you will need to thoroughly prepare for the interview.

Forrer & Associates is a valuable ally in the interview process. In addition to setting up interviews for positions that meet your job specifications and chief interests, the firm takes a consulting-based approach. We not only match candidates to appropriate open positions, but also provide insight into the company’s specific interview process along with preparation and coaching. As a result, Forrer & Associates exceeds the national average in our overall fill ratio, including “interview to offer” and “offer to acceptance” ratios.

Our consulting-based approach starts with creating an interview preparation package that you will receive via e-mail prior to your interview. The package contains the following:

- Interview itinerary with the following critical information:
 - Day and time of interview
 - List of people with whom you’ll be interviewing, their titles, their biographies and the sequence of interviews
 - Directions to the company’s location or other interview site
 - Detailed job description and company background information, including company summary, company website, departmental organization chart, etc.
 - Type of interviews the company conducts and whether testing will be involved

- Interview tips and sample interview questions
- Sample thank you letters
- Company application and disclosure forms

Being well prepared ensures that you are ready for anything. It also boosts your confidence level, so that you feel energized and excited to meet the individuals who will be conducting your interview. Be sure to take several copies of your resume printed on the Forrer and Associates template, which contains our firm's contact information.

The Basics

Once an interview has been scheduled, you should review the list of basics and start your interview preparation with company research.

- **Research the Company prior to the interview.** Use resources such as the Internet and networking to find out all you can about a potential employer. What do they do? Who are the primary clients? Competitors? Have a thorough understanding of not only the company but also its industry, including trends, hot issues and key players. Be prepared to articulate how you can contribute to the success of the company. Knowing this information will get the interview started on the right foot and it will impress the interviewer!
- **Arrive to the interview on time.** Traffic is not an acceptable excuse for being late for an interview! Factor in travel time, traffic and parking time. In urban areas, be sure to have cash for parking. If necessary, make a trial run to the site prior to the day of the interview. If you are late despite your best efforts, make sure to call the interviewer.
- **Dress professionally.** Wear a professional business suit to interviews; women may wear either a pantsuit or skirted suit. Select conservative colors such as navy blue, black or dark gray, and make sure your clothing is clean and pressed. Pair it with shined shoes and, for women, a conservative purse. Wear a suit even in a business casual environment. Do not wear perfume or cologne. If you smoke, do not smoke prior to the interview or your clothing will have a tell-tale odor.
- **Do not carry a cell phone** into an interview as this indicates that you have something more important to do. Leave your cell phone in your vehicle.
- **Listen carefully and pay attention to names.** Write down names if you must or obtain a business card so you can refer to the name during the interview and afterward. Take clues from those around you about pronunciation and whether someone should be addressed as Dr., Miss, Mrs., or Mr.

- **Avoid divulging more personal information than is appropriate.** Remember that the interview is in a business setting and the topic of discussion should focus on your professional qualifications.
- **Take a break if needed.** Focus on remaining fresh and engaging when interviewing for several hours or with several people. If necessary, take a bathroom break to freshen up.
- **Keep in mind that interviews over meals are still INTERVIEWS.** Meals tend to relax all participants. However, you should never let your guard down because it is still an interview.
- **Be nice to the receptionist.** It's not uncommon for the receptionist to also form an impression about you based on your actions and demeanor, which is later communicated to the interviewer.

Keys to success

- **Start the interview on the right track**

It's appropriate to initiate small talk when you first meet the interviewer. You can talk about the weather or traffic, but it's more personable if you ask the interviewer a question such as, "How is your day going?" It's okay to talk about the interviewer's special interests, which you may glean from advance biographical information or by looking at their office knick-knacks or photos.

I recently had a candidate interview with a notoriously difficult interviewer. The candidate noticed the beautiful photography of animals in Africa. As the candidate had also traveled to Africa, she was able to connect with the interviewer on a personal level and relax the tone of the meeting.

This small talk is a pleasant way to start the interview and eases stress for both of you. Just make sure you don't linger on ancillary topics for too long and avoid hot topics such as politics and religion. During the actual interview, build rapport by speaking in a conversational manner, listening, and providing information that supports your interest in the position and your ability to do the job.

- **Closing the deal**

Chances are your interview will fall somewhere within the range of a "dream come true" and your worst nightmare. Surprisingly, you have a lot of control over the outcome. Your goal is to leave a lasting impression. This is best achieved by telling the interviewer how you have overcome problems in the past in a manner that calls attention to your strengths. This will give you an edge over other candidates. Make sure you describe specific accomplishments and achievements that help define your character and job skills. Don't gloss over important details.

In school, you likely learned more when the teacher used an example to illustrate a period of time in history, rather than just rattling off a series of dates, events and famous names. While interviewers may “tune you out “ when you mention a string of your attributes – which tend to sound like everyone else’s – they are apt to pay close attention when you detail how you used those traits on the job. One reason is that these stories really define you – it’s extremely unlikely that two candidates would approach a unique challenge on the job in the same way.

Initially, this may be difficult to master, especially if you are an introvert rather than an extrovert. But, with practice, it can become second nature to you. We’ll assist you by providing some guidelines.

- **Becoming a Super-STAR**

When you are formulating your specific experience stories, use the acronym “STAR” to help you:

S/T= (Situation or Task) explains the circumstances or background

A= (Action) Describe specific action that you took

R= (Result) Conveys the outcome of your action (use measurable terms when possible). This is your time to brag!

Describe the **situation** or **task** in a few sentences. Be careful not to be too wordy or too brief – it’s important to keep the interviewer focused on the experience you are describing.

For example:

I was the senior manager on the audit of a publicly held manufacturing company. While reviewing workpapers, I discovered that it appeared that the client was improperly capitalizing an item which I believed should have been expensed. The guidance on this type of item was gray, and there was a relatively new pronouncement which addressed the matter as well.

Then, describe the action that you took. Tell this in a way that highlights your involvement, especially as it relates to your strengths. Explained properly, it shouldn’t sound too arrogant or too humble – you don’t want to downplay your role.

For example:

Utilizing the firm’s database, I researched the existing and new pronouncements for guidance. I also reached out to a peer with a client in a very similar industry to determine whether the same issue had arisen at that client. In addition, I downloaded the SEC filings from my client’s competitors to how the expenditure had been accounted for. Based upon this research, I drafted a memo detailing how my client was currently accounting for the expenditure, summarizing my research, and tentatively concluding

that the expenditure should be capitalized rather than expended. I also calculated the current year effect of the proposed change as well as the individual and cumulative effect of the change on prior years' financial results. I presented this memo to the partner for review.

Next, describe the result you achieved and how this helped your employer or client. Use statistics if the results were measurable or quantifiable.

For example:

The partner agreed with my assessment, and I scheduled a meeting with the client to discuss the matter. At first, the client fought the change. However, once I laid out the facts as per my memo, they agreed with our conclusion. The expenditure was properly capitalized on a go-forward basis, and the adjustment was made to the financial statements.

If you were an interviewer who just heard this anecdote, you would probably think that the manager had many attributes, including: taking initiative and being hard working, detail-oriented and resourceful. Plus, chances are you would remember this anecdote and the candidate. This illustrates why using stories in the interview is a powerful tool that leaves a lasting impression.

One important step you must take is to identify the right stories to tell. Develop a variety of stories that can be told during an interview, so that you will always have a ready reply – in the form of a story – when asked about particular problems or to describe your character traits. Your Forrer recruiter will provide you a short list of skills to focus on, including: negotiating, presenting, persuading, judging, planning, organizing and collaborating. You will want to focus on work-related experiences. You should be able to come up with an initial list of at least two positive examples of how you have exhibited each skill.

In addition to questions about positive experiences, you may be asked questions about negative experiences. In these cases, interviewers are trying to see how you handle disappointment and stress. On the job, rarely does everything work out 100 percent. There are always compromises and adjustments that need to be made. Use your negative examples of past work experiences to show how you've learned from that situation and applied that lesson, with good results, in a subsequent situation.

It also helps to rehearse these examples prior to the interview, either in front of a mirror or with another person. A Forrer recruiter can also "role play" these types of questions with a candidate. Practice these examples until you can relate them effortlessly and convincingly. These examples help interviewers not only evaluate technical skills, they also help them evaluate a candidate's communication, leadership and supervisory skills.

Consider looking at yourself from the interviewer's perspective. If you were hiring someone for this job, what types of skills would you be looking for? Write them down and be prepared to address them with some of your anecdotal stories.

Remember, the impact of these stories is hard to achieve by any other means and gives you a tremendous edge over candidates who don't use stories to set themselves apart.

Things to avoid in the interview

- If you feel like you didn't answer a question properly or something didn't go well during the interview, don't let it bring you down. During such incidents, interviewers get a "real life" view of how candidates handle stress.
- Likewise, if an interviewer pauses and there's dead silence, don't feel like you need to say something just to break the silence. The interviewer may be reflecting on what was just said or thinking about the next question. Try to discern the interviewer's speech pattern and respond accordingly.
- Never make negative comments or remarks about former or current employers, bosses or colleagues. You run the risk of being perceived as a trouble-maker or complainer. Keep all comments and responses positive.
- Do not initiate a discussion about salary and benefits. If you are asked about salary, always be truthful about what you are currently making. When asked what your expectations are, the answer should be: **"I am very interested in this opportunity and would welcome your best offer!"**
- Don't bring up quality of life aspects of the job, such as vacation time, flexible hours, car allowance and expense accounts until after an offer has been extended.
- Do not accept offers unless you intend to commit to an employer. Ask for additional time to make a decision if you are unsure. Remember, accepting an offer you have no intention in honoring is unethical behavior. Your Forrer recruiter will handle all negotiations for you regarding salary and benefits.

Testing

Testing may be part of the interview process. If included, it may be done either before or after your interview at the same location. Some companies send candidates to an independent testing consultant. Testing may be personality based, IQ-based or based on a mini G-MAT or SAT. Case studies are often used to assess your aptitude for business and finance, while role playing may also be part of the testing scenario.

One of my favorite case study questions: How many taxi cab drivers are in New York?

Follow through

At the close of the interview, thank the interviewer for his or her time and ask about the timeline for making a job offer – how long it will take and what steps will be involved over that period of time.

Send a handwritten thank you note via “snail” mail immediately to everyone who interviewed you. These notes demonstrate good manners and your writing skills. A thank you note alone can make the difference in whether one candidate is selected over another when all else is equal.

Summary

If you know your resume inside and out, know what you want from your next job, and have polished your interviewing skills, you are well on your way to obtaining your dream job.