

# Chapter 10: Interviewing

The job interview is generally the centerpiece of the job search process and therefore it is worth putting a good deal of effort and thought into your preparation for an interview. Howard Figler in his book *The Complete Job-Search Handbook* (Henry Holt and Company, New York, New York 1988) describes the job search process as analogous to detective work. The job seeker is attempting to look for clues, uncover leads, and ultimately find the right match to “solve” the career

search. The prospective employer can also be seen as engaged in a kind of detective work where he or she is trying to solve the mystery of who the applicant really is and whether they will fit into the job and company. Figler describes nine factors that the employer looks for during an interview and how you as the interviewer can respond most effectively so that you can be the “solution” to the employer’s mystery. We adore Howard and recommend his book highly.

*Howard Figler's Nine Interviewing Factors, from the "Complete Job Search Handbook"*

## 1. Personal Impression

### What the Interviewer Is Looking For

*"I wonder if this person will be an effective representative of our organization. Will he look professional, serious, dress attractively? Will he socialize well, make clients feel at home, make the customer want to be involved with us? Does this person display confidence, warmth, interest? If I were coming here for the first time, would I be impressed by him?"*



### What You Should Do

First of all, dress appropriately for the interview. Do enough research to know what is suitable for that work environment, and then dress about 10 percent better than the norm. Neatness, grooming, and a professional look are

the keys. Have more experienced people check you out if you are not sure whether your appearance will make the grade.

Personal sociability is important in almost every job. Generate friendliness, warmth, and enthusiasm as much as you can, without portraying someone other than yourself. First impressions do matter. Your ability to move into new situations and meet new people comfortably contributes to how you are first received. If this is a difficult area for you, practice placing yourself into new social situations, at offices, parties, and elsewhere.

Take a look at some of your nonverbal factors, such as vocal quality (do you speak clearly, firmly, not too fast or slowly?), body posture when sitting or standing, hand gestures, eye contact (a strong indication of assertiveness and ability to relate confidently), or facial expressions. If you are unsure about any of these, get some advice from a career counselor and practice any skills in which you are weak.

## 2. Competence

### What the Interviewer Is Looking For



*“Can this person do the job we have here? Has she had related experiences? Can I detect skills in her background that will help in this job? What does the resume say? Can I believe what’s on it? How do I know she can do those things? What can I ask that will cue me about her abilities? Maybe she can do the job minimally, but how good is she? Can she tell me things that will reveal her capabilities?”*

### What You Should Say

An interviewer will already have some idea of your competence if you have submitted your resume, but you should assume that he/she wants to know more, or have some verification of what the resume says. You should become a “talking resume.” The best thing you can do is tell stories about your past experiences, which reveal your abilities to perform the job. Don’t make the interviewer work hard to find out what you can do. Anticipate what the job calls for (with the help of your research), and make connections between your skills (as derived from past experiences) and the skills the job requires. Don’t be modest. Give some idea of why you believe you can do the job well. Interviewers like confidence as long as

you don’t overdo it. We’re not talking about bragging here, but simple declarative statements such as: “I am a good supervisor, and the reason I know that is my work last summer at the \_\_\_\_\_, where I oversaw the entire operation of \_\_\_\_\_.”

In many cases, the interviewer is looking for multiple competencies, your ability to perform many tasks well. Anticipate as many different competencies as you can and be prepared to talk about them.

EXAMPLE: “I can organize data projects, supervise staff, and do research in the technical libraries. I can also do public speaking when needed, and I like to write reports for

management in clear language. I know this job calls for a lot of different skills, and I have had some experience with all of them.”

Sometimes you will be referring to your previous experience in the same type of job, but often you will be applying for a different type of work, and will have to make connections or “translations” between one job and another, between your past experiences and the responsibilities of the new occupation:

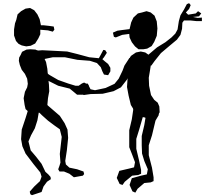
“In my job as a data processing manager I took care of the budget and managed the department’s resources, so I believe I can do those things well in this job as a purchasing agent.”

In general, the more clearly you relate your past experiences and present motivation to the job you want, the more an interviewer can believe that you have the capacity to do the job well.

### 3. Likeability

#### What the Interviewer Is Looking For

*“Would I like to work with this person? Is he enjoyable to be around? Will he get along with the others here in the office? If I ask him to work with a wide variety of people, will he handle that okay? Does he listen well? Will he relate smoothly to the higher-ups? Does he have some fun about him, or is he all work and no play? Is there anything in his personal life that might affect his attitude or moods on the job?”*



#### What You Should Say and Do

How do you go about being likeable? Well, there is no easy answer to that, but we’d better pay attention to it, because this is a powerful yet always unspoken factor in hiring decisions. Unless there is a strong argument to the contrary, people tend to hire people they like and find congenial. They do so for a variety of reasons:

- It is more enjoyable to work with likeable people
- Relationships in the office will be better
- Likeable people tend to get more cooperation, and thus more work is usually accomplished

- Such people tend to have greater potential for advancement

Like-ability is hard to program into your interview behavior, but there are things you can do to stay on the right side of this key factor.

- a) ***Be genuinely interested in everyone you meet***, from bosses through staff people, secretaries, receptionists, and anyone else. Word gets around fast in the office and everyone has a say about “what’s this person like?”
- b) ***Be a good listener***. Easy to say, but hard to do when you are focusing on what you are going to say next. Pay attention to the questions you are asked, the statements your

interviewers make, the feelings they show between the lines, and even their attitudes toward each other. Maybe what they are saying is even irrelevant to the job. Listen anyway. Listening, more than anything else, begins to cement the relationship with a person. Let them know you are listening by rephrasing or summarizing what you heard them say.

- c) ***Be as at ease with people as you possibly can be, given the circumstances.*** They are not going to bite your head off, and you will not fall into a deep hole somewhere, never to be heard from again, if you don't get this job. Try to imagine you are at a party and you are getting acquainted with some folks you think you're going to like.
- d) ***Be loose.*** Take what comes. Interviews can have unexpected little wrinkles in them, like phone interruptions, mistaken arrangements (so what if they lost your plane ticket, or gave you the wrong directions to the office), encounters with people you were not prepared to meet, spilled coffee, and maybe even a fire drill. The questions interviewers ask can be oddball and perhaps even designed to rattle you. Maintain an upbeat attitude no matter what answer you give. "Poise and Maturity" below discusses stressful questions in greater detail.
- e) ***Don't be manipulative.*** Don't try to endear yourself to anyone by making an obvious play for their approval, such as excessive comments about the pictures on their

walls or the trophies in their offices. These ploys are recommended in other books, but most interviewers will view your comments as transparent and thus discount them. Worse yet, such attempts to curry favor may work against you.

- f) ***Avoid negative talk.*** Don't be critical of former employers or indulge in stories about people you don't like. Even though your criticism may be legitimate, it casts a negative light on you. Sometimes an interviewer will even bait you, because he/she knows that your former boss is a difficult person. Don't be tempted to tell war stories, because the interviewer may assume you will be just as critical of his/her operation if you are hired. Don't be negative with anyone.

Interviewers may show you where you stand on like-ability by their smiles or other nonverbal responses, but they will seldom tell you directly. You need not press hard with your likeable behaviors. Just avoid the traps implied above, and remember that congeniality counts.

## 4. Motivation/Enthusiasm/Commitment

### What the Interviewer Is Looking For



*“I wonder how badly she wants this job. Is she fired up about it? Does she project this enthusiasm to me? How hard a worker is she likely to be, based on the intensity she is showing me? Is she really interested in this field, or is she just looking for a job? If we hire her, will she be with us long enough to make a real contribution? I wonder how I can find out what she really wants from her career. How do I know if this job is her first choice?”*

### What You Should Say

Depth of motivation often makes the difference between an ordinary employee and a great one. How can you demonstrate it? If they ask whether you want the job and you say yes, that doesn't quite settle the matter.

- a) Show your enthusiasm verbally and non-verbally. Don't be stiff. Let them know you like the job and would be very energized by it.
- b) Relate this job to your previous experiences. This is another place where story telling comes in handy: “I have done projects like this before, and have really thrown myself into them. For example . . . ”
- c) Talk about your ambitions, your desire for future growth in this field of work. Give some general idea of how you hope to progress with this company, and why such advancement appeals to you.
- d) Tell exactly what you like about the company, the department, the job, the products/services this company sells, etc.

Motivation can be done to excess, of course. Jumping up and down screaming “It's me! This job is me!”

would be a little over the line. But I know I can count on you to be tasteful.

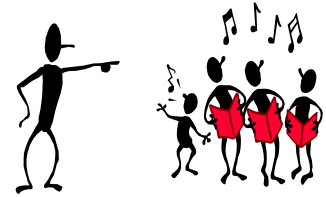
A good interviewer will ask you about your motivation and potential commitment, so be prepared to answer. Interviewers usually try to see how this job will fit into your career history; this is one way of gauging how motivated you might be. If you are changing careers, you will have to give the interviewer some insight into why you are moving in this direction and how it fits with your larger career goals and ambitions.

Interviewers usually believe that the most motivated applicant will do the best job, even if he/she has a little less relevant experience or needs a little more training. Thus, even if you have the qualifications on paper and you have answered questions satisfactorily in the interview, *don't be cocky or complacent*. More than one job offer has been lost by candidates who said: “I thought I had it made.”

## 5. Leadership

### What the Interviewer Is Looking For

*“Does this person have potential for taking responsibility in our organization? What makes me think so? Do I see evidence that he has been a leader in other settings? Does he seem to want to move ahead and be in charge of things? Would he be a good example for the rest of our staff?”*



### What You Should Say

Leadership is one of private industry’s favorite words. It also gets high marks from nonprofit employers. In fact, everyone likes leadership and tries to get as much of it as they can.

First let’s agree that “leadership” refers not only to being head of an organization, or club, or committee, or team; it also refers to taking responsibility for a project, even when you are not the appointed leader of a group. Leadership is a broad concept that denotes seeing a goal and bringing together the people and resources to achieve that goal. Often leadership will involve supervising or managing other people, but that is not always so. Leadership can mean building a boat by yourself in your backyard, or lobbying the city council to do something on behalf of the homeless.

Interviewers would like to see some evidence that you are a take charge guy, or a woman who makes things happen. They believe that such qualities will pay off for the company, because you will exert the same leadership skills on the job. Thus, you should call attention to any significant responsibilities you have had, even if the results were not

completely successful. Failures can be as important as successes. “We almost got the board of trustees to agree to have a basketball team at my college. I organized the effort, lobbied the board, called the referendum, and met with the president...” Tell interviewers about your leadership roles, even if they do not ask. Identify skills in your leadership positions that will help you on this job. Leadership usually is a good sign that you know how to get along with people and manage them. The interviewer is looking to the future as well as the present. The entry-level job may not have leadership in it, but the interviewer envisions bigger things for you. Show that your thinking is ambitious and that your previous leadership experience was no accident.

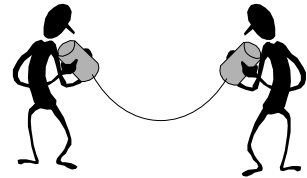
Talk about your accomplishments. If, during your reign as leader of the scout troop, the group organized more trips and earned more merit badges than in previous years, say so. If your leadership of the high school guidance department led to an increase in the number of students attending college and an expansion of the facilities, report that on your resume and during the interview. Leadership activity can occur

on the job, in community affairs, and in college organizations.

## 6. Communication Skills

### What the Interviewer Is Looking For

*“What evidence do I have that this person writes clearly and effectively? Would she represent our organization positively as a public speaker? Is, she a powerful communicator? Will she communicate well to other staff members? Could she write a speech for our president if she had to, and could she deliver it if necessary? How much writing and public speaking has she done before?”*



### What You Should Say and Do

Writing and speaking skills are highly valued in a wide variety of jobs, particularly for jobs that lead to greater responsibility. Organizational leaders are always required to communicate effectively, in writing and in person. Therefore, you should go out of your way to provide evidence of these skills. Offer examples of your writing style—perhaps management reports, publicity materials, or newsletters that you have produced. Take care that your resume and cover letters are well written; these are obvious examples of your writing talent. Any problems or sloppiness in these materials will be interpreted by the interviewer as a sign that you cannot write well.

Every time you open your mouth you give evidence of your speaking ability. If you have done public speaking, say so, but don't overemphasize this, lest it sound like bragging. The interview itself is a prime example of your speaking skill. Speak concisely yet with sufficient detail, don't mispronounce words, and work on your vocal quality if you speak

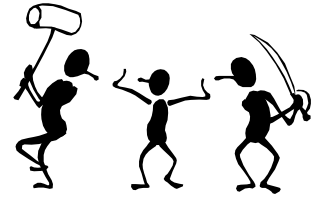
to softly, too rapidly, or in some ineffective way.

Don't try to blow the interviewer away with your speaking style, but make sure that you answer questions with conviction and speak with a tone of confidence. If this is a problem area for you, it can be corrected or improved through speech classes, Toastmasters clubs, and practice in your daily life

## 7. Poise and Maturity

### What the Interviewer Is Looking For

*“Can this person handle himself under pressure? Does he have the depth and maturity to deal with questions that are almost impossible to How would he project himself as a representative of our organization under trying circumstances? Could he handle difficult customers? Will he come apart when things get crazy around here or people challenge his ideas? How would he do in a heated argument? Is he calm under fire?”*



### What You Should Say

This is the area where the interviewer turns to stressful questions and lovely thoughts of how to rattle your cage. Interviewers do not always do this, but they will create some stress if they feel the job requires your ability to deal with pressure and they need to know how you conduct yourself. Sometimes your prior experience will reveal your ability to work under pressure, but if the interviewer is not sure, he/she may create some tension or uncertainty on the spot to see what you do with it. The interviewer may ask questions such as:

*“What would you do about our sales problems if you were the president of our company?”*

*“What is the biggest mistake you’ve ever made, and why did you let it happen?”*

*“Tell me why you think our company is so hot when you really know very little about it.”*

*“Who’s the worst boss you’ve ever worked for and why?”*

Above all, remember that how you answer the question- your calmness, your reasonableness, your ability to remain positive and congenial-is as important as the content of your answer. Grace under pressure is a virtue, and

the interviewer wants to see that you have it. You can admit to a bit of uncertainty before answering (a pause to give yourself time), but do so with poise, because that is what people in leadership roles are called on to do frequently.

The interviewer may try to argue with you and get you to admit you are wrong perhaps even badger you about a point of view. This is a test of your diplomacy and ability to engage someone on a difficult issue, maintain their respect, and still get your points across. “Winning” the argument is not as important as having a constructive, peaceful discussion, even if the interviewer is trying to rile you. Stressful questions are not standard parts of an interview, but you should be ready for them. Sometimes stressful moments will occur, even though they are not planned. An interviewer may misinterpret something you say, forcing you to clarify yourself in a tactful way. Or the interviewer may make a joke about something you said and you don’t think it’s funny. These incidents call upon your poise and maturity, your

ability to manage the conversation with style and self-control.

Poise and maturity is another item on the agenda that is seldom stated (No interviewer asks, “Are you mature enough for this job?”) but often noted. It contributes greatly to your overall

impression, so don’t let little glitches in the interview process get you upset. If you stumble around, have to say “I don’t know,” or get caught in a misstatement what’s important is that you handle the mishap with dignity and calmness.

## 8. Outside Interests

### What the Interviewer Is Looking For



“Is this person one-dimensional, or does she pursue things away from the job? Does she show any flair or originality in her outside interests? Do I see signs that she can get intensely involved in something; that she is productive, works hard toward goals? Maybe I can understand more fully who she is by considering the other things she does. Do these show any strong convictions? How about an ability to organize herself? Would people who work here be interested to know what this woman does off the job? Is there any evidence of achievement in her outside involvements?”

### What You Should Say

Whether you are a passionate handball player, a rock collector, have a collection of quilts you have sewn, or you make wine from your own vineyards, it is generally good to talk about your personal interests, especially if you are asked. Don’t push these interests into the conversation where they don’t belong, but be alert for opportunities to point out skills you have developed or knowledge you have acquired in your life that may be related to the job you want.

EXAMPLE: “I take geological field trips on my own, and have made maps of the area. This has developed my drawing skill, and I have learned a lot about the Surveyor’s Office. I think this background will help me as

a junior planner here at the Office of City Planning.”

Even if your interests are not directly related to the job, your involvement in them can be a positive sign of enthusiasm and your ability to organize your energies. Interviewers often like to know more about you and may ask: “What do you do in your spare time that you really get fired up about?” The interviewer is trying to determine if you have a spirit of dedication and intensity that may carry over to your involvement with the job. People who organize themselves for maximum efforts in their interests usually can display this kind of self-management and their careers.

While some interviewers might want you to say that you have no outside interests, because you are fully dedicated to your career, this is an unusual point of view. It is more common for an interviewer to prefer a balanced individual who works hard but also gets involved in personal activities. Interviewers recognize that most workers do not meet all of their needs from paid employment, and

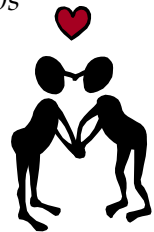
assume that a diverse individual will probably be a happier employee.

If you have not had any recent strong interests, either because you were involved in school or had family obligations, it is fine to talk about interests that you intend to pursue in the future. Even a little exposure to an outside activity should give you enough to talk about, if you are asked.

## 9. Your Relationships

### What the Interviewer Is Looking For

*“I know I’m not supposed to ask these things, but I’d like to know if his relationships are okay, because I don’t want to hire someone who has marital, roommate, family, or other problems of this kind. Of course, that is none of my business, but I know that relationship trouble almost always shows up on the job and subtracts from a person’s productivity. So, if I can hire someone who is on sound footing at home, he will undoubtedly do more for the organization. Maybe I can get him to talk about this stuff without my asking him directly.”*



### What You Should Say

Yes, it is none of their business. But they may try to find out anyway. Right or wrong, fair or unfair, the interviewer usually believes that relationship stability is a good indication of your stability and effectiveness on the job.

Of course, the interviewer is not going to come right out and ask you: “How are things at home?” But he/she may encourage you to talk about your relationships, even if only in subtle and indirect ways:

What led you and your wife to move here?

How does your husband like his work?

Do you have any brothers and sisters? What kinds of work are they in?

It is reasonable to answer questions like these. Any general or implied reference you can make to solid and stable relationships will probably work to your benefit.

In these days of two-career couples, a lot of job dissension comes from conflicts between spouses’ respective careers. Interviewers often try to find out whether your spouse has a job too or if that is a problem.

Relationships are off-limits for interviews, in the strict legal sense, but it

makes sense to talk about them if you are asked. It is more trouble to refuse to answer any question about your spouse or family member. Sometimes the interviewer will ask out of plain and simple curiosity—"What kind of work does your wife do?" In some cases your spouse's work will be seen as an asset to

you, if it is in a field that is related to the job you are seeking. You don't want to trade on your spouse's career, but it doesn't hurt to indicate what it is. The fact that you know a lot about your mate's work is another sign of a positive relationship.

### **Preparation for the Interview**

In **Appendix 10a** we provide sample interview questions for you to go over and practice. In **Appendix 10b** we give a sample application that we suggest you look at and fill out prior to your first interview. Hopefully by doing this you can be fully prepared for the interview and present yourself in the most confident and composed way possible.

