

Steps to prepare for good job interview

Wednesday, April 4, 2007 · Last updated 12:40 p.m. PT
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NEW YORK -- The spring hiring season is in full swing and that means - gulp! - it's time for those dreaded job interviews.

But speaking with prospective employers, whether you're going for your first job or you're a seasoned worker, needn't be such a nail-biting affair if you do some preparation.

"A lot of mistakes have to do with poor communications," said Norma Gaffin, director of content for the career advice section of the Monster.com job site. "People take so many things for granted, but you need to remember the basics - to dress well, speak well and always follow up with a thank you note."

Joe Hodowanes, a career strategy adviser, said the first thing a job candidate must do is research the industry, the company and the job. That means looking at the company's Web site, doing searches about the company on the Internet and even dropping in at the library to check the company out in professional references.

"You need to know what your prospective employer's strength and problems are or you can't project yourself as a candidate to deal with them," said Hodowanes, who is with the executive search firm J.M. Wanes & Associates of Tampa, Fla.

He suggests first-time job seekers, as well as work force veterans, might try this pre-interview exercise: Write down the sentence, "What value do I bring to a company and why should they hire me?"

Then, he said, over the next several days as you think of key selling points, write them down.

"If you can accumulate 15 or 20 items, then as things come up in the interview, they can be interjected at the appropriate places," Hodowanes said.

He contrasts an applicant eager to discuss his or her potential contribution to a company with an applicant who is quick to ask such self-serving questions as "What are the benefits?" and "How much vacation do I get?" And he asks, "Which one would you consider for the job?"

Hodowanes also stresses that interviewees shouldn't be afraid to ask probing questions. Some possibilities:

- Exactly what do you see me doing in the first 60 or 90 days that would help this company - or this division - the most?

- Besides the skill sets and education you've said you want, what do you think this person needs to bring to the job to be successful?

"Then sit back and be quiet, because whatever that person comes back with is going to be uppermost in their mind," he said. "It might be, being a member of the team, it might be understanding numbers and profitability.

"Then guess what you can do through the rest of the interview? You can hit on those points."

Monster.com's Gaffin encourages job applicants to practice before they go into an interview. Graduating seniors can usually get help at campus career centers, she said. And sites like monster.com have "virtual interviews" that can help.

She also suggests people "look very carefully at the job description." If, for example, it calls for someone who pays close attention to details, be prepared with anecdotes where you've done that.

"It doesn't have to be only work experience," she said. "I could be in extracurricular activities or course work or volunteer activities."

Increasingly, early interviews in the job-hunting process are done by phone. This, of course, requires different techniques than the in-person interview, Gaffin said.

"The big key to anyone on a phone interview is, 'When you're talking, smile,'" she said.

She added: "I'm not suggesting you wear a suit for a phone interview, but certainly don't do it in your pajamas because that kind of casualness will come through. You want to come across as professional."

Then, if the phone interview leads to an in-person interview, make sure you're on time and dressed appropriately, she said.

When it comes to bringing up money, both Gaffin and Hodowanes urge job seekers to let the prospective employer broach the subject.

"It shouldn't be you, especially early in the hiring process," Gaffin said.

If the interviewer persists with money questions, perhaps asking for a range, she suggests a response like, "I feel this is so early in the process that I need to learn more about the position before I would feel comfortable talking about it."

Hodowanes said that if an interviewer asks, a good response could be: "I'm sure you have a salary range in mind. Can you tell me what is attached to this position?"

Once you know the range, determine the midpoint, whether it's \$5 to \$6 or \$5,000 to \$6,000, he said.

On the Net:

<http://content.monster.com>

<http://www.jmwanes.com>

In these cases, \$5.50 and \$5,500 are the midpoints, and he suggested a prospective employee "try everything humanly possible to avoid going below that midpoint."

Even new graduates should negotiate if they're not happy with an offer, Hodowanes said.

"Most companies have more flexibility with salary than they let on," he said.
