

Preparing for an interview includes researching the company and the interviewer



## INTERVIEWERS ARE CLUELESS!

BY CARVER SMITH, CPA, SPHR



*Do your research, think about specific examples, and ask questions then you will make the interviewer look brilliant and confident in you as a candidate, not clueless!*

**I**nterviewers are clueless! This certainly is a gross generalization. However, most people put into the role of interviewer have never been formally taught how to interview and if they have, the training may not have included practice, coaching and feedback.

I reconfirmed this belief last fall as I went around the state and gave presentations to large WICPA groups on finding, recruiting and retaining top talent. I asked each crowd, “How many of you have conducted interviews?” Roughly 90 percent of those attending raised their hands. I then asked them “How many of you have had interviewing training?” Fewer than 20 percent raised their hands. So they may not be clueless, but they may be nervous, or at least, not as effective at interviewing as they could or should be.

So what does this mean for you as a professional who finds yourself interviewing for that perfect job? Prepare! Do your homework on the company and even the interviewer. Doing so has never

been easier with tools including Facebook (yes, the “older” crowd is on there too) and LinkedIn. It’s important to keep in mind that they are doing the same thing as you. Make sure you are controlling what you, and those you know, have posted on these sites. Yes, take down that sweet picture of you doing a keg stand! This research will help you prepare questions about the company’s career paths, culture and anything else that is important to you. Researching is more important than you think: The questions you ask not only demonstrate you are prepared, but also that you are truly interested in the opportunity.

Develop a list of skills and traits you think an employer is looking for. Skills are

those things you learned or were trained to do. They usually can be extracted from a resume. Traits are often referred to as “behaviors.” Many employers are looking for the same things. They want a candidate who:

- Takes initiative before being asked to do things
- Has critical thinking skills to be able to work through a problem
- Takes ownership of their responsibilities
- Has strong interpersonal/leadership skills

You can learn what a company is looking for by reaching out to friends or alumni who work, or used to work, at the company.

Now it’s time to think through examples of experiences that demonstrate these traits and any other characteristics about yourself that you want to be sure they know in that short interview. For example, share initiative stories where you went after something for the betterment of yourself or a team without being asked or encouraged to do so. Did you get involved in a unique project that was your idea? How did you initiate that effort? The beginning of that story and the obstacles you overcame will demonstrate the initiative trait many are seeking.

Don’t sell yourself short in coming up with examples. Early in your career you probably haven’t had huge accomplishments that changed the company forever. However, you may have

developed a new way to handle a process, made suggestions on new technologies or made a significant impact in a charity you support. Think through very specific details of these stories. What did you do, specifically? What did you say to others? What was the outcome?

Now you are ready for the interview. Many companies use behavioral-based interviews. Oftentimes it is the human resources representative who uses this method of interviewing; they tend to focus on the “cultural fit” of a candidate, and could be the only one trained in this area. The actual hiring manager (who you would report to) may be more focused on your “skills” in addition to getting a general impression of your fit for the team. Even if they don’t conduct a formal behavioral-based interview, sharing these specific stories and examples of your past will give the interviewer confidence that they know what you are about. There may be some “yes” or “no” questions that they need to go through, but it is even better if you can further support your answers with examples.

A good interviewer will probe beneath the surface of your answer to really understand the context of the story and what your role was. But be careful! Don’t get caught in the “we trap.” This is the problem of telling stories about what “we” did instead of focusing on what you did. Similarly, avoid answering questions with words like “usually,” “typically” or

“always.” Those are generalizations and aren’t specific enough. A good interviewer will ask you for an example, but if they don’t ask, give them one!

Give an overview of the situation, your role (what you did) and the result. Don’t go on too long. Make it about a minute and then see if the interviewer directs the story. But if you are prepared, you may have given them enough confidence to move on.

Wrap up the interview with some of the questions you prepared (it’s OK to use notes). You should definitely let them know if there is something you feel is important about your credentials, experience or interests that hasn’t come up. Point out key differentiators or experiences your interviewer may have overlooked.

If you are prepared, you will end up gently steering the interview to what you know is important even though the interviewer may not be comfortable interviewing. Do your research, think about specific examples, and ask questions; then you will make the interviewer look brilliant and confident in you as a candidate, not clueless! ● ● ●

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