

**Ajilon**



# Guide to effective interviewing

Proven tips on how to  
be successful at job interviews.

Win the job  
you really want



There is nothing quite like the pursuit of your dream job. To win that job, however, you must excel at presenting your marketable skills and experience to potential employers. In other words, you have to be an effective interviewee.

Just the thought of a job interview is enough to make most people nervous. However, it is crucial to overcome any apprehension you may have — like it or not, the job interview is the primary way both employers and candidates judge each other.

The interview process can often become frustrating due to poor selections from both sides of the table. **But there are proven ways to get beyond the typical interview, and that is what this guide is all about.**

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### **Prepare like a champion.**

Roger Staubach once noted that “in business or in football, it takes a lot of unspectacular preparation to produce spectacular results.” The same goes for interviewing.

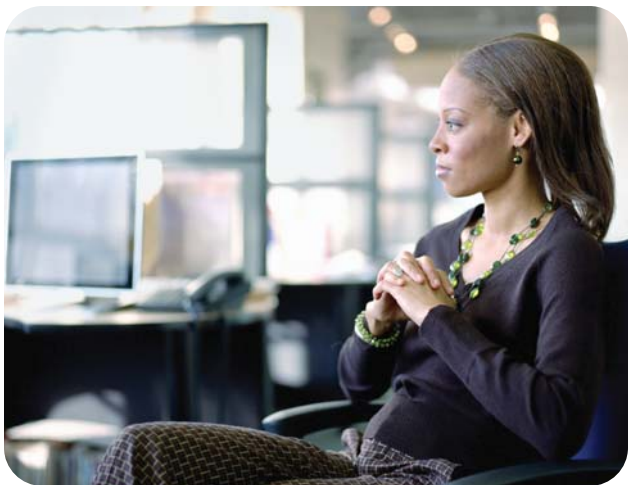
Unfortunately, too many candidates are unprepared to talk about themselves. You may be dressed for success on interview day, but if you can't convince the interviewer — face-to-face — that you are right for the job, you won't win the job. It's that simple — and that tough.

The only way to distinguish yourself from the competition is to present your qualifications and yourself more effectively and persuasively than others do.

### **Practice interviewing.**

Selling yourself to a prospective employer in 45 minutes can make anyone a bit anxious — even the most experienced interviewee. However, there is a simple way to overcome nerves — just practice interviewing. Ask your recruiter, a spouse, a relative, a friend — anyone you trust — to provide constructive criticism and conduct realistic interviews.

Practice interviewing in a context as close to a real interview situation as you can. Give the interviewers your resume. Tell them to assume



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they never met you. Play it straight. After the interview is over, discuss your performance and ask for honest critiques. Get suggestions on how to improve your presentation. Remember, once you start doing real interviews, you will almost never get direct, candid feedback, so take advantage of the opportunity during this practice stage.

If you can videotape your practice interviews, by all means do so. Seeing yourself on video can be uncomfortable, but it will be well worth it.

### **Research the company.**

Find out as much about the company, its history, its competitive environment and its future as you can. Candidates who arrive at interviews completely unprepared are remembered for all the wrong reasons. Instead of showcasing their competence and thoroughness, they display a “wing-it” mentality that doesn’t bode well with employers.

Most good research begins on the Internet. Go to a search engine and conduct a keyword search on the company name. You’ll be surprised at the wealth of information you will uncover.

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### **Rely on your recruiter.**

Don't expect the Internet to be your only resource. Time permitting, you might also want to access the library, government offices, professional associations and especially your recruiter.

Ask your Ajilon representative about materials and resources available for you — many staffing firms can provide comprehensive information to help candidates prepare for interviews. Also, don't be afraid to ask the potential employer to provide you with information that might prove helpful in preparing for the interview. Brochures, annual reports and other marketing materials can be enormously beneficial.

Be prepared to ask good questions about the company and its direction. Have a thorough understanding of the position, its duties and responsibilities, and what is expected. Who has been successful and why? Who has failed and why? Who does the position report to and who does it oversee? What needs to be done in the first six months?

A good recruiter will be able to provide insight in these areas prior to the interview.

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### Other preparation techniques.

Clear your mind of other matters before the interview. Focus on being energetic, assertive, confident, and likable.

- **Have in mind what characteristics about yourself you would like to get across in the interview.**  
Review everything you've done in the past for evidence of these characteristics.
- **Review each item on your resume and consider whether an interviewer is likely to ask about it, and why.**  
Formulate messages and information you would want to convey for each entry. Be prepared to address weak spots or gaps in your resume if there are any.
- **Rehearse, rehearse, rehearse.**  
Actors rehearse their lines and moves. Athletes practice their skills. Salespeople practice their presentations. When you go on a job interview, you are performing, competing and selling. You have to rehearse, but be sure you don't memorize each answer word-for-word. Your responses should sound natural and conversational, not as though you're reading from a script.
- **Consider some interviews a rehearsal.**  
If you're lucky, your first interview will not be for the job you really want and can be a kind of "dress rehearsal." This doesn't

mean you don't have to take it seriously — do the best you can. Then critique your performance afterward. Identify your weak spots, determine what you need to do to improve, and go to your next interview a much more polished candidate.

- **Have in mind questions that are important for you to get answered at this stage of the interview process.**

### **Dress for success.**

Be sensible about how you dress. Many experts on interviewing give countless tips on what to wear, which colors to shy away from, what to carry, etc. The real rule for how to dress and what to carry is to use common sense. Look neat and clean. Perfumes or cologne should be kept to a minimum. Dress appropriately for the position for which you are applying. Jewelry should be minimal and in good taste. Don't wear jewelry that is going to dangle or distract. Please do not smoke or chew gum even if offered. Make sure your shoes are polished.

Your failure to use common sense in the area of dress is likely to have two effects, neither of which will help you get a job. First, it may make the interviewer uncomfortable. Second, and more important, it will mark you as lacking in good judgment. If you are still unsure about the most appropriate attire for an interview, ask your recruiter to help you make the right decisions.

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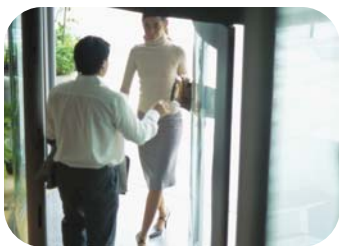


Honest and direct answers are disarming and effective.

## **Answering questions.**

An interview involves an exchange of information. Here are some guidelines that will help you improve the quality of your answers:

- **Answer the question that's asked.**  
You would be surprised how many candidates do not do this. You should not intentionally ignore a question by answering a different question or asking a question yourself. If you are unsure about the question, ask the other person to repeat it. Or paraphrase the question yourself to test whether you've understood it.
- **Answer questions honestly and directly.**  
Interviewers want to deal with candidates they can trust. Candidates who waffle responses hurt their chances. Honest and direct answers, on the other hand, are extremely disarming and, because they're relatively rare, very effective. But remember to play up your strengths. If you have to talk about negative experiences, point out what you learned from them, and why you will not make the same mistakes again.
- **Organize your answers.**  
Flitting about from point to point, going forward, backward, and every which way in answering a question suggests that you would do the same thing on the job. Do not be afraid to take a little time before plunging into your answer. Consider ways to give your answer structure,



either by organizing your response chronologically, organizing your points in order of their importance, or simply by starting your answer with a statement such as, “There are three things I would consider in answering that question. First...”

- **Be brief.**

An interview is supposed to be a dialogue, not a diatribe. If you think you’re going on too long, cut your answer short. Try to follow the “Three-Minute Rule” — do not talk for more than three minutes without allowing the other person to participate in the conversation. If the interviewer wants more information, she can always ask a follow-up question.

- **Be energetic.**

Few things are worse than listening to a candidate drone on in a monotone voice about how great he is with an indifferent expression on his face. If you are not interested in or energized by your response, how can you expect the interviewer to be?

- **Be positive about your reason for leaving your current job.**

Or any previous jobs, for that matter. The key word to remember is “more.” You want more challenges, more responsibility, more opportunity, etc. If you’ve been fired, stress how much you learned from the experience and how it has helped you become even better at what you do. Be as positive as you can.

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- **Quantify the confidence other employers have placed in you.**

Do this by stressing specific facts, figures and measurable accomplishments. Mention the number of employees you've supervised, the amount of money you controlled, the earnings that your department achieved under your management.

- **Never speak badly of past supervisors or employers.**

- **Make the job you're interviewing for your chief objective.**

Frame your answers so that you let the interviewer know that you see this job as a means to achieving your ultimate career goals. Be careful not to make it sound like either a stepping stone or a safe haven.

### **Handling obstacles.**

There will likely be aspects of your career that could present obstacles to employment if not handled correctly. Here are a few of the most common red flags to employers and some ways you can overcome them and turn them into positives:

- **You were fired from your last job.**

Terminations are emotional. When you are fired, it's natural to feel resentment, anger, fear, anxiety, humiliation and even relief.

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The key here is to vent before you do the interview circuit. Bend the ears of loved ones, friends, and associates until you feel some sort of closure. Be sure that when you discuss your termination during that very first interview, you can provide emotionally-neutral answers. When you respond to questions about terminations, always include some lessons learned that will benefit future employers.

- **You were laid off.**

By now, just about every interviewer you encounter has been touched by layoffs directly or indirectly. The good news is that the stigma of unemployment is mostly gone, especially when the reasons for layoffs are not performance-related. Here, you want to emphasize that the layoff was unrelated to you as a person and as a worker, you did not take it personally, and you realize that business is business. Employers are curious about how you will react to adverse situations if hired; here is a good place to show that — no matter what — you can make the best out of a less-than-stellar situation.

- **You don't have enough experience.**

When employers raise objections in the qualifications area, you must be able to identify related experience or transferable skills that will convince the interviewer of your ability to do the job.

If the interviewer feels you do not possess the right degree, stress the strength and quality of what you do have. Remember, the fact that you are being interviewed at all means that despite not having the right degree you are still a viable candidate.

- **You're overqualified.**

If you are deemed as being overqualified, your first defense should be to reiterate your best qualifications for the position. In other words, view the objection as another opportunity to sell your qualifications. If the interviewer is still unsure, probe more deeply into the resistance. Your main objective here is to push interviewers into rethinking their position and keeping an open mind.

- **Are you compatible?**

It's not enough to have the skills the employer is seeking. Interviewers want to know if and how you'll "fit" into the company. They'll ask you how you got along with your previous supervisors, what your colleagues thought of you, where you see yourself in five years, etc.

If you had or have a problem with your most recent boss, try to neutralize it by focusing your answer on the productive parts of the relationship.

The "Where do you want to be in five years?" question is a staple in the world of interviewing that you will likely be asked numerous times



throughout your career. Don't respond, "I'd like to have your job." Instead, show an interest in the current job and in making a contribution to the organization. Talk about the levels of responsibility you'd like to attain, and that your primary goal is to add value to the organization.

### **Closing the interview.**

There are only four important things you need to remember about closing an interview (besides the obvious "thank you" and firm handshake):

1. If you have questions about the company that would affect whether you would want to spend further time interviewing, ask them now. To learn more in-depth information about the position and the organization, you can ask questions such as:
  - What is your highest priority in the next six months, and how can someone like me help?
  - Please tell me about a typical day.
  - What are the common characteristics of your top people?
  - Where do you see your company in the next five years?
  - What are your personal satisfactions and disappointments since you have been with the firm?
2. If the interviewer has failed to elicit some important information about you, make that information known before you close.

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3. Find out what the next step will be and when it is likely to occur.
4. Keep in mind that it is inappropriate (and premature) to ask about salary, benefits, work hours, parking, etc. on the first interview.

### **Follow-up.**

Even when the interview is over, you must continue to sell yourself by following up and reinforcing your qualifications. Effective follow-up gives you a chance to say things you have forgotten to say, or to correct things you wish you had said differently. Most importantly, it distinguishes you from other candidates — all too many people do not follow up. This is your chance to stand out.

### **The follow-up letter.**

Often called a “thank you” letter, this crucial follow-up device should do much more than say “thanks.” While you want to express your gratitude for the interview, you can also express interest and enthusiasm for the position, reinforce or correct a first impression, review your major strengths and qualifications, and recap the next steps in the hiring process. Never use your company stationery for this letter, it sends a bad message. And be sure to mail the letter within 48 hours of the interview. The interviewer will be seeing other candidates and may not remember the details about you without a reminder. Follow up by email is also perfectly acceptable.

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Most recruiters will work with candidates to develop an effective follow-up letter. If a recruiter placed you in an interview, you should refrain from calling the employer directly — while some companies may consider it assertiveness, most will feel you did not follow appropriate decorum.

### **Talking money.**

This is probably the most uncomfortable part of the interview process for both parties. Should you ask about salary, or should you wait for the interviewer to bring it up? Should you be honest about your most recent compensation?

Try to postpone answering any questions about compensation until the employer is enthusiastic about your candidacy. Rather than box yourself in or screen yourself out in the early going, say that you're flexible but need to know more about the position.

If interviewers really persist, you probably should name some numbers rather than risk irritating them. Express realistic expectations and needs by using salary surveys as a basis for your requirements. This will also convey to the employer that you know your value in the marketplace and are seeking it.

Once you know an employer wants to hire you, your first instinct may be to go for the stars. Try to resist. Instead, name a figure that, based

on your research, genuinely reflects the fair market price for your employment. If you're working with a search firm, the recruiter will play a key role in the negotiation process. Think of your recruiter as an intermediary and talk openly with him or her. Share your concerns and expectations and call with comments or questions. An effective recruiter will act as an objective third party and help both sides achieve a win-win situation.

Above all, remember that the opportunity is the single most important element of your decision. No amount of money will make a bad job good. A quality position, working with quality people in a dynamic work environment, offers rewards that money can't buy.

### **Accepting the job.**

If you are satisfied with the offer, express your satisfaction and ask for something in writing to reduce the risk of confusion.

Congratulations! You've worked hard to get through the interview process and secure the position you desired. Now you're on your way.

### **Be willing to turn the job down.**

If the job, or the offer, does not meet your criteria — and there is no more room for negotiation — simply do not accept the offer. Also, do not use this as a ploy to procure better compensation, you may lose. You will be on much firmer ground

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if you reply to the offer with “Thank you. I’m really interested in joining your company, but there is something I’m concerned about.” If you and the company can’t work out such concerns, move on.

### **Guidelines for working with recruiters.**

The key to a successful relationship with a search firm is trust. Here are some guidelines you can follow to get the most from the relationship:

- Ask recruiters openly if they think they can help you and how. In turn, share your relevant search activities with them.
- Offer names of other candidates who may fit a search firm’s profile. In appreciation, they may set up more interviews for you.
- Draw on your search firm’s expertise. Ask recruiters to brief and coach you for the interviews they arrange.
- Be honest about your financial needs and goals.
- Accept their role as intermediary. Until you are hired by an employer, a recruiter’s job is to function as a go-between.

**To learn more about how Ajilon can help you achieve your career goals, please contact your local representative today.**



Above all, remember that the opportunity is the single most important element of your decision.



## About Ajilon

Ajilon Professional Staffing is a leader in recruiting and project consulting, with specialty divisions in finance, office and legal. In North America, more than 200 offices service a range of clients through an integrated suite of human capital solutions.

- Ajilon Finance specializes in the temporary and direct-hire placement of premier accounting, financial and bookkeeping professionals.
- Ajilon Office offers clients specialized administrative and management professionals on a temporary and direct-hire basis.
- Ajilon Finance Solutions provides senior-level financial and operations professionals to companies on a project or interim basis.
- Ajilon Legal places highly-qualified candidates in a wide range of specialized positions including attorneys, paralegals and legal support professionals.

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