

Tips on Preparing for a Job Interview

Well-prepared candidates are more confident and provide more thorough answers. If you know how to give complete answers, you will worry less and are able to ask better questions. All of this improves the odds that you will be assessed fairly, especially if the focus of the interview is on detailed discussions about your major accomplishments.

Step 1: Make sure you know your own strengths and weaknesses.

Write down your four or five strengths and one or two weaknesses. Include a short, one-paragraph example of an accomplishment using each strength.

With the weaknesses, write a specific situation where you have turned that weakness into a strength or have overcome the weakness. As you'll see in the "Universal Answer" below, these examples are critical.

Step 2: Learn the "Universal Answer."

Most answers during the interview should be about one-to-two minutes long. Generally, if you talk for more than three minutes, the interviewer loses interest. You may be ranked as boring, long-winded, or too self-centered. If you talk less than a minute, you may be considered superficial, incompetent, or lacking interest.

Practice your answers using the "Say a Few Words" acronym:

S: make an opening **S**tatement

A: **A**mplify that statement

F: provide a **F**ew examples

W: **W**rap it up

Providing the example is the most important part of the exercise. This is the demonstrated proof behind the opening statement.

Interviewers will use these examples to form their judgments about your competency. Most candidates talk in generalities. Specific examples are much more convincing. For instance, a marketing manager could give a specific example to describe how she launched a new product rather than saying she's strong in advertising and new-product promotions.

While this might be the opening to the classic "What are your strengths?" question, the answer will be more meaningful if you give a specific example and then describe how your strengths, like creativity and perseverance, were required to achieve the results.

Step 3: Write up two significant accomplishments.

To improve your verbal pitches, prepare more detailed write-ups for your two most significant accomplishments. Each of these should be two-to-three paragraphs in length, but no more than half a page each. One should be an individual accomplishment, and the other a team accomplishment. Make sure you include examples of your strengths in both write-ups.

Most candidates get a little nervous in the opening stages of an interview, which can result in temporary forgetfulness. The write-ups will allow for better recall of this important information at these times.

Step 4: During the interview, move the interviewer to ask the “Universal Question.”

Discussions about major accomplishments should dominate the interview session. Since most interviewers don't ask about this naturally, you can attempt to get them started.

To do this, ask this question early if you feel the interview is going nowhere, “I don't have a complete understanding of your real job needs. Would you please give me an overview of what the job entails and describe some of the key challenges in the job? Then I can give you some examples of work that I've done that's comparable.”

Something like this will allow you to then describe a related project you've worked on. Managers generally like candidates who are more forceful and those who ask good questions. Make sure you have a list of other insightful questions to ask, such as “What does the person in this job need to do to be considered successful, what's the biggest problem that needs to be addressed right away, what kind of resources are budgeted already, why is the position open, and how have you developed your team members?”

Step 5: Ask for the job.

At the end of the interview, tell the interviewer that you are interested in the job (if you still are), and would like to know what the next steps are. If the next steps seem evasive or unclear, ask the interviewer if your accomplishments seem relevant to the performance requirements of the job. Understanding a potential gap here allows you fill it in with an example of a related accomplishment. Sometimes you have to ask for the job to understand what points you need to get across or re-visit.

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