

# THE SUCCESSFUL INTERVIEW

## HOW TO MARKET YOURSELF FOR CAREER ADVANCEMENT



by Valerie Restifo

**W**hat went wrong Linda had an emergency at the hospital and was 20 minutes late for her job interview. She had to borrow a lab coat to cover a stain on her uniform, and she had forgotten her resume, which she hadn't had time to update anyway. Nevertheless, she was sure that she'd get the position she was applying for. She had put in five good years of medical-surgical nursing for this hospital, and the recruiter would understand that she needed a change. She scheduled an appointment to discuss the job with the recruiter at 3:30 pm on a day that she was working so that she wouldn't have to get dressed up and come in on her day off. Nevertheless, she didn't have a free minute during the shift to even think about the interview. By the time the interview started, Linda was so tired she let the recruiter do all the talking while she fought to stay awake. She couldn't tell the interviewer why she wanted the position in home care, except to say she disliked her head nurse. When she was asked for the names of four references, she drew a blank and said she'd have to send in some names later. Linda left with great expectations, hoping for a speedy transfer. Instead, she received a letter notifying her that she didn't get the job, leaving her wondering what had gone wrong.

### Interviewing as a Business

Interviewing is an important opportunity to market yourself for career advancement. Whether you're interviewing for a new position, starting a new career, or seeking a promotion, the key to a successful interview is careful and thorough preparation.



The better prepared you are, the more likely you'll be chosen over the competition. Approach interviewing as if it were a business. Think of the interview as a self-marketing strategy to promote a product: you. You are the salesperson making a pitch to the customers. One way to persuade customers that you are the best person for the job is to convince them you can meet their needs, solve their problems, and bring unique qualifications to the position. Articulate the benefits you bring to the job, rather than just describing yourself in general terms. For example, instead of presenting yourself as an RN with five years of experience, emphasize that you can manage eight to ten patients and take charge of a unit as well.

Studies have shown that as many as 80 percent of job seekers are unable to accurately describe their skills during an interview. Men are more likely to exaggerate their abilities, while women underrate themselves. Neither approach will help you win an offer. To represent yourself realistically, think about your knowledge, skills, and abilities beforehand, and then record three of your most marketable strengths on an index card to take with you to the interview. Repeat your key strengths during the interview.

### Types of Interviews

In a *behavioral* interview, past behavior is viewed as the best predictor of future outcomes, while a conversational or *nondirective* interview consists of a give-and-take discussion on many topics. Some sessions are carried out by a team or panel, which must reach a consensus in choosing a candidate. *Screening* interviews are designed to weed out applicants and narrow the field before a choice is made. *Stress* interviews are intended to make candidates uncomfortable in order to assess their

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ability to handle challenges. In a *situational* approach, the interviewer presents scenarios and asks candidates for examples of how they would respond.

Follow-up interviews are common for positions in management, education, advanced practice, and for highly specialized jobs. Some employers conduct initial or pre-screening interviews by telephone before calling in the best applicants for interviews.

Following some basic guidelines can improve your chances of getting that important job offer:

### 1 Research the Employer

Familiarize yourself before the interview with relevant background information on the company. Visit their web site, or your local library. Find out the number of beds at the hospital, the size of the staff and the annual budget, the specialties or services offered, the age of the organization, and accreditation status. You may also want to get a copy of the job description, organizational chart, philosophy of nursing, mission statement, strategic goals, and employee and patient handbooks from the nursing, human resources, or public relations departments. Conduct informational interviews either by phone, e-mail, or in person, with those familiar with the agency's reputation, work environment, and corporate culture. If you decide you want to work at a given institution, formulate why, so when you are asked you can offer a clear, concise answer.

### 2 Practice Logistics

When you call to schedule your appointment, find out as much as you can about your future interviewer, such as title and department, how long it is expected the interview will take, and if you should bring any additional materials with you, such as written references. Schedule your appointment when you're at your best — early in the day if you're a morning person, or in the afternoon if you're not. Don't forget to get detailed directions and parking information ahead of time. A trial run to the facility at the same time of day as your interview is helpful if

you've never been there before. It's a good idea to get an application form ahead of time so you can complete and copy it before you go.

Also, bring extra copies of your resume to the interview. Take a map and the name and phone number of the person you're meeting; an index card with your three strengths written on it; a list of questions that you're prepared to ask the interviewer; a pen and paper to take notes; your calendar to schedule a follow-up appointment as needed.

You'll probably want to put all of these items in a briefcase along with your professional portfolio — a binder or folder with important papers, including any documentation that supports your qualifications. For example, you may want to bring a typed list of the phone numbers and addresses of three to five personal friends and professionals who have agreed to be references; letters of recommendation from coworkers, instructors, and other providers; performance evaluations; thank-you letters from patients and families; school transcripts; continuing education certificates; awards; and samples of your writing (reports, teaching aids, articles). Other documents might include your professional license and certificates, social security number, driver's license, and other proof of citizenship.

### 3 Practice Questions and Answers

Interviewers ask four basic kinds of questions, and you should be ready for them. Background questions ask for elaboration and clarification of information on your resume, for example, "How were your grades in school?" or "How did you like working at Memorial Hospital?" Professional questions relate to your career goals and their relationship to the position you're seeking, such as, "Where do you see yourself in five to ten years?" Interviewers ask *functional* questions



such as, "How do you deal with conflict on the job?" or "How would you deal with an angry family member?" to gain insights into your interpersonal skills.

Make a list of practice interview questions and jot down brief answers along with brief anecdotal "success stories" to illustrate your answers. Quote compliments that people have given you in performance evaluations, thank-you letters, and awards. Be aware that the interviewer is observing both your verbal and nonverbal communication skills, including speech, posture, eye contact, body language, sensitivity, and enthusiasm. Keep in mind that the interviewer is looking for a match between the role's requirements and your qualifications. Ask yourself, "What are the recruiters looking for?" but at the same time, it's important to be yourself. Practice enough so that you feel confident but not overrehearsed. Have a friend be the interviewer so you can get used to answering questions, and use a mirror to observe your body language and facial expressions. There may be some adjustments you want to make. For example, many people fidget without realizing it.

## The Question Inside the Question

Some of the more challenging interview questions may seem simple, but may suggest more than their literal meaning. For example:

**Question:** Tell me about yourself; or, what are your strengths?

**Meaning:** *Why should we hire you?*

**Question:** What is your philosophy of nursing? **Meaning:** *Is your philosophy compatible with ours?*

**Question:** What is the biggest mistake you ever made, and how was the problem resolved?

**Meaning:** *How do you prevent errors, and do you learn from your mistakes when you do make them?*

**Question:** How long would you stay on staff if you were hired? **Meaning:** *Will it be worth it for us to hire you?*

**Question:** What have you heard about us? **Meaning:** *Have you done your homework?*

After you have prepared as best you can for the interview, imagine yourself going through the process successfully several times. Imagine yourself summarizing your strengths and interests and reaching successful closure. Keep in mind that the interview is your opportunity to ask questions as well. This is looked on favorably, as it reflects your enthusiasm and critical thinking skills. Questions you might want to ask are:

*“What are the opportunities for promotion from this position?”*

*“Why is this position available?”*

*“How and when will the decision be made?”*

*“When do you hope to fill the position?”*

*“What measures are taken when you are short-staffed or overstaffed?”*



■ The decision to hire is usually made within the first 60 seconds, so you'll need to put your best foot forward from the start. Show up at least 10-15 minutes early. Smile at everyone you meet and shake hands firmly. Wait to sit down until the interviewer invites you to do so. ■

To help you evaluate important information when you're interviewing several employers, develop a checklist of questions, designate a copy for each employer, and assess each response, recording a “+” (positive) or “-” (negative) score for the answers. Add up the totals and compare. Remember that any question about the position is appropriate if the answer will help you evaluate whether you're right for the job.

### 5 Dress Conservatively

How you dress for the interview reflects your degree of professionalism and also how you feel about yourself. Wear business attire that is modest, conservative, tasteful, clean, and neat. A tailored suit works well for men and women. For women, a dress, blazer with a skirt, or slacks are all appropriate, as well as sensible dress shoes (no heels) and a simple purse or briefcase. Wear neutral hose or socks. Uniforms, scrub suits, and lab coats are inappropriate, particularly after a day at work. Wear minimal jewelry and makeup, and avoid perfume, cologne, or aftershave.

### 6 Honesty and Effectiveness

The decision to hire is usually made within the first 60 seconds, so you'll need to put your best foot forward from the start. Show up at least 10-15 minutes early. Smile at everyone you meet and shake hands firmly. Wait to sit down until the interviewer invites you to do so.

Try to maintain a relaxed, comfortable posture, and don't fidget. Remember, a great deal of communication is body language, and that's what people remember about you. Be enthusiastic, optimistic, and positive in your responses. An interview is a two-way street; you should balance listening with talking. Use a conversational tone, a strong voice, and well-paced speech. Don't rush to answer complex questions. It's all right to ask for a moment to organize your response before you speak. Try to match your communication style with that of the interviewer's. Keep your responses brief (two minutes maximum) and to the point. If you don't know the answer to a question, be honest and say so. Maintain eye contact throughout the interview.

Downplay your weaknesses, but be honest. If your grades were not what they could have been but you have a reasonable explanation for this, you should elaborate. Avoid negative comments about past employers, supervisors, or coworkers. If you were terminated from your last position, be brief, honest, and straightforward about the circumstances. Ask to visit the area where you would work and to meet the staff and supervisor. Also, you may want to request an observation day so you can shadow someone who does the same or similar job. Be sure to arrange a follow-up before you leave the interview. Get the names, titles, and business cards of everyone you meet.

## **7** Follow-up

After the interview, assess your performance. What did you do particularly well? Were there any answers you gave that could have been more polished or succinct? Make notes for next time, but don't dwell on any errors you think you might have made. It's important to learn from the process, and to feel good about yourself.

Write a brief thank-you note to each person who interviewed you within a day or two after the interview, reminding them of your interest in the position. If you don't receive a timely response from the interviewer, call to determine your status. If the position has been offered to someone else, ask if you can be considered at a later time, or as an alternate. If the answer is no, you may ask for feedback, or for a specific reason you were not chosen. It is up to the employer how to respond to this.

If you are offered a job, ask for a few days to think about it to be certain you aren't rushing into anything. Do not discuss salary until the employer has made an offer. In terms of your salary requirements, you need to know the market value of the position as well as the dollar figure you want. When you quote a dollar range for your desired salary, the lower number is what you could live with and the upper number is a few thousand dollars more. If you are offered less, consider the total compensation package, including an additional 25 to 40 percent that represents benefits. Be sure to consider the costs of commuting and child care. ■

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## SUGGESTED READING

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