

THE ART OF SELLING YOURSELF IN AN INTERVIEW  
The New York Times  
Careers by Sabra Chartrand

- 1. List the questions often asked by interviewers**
- 2. List the recommendations given in this article**

Once upon a time, interview skills were something you had to master to land a first job out of school, and then perhaps update once or twice again over the next decades if you changed employers. But career options, employer expectations and economic conditions now mean that people are looking for work or switching jobs more often, forcing them back into the interview arena as frequently as every few years.

At the same time, the target has become a moving mark – being interviewed nowadays is no longer just a formal, back-and-forth, 20 minute exchange about education, experience and where-do-you-see-yourself-in-five-years?

Now the interview process can start online, or by phone or fax. It can progress to a face-to-face meeting with a recruiter who asks probing behavioral questions to get you to describe how you've handled yourself in the past. It can move to a panel interview with the managers and colleagues you'd actually be working with and who may have final say over whether you join their team.

So, once you've created a fabulous electronic resume, networked through e-mail with colleagues in your field, and explored all the great offers from online job banks, you're still facing the traditional, big hurdle in the career hunt: the interview.

Most people dread job interviews more than any other part of the search for work. Web sites overflow with common-sense articles, reports and advice from career coaches: Research the company, prepare your answers, dress properly, and take control of the conversation.

An interview is essentially a sales meeting, and the product you are pushing is **yourself**. Most interviewers are not professional headhunters, and they may have no more experience – or finesse – with the process than you have.

Some see interviews as their chance to discover whatever disqualifies you. Those interviewers are likely to rely on standard “tough questions” in their effort to figure you out. So the experts recommend preparing for those potential questions before the interview: Tell me about yourself. What are your weaknesses? Strong points? How do you think you'll fit in best? What kinds of people rub you the wrong way? Why did you leave your last job?

In truth, however, more interviewers are relying on a technique that psychologists began perfecting in the early 1980's – the behavioral interview. The idea was to turn the interview on its head – make it active, rather than passive. Employers and recruiters – and those who studied them – realized that asking theoretical questions about what a candidate would do in a job situation was not a very effective way of determining how he'd respond in real life.

So the interviewer's question went from “Tell me how you would ensure meeting the deadlines?” to “Give me an example of a time a piece of equipment broke down and describe what you did to save the project?”

Interviewers like these questions because what you've done in the past tells them the most about what you're likely to do in the future. Job applicants hate them because – well, for the obvious reasons. If you're not prepared for this behavioral approach, you can freeze in the interview, your mind in a desperate race for an appropriate answer. If you are prepared, you'll walk a delicate line in phrasing and presenting your answers in the best possible, but still honest, light.

In Behavioral Interviews – A Job Candidate's Toughest Obstacle, Damir Joseph Stimac, A career strategist, lists 12 areas that he says interviewers ask about in behavioral interviews to get candidates talking about their past job or task experiences. He suggests that candidates prepare an example of a success and failure in each category, just in case the interviewer presses for both.

But just answering these intrusive questions isn't enough to really please the toughest interviewer or to outshine the fiercest competition. When the Owen Graduate School of Management at Vanderbilt University asked 50 corporate recruiters about interview style, many said they were most impressed with candidates who could captivate them with accounts of their work experience. Show, don't tell, seems to be the rule of thumb for these recruiters. They want to hear about a candidate's experiences in thoughtful, descriptive, even entertaining detail.

Other experts recommend applicants to be aware of the “background noise” at a job interview. While the recruiter may be talking about specific job openings or your past experience, and asking about the contributions you hope to make to their company and about your long-term goals, he or she is also registering information about you on a second level.

It begins with the physical impression you make – your voice, body language, eye contact, expressions – and includes your attitude – whether you hit it off with the interviewer, your enthusiasm, your self-confidence.

These factors can be particularly complicating if you find yourself at a panel interview. In that case, you are playing to an audience, each of whom may have a different expectation about questions and a different reaction to your answers. You have to talk to the group, as well as to each member. In *The Panel Interview*, Dave Soss, a career counselor, suggests that candidates visualize themselves before a battery of interviewers and practice looking at and talking to each one.

No matter the interview context, thoughtful answers should be on the tip of your tongue. You cannot make up excellent responses in just two days before the interview. An interviewer asking how you heard about his organization or how you think you’ll fit in may really be asking what you know about the company.

You’ll need to research the business so you can talk about a specific department or several areas, depending on the job opening. Your answers should show that you know a department may be expanding or that the company is adding new clients. You should demonstrate interest in the company beyond the regular paycheck. Talk about your experience networking with other employees or using the company’s products.

Know when to keep your mouth shut, too. An interviewer who asks about your weaknesses and then sits back in silence may be waiting to see if you talk on and on unnecessarily. Tell her instead about a couple carefully chosen characteristics you feel you can improve but that are not crucial to your job performance. Then wait quietly for the next question. The same can be said for describing your strengths.

The hardest question may be the request to describe yourself. For this part of the interview, it’s best to have a short, prepared monologue about your successful work history, projects that interest you, and ways you have met and overcome challenges in the past. But avoid launching into a stiff recitation of your credentials. Instead, make your tone conversational. Imagine yourself describing the same accomplishments to a new acquaintance over dinner.

Many people feel that questions about how they get along with others and why they left their previous job are nothing more than a trap. It is best to be careful when confronted with these queries. Never criticize a former employer. Give the discussion a positive spin: you left because you wanted a job with a brighter future, a new challenge, more responsibility.



