

## 10 Steps to a More Successful Job Interview

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In this increasingly competitive job market, it is hard to land a job interview. Once you do, how can you present yourself as strongly as possible? What are the mistakes to avoid? Listed below are simple steps to allow you to put your best foot forward.

1. Demonstrate your passion for the mission.

In our experience in working with nonprofits, the number one reason why job candidates are eliminated is that they are not perceived as caring deeply about what their prospective employer does. Each nonprofit has a unique mission, and wants employees, particularly in development, who will speak with knowledge and enthusiasm about what they do. You should have a good answer to the following questions: Why would you want to work here? What is it about our mission that excites you? Do you understand our history? Do you want to work in an organization of our size and budget?

To prepare, you should learn about the organization's history, mission, staff and board. Review the website closely before you apply, and only apply for positions in organizations for which you could be truly excited.

If you are interviewing with a performing arts organization: attend a performance; with a museum: visit the exhibits; with an environmental group: go on a scheduled hike. Consider becoming a member.

Once you are scheduled for the interview, review the web site again and take a look at Guidestar. Read about the backgrounds of individuals with whom you will interview. Think about how you will describe your personal passion. Always have questions to ask about the organization during your interview.

2. Talk about why you want this position.

Many times, candidates will go for job interviews without carefully reviewing the job description. In an interview, you have a short period of time to talk about why you are the best person for the job. To do this effectively, make sure that you are clear about the expectations and qualifications listed in the description, and that you can talk about how your background is a match. Be honest and if there are areas where your experience is not a direct fit, be prepared to talk about how other parts of your background transfer to what is needed.

3. Practice before your interview.

In your interview, you need to be clear and concise. Very often, interviews become unfocused because candidates do not answer the questions that are asked. Listen carefully and respond specifically to the questions. Be able to quantify and provide

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specific examples. Be prepared to answer typical interview questions on strengths, weaknesses, why you want this position, and why you have left your last position. Review your own dates of employment and accomplishments so you can be specific and accurate. Anticipate possible questions and do a mock interview with a friend.

### 4. Never trash a previous employer.

While a potential employer wants to hear about why you would like to work for them, they do not want to hear a litany of complaints about your current or most recent employer. After all, you made a choice to work for that employer. What does it say about your judgment if you have only negative things to say? And what will you say about a future organization?

Most employers understand that a past or current situation may not be ideal, but you should be able to talk positively about your employer and succinctly about what in your current situation has led you to consider a new position.

### 5. Dress conservatively and do not be late.

It is always surprising to hear that candidates have dressed too casually or in clothes too revealing. Don't wear flip-flops. Think about hemlines and cuts of blouse. What jewelry might be distracting? Avoid perfume or after-shave. While some offices are casual in garb, it is hard to gauge this from afar. In addition, even in a casual office, there may be an expectation that staff members will dress more formally when they meet with donors and prospects. If you are overly casual, an employer may wonder about your ability to interact appropriately with these constituencies. A potential employee should always tend toward over-dressing in the interview. Most employers believe that you will never be more dressed up than you are when you show up for your interview, so take the time to make a positive first impression.

As well, you can ruin your chances of going to a next stage by arriving late. Do a trial run before the interview so you know where you are going. Know whom you need to ask for. Bring the phone number of the interviewer with you so you can reach them if there are unanticipated delays.

### 6. Understand what the next steps in the process are.

Sometimes organizations are in a hurry to make an offer. In other cases, there are many other people to be interviewed and key decision-makers may be away. Don't leave the interview without asking about the process. This can reduce your frustration at timing and will enable you to find out whether they would like to have you contact them directly about next steps.

As well, be sure that you can be reached quickly. This point often goes back to your resume. Be sure to have a number on your resume that you will check frequently and that has a message that clearly states your name. Make it clear that it is ok to leave a

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message. A good employer will be reluctant to leave confidential messages unless you provide explicit permission.

### 7. Prepare your references.

While employers will often check your references as a last stage in the process, it is important for you to think about the people you would like to suggest as references, make sure that you have accurate contact information for them, and let them know about your search. In this way, you can quickly contact them if you are a finalist for a position. If you do expect a potential employer to call them, let your references know about the specific organization and position in which you are interested and why you think you are the right person for the job.

### 8. Bring collateral materials.

While many employers rely on electronic resume submission, bring a few extra copies in case you meet with someone who does not have yours readily at hand. Also consider whether some examples of your work might be of interest in this particular position. Organizations often want to see writing samples and annual reports, event invitations, and grant proposals may be useful for certain positions.

### 9. Research the salary range.

Avoid raising compensation issues yourself, at least early in the interview process. However, there may be a posted salary range and you can use the web to research the salary of the position. A particularly good source of information is the Form 990 on Guidestar. Know in advance what you will say about compensation if you are asked about your requirements. You should know your current salary and the value of your benefits. Be honest as this information can usually be verified. Unless you have a good reason, you cannot usually command a significant increase, so don't have undue expectations.

### 10. Say thank you promptly and professionally.

When you work in development, you are expected to initiate and maintain personal contact with donors, especially in stewarding their gifts. When you are applying for a development position, you have an opportunity to demonstrate that you can do this part of the job by quickly doing personal, accurate, and professional thank you notes to the people with whom you have interviewed. Remember to obtain correct names, titles, and addresses for each person you have met. Proof any correspondence carefully. If there were questions that were raised during the interview for which you did not know the answer or on which you would like to elaborate, plan to follow up in writing after the interview.

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While the person who interviews you may have a personal preference for email or snail mail, it can never hurt to say thank you twice—emails are rapid and written correspondence is more personal.