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### Stand Out in Your Interview

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You've just landed a job interview for a position you really want. Congratulations. Now, you know you only get one chance to impress, but how exactly do you do that? Given all of the conflicting advice out there and the changing rules of getting a job (<http://hbr.org/special-collections/insight/the-new-rules-for-getting-a-job>), it's no wonder that job seekers are confused about how to best prepare for and perform in an interview.

#### What the Experts Say

One common piece of advice is to "take charge" of the interview. John Lees, a career strategist and author of *The Interview Expert: How to Get the Job You Want* ([http://www.amazon.com/The-Interview-Expert-How-want/dp/0273762559/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1348604485&sr=8-1&keywords=the+interview+expert](http://www.amazon.com/The-Interview-Expert-How-want/dp/0273762559/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1348604485&sr=8-1&keywords=the+interview+expert)) and *Job Interviews: Top Answers to Tough Questions* (<http://www.amazon.co.uk/Job-Interviews-Answers-Tough-Questions/dp/0077141601>), says this advice is misleading: "The reality is that the interviewer is in control. Your job is to be as helpful as you can." Claudio Fernández-Aráoz, a senior adviser at Egon Zehnder International and the author of *Great People Decisions* (<http://www.amazon.com/Great-People-Decisions-Matter-Master/dp/0470037261>), agrees: "You need to help interviewers do the right thing since most of them don't follow best practices." According to Fernández-Aráoz, who has interviewed more than 20,000 candidates in his 26 years as a search consultant, most interviewers fall prey to unconscious biases and focus too heavily on experience rather than competence. It's your responsibility to make sure this doesn't happen. Here's how.

#### Prepare, prepare, prepare

Most people know they need to show up to the interview having done their homework, but both Fernández-Aráoz and Lees agree that people rarely prepare enough. "You can never invest enough in terms of preparation. You should find out as much as possible about the company, how it's organized, its culture ([http://blogs.hbr.org/cs/2012/05/when\\_choosing\\_a\\_job\\_culture\\_ma.html](http://blogs.hbr.org/cs/2012/05/when_choosing_a_job_culture_ma.html)), the relevant industry trends, and some information about the interviewer," says Fernández-Aráoz. He also advises researching the specific job challenges. This will allow you to demonstrate you have what it takes to fill the role.

#### Formulate a strategy

Before you enter the room, decide what three or four messages you want to convey to the interviewer. These should

"show the connection between what you have achieved and what is really needed to succeed in the specific job and context," says Fernández-Aráoz. Lees says the best way to do this is to draft narratives ahead of time. "People buy into stories far more than they do evidence or data," he says. Your stories should be concise and interesting. Make sure they have a good opening line, such as, "I'm going to tell you about a time that I rescued the organization." Then, learn them like the back of your hand. Know how they begin and end so you can relay them without stumbling or sounding like a robot. Whenever possible, use one of your stories to answer an interview question.

### **Emphasize your potential**

"No candidate will ever be perfect, and you will be no exception," says Fernández-Aráoz. Instead of harping on where your resume might fall short — or letting the interviewer do the same — focus on your potential ([http://blogs.hbr.org/cs/2011/11/the\\_interview\\_question\\_you\\_sho.html](http://blogs.hbr.org/cs/2011/11/the_interview_question_you_sho.html)). This is often a far better indicator of future job performance. "If your past achievements are not directly related to the job, but you've demonstrated a great ability to learn and adapt to new situations, you should very clearly articulate that," says Fernández-Aráoz. For example, if you're interviewing for an international role but have no global experience, you might explain how your ability to influence others in a cross-functional role, such as between production and sales, proves your ability to collaborate with different types of people from different cultures.

### **Ace the first 30 seconds**

First impressions matter. Lees points to psychological research (<http://www.psychologytoday.com/collections/201203/the-first-impression/first-glance-0>) that shows that people form opinions about your personality and intelligence in the first 30 seconds of the interview. "How you speak, how you enter the room, and how comfortable you look are really important," he says. People who perform best in interviews start off by speaking clearly but slowly, walk with confidence, and think through what "props" they will carry so they don't appear over-cluttered. Lees suggests rehearsing your entrance several times. You can even record yourself on video and play it back without the sound so you can see precisely how you are presenting yourself and make adjustments. The same applies to phone interviews. You need to use the first 30 seconds of the conversation to establish yourself as a confident, calm voice on the line.

### **Don't be yourself**

Lees calls the "be yourself" advice "demonstrably untrue." He says, "It's a trained improvised performance where you're trying to present the best version of you." Bring as much energy and enthusiasm to the interview as you can. But don't oversell yourself. Because there's an oversupply in the talent market, employers are wary that people are exaggerating their experience and skills. "If you're going to make a statement about what you can achieve, you need to back it up with hard evidence," Lees says.

### **Be ready for the tough questions**

Many people worry about how to answer questions about a pause in their work history, a short stay at a recent job, or other blemishes on their CV. Again, the best approach is to prepare in advance. Don't just have one answer for these difficult questions. Lee suggests three lines of defense. First, have a simple, straightforward answer that doesn't go into too much detail. Then have two additional answers ready so that if the interviewer follows up, you have something further to say. For example, if you didn't finish a degree that would've been helpful to the job, be ready to answer an initial question with something like, "I felt it was better to go straight into the work world." If the interviewer pushes further, be ready with another level of detail, such as, "I thought about it carefully. I knew it would carry negative connotations but I thought I would learn a lot more by working." Lees says, "The key is to never be pushed so far that you are left high and dry without a smart answer."

### **Be flexible in the room**

Even with all of the right preparation, you can never predict exactly how the interview will go. "You need the radar working in the room. A good candidate knows how to tweak the performance to play to different situations," says Lees. Ask yourself: Do I need to supply better answers? Do I need to work on my tone? Do I need to just shut up? "A

lot of interviewers like to hear themselves talk and you should be willing to let them," says Lees. Adapt to the circumstances.

### **When it's going poorly**

There are times when it's clear the interview is not going well. Perhaps the interviewer is not engaged or you stumbled over answers to some important questions. Resist the temptation to agonize over what's already happened. "That's a surefire way to get lost," Lees says. Instead, focus on the moment. "Concentrate on answering the current question as if it's the first," he says. You can also redirect the conversation by acknowledging the situation. You might say something like, "I'm not sure if I'm giving you what you need" and see how the interviewer reacts. "You just have to be sure you aren't digging a deeper hole," says Lees.

### **Principles to Remember**

Do:

- Find out as much as you can about the job qualifications ahead of time
- Prepare concise stories that demonstrate your ability to do the job
- Rehearse the first 30 seconds of the interview — they matter most

Don't:

- Panic if the interview is going poorly — focus on giving the best possible answer to the current question
- Try to anticipate exactly how the interview will go — be prepared to adapt to what's happening in the room
- Answer a tough question all at once — reserve detail for follow-up questions

### **Case study #1: Connect with your interviewers**

Three years ago, Pei-Cen Lin applied for a learning and development job at a government agency. Since the job was in DC and she lived in New York, the hiring manager scheduled a phone interview. To prepare, Pei-Cen researched the organization and studied the job description. "I looked at key words and thought back to my own experience and how it would relate," she says. "I tried to reflect on why they were interested in me and what I could bring to the table."

When the interview started, Pei-Cen learned that there were three people on the line and they would each be asking behavioral questions. She knew she needed to engage all of the interviewers as quickly as possible. "I tried to imagine them sitting in their offices so I could get a mental picture of real people," she says. When asked a question, she used the interviewer's name in her response. Then she asked the others, also using their names, whether there was anything they wanted her to elaborate on. Still, it was tough to gauge whether she was connecting. "I couldn't see their faces or if, for example, they were passing notes to each other in the room," she says. But her attempts to engage them worked. A few weeks after the interview, she received an offer.

### **Case Study #2: Turn it around when it's going badly**

Rutger Von Post had recently been promoted and was interviewing candidates to fill his previous role as marketing associate. The position required strong sales and influence skills as the main task was to call and convince executives to meet to discuss the firm's consulting services.

In one particular interview, the candidate, Thomas\*, was failing and Rutger was eager to end the conversation. "He was unable to convince me that he had what it took to influence someone to take a meeting," he says. As he was wrapping up, Rutger inquired whether he had any questions. Thomas said he did and then asked, "Do you have any concerns about my ability to do well in this job?" Rutger says, "I was taken aback by the directness of the question but I replied that yes, I did in fact have concerns." He then told Thomas why he didn't think he could do the job. Thomas asked for permission to address each of Rutger's points. He did, much to Rutger's surprise and satisfaction.

"Basically, by countering my objections he 'sold himself' to me and demonstrated the exact skills I was looking for," he says. Rutger passed Thomas on to the next round of interviews and Thomas eventually got the job.

\*not his real name