

It ain't Guantanamo

Interview; interrogation. One and the same, surely? Veronica Miller gives some pointers to help you avoid the mind-numbing stress an interview situation can cause.

T3 Job interview, two words that strike dread in the hearts of even the most valiant (along with nuclear strike and mother-in-law but they have concrete bunkers and caller ID for those). For job interviews, you have this invaluable gem of a magazine. Not quite the same as a pantry stocked full of tinned goods, but equally useful.

If you have passed the first hurdle and been invited to interview for a position, there are some golden rules that may seem obvious, but you would be shocked and stunned by how many things people get wrong. Ignore the following at your peril.

A BIT OF PREP

Know where the interview is taking place and check how long it is going to take you to get there. If there is a possibility for delayed travel which, in my experience of London Underground

is remarkably high, try to ascertain if there are going to be any planned engineering works that might delay you and familiarise yourself with an alternate way to get to there.

Do a little research, as going in prepared will hold you in good stead. Read the company's website, paying particular attention to the press releases; the trade press; and, if appropriate to the role you are interviewing for, the competitors' websites. If available online, read the biography of the person or people interviewing you.

'Use your consultant,' recommends Julie Lawrance, Business Director at Hays Taxation, 'they'll be able to give you a good idea of the personality of the interviewer and the culture of the company, so you'll know what to expect going in.'

ON THE DAY

Dress smartly. Even if the company has a casual dress code, it is generally expected that candidates will wear a business suit. And don't forget your shoes. Nothing screams 'inattention to detail' like scuffed shoes!

Read over your CV again and remind yourself of what it says. The number of candidates who don't know their own CV is astounding – terrifyingly astounding.

Whatever you do, do not arrive late. In fact, try to arrive five to ten minutes early. But if you get to the interview location any earlier than this, go for a walk

around the block or grab a cup of coffee in a nearby café. There is little that is more frustrating than an interviewee arriving twenty minutes early: there's enthusiastic, and then there's desperately over-eager.

ONCE YOU'RE IN

If you are being interviewed by more than one person, look at each person as you are introduced and ensure that you remember their names so you can direct answers or questions to them during the interview.

You will have, on average, only an hour to impress your interviewers. So concentrate of giving a good impression. Be aware of your body language, don't slouch and certainly don't fidget. You may well be very nervous, but at the risk of sounding like my mother, for the love of all things holy, don't bite your nails or something equally disturbing!

It may be obvious, but listen to the questions; it's easy to get caught up in the emotion of the interview and not to hear properly. Think before answering each one. If you need time, take a sip of water to give you a minute to compile your answer. Interviewers will appreciate a well-thought-out answer more than a fast one.

And as much as you might feel like you should be in an orange jumpsuit in a prison in Cuba, please try to remember that this is not an interrogation.

IT'S YOUR TURN

Interviews are not just for you to be questioned, but they are a chance for you to find out about the company, the role and the team in which you could potentially be working. While the job is important, remember that you are going to be spending a lot of your waking hours working with these people, so it's vital that the culture suits you.

Julie Lawrance recommends you seize the opportunity to ask

some questions of your own, such as: What are the other people in the department like?; How would their roles impact on mine?; What training or induction is given?; What would be my core responsibilities?; What sort of one-off projects might I be given?; What interaction would I have with other departments of the company, or with clients or suppliers?; What scope is there for taking on extra work or being involved in any other aspects of the company?; What plans do you have for expansion and how would these impact on my role?; and Where are the opportunities to progress within the company?

'However, don't talk salary unless the interviewer brings it up,' advises Mark Glubb, Practice Manager at Brewer Morris. 'Leave the negotiations up to your consultant as they'll have a clear idea of yours and their client's expectations.'

WRAP IT UP

When the interview is over, make sure the interviewer has the details of where you can be contacted. Remember to thank the person who interviewed you for their time – and on your way out thank anyone who helped you; the receptionist for instance, if you were brought water, tea or coffee, or your bag and coat were taken care of. Not only is it polite, but a number of people may influence the decision to hire you.

Try to ascertain when they are coming to a decision, but don't push the point if they don't know.

AFTERWARDS

'Call your consultant as soon as is practicable after the interview,' says Mark Glubb. 'They'll want to get your impressions, and will be able to follow up with any questions you may have forgotten to ask.' They will also be able to give you some honest feedback, both good and bad, from the interviewer.

WHAT CAN YOU EXPECT?

There are always some questions which are pretty standard for any interview. According to Julie Lawrance, these could include:

- ▶ Describe yourself in one word;
- ▶ What are your strengths and weaknesses?;
- ▶ Tell me about your management style;
- ▶ What role do you tend to play in a team?;
- ▶ How would your team describe you?;
- ▶ Why do you want to work for this organisation?;
- ▶ What three major achievements have you had in your career?; and
- ▶ How would you contribute to the growth of a firm?

While the context of the questions may differ, the thrust of the query will be the same, so prepare for these predictable elements. For example, think about your strengths and weaknesses. And be honest. Lies and exaggerations will always be caught, either at reference stage or, worse, once you are in the job. If something comes out wrong (as it is wont to do with me when I'm under stress), don't be afraid to rephrase it. No-one will think ill of you if you do. Better to correct a badly phrased statement than let it stand.

Most important of all, be positive. Negative answers or questions could end up in you being thought of as a negative person, which we know you're not.

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It can be beneficial to write a letter or an email thanking the interviewer for their time and to let them know you are still interested in the position.

If you get the job, congratulations! If you don't, learn from what you did wrong and work on improving your interviewing weaknesses for the next time.

Interviewing for a job has to be one the most stressful things you could ever do. We've all been there: no-one enjoys having their experience probed and prodded by a complete stranger, except very special people in very special circumstances, so take a deep breath and walk into that room like you own it. You never know, one day you might. ■



Veronica Miller

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