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15 Minute Guide

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Successful Interviewing:

What Candidates Need to Know

By Jeff Lipschultz, Founding Partner, A-List Solutions

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How to Approach Interviewing

Interviewing does not have to be an intimidating experience. Certainly there may some excitement about the prospect of landing a great new job, but in the end, if you are the right fit for the job (and the job is a good fit for you), the pieces will fall into place. Of course, this only can happen if you provide the right information to convey what a good fit you really are. To do this, you need to master the two keys to good interviewing.

Prepare

Make sure you do your homework on the company and the position. You want to clearly convey that you have an interest in the job. Just showing up and answering their questions is not enough. You will be measured by your enthusiasm and interest in what they are offering. By showing you have invested some of your own time learning about the company and being prepared for the interview will convey as much about you as the answers to their interview questions.

Incidentally, good preparation leads to less nervousness during the interview. As you will see, with a preparation methodology, your interview materials are your security blanket to rely upon during the interview. Sometimes, without a safety net, you can feel unsure of yourself or more prone to rush into a less optimal answer.

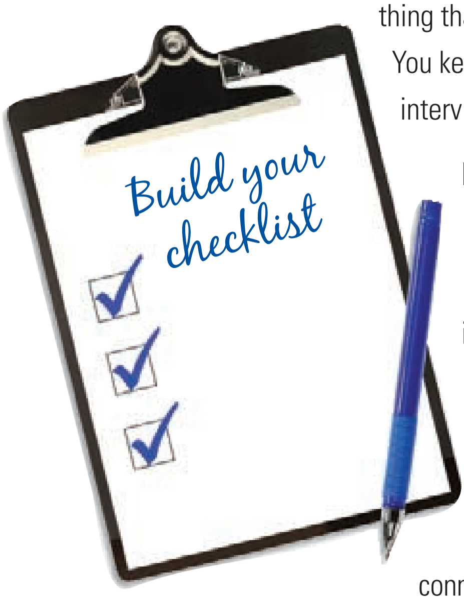
Take ownership of the interview

There are many good interviewers representing companies out there. And, there are many who are not so good. Keeping in mind that the goal of an interview is an efficient, comprehensive review of all relevant facts about the candidate, you would be surprised how many interviewers miss the mark. Many don't even know they're missing mark until the try to decide which candidate they want to hire (some don't even realize it then).

Interviewers don't always ask all the right questions or probe deeply enough to get the optimal information out of the interview. It's best to assume that YOU will have to ensure all the ***pertinent*** information gets shared. You will take ownership of the interview even though they are asking the questions. There are many ways to do this.

How to Prepare

Although most candidates know that preparation is essential to an interview, many only do half the work. Some try to predict what will be asked, and build their "canned" responses. This is not what we call "taking ownership of the interview" as discussed previously. Preparation needs to include building a checklist of topics YOU want to cover during the interview. This checklist will have all the essential items that will convince the interviewer you have the proper skill set for the job. Just like going to the grocery store, having a list focuses you on what you need and do not need. In the interview, it ensures you cover the items you want and do not go on tangents or rush to answer with less than optimal examples. During an interview, it is easy to panic a little and say the first



thing that pops into your head. A checklist is your "safety net" to reference if you get stuck. You keep it handy during the interview and check off items as they are shared with the interviewer (this is covered in detail in a subsequent section).

I joke with candidates that building a checklist is "child's play." It is simple and has three steps:

1) On the left side of your desk, put the job description and any other company information you may have the job description. Put your resume to the right. Then put a blank sheet of paper next to the resume.

2) Literally connect requirements and company info on the left with the resume experiences and skill set on the right. It is like connecting the dots with a crayon – child's play! Hopefully, you create a complex web of connections as you may connect a requirement to several spots on your resume. And several requirements on the left may link to the same experience on the right. These connections are checklist items.

3) Build your checklist by listing the requirements (and related company info) along with the best examples of your ability and experience. You should include boxes to check off as you interview. You need not write out details, as all you will need is some code words to remind you of the example(s) you want to share. For example, you list might include:

- ❑ **ASP.NET experience:** Project Ginger at Company XYZ; using since 2004
- ❑ **Web Graphics:** Project JoJo at Company ABC; Won the Peanut Award for outstanding design
- ❑ **Teamwork:** Worked on several teams (X, Y, Z); led effort of team at Company XYZ on project for Client123.

You get the idea. The list becomes a super-concentrated version of your resume. By the way, it's alright if your interviewer sees your checklist, as this just makes you look prepared for the interview. And, in reality, it makes their job easier. Make sure checklist items are in **priority order** so you can visually spot items near top that still are not covered towards end of interview.

Of course, preparation also includes learning as much as you can about the company (items from the "left side" in the exercise above). You might make a connection with your interviewer from this research (common clients, associations, schools, similar projects and/or processes). Don't stop with just the company web site. Leverage on-line search engines, LinkedIn and other relationship marketing tools. Archived articles on the company can be a wealth of information. If you are working with a recruiter, make sure he or she has given you more than a job description. They should know about the corporate culture and team, recent history, and position requirements that are not posted.

How to Take Ownership and Use Your Checklist

As discussed earlier, it is imperative that you assume you are responsible for sharing all the best information you have. Although the interviewer is asking the questions, you are providing the answers. How you do this dictates how much "ownership" you have in the process. Your goal is to get as many of the items on your checklist shared as possible. This requires some quick thinking during the interview. The different kinds of questions you are asked allow you to cover a lot of ground. Here are some examples of questions and how to answer, while leveraging your checklist along the way.

The Direct Question

This is one where the interviewer asks you a very specific question that you have a very specific example/answer from your checklist. A simple example of this question: "How much experience do you have in sales?" You should not only have those facts on your checklist, but also a few key achievements in this area.

The Indirect or Generic Question

Some interviewers ask questions like "tell me about yourself or your experiences?" They do not want to hear where you grew up or what high school you attended. They want to hear examples of work and skills that pertain to the job. Use your checklist! If the interviewer really does want more on your personal background, they will probably ask a slightly more direct question in that direction. Another generic question is "what is your favorite work experience or position held?" Again, your checklist has the answers – you certainly listed some of your best work. The key to this type of question is to talk about experiences that are relevant to the job for which you are interviewing, not just anything that comes to mind (that's why you have a checklist to reference throughout the interview).

The "Classic" Question

These are the ones that you know they are going to ask or you have heard many times in interviews. Examples include "where do you see yourself in five years?" and "what is one of your pet peeves?" Even these questions can be links to your checklist. For these types of questions, don't be shy about practicing the answers with a friend first. The test is to see if what you wanted to convey in your answer is what is perceived by your friend. Sometimes answers are so convoluted that the true essence of your answer is lost in a long-winded, multi-faceted answer.

One of my favorite Classic Questions is "why should I hire you?" Instead of telling the interviewer why you want the job (which tells them little about why they should hire you), tell them more from your checklist, specifically: **(1)** your skill set; **(2)** your knowledge about the company, industry, processes they use, challenges they face, clients, and their learning curve; **(3)** your manageability (you are not a "problem child," but low maintenance); **(4)** your value and their return-on-investment (you bring more to the table than they requested for the same salary); **(5)** your tendency to go above and beyond a job description (you work hard and contribute in unique ways).

Interviewing the Interviewer

There is one other consideration the candidates sometime forget during the interviewing process: ***Make sure you like them as much as they like you.*** Keep in mind during the process, that you have to ask good questions, make observations, and conduct research (through employees that work there, internet articles and discussions, financial data) so that you are well-educated on the company.

Just be sure to maintain your enthusiasm while collecting this data. Sometimes the information you have can slant your thoughts on the company, but you need to weigh out all the pro's and con's before deciding if this is the company for you. In the meanwhile, assume it is your ideal job and keep in mind, you cannot turn down an offer you do not have. You goal is first to get an offer, and then to decide if you should take it based on the information you gathered during the process.

Follow-up

Sending thank you notes is still appreciated by hiring managers. It sends the signal that you are truly thankful for their time and interested in the job. If the process is going to execute quickly, you may have to send an email. Even with an email, you can construct a short note as an attachment that seems a little more personal than putting your text in the body of the email.

Based on the timeline you were given, there is no harm in following up with the appropriate contact to see how the process is going. However, there are more creative ways to touch base withthe hiring manager to keep you at the front of his/her mind:

- **Send an interesting article** that ties back to something you talked about during the interview or pertains to the company's industry. You can also offer a sample of your work (often times, a link to your own web site is a more convenient method for this).
- **You can write a white paper,** eBook, or blog post that would be of interest to the manager and send a link. You might even mention that the conversation you had inspired you to write about the topic.
- **Connect using Social Media** like LinkedIn, Facebook, and Twitter. Even if you do not get the job you interviewed for, you might be called back down the road if you stay on the radar. Plus, you can tap into the manager's network and find other opportunities.

The idea is to have something to say when revisiting the manager other than, "What's the status of decision?" Updating on your status can be risky as you don't want to appear too pushy, unless you truly have a time-sensitive decision to make.

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Jeff Lipschultz is a founding partner of A-List Solutions, a premier recruiting firm in Dallas-Fort Worth. Jeff has a stellar track record in recruiting and managing diverse teams in engineering, IT, marketing, program management, and client relations. Jeff has worked at several Fortune 500 companies, start-ups, and small OEM. He enjoys blogging about job/candidate search, technology, and quirky observations of society.

About A-List Solutions

A-List Solutions is a full-service staffing and recruiting firm providing permanent and contract placement services for management, IT, and key positions in most companies. A-List Solutions also offers employer brand consulting to attract top talent using the latest strategies including advanced social media and web 2.0 techniques. Company experts also work with talented candidates on marketing themselves through proactive career branding.

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About Job-Hunt

Job-Hunt.org is a free "employment portal" Website which links to over 13,000 employers and job search and career resources. Advice from various job search experts is also provided, from protecting your privacy to using Craigslist, LinkedIn, and Twitter in your job search.

Jeff Lipschultz is Job-Hunt's "Working with Recruiters Expert" offering advice every month to help job seekers succeed in their job search.

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