

How to Prepare for an On-Site Job Interview

Research first, ask incisive questions later

BY TAUNEE BESSON

Editor's Note: This month columnist Taunee Besson answers questions about common job hunting and career problems. If you have a question about your job search or career, send it to our monthly advice column, National Business Employment Weekly, Box 300, Princeton, N.J. 08543-0300. All names are kept confidential.

Question: Last week I answered an ad for a management position with a large manufacturer in the Northeast. Today, the plant manager's office called asking me to fly there for an interview in two weeks.

While it feels good to get a quick reply on my resume, I'm concerned that I know so little about the company, the job description and the salary and benefits package for the position. I pride myself on never being caught without the necessary information to discuss salient issues and make good decisions. I'm not comfortable with jumping on the plane, hoping to find out what I need to know at the interview. In the next two weeks, what can I do to prepare myself to ask the right questions and give the right answers?

Answer: While giving you specifics on the "right" questions and answers is risky business (since right is a relative word), you can take the following steps to gain confidence for your interview.

Find Out About the Job

It's difficult to sell yourself when you don't understand what a potential employer is looking for. Ads are sketchy in their discussion of appropriate experience, skills and credentials. To gain an advantage over the competition, remember the old cliché, "Knowledge is power." If you didn't ask for a more complete job description during your interview call, do it now. Contact the company recruiter, production manager or whoever called you and request more information about the job, its compensation package and the qualifications needed to be hired.

Most mid- to large-sized companies already have written job descriptions and salary ranges that

Ms. Besson is president of Career Dimensions, a Dallas-based firm specializing in career development and job search programs for professionals and corporations.

are easy to mail or read over the phone. Even if this company doesn't, talking to the recruiter or manager should give you the facts you need.

Check Out the Company

During your call, ask the company to send you its recruiting literature, an annual report and its internal newsletter. If the company is large, you may find these resources at the library, along with magazine articles about the organization's philosophy and strategy, its products and competition. Larger libraries also have newspaper clipping files, 10K reports, Dun & Bradstreet listings and other resources that detail the firm's financial position.

Why do you need all this stuff? Ask any employee whose job was eliminated without warning

Ask the company to send you its recruiting literature, an annual report and its internal newsletter

because of a corporate downsizing, hostile takeover, merger, change in company strategy or the dropping of an unprofitable product line. While research won't guarantee ultimate insight into a company's direction and problems, it will help you ask incisive questions and identify potential problems.

Learn About the City

You'll also want to know about housing, likely commuting time and distance and recreational and cultural opportunities in your new location. Chamber of Commerce literature, the local newspaper and a realtor's relocation packet are several resources available to job candidates. You might also call friends (or friends of friends) who live in the area, or the president or membership chair of your local professional or civic organization.

Before your interview, discuss the city's attributes with your family to find out their concerns. There's no point in moving if the community doesn't offer what you (and your family) need.

Your List of Questions

As you gather and digest information on the job, company and community, formulate questions to ask your interviewer. Issues to discuss include:

The Job Description. See if it matches your expectations. Ask probing questions to showcase your grasp of its intricacies, challenges and problems.

Potential Career Paths. If you excel in the position, what will be your potential career options within the department and company?

The Organization's Mission, Philosophy, Goals and Structure. What drives this company? Where does it want to go? How will it get there?

Your Department's Mission, Structure, Goals and Clout. Will you be comfortable and motivated in this environment? Does the organization respect and listen to your department's ideas? Does it have authority equal to its responsibility?

Your Manager's Style. Is he authoritarian, democratic or laissez faire? Can you live with his approach?

Other Key Colleagues. Will you be working on a team with others or alone? Who are your co-workers? What do they do? What will you be doing together? Can you meet them before accepting a job offer?

The Boss's Boss. That person has the real power over your career. Can you meet her? How accessible is she? How flexible is the chain of command?

Delicate Subjects. Toward the end of the interview, after you've built some rapport, you might ask why the position is open. This can tell you volumes. Is it newly created or was the last person in it fired or promoted? Compensation questions, especially involving benefits and perks, are best left until the end as well. Be sure to ask about how the interview process will continue. Will there be multiple interviews? What's the time frame? When can you expect to hear from them?

Their List of Questions

While spontaneity has its advantages, most people are more comfortable when they've developed their answers to key interview questions before

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Interview preparation

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they're asked. Below are some seasoned interviewers' favorites, guaranteed to unnerve an unprepared applicant:

- Tell me about yourself.
- Why should we hire you?
- Why do you want this job?
- What are your greatest strengths? Weaknesses?
- What are your proudest achievements? Most dismal failures?
- How would you go about attaining success in this position?
- What's your definition of success?
- How do you deal with a crisis? Usually you'll be given a scenario to discuss.
- What are your career goals?
- What salary do you want? Not knowing the right answer to this may be disastrous.
- Why do you want to leave your current job? Why did you leave previous positions?

The boss's boss has the real power over your career, so try to meet him or her

- How do you (and your family) feel about moving?
- Tell me about your family. (This is none of their business but they may ask you anyway.)

As you can see, preparing for an interview involves a major research effort, but the results are well worth it. Few people do any more than superficial homework before jumping on the plane. The more you do, the chances of getting the job rise exponentially. Even more important, the likelihood that you will identify a good career match for your skill and goals increases because your investigation has spawned the right questions. ●