

This document gathers many notes, ideas, and suggestions for preparing for an employment interview as the *interviewee* – the job candidate who seeks to impress. There is a companion document for the hiring manager – check out our web site for a copy.

You will note that it is slanted towards IT – sorry, that’s my background / career direction. Still, the general approach is pretty good, and once you get into the flow, you’ll be able to add career-specific questions of your own.

**Note:** This is an aggregation from many sources (books, articles, web sites, etc.), and no attempt has been made to provide attributions for any of this material, although most of it has at least been edited to fit the context.

The document has also benefited with input from readers such as yourself. Please, if you have tips, suggestions, other observations you’d like to share, drop us a quick eMail!

As such, this is one of the more dynamic documents in the collection – be sure to check our web site for the most recent copy (your “version date” is in the upper right).

**In General**

You should know the following:

- Who am I meeting? Make sure you know *and remember* first names!
- Where are we meeting? When are we meeting? Is an agenda available?

Before the interview:

- Review this list of questions – rehearse the tough answers, and make a handwritten list of the ones you want to ask them.

At the end of the interview:

- If you are interested in the job – say so! Shake the hand, and say “I want this job”. Classic mistake is to assume they know you want the job – tell them!!

Think about bringing the following:

- A business card – to give at the end of the interview, if you are so inclined. If you have a personal web site, make sure the URL is on the card – or, create a card specifically for the URL (a nice handout thingie to help them remember you, and to entice them check out your excellent web site).
- Especially for more traditional firms -- Nice, clean hard copy of resume / cover letter, on nice paper, specifically addressed to interviewer / company.
- Sample "portfolio" of past projects / sample deliverables.
- Hard copy of reference list, on nice paper -- but don't offer it automatically! See note below ...

**Be Prepared Before the Interview**

Nothing impresses more than knowing something about the hiring organization. Do your homework, and find out the obvious and the not-so obvious about the company.

- Internet Message Boards:* Monitor this company’s Yahoo!, Raging Bull, and/or Motley Fool site for a few days before the interview. Demonstrate a timely awareness of major company news as well as rumors and investor sentiment.
  - ☛ Remember, however, to treat all rumors and attitudes expressed with a skeptical eye – if you’ve ever worked for a company subject to rampant discussions, you know how wildly off they can be.

- ❑ *Publication Search:* Try a Wall Street Journal article search. For smaller and/or local Chicago area companies, try the Chicago Tribune or Crain's. If you can identify the vertical market, maybe look through some trade publications.
- ❑ *Corporate Databases:* Invaluable source for detailed information on a company – but reports usually cost \$\$\$. Pay for them if you must, but take advantage of resources like outplacement services, associations you may belong to, public libraries – see if they provide some access to corporate reports.
- ❑ *Network:* Check through any of your personal contacts – but be discreet! You don't necessarily want to tip your hand re: who is looking, who is hiring, where the opportunities are. There are also web sites that provide "gripe zones" for employees to be frank about corporate culture.

**What might You expect from your Interviewer?**

- ✓ It happens more often than you might think – the interviewer will be looking at your resume for the first time at your interview! Especially when you are meeting very busy executives / managers, or going through a number of interviews, same day, to get that "team feedback" thing.

Don't be insulted! Be understanding (they are busy folks, there are many other candidates); also, use the opportunity to call out some of your best stuff.

- ✓ You may get an interviewer that likes to do a lot of talking. They may be selling themselves, they may be selling the company / opportunity, or they may just like to hear themselves talk.

**Warning:** Do not be lulled into simply listening to them fill the interview time – try to find constructive, yet diplomatic opportunities to break in and offer opinions / ask questions. The reality is that the interviewer may not perceive themselves to be monopolizing the conversation – they may think they are filling time because you are not opening up.

*Remember, the only "truth" that counts is the interviewer's perception.*

**What will the Interviewer ask You?**

It's critical to be prepared for some of these questions – classics that you don't think of, but interviewers always will. Some are hard to answer – if you are prepared, with a reasonably glib answer that is not sugar coated, fluffy, or politically correct, but honest and open, you will differentiate yourself from all the other candidates.

- ❑ *Sample Questions listed below:*
  - ☺ What is this question trying to get at?
  - ☺ A good way to answer this question – positive indications
  - ☹ A bad way to answer this question – negative indications

**The Classics**

- ❑ *Why are you currently looking to make a change?*
  - ☺ Best approach is to have a "no-fault" answer; "current employer is being merged and moved / going out of business" is about the best because the circumstances are beyond your control. When in doubt, expressing a desire for career growth and finding options limited in your current situation should do.
- ❑ *How would you describe yourself?*
  - Tell me about yourself*
  - Tell me your life story*
  - ☺ If you can't deliver a nice, concise, and relevant story in about 2 minutes, you don't appear well prepared. Try for a concise synopsis of your career, leading right up to why you are great for this opportunity.

- ❑ *Do you have a geographical preference? How long will the commute be? Have you tried it yet? Did you have any trouble finding the place? Were the directions all right?*
  - ☺ Good hiring managers understand how de-motivating a long, painful commute, every day of the week, can be!
- ❑ *Have you been interviewing long? Who are some of the other types of companies you are speaking with?*
  - ☺ They are fishing for data with this one – do you have many prospects (will I have much competition in landing you), have you been looking for a long time (why so long?), will you give up details (negotiating information, also a judge of how you might communicate re: business sensitive information). Also might give a hint towards the type of company you want to work for (big/small, business area) and expected job title / role.
- ❑ *What is your biggest weakness?*  
*If your last boss / peer were asked what your major weakness / key area of improvement would be, what would they say?*
  - ☺ The classic response is to take a “weakness” and relate it as a “strength” (“work too hard”). Everybody does this, this is too pat, usually is expected and may come across as disingenuous.
  - ☺ As an alternative, try describing a developmental goal; “I’d like to develop business skills in public speaking / sales / contract negotiations” etc. – especially if the weakness / development opportunity represents a stretch and/or a departure from the job description under discussion.
- ❑ *How do you think your current supervisor would describe you?*  
*How do you think a friend, professor, co-worker (peer) who knows you would describe you?*  
*What accomplishment / achievement are you most proud of?*
- ❑ *What do you do in your spare time / away from work?*
  - ☺ This is a basic philosophy question – best answer may depend on you and/or the job opportunity. I, for example, like to demonstrate that I have a personality, a life outside of work, and that it is important to me.
  - ☺ There is a key opportunity here to illustrate that your personal lifestyle / philosophy / values are in line with the corporate culture / lifestyle / values.
- ❑ *What are your long-range and short-range goals and objectives, when and why did you establish these goals, and how are you preparing yourself to achieve them?*
  - ☺ What are your future plans? Are you actively managing your career?
  - ☺ Are you willing to grow with the company? Are you interested in growing with the company? Hiring managers like to think that this will not be just another pit stop on your travels through your career.
- ❑ *When/if hired, what will your first week / month look like? What will you do first?*
  - ☺ This one is interesting, kind of key, because it stress tests your operational take on the role and your ability to “hit the ground running”.
- ❑ *Why should I hire you?*
  - ☺ Wide open question – a bit of a stress-tester.
- ❑ *Why do you think you might like to work for our company? (What do you know about our company)?*
  - ☺ Really interested in the second question – if they don’t answer it when you ask the first, drill down to the second.
- ❑ *What are the significant, unique strengths you will bring to the position?*

**Killers**

Here are some stress testers, looking to trip you up or put you on the spot. Be ready, be smooth, - and be honest and real!

- ❑ *Describe your last mistake. What was the situation, and what did you do to rectify the problem?*
  - ☺ Ideal response is a quick admission of a failure, and a quick move to take responsibility. Plus, efforts invested to fix the situation. Direct interaction with all parties involved (vs. hiding through an intermediary) is key here.
  - ☹ Weak response is to offer reasons/excuses, fix blame elsewhere, or cover up the problem without anybody finding out. Also, don't come back with a null response – nobody's perfect, and if you were, why are you looking for another job?
- ❑ *What motivates you to do a good job at work?*
- ❑ *What management style provides you with the greatest opportunity to do your best work?*

**Outside the Box**

A good hiring manager sprinkles the interview with off the wall questions. They are looking how you think on your feet, how you approach creative problem solving. Just don't get thrown off guard too much, and don't avoid 'em – you don't have to tell them the right answer, you know.

- ❑ *What specific goals, other than those related to your job, have you established for yourself for the next ten years?*
- ❑ *How do organizations change? What or who makes change happen?*
- ❑ *What was the last good book your read? (non-technical!)*
- ❑ *Give me an example of an idea that has come to you and what you did with it?*
  - ☺ Looking for both creativity and entrepreneurial tendencies.
- ❑ *(Given what you know), what is it about this job that will make you fail? Give me a situation in which you failed, and how you handled it? If I asked the people who know you for one reason why I shouldn't hire you, what would they say?*
  - ☺ Asking someone to describe themselves in negative terms leads to cognitive dissonance. "Fail" is a very strong word! Can you turn a negative around to be a positive?
- ❑ *Why is a manhole cover round?*
  - ☺ So it can't fall in.
- ❑ *How many cars are there in the USA? How many manhole covers are there in the USA?*
  - ☺ You're not given enough information to answer the question. What they want to know is – can you reason out an intelligent guess?
- ❑ *How are M&Ms made?*
  - ☺ Looking for creativity here – I haven't got the foggiest idea, myself!

**Motivation**

If you are looking at a management / team building position, you better be ready and able for some of these!

- ❑ *Describe methods you have used to motivate a team.*
- ❑ *What motivates you to do a good job at work?*
- ❑ *What management style provides you with the greatest opportunity to do your best work?*
- ❑ *What do you like most / least about your former boss?*
- ❑ *What are you seeking from this position that you are not receiving in your current position?*

- If you worked for me, how would I motivate you to do your best work?*
- What's the most useful criticism you've ever received?*
- How do you determine / evaluate / define success?*
- What do you think determines a person's progress within a company?*
- How would you define stress in the work place? How do you choose to react to it?*

Technical Questions

There are actually a million of these – a better summary is in the Hiring Manager version of this document.

- Here's a blank sheet of paper. How would you reinvent our business from an IT perspective?*
  - ☺ Do answer in business terms. DO NOT answer in technology terms. The business world is wary of the technician / tool wonk, looking for a nail for their favorite hammer.
- How do you keep abreast of new technologies?*
- What development methodologies do you use now? In the past?*

References

First, realize that a good reference list is a prerequisite for the interview / job search process. Just like a resume, it's a great tool to have before you get any interviews, and ready to go at a moment's notice.

Also, remember that a reference list is not just a piece of paper with names and phone numbers on it. It's vitally important that you have set yourself up with high quality, reputable folks, with good positions / roles / titles. In addition, these people may be given a chance to lobby for your candidacy – make sure they are referenceable.

Before you place someone's name on your reference list, it is crucial that you get their permission in advance. Whenever possible, provide advance warning when a reference call may be coming. Fill them in on the name of the company, the type of position, the name of the caller (if known). You could also use this opportunity to review the position with your reference, and discuss what important points should be stressed.

Does this sound like you are stacking the deck in your favor? Absolutely! In addition, most of your references will appreciate the pre-briefing – it allows them to do you a terrific favor without a lot of effort / thinking / preparation on their part.

Usually, it's not a good idea to give out references to every interviewer. Best approach is to only give out a select list, and only when it appears that you are very far along the interview process – like, a finalist, or it's a done deal and this is just a formality.

What if they ask for a reference list, "early" in the process? An acceptable push-back is that the people on the reference list are very important, busy professionals, who you don't wish to bother unless you are a lot closer to the decision. You can show your reference list, talk about the people on the list, and get specific with name, role, relationship – just withhold the hard copy.

**What should You ask the Interviewer?**

It's always good to come prepared with insightful questions – it demonstrates that you have a general interest in the opportunity, and have specific questions to help flesh out your understanding. Also, depending on the questions you ask, it can help to show your interviewer that you have a deeper understanding of the business drivers in any situation – i.e., you are not “just a technician”. In addition, this is a rare chance to ask a bunch of nosy questions, and get either some terrific insights or a good indication how communicative the organization is.

**General Corporate Strategy / Direction**

- ❑ *What drives senior management / board of directors?*
  - ☺ Is it shareholder value, market share, growth, top line revenue, earnings per share, other? Helps to understand the primary behavioral motivators – what will drive project / investment decisions.
- ❑ *What is the corporate business model?*
  - ☺ Directly owned, publicly traded, has a parent corporation, or is a holding company for a number of affiliates.
- ❑ *For this company, or in this industry, what fundamentally drives shareholder value?*
  - ☺ Ex. For Pharmaceutical manufacturers, it is R&D and innovation, not sales and marketing prowess. If the interviewer / hiring manager gives a well thought-out answer, it can be indicative of how close to the business they really are.
- ❑ *What are the significant industry trends?*
- ❑ *What is the long view for the company? for Information Technology / Management / Systems?*
- ❑ *If you had to guess the future, what might be the most surprising change or reversal of conventional wisdom in your field?*
- ❑ *What are the top priorities / goal for this year? Next year?*
- ❑ *What % of the business is global?*
- ❑ *What are the current growth prospects? What are the current / target growth rates (EPS / revenue)? How does that compare with industry / sector averages? Why the discrepancy?*
- ❑ *What, if any, role do partnerships and/or alliances play? Any examples, or existing agreements, in place?*

**IT/IM General Positioning**

- ❑ *How is IT referred to in this company?*
  - ☺ Information Technology / Management / Services? This identification helps to ferret out if IT is an order-taker or a strategic part of the business.
- ❑ *What is the lead IT person's title, and who do they report to?*
  - ☺ VP could be better than CIO; in general, reporting to CFO indicates a fairly old-fashioned company, where IT is an expense. Reporting to the CEO is the best situation.
- ❑ *What are the key value adds/ expectations for the CIO office / role? How is success defined for this position / IT?*
- ❑ *What are the key constraints / challenges? Important opportunities?*
- ❑ *What, if any, is the strategic / business planning process? And what is IT's role?*
- ❑ *How is the company technologically positioned against the competition?*

Corporate Culture

- What are the three most urgent questions you'd like to ask your CEO?*
- Characterize the legal / regulatory environment in the industry.*
  - ☺ e.g. Compare to the highly regulated world of pharmaceuticals – and the impact on our freedom to innovate.
- Characterize the impact of other forces -- trade associations, distribution chain constraints, selling influencers, etc.*
- What is the corporate attitude towards risk, investment?*
- How does your company treat people involved in failed projects? Does your company reward risk-takers, regardless of outcome?*
- How are business projects justified - ROI / EVA / NPV? Is there follow-up after the fact?*
- For IT projects, is there a standard methodology for proposals, prioritization, governance, and development?*
- How would the rest of the company rate IT's performance?*
- Are you compensated for lowering costs or increasing revenue?*
- What is the average age / tenure in IT? Recent turnover ratio?*
- When was the last time you took a risk in order to help a subordinate grow? What happened, and was the individual better off for the experience?*
- What is the relationship between HR and IT?*
  - ☺ Good to understand the basic systems / support issues, plus priorities of & attention to this important group.
  - ☺ Also, need to understand how HR is involved with the critical IT issue of recruiting / retention and the ongoing talent shortage / flight risk throughout IT.

Customer Relationships

- Who are IT's customers (internal vs. external)? Who are the corporation's customers? How close is IT to the corporation's external customer base?*
- How much time do you spend with your customers? Is that more or less time than the answer for last year?*
- In 10 words or less, what business are you in? Six months from now, what business will your customers want you to be in? Twelve months from now, what business will your customers demand you be in? Does your company have the will and nimbleness to make these changes? If not, what are you going to do?*

Technical and Other

Careful here – don't come off as overly interested in "tech trivia".

- How important a role does web-based technology play in your organization's ability to respond to change?*
- What is the reach of the IT infrastructure? Global / regional network(s)? Internet connection(s)?*
- How much new development work / support is insourced (vs. outsourced)?*
- What, if any, are the current application standards / mail / calendar?*
- How did XYX Corp.'s internet presence get to the current state? What (or who) is maintaining / evolving that presence?*

Supporting My Career Aspirations

- ❑ *What might the next step(s) be for someone taking this role?*
  - ⊗ Watch out – don't appear like you are already looking to move on or take someone else's job!
- ❑ *How does the company keep employees current on new technologies?*
- ❑ *Is anybody internal being considered for this position? What, in general is the typical career path here?*
- ❑ *How does the company help employees balance personal and professional lives? What does it take to get ahead?*
- ❑ *How can I work with your company so, together, we can meet my career goals?*

Company-specific Questions

This is a growing collection that, in some cases, are specific to companies I've interviewed with – but may be useful in other situations.

- ❑ *What exactly does the Corporate CIO / CIO group do? Compare and contrast to the business unit CIOs.*
- ❑ *Any rivalries / competition / "caste structure" between business units? Any data on SBU revenue as a percent of total sales?*
- ❑ ***(for an alliance corporation, between two competitors)***  
*What is the relationship between the two parent organizations? How does this affect (+/-) your "freedom to operate"?*

*Did you think of anything we missed?  
Remember, this material gets better with help from readers like you –  
please, drop us a line with your questions, comments, and suggestions!  
**AtDhVaAnNkCsE!***