

Interview Tips for Candidates

As a successful executive, you may not have interviewed in a competitive situation for some time. Your goal for any interview is to be sure that when you leave, those with whom you met are convinced that you are the ideal candidate for the position, whatever it may be. You want to be in the driver's seat, getting the option to move forward to the next round, or the offer, dependent on where you are in the process.

Here is a checklist of helpful tips as well as common mistakes to avoid in order to attain your goal of a successful interview. These examples have come directly from WittKieffer consultants and their experiences in executive search interviews.

Preparation

Do your research. Visit the potential employer's website, and get a feel for their competitive environment and potential issues. Referencing news items or web sections during your interview shows that you have taken the time to familiarize yourself with the organization. Other information available in public forums includes bios of key leaders, non-profit income tax returns, quality data, survey results, etc. "Who are your major competitors?" is not an impressive question; it is something they will have heard from other candidates.

Manage your social media profiles. You can expect they have searched the public domain regarding your background. Maintain your various profiles, especially LinkedIn and Facebook. Anything you say is available to your potential employer; avoid making statements online you wouldn't say in your interview. If there are any issues likely to be discovered, no matter what, make sure your search consultant is aware. Information can be managed, surprises cannot.

Prepare materials ahead of time. Unless specifically directed to do so, don't bring numerous handouts. You should be able to summarize material succinctly and cogently. Most people are linear thinkers, so be organized and logical. This will save time and avoid disrupting the flow of the interview.

Trust your consultant. Your search consultant will share any relevant information with you regarding the search committee, the people with whom you will interview, their questioning techniques and major concerns of the organization. These insights will help you feel more prepared and confident during the interview process.

First Impressions

Look the part. The basics for any interview include highly professional business attire: err on the side of being conservative. Wear clean shoes. No excessive cologne, perfume or jewelry. In some instances, you will be overdressed, as many organizations subscribe to office casual. Don't worry. Being underdressed is not the way you want to go; being overdressed makes a much better impression. Unless told otherwise, appropriate attire is a business suit.

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Practice with friends and colleagues until you feel confident. Make a real connection with a firm handshake, good eye contact and a pleasant smile. This is your time to literally and physically connect with the search committee, so use it well. Try to do this at the beginning and end of each meeting.

Punctuality

Arrive at least ten minutes early for each appointment. If necessary, perform a trial run, traveling where you need to be for your first meeting. Make sure you have contact information for the employer and your consultant in case an extreme situation prevents you from arriving on time. If weather or connections could pose a problem, travel the day before. Don't rely solely on your GPS if driving; instead call the organization to double check directions or any potential road blocks or closures.

Body Language

Your body language has an impact on the way you are perceived. Use good posture, stand up straight and sit slightly forward, but don't lean your elbows or your knee on the table. Don't let yourself get too relaxed. This happens most often when the chemistry is good and you begin to feel like "one of the gang." When interviewing for an executive position, it is always best to carry yourself in a way that projects confidence.

Remote Interviews

Interviews via Skype, FaceTime or other forms of video connections should be treated the same as face-to-face interviews. The same rules apply with first impressions: Look the part, make good eye contact (with the camera, not the screen) and log in to the meeting on time just as you would arrive on time for an in-person interview. There are a few variables with video interviewing, however. Pay attention to your setting; it should be simple and clean so as not to take attention away from what you have to say. Practice using the technology ahead of time to be sure there are no glitches the day of the interview. Finally, pick a place where you can be free from disruptions. Focus only on the search committee, just as you would if you were in the same room.

Opening Remarks

Plan your opening statement. In all likelihood you will be given a few minutes for some opening remarks. Develop a five to ten minute infomercial about yourself and practice it in front of a mirror or friend. Time yourself. Chances are the committee has been briefed about you, so a recitation of your chronological resume is not required. Remember, the goal of the interview process is to test the two-way chemistry. Begin by thanking them for the invitation to interview, then give them information to start a conversation; discuss your philosophy of leadership, values that are important to you and why you're there. Signal that you are finished by saying something along the lines of, "I'm happy to answer any and all questions you might have that would help you determine I am the best person for the position."

If there is a glaring issue or hole in your experience, one approach is to address it in your opening remarks. For instance, you know you are the only candidate for a CEO position that has not previously served as a CEO. You might say, "If I were the one doing the interviewing, I would be thinking, 'Why should we consider this person when we could go with someone who's already shown he or she can be a CEO?' I'd like to take a minute or two and illustrate to you some examples of my leadership abilities."

This is a great opportunity to work with your consultant. List your major skills and/or accomplishments before the interview, and talk through how each would be beneficial to the new organization. Your consultant can give

you objective feedback and help determine which highlights of your work history will benefit you most during your opening statement.

Question and Answer Sessions

Listen before answering and respond with confidence. Strong listening skills are just as important as your answers. Then answer the specific question they asked. Catch and hold each person's attention as you answer, coming back to the individual who posed the question.

You will not always have the answers to the search committee's questions, so be careful of making sweeping pronouncements or judgments with incomplete information. You can begin your answer with a phrase such as, "With what I know so far, I might look at this..." It is okay to say, "You know, that has never come up," or, "I have never encountered that situation." Continue on to say, "However, here are some skill sets I have that I would use under those circumstances" or "Here's who I'd tap into as a resource for those kinds of situations." It will give them confidence that you know where you need support and you're not above getting help.

The committee has a set number of questions that they need to ask during the time allotment, so keep your answers brief and on target. Don't let flight of ideas make you wander from one point to the next. After you answer, give them the opportunity to ask a follow-up question or change direction entirely. If you feel like the committee may want more information, you can also end your statement with a question to them: "Did I provide you with enough detail?" or, "Did I answer that to the depth you needed?"

The most effective method of answering a question is using specific examples. Consider the difference between the two answers below:

"Tell us what you would do in your first 100 days if you were to get this position."

"I'd like to meet with key individuals, administrative teams and board members, listen to what they think the issues are and help those interactions determine my priorities. I would go to them; I don't make people come to me. I'd walk the floors and get out into the community, get a feel for the regard in which the town holds the organization."

OR

"I would need to make time to get to know the organization and its people. When I started my last job, I devoted at least 15 minutes in each meeting to discussion about the general state of things, making sure people could educate me. I scheduled lunches with my new colleagues and even organized coffees at my house a few weekend mornings in a row so staff could stop by informally and get to know me. If I am hired, I plan on establishing a similar routine to make sure that I get input from others as I learn my position and tackle my responsibilities."

Specific examples paint a much clearer picture of what it would look like to have you as a leader. You can tell the committee what they want to hear, but it is much more effective to help them see it.

The question most stumbled over by candidates is, "Why are you applying for this position?" No matter how remote or how challenged, every organization wants to feel that you are drawn to them because something about the position excites you. This is your time to outshine other candidates; prepare this answer ahead of time, and base it on aligned values, challenges you find interesting or innovative practices that you can bring to the table.

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Closing

Aim for a successful close. Most committees will reserve the last 10 to 15 minutes for your questions. Have two to four key questions prepared, while also leaving room for a question that may have come up during the interview. Remember, this portion of the interview is another chance for the committee members to learn about you. Even if they have answered every question you had during the course of the meeting, create one or two on the spot. Psychologically, it feels as if you are uninterested or disengaged if you do not ask closing questions.

Thank them again, shake hands and tell them you hope you'll be hearing good news from them sometime soon, even if you come away feeling that your interest has declined. Your goal is to be the person making the decision, and if you have no job offer, there is no decision to make.

Remember this truth: If you don't interview well, others will make all of your important career decisions, not you. So the stakes are high, and preparation and practice are essential.