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HOW THE MOST SUCCESSFUL CANDIDATES INTERVIEW

We've conducted hundreds of interviews, and have seen time and again how a successful candidate differentiates themselves during the process from their less successful peers. Yesterday, the New York Times published an interesting snapshot of how one candidate's interview skills evolved over the course of his search.

In past blog entries, we've detailed some amazing instances of baffling candidate behavior, but beyond the obvious "red flags" of arriving late without good reason, demonstrating unfamiliarity with germane, public information, or showing up in dress socks and Birkenstocks, there are plenty of other ways to make or break one's candidacy.

One key factor under a candidate's complete control is their preparation, approach to, and execution of the interview process.

Preparing for an interview involves more than reading the company's annual report, latest press releases, or executive bios, and starts long before one sits down across the table from the hiring executive.

Early on, when discussions begin with the search professional, a savvy candidate will carefully review and analyze the position specification and tailor their resume as specifically as possible – including clear, concrete accomplishments that directly address the responsibilities and requirements of the position.

This exercise, beyond making one look as well-suited and attractive as possible on paper, forces critical thinking and specific self-assessment: why am I best suited for this opportunity and what is my value proposition to the hiring executive and the organization? It lays out the framework for subsequent communication, and crystallizes and prioritizes relevant experiences and accomplishments from one's background – again targeted as closely as possible to the particular opportunity.

During early discussions, successful candidates get as much information as possible from the search professional and other sources, including the typical and requisite study of financial filings, analyst reports, and other industry media. They ask thoughtful questions about what success will look like in both the short- and long-term, perspectives on the hiring executive and company culture, and generally what expectations are for the person in the role.

In terms of mindset, the best candidates approach the meeting with the hiring executive as if they were a consultant – seeking to understand what "issues" the hiring executive is confronting and how they represent the best solution. Too many people get so caught up in trying to sell themselves from the first handshake that they forget to LISTEN. The vast majority of the time, if you let them, the hiring executive will spell out upfront, in crystal clear terms, what it is they are looking for, and what critical "issues" they are looking to solve. Successful candidates tailor their message and responses as specifically as possible – remembering it is not about "them" in the abstract, it's about how they represent the "solution" to the hiring executive's needs.



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A good “interviewee” doesn’t get overly personal or bogged down in anecdotes or ancient, irrelevant history. The best interviews usually take the form of a conversation, not a monologue. Excruciating levels of detail about one’s past are rarely necessary or appropriate, especially in an initial meeting. The best candidates heed the fact that they have limited time to make their case. They keep their answers to questions on point and don’t ramble or get caught in tangents – they never feel compelled to say: “stop me if I am going too far into the weeds/straying too far off course/getting into too much detail.”

The most successful candidates approach the interview with the hiring executive as if they were a professional advisor. Nine times out of ten, if one listens upfront and asks the right questions before and during the interview, the keys to successfully addressing the hiring executive’s needs will be unmistakable. With appropriate preparation, the best candidates are able to convey – specifically and concisely – that they are the exact “solution” that the hiring executive is looking for.