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JOB INTERVIEWS: KEYS FOR RESULTS

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Many students seem disinterested in learning to handle employment interviews effectively. This article discusses students' motivation to become skilled interviewees and steps educators and counselors can take to increase students' interest in this crucial career activity. The article also discusses mistakes students frequently make during employment interviews and provides suggestions educators can use to help students avoid these difficulties.

Keywords: *interviewing, employment, motivation, coaching*

An employment interview may last only an hour, but that hour is one of the most important hours in anyone's life. Just one hour may determine a student's career. Unfortunately, however, many students seem disinterested in learning to interview effectively. Faculty members are often frustrated and baffled by students' indifference to something so important, which almost everyone can learn to handle skillfully.

In this article, we discuss reasons for students' apparent disinterest in learning to interview effectively and steps educators and counselors can take to increase their motivation to become skilled interviewees. We also discuss mistakes students often make during employment interviews and provide suggestions to help students avoid these pitfalls.

LEARN INTERVIEWING SKILLS

People like to feel comfortable and competent; therefore, they tend to give priority to tasks that are familiar—tasks they know they can handle. Many students have limited work experience and often have very little familiarity with employment interviews (Onoda and Gassert, 1978). Despite their apparent indifference, students know employment interviews are important. Ironically, the importance of interviewing, combined with their lack of experience, may actually reduce students' motivation to interview effectively. Because they have little experience with interviewing, it's easy for them to procrastinate developing this important skill. When they think about the inevitable, crucial employment interviews that will determine their futures, they may feel intimidated and inadequate. This is not surprising. In fact, it is only reasonable that they feel this way because they have almost no experience doing it and are largely lacking in understanding, much less mastering, the basic skills involved.

The expectancy theory of motivation explains that motivation to perform a task—such as learning to interview effectively—depends upon one's confidence in effective performance and the belief that valuable payoffs will happen. Therefore, in order for students to be motivated to interview effectively, they must be persuaded that they can learn to handle employment interviews and become so proficient that instead of seeing the employment interview as an intimidating evaluation, they will experience it as a process that is interesting and enjoyable. Students should also see that effective employment interviewing leads to years of employment that are more satisfying, secure, and remunerative. In addition, they should understand that failing to learn these skills, which they can certainly acquire, will lead to longer periods of unemployment and work that is less satisfying.

Fear of rejection is a major reason students avoid thinking about employment interviews. Therefore, counselors should help them perceive employment interviews not as a win-lose experience but as a process of finding an employment situation that is a good fit for their skills, interests, and personalities. Students should understand that if they do not

receive an employment offer, instead of viewing it as a rejection, they should try to see it as a situation that was not a good fit for them. At the same time, this must be balanced with the realistic view that there may be several candidates who are a good fit, and when students locate opportunities for which they are a reasonably good fit, they can use the interview to showcase their potential. Counselors must convince students that they are going to be informed and coached as they develop the ability to highlight their assets through interviewing. Thus, there is a series of ideas that should be presented to students:

- Interviewing is a crucially important, inevitable process.

- Effective interviewing entails certain basic skills.

- Students can trust that they will benefit from training to make them skilled interviewees.

- Students should aspire to compete effectively with other candidates, while remaining relaxed and enjoying the interesting interview process.

- Students should feel confident that they can learn to do this. (This confidence should be instilled by professionals through the use of the ideas presented in this article).

REQUIRE INTERVIEW TRAINING

Because students are inclined to put off learning to interview, it is important that interview training is incorporated into the required curriculum. If learning to interview is optional, classes, extracurricular activities, and abundant opportunities for entertainment prevent most students from developing interviewing skills. Unless interview training is incorporated into required classes, many students will not develop this crucial ability; therefore, it is vitally important that interview training be part of the standard learning experiences for every student. Many universities make interview training available through an on-campus career center, but they do not build interview training into the standard curriculum. From this perspective, it is not surprising that many students ignore learning to interview.

There are two aspects to learning to interview: developing a clear intellectual understanding of how to interview effectively and learning to apply these ideas through several practice interviews. Theory and practice are both important. Students must understand the ideas that go into effective interviewing because these ideas will guide them when they practice interviewing, which is quite crucial. One cannot learn to play the violin by just reading about how to do it; one must practice it. The same thing is true for interviewing. Ideally, every student will have several practice interviews of which video recordings are made, and every student will watch those video recordings with a faculty member who uses a coaching style of feedback to improve interviewing. In fact, various scenes from episodes of television shows can even be useful to develop insights into the interviewing process (Bloch, 2011). Sometimes, practice interviews are called "mock" interviews, but we recommend calling them "practice" rather than "mock" interviews. For one thing, most students are unfamiliar with the terminology "mock interviews." In addition, the word "mock" has an unfriendly connotation, suggesting that the student may be mocked in the process.

PROVIDE PROFESSIONAL GUIDANCE

Self-Analysis

Perhaps the most important thing students can do before an employment interview is a self-analysis. "Look closely at your short- and long-term goals" (Paris & Stinson, p. 46). Students should focus on and consider their dreams, concerns, and frustrations, and then follow their judgment of what is best for them (Fooks, 2002). However, counselors should realize that students seldom consider the importance of self-analysis for gaining an edge in employment interviewing. As a result, counselors should encourage students to do some introspection and consider the questions in the Self-Analysis Pyramid.

When answering these questions, students must be honest with themselves. For example, they should consider how assertive and outgoing they are and reflect on their creative and analytical abilities. Furthermore, they should assess the effectiveness of their oral communication skills and the different types of professional training they may or may not have. Their honest assessment of themselves, as part of the self-analysis, should then be used as a reality check for narrowing down jobs for which they decide to apply. Students are more likely to excel at interviews for jobs for

which they are a good fit, and self-analysis beforehand will help students identify jobs that suit them. In addition, self-analysis arms students with knowledge of specific skills, abilities, and qualities they possess to impress interviewers favorably.
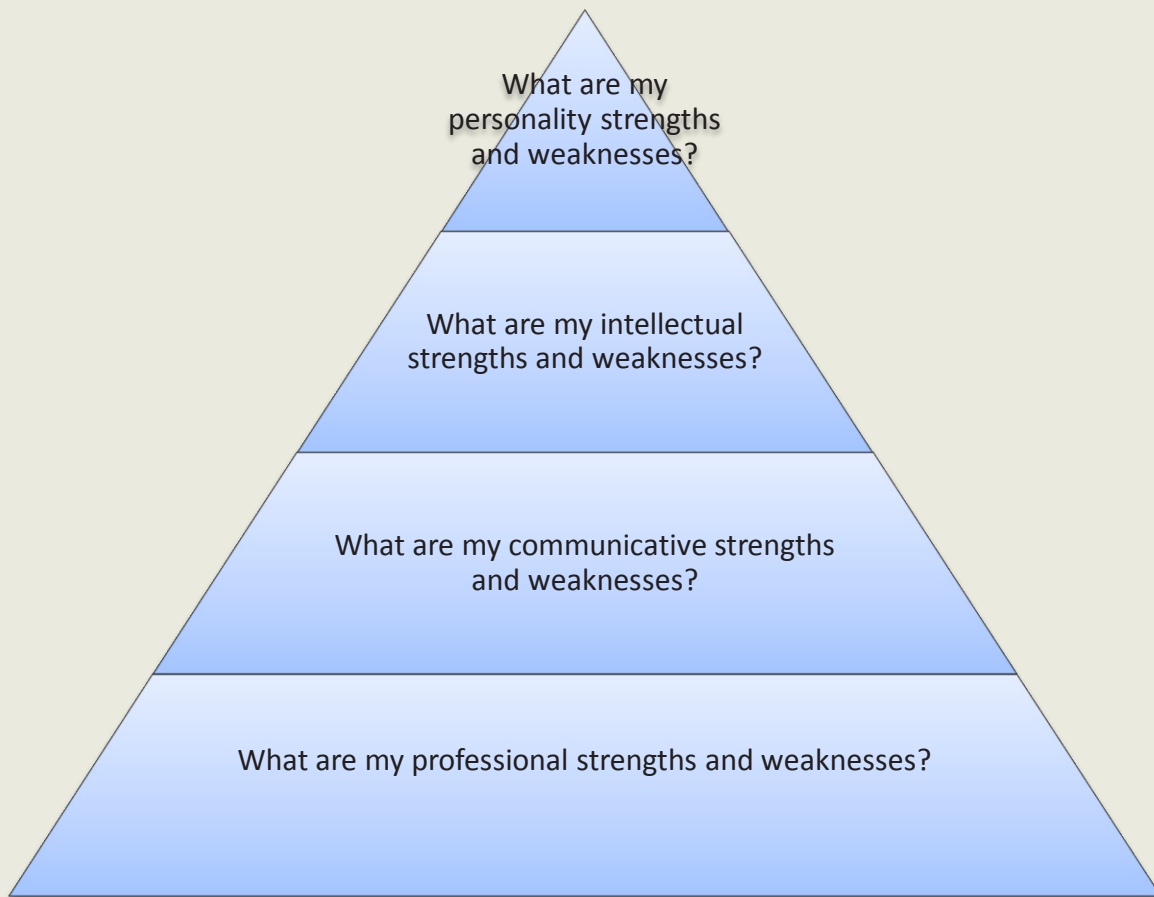

Figure 1. The Self-Analysis Pyramid

Successful Interviews

Most students think they have had a successful employment interview if they get the job. However, this limited view of success can lead to poor decisions and regrets. For example, when students accept jobs for which they are not well-suited, they often say, "If I had just known then what I know now, I never would have taken this job." In many cases, unfortunately, they could have gained the information needed to make a wise employment decision if they had been skilled at interviewing. Therefore, if getting the job doesn't guarantee one had a successful employment interview, how should students determine whether the interview was a success? Professionals should help students understand the interview was a success when they know whether or not they are "right" and qualified for the job—regardless of a job offer. Only by gaining this information can students avoid the mistake of accepting a job offer that is not right for them. Likewise, if the job is a good fit for them, they will impress the interviewer by showing that they are both "right" and qualified for the job. Sadly, many students who have a lot to offer do a poor job of showcasing their talents in the interview; when a student interviews well, that student really stands out in the mind of the interviewer.

To determine whether they are right for a job, students must consider their personalities, values, goals, what motivates them, and, in general, what is important to them in life. This reflection is done and clarified through the self-analysis discussed earlier. Then, through outside research and information gained in the interview, students can judge whether a job is right for them. Determining whether students are qualified for a job is also done through outside research and information gained in the interview, enabling students to determine whether they can perform the duties associated with the job. Just having a college degree in a certain field doesn't mean a student will be skilled

at performing all jobs in that field. Therefore, it is necessary for students to confirm they either have the proficiency to succeed in a job or they can get the training needed to meet the expectations of the job.

Impress Interviewers

"The key to hiring success is identifying the candidate with the greatest level of 'fit' with the job and the organization" (Davis & Herrera, 2013, p. 48). Counselors should help students understand that employers are favorably impressed when students answer questions by showing they are a good fit for a job. For example, consider the following question, which employers often ask: "Why are you interested in this job?" Inexperienced students often respond to this question with a vague generality such as "I am interested in this job because this company has such a fine reputation, and I was hoping to be able to stay in this area after graduation." Although this answer may be sincere, it will not impress the interviewer favorably because it is shallow, and other interviewees will give a similar answer. Instead, students should give a more thorough answer by indicating they have the skills necessary to excel in the job, and the work they would perform is meaningful to them. Students who elaborate on their unique job-related skills and explain how their values would be fulfilled through the job are likely to impress the interviewer as excellent candidates.

Show Enthusiasm

It is wise for counselors to point out that employers frequently complain about students who lack enthusiasm during interviews. This apparent lack of excitement may be due to students' nervousness; however, interviewers often fear that applicants who show little motivation during the interview may also lack motivation on the job. Therefore, if students are interested in a particular job, that interest should be visible through their enthusiasm during the interview. Students should let their personality shine through to differentiate them from other candidates (Maturo, 2008). As students show in the interview that they are an excellent fit for the job and impress the interviewer with their enthusiasm, they should avoid destroying the good impression they have made by asking the following questions (Bockanic, 2012; Smith, 2013): "What's the compensation for the position?" "How many sick days per year are employees given?" "How many vacation days per year do employees receive?" "What does your company do?"

Recognize Learner Responsibilities

As all too frequently "tomorrows" become "yesterdays," learners must be encouraged to focus on the importance of preparation for their futures. In practice, lack of understanding may contribute to failure in interviewing sessions. A key factor involves making a sincere attempt to consider employment from an employer's perspective, which implies recognizing a need for accomplishing job tasks and meeting, as well as exceeding, customer/stakeholder expectations. So, what types of considerations really count?

First, it is absolutely necessary to know basics of the job-interview process (Smith, 2013). Simple things are too often either not considered or overlooked. The interviewee should be careful to arrive for an interview a few minutes before it is to begin. As this meeting might be held at an unfamiliar location, interviewees often neglect to plan ahead and become aware of potential complications, such as unanticipated road construction blocking lanes of traffic, unavailability of parking facilities, or the amount of time needed to actually reach the desired destination.

Next, job seekers must firmly grasp the fact that there is never a second chance for a first impression. They may cling to a belief that "little things will be overlooked." Not necessarily. It is important to always "keep your guard up." For example, a candidate should not smoke or drink beer/liquor, even though an invitation may be made to do so during a "break" or at a dining event. Interviewees should be informed to have materials available for jotting down pertinent information. Women should not empty purses, or men their billfolds, on a desk in search of pens or note pads. Proper behavior around administrative staff members or other personnel should be practiced, as these persons should actually be considered as participants in the interview process; indeed, they may represent "direct lines" to hiring managers.

It's often said that "experience keeps a dear school," a comment with a direct relationship to job interviewing. Practice makes perfect, as long as the correct initiatives are practiced. Consequently, most interviewees are skilled at dressing professionally, shining their shoes, and being polite; however, the growing use of behavioral questions necessitates

being able to provide specific responses to questions. Learners must be taught to provide relevant details to questions such as "What is the greatest challenge you've encountered? ("Getting my degree" is an insufficient response.) Or, "Why did you choose your academic major?" (Just saying, "I liked the courses" is not a comprehensive answer.) Such questions provide opportunities to demonstrate critical thinking and evidence a mature sense of understanding employer-related concerns.

While the importance of thanking interviewers is widely acknowledged, this value should not be underestimated. Applicants should always remember to send a personal note of thanks to interviewers (Fidler, 2014). Counselors can emphasize that such messages provide opportunities to include evidence of listening to key information learned during an interview. Such an inclusion might represent a key, unique differentiating feature for a job candidate. However, the role of sincerity must be recognized, as the thank you message should not appear to be prepared ahead of time and arrive electronically minutes after an interview has been concluded.

Counselors need to consider that learners do not necessarily recognize all important considerations. Too frequently, young interviewees neglect to ask for business cards from interviewers. These cards serve as a source for correct spelling of names/addresses to be used for thank you notes and potential future correspondence. In addition, they can be filed as sources of information for possible future contacts.

At times, educators and counselors make unrealistic assumptions. As educators, we have learned not to take understandings for granted. For instance, Millennials may not be familiar with the word "networking." Therefore, it pays to set aside classroom time and explain its meaning. Similarly, students have been observed scheduling phone interviews in hallways between classes. Many students have not learned to list questions they desire to ask before phone or in-person interviews and then experience complications in future attempts to contact interviewers.

Unlike the preciseness needed for keeping accounting records, the interviewing process involves reckoning with any number of variables, and some interviews will not result in desired outcomes. However, if not successful, interviewees must be informed not to lose personal confidence and self-esteem; a key is to learn something from every interviewing experience. As a learning aid, they can make a list of pros and cons from each of these experiences and periodically review items on the list as helpful reminders for future interviews.

Anticipate Success

In reality, *skills* can be taught, but *attitudes* are difficult to change. For interviewees, a pertinent consideration is to focus on the present, consider the future, and concentrate on getting the desired job. During interview sessions, frowning, sitting in a "slumped over" position, and acting in a carefree manner do not demonstrate winning strategies. Consequently, the interviewee should carefully consider questions and THINK before answering. It is important to be prepared and honestly try to turn potential negatives into positives. For example, a common question asks candidates to relate their weaknesses. A good response might be, "At times, I tend to be a little impatient, but this has always helped me to stay focused and achieve personal and professional goals."

Generally, it is wise to anticipate unexpected questions. "Why should we not hire you?" exemplifies this type of question. Once again, a key response could include commenting about a true belief such as, "You should not hire me if you would want me to do anything unethical." While it is impossible to predict the many complexities that might arise at job interviews, preparation, practice, and common sense go a long way toward reaching successful outcomes. Indeed, the job-interviewing process represents both an "art" and a "science."

This article was intended to provide an integrated set of research-based ideas to help faculty members and advisors more effectively enhance students' performance in employment interviews. Hopefully, this contribution to the literature will be useful to that end.

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