

Interview Preparedness: How to Find and Interview for the Next Right Job

Erin Nyren and Tom Lang

Finding a new job or career can be a challenge, and the interview can make or break your chances of landing the job you want in your organization of choice. Taking the right approach to the job hunt and preparing carefully for the interview will help you proceed into your new position with confidence and will go a long way to ensuring a smooth hiring process for both you and your future employer.

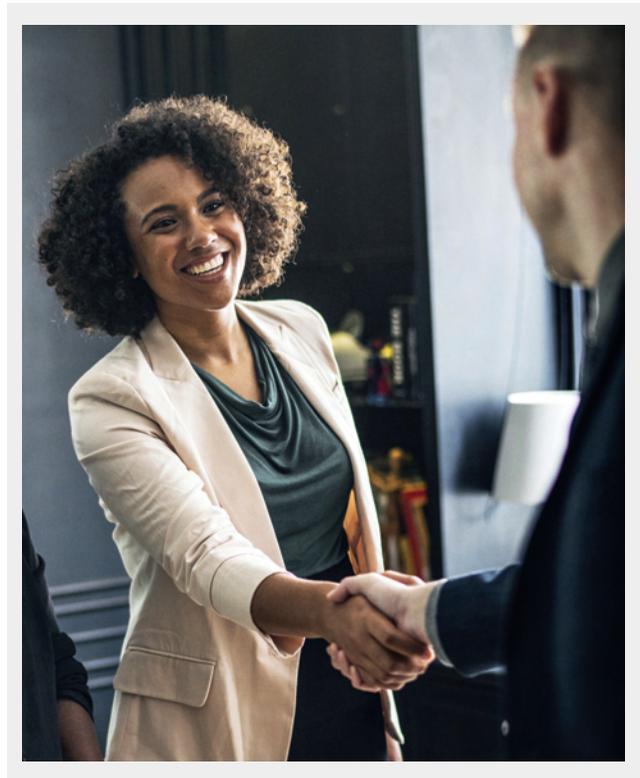
So . . . You're Thinking about a New Job . . .

Maybe you're ready for a new level of responsibility in your current organization, or maybe you're scoping out a new employer. Maybe you're starting your career or perhaps even considering a new one. One way or another, eventually you'll wind up sitting across a desk from at least one, and probably more, of your future supervisors and coworkers, answering questions about everything from your hobbies to your goals, successes, and challenges. And only one thing is guaranteed: "Ummmmm . . . uh . . . well . . ." is not the answer you want to give!

Erin owns her own company that provides books and lessons for children's science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) education, and Tom is a former department manager at a major clinical and research center. We have each interviewed lots of job candidates. We've seen the good, the bad, and the ugly of those who are passionate and well prepared, and we've had the embarrassment of seeing just the opposite (and trust us . . . it's awkward for the interviewer too, not just the potential employee).

Finding the Right Job: Two Approaches

But first things first. If you are looking for a new job, you can take two basic approaches. (See *What Color is Your Parachute*, by Richard Nelson Bolles for more detail.) The first is the most common and the least effective, in both



the short and long term. That approach is to send your resume to as many as advertised openings you can find. This approach has several problems: 1) Most jobs are not advertised; their availability is circulated through informal networks, both inside and outside the company. 2) You are letting the employer choose you before you choose the employer. 3) You have to cope with lots of rejections or non-responses, neither of which is good for your mental health. 4) You are putting yourself at the mercy of HR departments, who (and we swear this is true) see how many words in the job description also appear on your application. The fewer words in common, the less likely you are to get a response. Finally, 5) you might get the job and find that it's the wrong job, after you've moved, after you've made other financial commitments, and after you've tried to convince yourself that you really can be happy there for several years. This approach is haphazard and not particularly systematic.

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However, if you take the second approach, though it involves a bit more planning and time, you are much more likely to find a position that is a good fit. This involves several steps: 1) determine what kind of job you are looking for, what you want to do, where you want to do it, and with whom you want to do it. 2) Go the city where you want to live. If you want to live in New York, don't waste time looking in New Orleans. 3) Identify the companies in that city that likely have the job you are looking for and learn all you can about each of them. Especially, try to *identify the title or name of the person who can hire you*. Membership directories of professional associations, such as CSE, can help you connect with members working in those companies and provide an opportunity for professional networking (which will continue to have benefits, even after you get the job). These contacts can tell you what it is like to work there and who you should be talking to. 4) Contact the person you believe might hire you and ask for a brief informational interview. However, you are not looking for a job yet; you are collecting information about what might be involved in changing jobs or careers, and that's what you should tell the person you're talking with. 5) If the conversation goes well and you believe you have a good rapport, leave a 1-page resume (not your 9-page curriculum vitae) with your contact information. If the conversation doesn't go well, just thank the person and move on; the conversation just paid for itself by ruling out a bad fit.

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The purpose of the informational interview is to stop you from spending time on organizations that don't look promising and to get you into the informal networks where most jobs are advertised. For example, Jim isn't looking for someone right now, but he knows that Cindy is, and he passes your information on to her. Or, in 4 months, when things have changed, he remembers your interest and contacts you. This process generally takes longer, but it pays off by getting you a job where you are likely to be happier longer.

The Formal Interview

The best job is the one where you complete an employment application *after* the company has already expressed serious interest in making you a part of the team. However, if you need to interview for a job, consider the advice below.

Interviewing for a job is a bit like speed dating: Everyone is trying to decide if this relationship is right for them, and they don't want to take weeks or months to make up their minds. Employers need to discern whether your experience,

skills, and personality make you a good fit for the job, as well as whether you fit into their culture. They need to know that you can (and will) do the work to their standards, as well as to the standards of their clients or other stakeholders, because hiring the wrong person can be devastating for their organization. As such, they need to ask pointed and sometimes detailed questions, and your answers need to make them feel confident that you're the right one for the job. For you to achieve this, careful preparation is key.

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Get Ready by Doing Your Homework

Being well prepared for an interview will not only make you feel more at ease, it will help you anticipate some of the things your potential employer will want to know and enable you to get into the right mindset. Here are some things you should do before any interview:

- Visit the organization's website and learn what their mission, vision, and values are, as well as a little about their corporate culture if that information is available. You don't want the interview to revolve around asking what the organization does; you want it to revolve around what you can contribute.
- As ridiculous as this may sound, review your resume and be certain you know the details included on it. Not only should you be certain there are no errors, you should be prepared to answer questions about your experience. This capability is particularly important if you are a mid- or late-career applicant and have had many different experiences, especially those that happened years ago. Nothing is more embarrassing than being unable to answer questions about your own background!
- Search the Internet for interview questions commonly asked by employers hiring editors or writers, whatever the job you're interested in. Many websites have a veritable smorgasbord of questions ripe for the viewing. These questions are invaluable because they help you get inside the mind of the potential employer and take some of the guesswork out of anticipating the questions they may ask.
- If you know someone who works for a similar organization, ask them if there is a list of approved interview questions. Many companies keep these on file for interviews, and they often include hundreds of questions for every possible employment situation.

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- Ask yourself, given what you know about the organization, what you can offer a new employer. Telling them how you think you can benefit them as an employee also gives you a chance to show how much you know about the organization, which should help put them at ease. Remember: your interviewers are often more nervous than you are about the interview. If you get the job and it doesn't work out for you, you can quit. If it doesn't work out for them, it can take a lot of time, money, and even legal maneuvering to move you out of the job.
- Have a friend or family member put you through a mock interview. Don't just *think* about the answers to the questions, get someone else to ask them and force yourself to tell them the answers as though they were the potential employer. You'd be amazed how answers that sounded right in your head become awkward and garbled when you try to say them out loud. If your friend or family member has done interviews in the past, all the better.

Questions to Ask Your Future Employers

Finally, when the interview is ending, the interviewer(s) may (and should) ask if you have any questions for them. Do not pass up this opportunity! After all, the interview is also about whether the organization is right for you. Although you have already done your homework (haven't you?) and reviewed the organization's information online, you now have an opportunity to ask them some questions to get a better feel for whether you would like to work for them. Here are a few questions you should consider asking:

- How does the organization see itself maturing, and what positions does it see developing? In other words, what are the advancement opportunities in this job? Will there be opportunities for promotion, or is this position as far as it goes?
- What benefits does the job offer: insurance, vacation and paid time off, training, bonuses, retirement and

retirement contributions? This information may be in the job advertisement, but if not be sure to ask about it.

- What skills and training are most important to the organization? In other words, what professional development activities will they pay for: conference attendance, memberships, book and webinar purchases, time off (with or without pay) to attend trainings, and so on.
- What are their expectations of the chosen candidate in the first 6 months? Most good organizations have an onboarding/probation phase, during which they allow you to learn more about what they do, who you will be working with, and what a typical day will look like, as well as time to learn about any technology you may need to be familiar with, such as software programs. If they intend to throw you right into a project immediately, the job could be relatively basic, they could have a poor understanding of the learning curve for the tasks, or you could have been hired with the expectation that you could hit the ground running and produce immediate benefits.

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We spend a third of our lives at work: more than 90,000 hours over the course of a career. Putting a lot of thought and preparation into managing this third of your life is thus well worth the effort. There is an old saying (attributed to several people across the millennia who are alleged to have coined old sayings) that good luck is what happens when opportunity meets preparation, whereas bad luck is what happens when lack of preparation meets reality. Organize your luck; take career planning and job hunting seriously.

Good luck in your search, and all the best for your new job or career!