Coping with job interviews

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This article was originally published in SAPA in November 2005. It has been updated and republished as the logical next phase of finding your dream job. In the last issue of SAPA, we spoke about preparing your CV. Now we take the process further. You’ve sent your CV out, and been invited to a job interview. How do you handle the interview?

Job interviews can be scary. You’re nervous. Your heart’s beating faster than it usually does. Your palms are sweating. You just can’t think straight. This may be the job you’ve wanted all your life. It may be essential if you’re to feed your family. How do you make sure that you don’t spoil your chances of getting the job?

Preparing for your interview will help you to make the most of the opportunity. It will improve your confidence and give you an advantage over other candidates.

Arriving at the interview

Make sure you know where to go, and leave home early enough to get there with time to relax before you go into the interview. Getting lost or caught in the traffic will add to your stress levels.

It’s useful to take copies of any documents you may have sent to the company, e.g. your CV, references and any other important documents.

When you walk into the room, stand up straight and smile; and don’t forget to lose the chewing gum and switch off your cell phone before you go into the room.

What do other people see?

Before you even open your mouth, the person interviewing you will have observed you. He or she will have noticed your smile and your posture, as well as the way you are dressed. (Hint: Find a copy of the September/October 2005 issue of SAPA. The article about dress codes will help you to choose your clothes!) Neat, clean, professional clothing is essential, and it’s a good idea to prepare your clothing the day before – a power failure or a rush in the morning could make you more nervous.

It’s tempting to fidget, or play with your hair or your hands, when you’re anxious. Don’t do that! Try to sit comfortably and relax. Look at the person who’s talking, nod and show that you’re listening.

What you should know before you arrive

An interview is an opportunity for you and the employer to get to know each other. Your answers to the interviewer’s questions will show if you have the personal qualities, skills and abilities that are needed.

Study the job advertisement. It will tell you what the key performance areas are and what is expected of the employee. If you’re able to, get hold of a job description. This will help you to answer questions, and to ask suitable questions. It will also help you to show the interviewer that you know something about the potential employer and the post you hope to fill.

Make sure that you recognise key issues in the environment in which you hope to work, and can speak about them. For example, if you’re going to work in a community or institutional pharmacy, you may be asked about the cold chain, and how you would handle a delivery of insulin or vaccines.

Answering questions

Although interviews can be very different, depending on the people who are interviewing you, some of the questions asked will be the same. It’s a good idea to think about these beforehand, and maybe even to practise the answers aloud.

Questions you may be asked

• Tell me about yourself. (You don’t need to give your entire life history!) Why do you want this job?
• Why do you want to leave your current job? (Be honest and give broad reasons. Do not criticise your employer!)
• Give me an example of how you have handled a difficult situation.
• How would you cope with an angry client?
• What are your strengths? (Mention those strengths that would be useful in the job for which you are applying, e.g. if you are self-disciplined or you have good interpersonal skills.)
• What are your weaknesses? (Talk about weaknesses that can turn into strengths if you use them correctly. For example, if you are fanatical about having everything in the right place, you may be perfect for controlling stock.)
• What have you learnt from your mistakes?
• A lot of people have applied for the job. Why should I appoint you? (Highlight your experience and abilities. Talk about areas where you can make a contribution.)
• You may be asked an unexpected question. This is often done to see how you cope with the unexpected. The questions may have nothing to do with your job. For example, you may be asked your opinion on termination of pregnancy or what you think of the latest Bafana Bafana coach.

Some rules for answering questions

• Speak clearly.
• Be honest.
• Try to avoid yes or no answers.
• Answers should be concise, but comprehensive.
• Take your time – think before you answer.
• If you don’t understand a question, ask the interviewer to repeat or clarify it.
• If you feel awkward about answering a question, breathe deeply and take your time. It isn’t easy to answer questions about academic failure or being fired.
• If you know one of the interviewers, make sure that you don’t answer a question with, “Well, you know me.” Even if the interviewer does know you, your answer will be compared with other interviewees and, besides, the other interviewees don’t know you.
• Don’t interrupt the interviewer.
• Be positive.
• Be enthusiastic.
• Be yourself!

Asking questions

At the end of the interview, you will usually be given the opportunity to ask questions of your own. Prepare your questions in advance. Keep the questions brief. Ideally, ask questions that can’t be answered with a simple yes or no. For example, ask “why?” or “what is…?”

Most interviewers will tell you what the next step is and when you can expect to hear from them, but if they don’t, you may want to ask them.

When the interview is over, thank the interviewers for their time, and smile before you leave, even if you felt that the interview went badly.

It isn’t always easy to get the job that you want, but if you use your common sense, you can minimise the stress of an interview.

Some useful websites

http://content.monster.co.uk/job_hunting/articles2/coping_with_interviews
http://www.cnn1.co.za/job_interviews.html
http://www.jobs.co.za/job-seekers/career-advice/article/26/preparing-for-a-job-interview
http://www.jobinterview-tips.co.za/