

Essentials of RA

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How TOP Performers Interview

Part 2: Who Employers Hire

Most professionals who have gone to the trouble of acquiring vast amounts of technical expertise in their chosen fields would like to show themselves in the best possible light during job interviews to secure career positions that maximize their earning potential and provide the most professional fulfillment. To meet their interview objectives—ultimately to be hired for the position—interviewees must be perceived as top performers by the prospective employer. Branding oneself as a top-performing technical professional requires a natural personification of goals, strategies and tactics, qualities that are so a part of the individual that they are effortlessly showcased in any interview, whether formal, informational or courtesy, and evident to any member of the prospective organization, from the receptionist to the president.

Goal-setters internalize their career game plans to such a degree that they can automatically size up each position under consideration with the best plan for technical and cultural fit. In the ideal interview, communication flow between the participants is effortless because the goals of the interviewee and the prospective employer are determined easily and their compatible objectives blend seamlessly.

A strategy that allows top-performing professionals to secure the next “just right” career position is the development of a personal profile—an objective self-assessment of motivations, thinking, behaviors and traits, as exhibited through day-to-day work situations and interactions.¹

In addition to a self-knowledge strategy, crucial to acquiring that next career position is the strategy of thorough research and understanding of “target” companies. Corporate culture, “family friendly” policies, the company’s stage in its life cycle and advancement opportunities (to name a few) equip interviewees with the necessary intelligence for the interview process, enabling top performers to better assess their chances of thriving and advancing in a position.

The implementation of tried-and-true tactics in successful interviewing also yields the comfort level of a natural-flowing, effortless process to candidates and prospective employers. As a result, the interview can focus on the most fundamental basis for the meeting: dissecting the need or problem to be resolved. The overall goal of interviewees is to present themselves in a professional and likeable manner, allowing employers to gather all the information needed to make an informed decision as to whether or not the position meets the candidate’s career goals. With these goals in mind,



a tactical interview process for top performing candidates includes five steps:

Prior to the Interview

Ask the scheduler to provide a list of all interviewers. Study the company website. Find biographies or articles by the interviewers, so you have reference points from which to understand the audience. This demonstrates thoughtfulness, attention to detail, ability to do research, initiative and enthusiasm. How flattering to the prospective employer!

Ask the hiring authority or human resources for a complete position description. If you have not written a cover letter addressing the requirements of the position, be sure to do so prior to the interview. Write a list of questions for the interviewers ahead of time. This shows genuine interest and serves to create and maintain an interactive interview format.

Ascertain the needs of the company and the interviewers. A position becomes available because there is a problem to be solved, even if it is simply a company’s rapid growth. Issues related to a company’s life cycle often require employees of vastly different skills sets, depending upon where a company is in its life span. Knowing the company’s life cycle stage at the time of the interview, and whether there is a potential match to the culture, work pace, management style, marketplace priorities, technological edge and the like, will help guarantee that both candidate and company make the right choice. For example, if a medical device or pharmaceutical company is primarily in its R&D stage, the atmosphere may be fast-paced, entrepreneurial, engineering-intensive or venture capital-driven. In such a scenario, those who seek stability, certainty, security and order may not be willing to bear the risk that start-ups or bullish young companies bring to the table.

Prepare to discuss your desire to change employers or careers. Particularly for technical professionals, it is always

tricky when differences in personality, work style or ethics issues are the reasons for the change.

For example, individuals whose work persona borders on arrogance, displayed through passive-aggressive behavior towards peers/associates or superiors will sooner or later find themselves holding a pink slip regardless of their brilliance in solving technical problems. Only the most secure managers can handle a steady diet of pushback from such an individual, and if the behavior is disruptive to the team or department, they simply have no choice but to let the person go. In such a situation, getting references to secure the next position is difficult, at best. A person in this position can offer the prospective employer a “try before you buy” (i.e., a contract or temp-to-hire) arrangement wherein the new employee would be on trial for 90 to 180 days to prove to the employer that lessons have been learned. Recruiters who represent such a candidate may offer to forgo payment until the trial period is complete, or offer to return a portion of the fee if the new employee does not work out.

As for the candidate response to a question such as, “Why did you change employers?” the best answer is, “I am thankful for the opportunity given me by my recent employer. My boss and I agreed it was time for me to move on after xx years of a mutually productive relationship.” To the question “Did you leave on good terms?” one may truthfully answer “Yes” if the company made the effort to offer severance. If the question is “Are you eligible for re-hire?” one may respond in kind, “In terms of technical competence, without a doubt, yes. However, I have learned that I work better in a (insert here what works for you in terms of corporate culture, example: smaller, or more entrepreneurial or self-directed, etc.) environment.” Such answers show that the candidate is confident while grounded in reality, has discovered what works best and is moving on with courage. By not avoiding the issue, or giving non-answers or making negative statements about present or former employers, the applicant demonstrates integrity and self-discipline, treasured traits to a prospective employer.

Arriving for the Interview

Arrive early for the interview, prepared to fill out a written application. It is easy to get lost or stuck in traffic. Candidates who are late for the scheduled interview are “marked down” despite roadway conditions.

The first three to 10 minutes set the stage for lasting impressions. Dress appropriately and smile. Do NOT smoke or chew gum. Disable cellular phones, pagers and electronic devices from ringing during the interview.

Bring a binder equipped with extra résumés, business cards, neatly typed questions, and a pad for interview notes. Avoid rummaging through a briefcase for these items.

Beginning of the Interview

Firm handshakes are appropriate. If you suffer from sweaty palms or experience stage fright, simply offer your card or résumé, and get the interviewer’s business card. In this way, you can avoid a potentially embarrassing moment.

When you are interviewing with more than one person, track each interviewer by writing his name and title for your own reference. Jot down a key phrase, point or question beside each interviewer’s name so that you can refer to it in your thank you e-mail or handwritten note.

During the Interview

Focus on two things only: Establish rapport with the interviewer(s) and gather information by ascertaining expectations.

Never interrupt or force information on the interviewer. On the other hand, being too brief makes interviewers feel as though they have to “pull” the information out of you.

Work into your answers pertinent examples of achievement or performance excellence. Having a list of well-thought-out questions will also serve to keep the interview flowing. Remember that just as they are interviewing you, so are you interviewing them.

Get on a first name basis, if appropriate, and maintain eye contact. These norms are important in our contemporary business culture. Not doing so is perceived negatively, perhaps as having something to hide, low self-esteem, or disrespect. Being focused and alert prevents sending signals of ambivalence, aloofness or disinterest. Friendliness and enthusiasm increase the comfort levels of the interviewers.

Answer questions and make statements in a direct concise manner, without exaggeration. Keep in mind that no matter how qualified you are, no one person has all the answers to a given work situation. Exaggerating, which some observers perceive as lying, raises red flags; if your references cannot back up what you assert regarding your work

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skills, behaviors or traits, you most assuredly will not get the position. Stay on the professional level during the interview by showing how you solved problems, and the resulting accomplishments.

Sample Interview Questions:

1. Why should I hire you? (What can you do for me/my department/the company?)
2. What training or qualifications do you have for the job? (accomplishments that address the employer's problem or need)
3. How have you helped the company's/site's bottom line? (cost savings, scrap/waste reduction, increased market share, negotiations with regulatory bodies, minimizing duplicate efforts, acquiring certifications without observations)
4. Why do you want to change jobs? (qualities that show initiative, flexibility, risk-taking)
5. What kind of experience do you have for this job? (certifications that are prized in your industry: CCRA, CCRC, CQA, RAC, RAB Auditor, etc.)
6. Why are you successful? (management skills and technical expertise)
7. How many and what type of people have you supervised? (team building and leadership skills)

End of the Interview

Be aware of the time limit for the interview. Interviews are typically 40 to 45 minutes in length, so after 35 or 40 minutes, or when asked, "Do you have any questions for me?" be sure to raise these closing questions:

"What concerns do you have about me representing your company?" Address interviewer objections and concerns.

"Am I a good fit for your department (or team)?"

Ask for the job by stating, "I am very interested in this position, and want to move forward," and further assert yourself by asking, "What is the next step?"

After thanking the interviewer in person, it is proper etiquette to send thank you e-mails or handwritten notes within a day of the interviews. This serves several purposes. It shows the prospective employer your interest and underlines your traits of organization, initiative and attention to detail. The note is another chance for you to reference some point from the interview that bears emphasis. "You mentioned that the position requires an experienced site auditor. I am certain I can meet your expectation of conducting site audits because in my five years as a clinical research associate, I routinely conducted quarterly audits on my 23 sites as part of my responsibilities."

These suggestions for successful interviewing bear study and review each time you are ready to advance your career as a top performer. Of course, once hired, you must do all those things that insure good reviews, advancement, and acceptance into the group. If you followed an interviewing strategy and employed most or all of the steps outlined above, you can proceed to address the challenges of the new position and be well on the way to a real sense of achievement and fulfillment.

NOTES

1. "What Employers Hire," *DIA Forum*, Vol. 40, Issue 1, January 2004.