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Reduce Your Interview Anxiety

For most job seekers, the best antidote for this job-search stress is practice and preparation

By: CB Bowman

Nervous about an upcoming interview? That's normal. Fear of the unknown, rejection or failing is behind most job seekers' interview anxieties. But by managing the interview process, you can control your fears.

If you view interviewing as a business procedure and take charge of every phase, from choosing a career, conducting research and creating a personal marketing plan to meeting with employers, following up and negotiating a salary, you can keep your emotions on an even keel.

You may assume that the best way to deal with interview fears is by willing them into submission. But people who constantly control their emotions and situations create a self-defeating cycle when interviewing. They concentrate on trying to control the meetings instead of preparing thoroughly and following the interviewer's lead.

This prevents them from focusing on what the hiring manager is saying - virtually guaranteeing rejection. Their listening skills will seem poor and they may have difficulty bonding with interviewers. They also may appear haughty, adversarial, arrogant or disinterested.

A controlling job searcher once told me, "I would never ask for a job. It's not my style." But when you're competing with several equally qualified candidates for every desirable position, this attitude may lead you to a long period of unemployment.

Being passive when job hunting is just as harmful. Unless your interviews are interactive, you won't know how well a meeting is going. To reach your goals, including career objectives, "you have to ask for what you want in life," says Charlie Adamo, a former vice president for Kraft Foods in White Plains, N.Y.

A Seven-Step Approach

Asking for what you want is part of managing the interview process. To reduce your fears and boost your confidence, you must conduct research and honestly assess yourself and your skills, traits and interests. The following steps can help you to prepare:

- **Manage your expectations.**

Candidates often make wishful statements such as, "I hope that I land this position," or "This is my dream job." But wishing for a job won't make it happen. To manage your expectations, you must have a firm grasp on reality.

This doesn't mean being negative. Don't say, "I can't possibly land this position," or "I don't really want or deserve this job." Instead, seek an achievable middle ground. Tell yourself, "I'm interested in this position and I'm going to do as much as I can to land it. If I don't receive an offer, I'll keep searching for something equal or better and use what I've learned to improve my job-hunting skills."

Managing expectations allows you to participate fully in the interview process. You'll know not to expect a job offer immediately after your first interview and you'll be able to focus on learning about the company and moving the process forward. Asking about the hiring timetable and what your prospective department or hiring manager needs is appropriate and expected and shows you're interested in the company and job. What you learn will help you to follow up after the meeting, earn an offer and negotiate more effectively.

Visiting the company before the interview also can help you reduce anxiety. "Discreetly visit your location a day or so in advance," says Barbara Barra, executive vice president of Lee Hecht Harrison, Inc., a New York-based career counseling firm. "You'll learn how to get there and how long the trip will take and be able to observe employees to get a better sense of their culture and dress code."

- **Know your goals and what you can contribute.**

Many employees are never told their value to their companies or don't bother to keep track of their past successes. It's no surprise, then, that they have difficulty writing resumes or communicating their worth to potential employers. If you don't already, start keeping track of your projects and successes by asking yourself these questions:

1. What was the task?
2. What was the purpose of the task?
3. What was the result?
4. What role did I play in reaching the solution/result?
5. What lessons were learned?
6. How did the project affect the company/client in terms of:
 - Money saved/spent
 - Increase in volume/share of the market
 - Time saved/spent
 - Productivity (increased/decreased)
 - Effect on the organization/division

Keep a file of your successes and activities. Review your achievements and create "stories" that you can tell interviewers when asked about your accomplishments.

- **Do research.**

Before interviewing, become familiar with industry trends, the company and its competition. Visit relevant Web sites, review help-wanted ads and search on-line research or clipping services for information. Industry associations, trade journals and business periodicals are other good sources.

Try to learn appropriate industry terminology for the position you're seeking. This will help you connect with interviewers, communicate your transferable skills and be seen as part of the team. Industry terminology can be subtle. With the widespread use of computerized resume systems and key-word searches, using the wrong terminology may mean you won't be considered for suitable positions.

Also try to learn answers to these questions:

- What challenges do the industry, company and division face?
- How is company or division growth determined?
- What's the company's financial outlook? How is your division tied to the company's bottom line? How does it fit with the company's vision and strategy?
- What projects are key and why? How are they supported?
- Are any lawsuits pending against the company?
- What type of management process, organizational structure and culture can you expect? Is the fit right?
- Is the company likely to be acquired, reorganized or downsized and why?
- Is a relocation likely in the near future?
- What's the rate of employee turnover?

Networking with former and current employees, customers and suppliers may help you answer these questions. Ideally, you should locate an insider who knows your prospective interviewer and can tell you about his or her background. While you may not learn everything you want, your investigation will uncover useful information to help you manage your interview jitters.

- **Know your worth.**

Determine the average salary and bonus level for the position you're seeking and other pay information that can help you to negotiate effectively. To gauge this amount, find out the market value for your skills at similar size companies in your prospective industry.

Industry and professional journals often conduct and publish salary surveys. Other sources include consulting firms and business periodicals. The publication also publishes an annual review of salaries for executives and professionals in more than 30 fields and industries.

By networking, you may be able to determine what the company's competitors pay for similar positions. Also investigate how long the position has been available and why, and if you're likely to be promoted in the future.

- **"Own" your resume.**

Always write your own resume. The struggle to compose it will give you a deeper understanding of your accomplishments and how to communicate them to decision-makers. The process also will build your self-esteem and ability to think quickly during the interview.

If you're stuck, you may want to seek advice from a professional career coach. However, put your document in your own words. When asked about information on their resumes, many candidates falter and lose credibility because they can't express the information in their own words.

- **Practice communicating and thinking on your feet.**

Besides responding to the interviewer's queries, you'll need to state essential points you want to make and ask appropriate questions during your meeting. Your listening skills, body language and appearance also are critical to making a good impression.

Before the meeting, ask a friend or colleague to bombard you with unexpected interview questions and record your answers. Try to answer without hesitation. Seek honest feedback about the quality of your responses. Typical questions you should practice, according to Ms. Baxxa, include:

- Tell me about yourself.
- What kind of salary are you looking for?
- Why are you interested in this position?
- Why are you in the market?
- What are your strengths and weaknesses?
- What prevents you from being more productive?
- Have you ever had any failures?
- Why do you want to change careers (for career changers)?

Visit the library or local book store and review job-search and career guides, which often include chapters devoted to potential questions. Answer the questions on your own before reviewing the recommended responses. Don't memorize the suggested answers and repeat them verbatim to interviewers, since you may sound suspiciously like other candidates who scanned the same career books.

Such guides also can help you develop a strategy for responding to inappropriate or illegal questions, such as: Are you married? Do you have any children? Do you plan to have any children?

Based on your research, decide what you want to communicate so the hiring manager will understand your capabilities, experience, achievements and skills. Gear this information to how hiring you will help the company solve a problem.

Also develop a list of questions to ask during the interview. "A great part of managing your tension is realizing that the interview is a two way street," says Ms. Barra. "It isn't an interrogation, but a conversation." Both parties have a similar agenda: determining if you have the skills, knowledge, motivation and interest to do the job and the values to fit in, says Ms. Barra.

Practice your nonverbal communication skills by asking a friend or family member to videotape your practice interviews. Also review reference books on body language to identify bad habits and improve on good behaviors. Squirming in your

seat, clicking pens, bouncing feet and legs or fiddling with your hair shows you're nervous and distracts interviewers.

Use your knowledge to analyze what the interviewer's body language is saying about how the meeting is proceeding. Focusing on your questioner will also help lower your anxiety and improve your listening abilities.

Your appearance also communicates a message to interviewers and may cause you to be misjudged. If you're not certain that you're making the right impression, ask an image consultant or career professional for advice.

- **Remember the basics.**

Before the meeting, get a good night's sleep, reduce built-up stress by exercising, eating properly and avoiding caffeine if you're sensitive to it. Select clothes that you feel confident and comfortable wearing and make sure they're clean and pressed.

Arrive 15 minutes before the interview so you can relax, review your surroundings and visit a rest room to check your appearance. Model yourself after professional speakers, who often arrive one to two hours before presentations to observe, check their equipment and seating arrangements, review their material and relax.

Practice smiling and showing enthusiasm during the meeting. This can be infectious and have a positive effect on the interviewer. By concentrating on something besides your nerves, you'll deflect your jitters.

You can't eliminate interview fears simply through an act of will. Instead, calming yourself requires practical steps, including research, learning what the interviewer wants and rehearsing potential questions. Practice will help you become mentally agile. You'll be ready to focus on your immediate concern: to communicate successfully and manage your nerves.

The Right Way to Ask for What You Want

Many job hunters don't know how to ask interviewers for what they want. The chart below illustrates positive and negative methods of making requests during interviews.

Positive

1. Communicating your goals respectfully to the listener (mirroring his/her personality may be effective).
2. Contacting decision-makers or designated representatives directly.
3. Being clear and precise.
4. Being flexible (always prepare alternative solutions to desired goals).
5. Being creative about negotiating.
6. Stating your accomplishments in relation to the listener's needs.
7. Proving your "committed" interest in the company and outlining what you can contribute.

Negative

1. Demanding what you want.
2. Going around the decision-maker, thereby underestimating his/her authority.
3. Being indecisive and vague.

4. Being rigid and demanding.
5. Being myopic about negotiating.
6. Exaggerating and overstating your accomplishments (especially out of context).
7. Asking why you should be interested in working for the company (proving only self-interest).

