

Young job seekers:

Practice makes perfect when preparing for interviews

By Robert Holton

All job seekers have challenges to overcome as they set out to establish their careers, but the challenges for young job seekers may seem even more daunting. More experienced employees are often competing with those new to the workforce for the same jobs. The situation isn't hopeless, it just takes some prior planning to turn what might appear to be a disadvantage into an advantage.

Begin with practice

Hold mock interviews with anyone you can—friends, family or neighbors. Young candidates often stumble or stammer more than experienced candidates, due simply to lack of practice. Difficult interview questions can create an uncomfortable silence, and an

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inexperienced candidate often rushes to speak too quickly. Practicing answering common questions several different ways eliminated that panic of trying to invent an answer during an interview.

In addition to simply answering the question, think of examples to support what you are

saying. Shelly Tregellas, human resources manager at Bostick-Findley in Milwaukee, hires her share of young people. She says, when interviewing candidates, she looks not only at what kind of answer a candidate gives to a question, but also how the candidate responds.

"The way in which a candidate answers a question is important," says Tregellas. "Not just the answer itself, but things like verbal competency, being direct, being prepared and automatically giving examples indicate the quality of the candidate."

Being comfortable in an interview creates a sense of polish, poise and confidence. These are qualities expected of more experienced candidates, so that when an inexperienced candidate demonstrates these qualities, it is memorable.

So practice, practice, practice. So prior to heading out for an interview, rehearse. Dress up in proper interview attire, find a quiet room at home and avoid interruption. The more closely you re-create an actual interview, the more comfortable you will be at show time. It is helpful to have an idea of what you will say when a question is asked, but don't memorize an answer.

"Too rehearsed an answer doesn't give an impression of flexibility to handle situations as they occur," says Tregellas.

Setting goals

Kurt Kellogg, the co-founder of HPD International, experienced sales doubling from year to year, and the staff had to grow in order to keep up. As a company, HPD International focused more on

what a person may be able to do five years from now than on what that person can do today.

"We seek out someone who sets goals for themselves," Kellogg says. "Not only the goals that have been thrust upon them by past employers or professors, but their own personal goals."

Demonstrating you are goal-driven can set you apart from other candidates. Shelly Tregellas speaks of this as "goal-orientedness."

"The direction doesn't need to be specifically related to a career," Tregellas notes. "It can be school or personal life, as long as there is evidence of being directed to some type of goal."

As an inexperienced employee, you also have the unique situation of creating completely independent goals. More experienced candidates will develop their goals based on past employment experience, but young job seekers often have the advantage of being uninfluenced.

"It's like a blank sheet of paper," says Kellogg. "I think younger people tend to be more naïve, but they're also more optimistic. They believe anything is possible."

Tregellas states that this optimism allows young job seekers to be perceived as catalysts for change, rather than simply going along with change.

Surprisingly, many young or inexperienced candidates intentionally dampen their enthusiasm, thinking that doing so will make them seem more mature. However, hiding enthusiasm can cause them to lose out on positions.

Be prepared to learn

Another common error among young or inexperienced job seekers is the natural tendency to make up for lack of experience by acting more knowledgeable or more confident than they actually are. Keep in mind, the entire job search process is one of self-discovery. A sense of humility and an eagerness to learn from others can be very helpful. In an interview, Tregellas is seeking evidence of employees who continually want to improve themselves.

"I want people with a drive to learn more, do more," says Tregellas. "People with a sense of competence without arrogance, a person who is willing, able and loves to ask questions. In today's business environment, the individual has to bring the structure. How do they handle that? Do they fear it or do they view it as a challenge?"

If you view it as a challenge, according to Tregellas, you will succeed. Rather than fearing your lack of experience, see it as a challenge to practice new skills, set new goals and learn something new about yourself.

Common Interview Questions

1. "Tell me about yourself." (Response should be 2 minutes)
2. "Why should we hire you?"
3. "What do you look for in a job?"
4. "How does this job fit into your overall career plan?"
5. "How would your peers describe you?"
6. "How would your boss describe you?"
7. "Do you work well under deadlines or pressure?"
8. "Why do you want to work for us?"
9. "What are your strong points?"
10. "What are your weaknesses?"
11. "What was wrong with your current or last position?"
12. "Why did you leave your last job?"
13. "Do you prefer to work by yourself or with others?"
14. "Tell me about a problem you've faced and how you handled it?"
15. "What interests you most about this job?"
16. "Have you ever been fired?"

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