

Jobs & Careers

Farmington Observer

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Tips for making interview flow smoothly



By George Hayes
Q. There have been some uncomfortable moments in recent interviews when nobody seemed to know what to say. How should I handle these situations?

A. Some people you meet in interviews are great in their own disciplines, but lousy conversationalists. Even managers who are engaging under other circumstances might find it impossible to relax in an interview. Others are terrified of saying something inaccurate or illegal. It's very common to find the interviewer more nervous than the candidate!

While these folks have thumb power (up or down), their discomfort doesn't have to work against you. The real problem begins with candidates who are afflicted with "guest syndrome," a conversational disease that is often fatal.

People with guest syndrome approach interviews this way: I, the candidate, am the guest here. You, the employer, are the host. It's your place and you know what you're doing, right? As the host, it is up to you to make me comfortable, structure the discussion intelligently, and carry the conversational ball. The job is simply to answer any questions you pose thoroughly and accurately. Have at it, Bub.

Put simply, you will blow interviews by taking this posture. As I've pointed out in earlier columns, your prime directive in any sales conversation is to make the other person feel good. You must take responsibility for making the interview flow smoothly, pleasantly and comfortably. Here's how:

• Have four to five open-ended questions (who, what, where, when, why or how) absolutely, stone cold memorized before the interview. These shouldn't be

stale or boiler plate questions from a book, but questions that are of real importance to you in making a career decision. When an agonizing silence occurs, reach down into your bag of questions and roll one out, just to keep the conversation going.

• Ask about the interviewer personally. How long have you been here, Bob? Do you like it here, Mary? Tell me about your career, Sue. Give people the easiest thing in the world to talk about - themselves! Besides, it's usually a favorite subject.

• Have four to five "strong points" absolutely, stone cold memorized. It's easy to interview people who know what they want to say. By articulating skills and experiences which are likely to be of value to the employer, you save the other person the difficult task of having to dig for relevant information.

• Take advantage of opportunities to use humor. You don't have to be a stand up comedian to pull this off. Just watch for conversational windows to lighten it up. Nothing provides relief like a chuckle. It tells the interviewer that you're just another human being and a person who might be nice to work with.

Q. I've been told to contact functional managers directly and avoid going through Personnel departments. Is this true? How can I identify the right people?

A. Most outplacement firms are now encouraging job seekers to do what headhunters have always done: Identify the decision maker and avoid Human Resources as a potential obstacle in the hiring process. For skilled and professional hiring, Personnel people sometimes lack the technical understanding to recognize a good fit or are slow to respond to staffing needs in some areas of the company. In any sales endeavor (that's

what a job search is), it makes good sense to concentrate time and resources on the person who will champion your cause and make the final call. Often, that's not the HR Manager.

Hold on. I don't have it in for Personnel managers. There are many, many good ones. For example, Bill R., Corporate Director of Human Resources at a large food processor with plants in Livonia, Flint and Toledo, actually greases the employment process and leans on department heads for decisions. Plus, Bill knows his industry from a technical standpoint and can make solid go or no go decisions based upon years of experience as an engineer and operations manager.

Better yet, Bill knows when to get out of the way. He encourages direct dialogue between candidates, department heads and recruiters. Many HR people would claim this is inefficient, out of control or dangerous. Nonsense. Bill's company is pushing \$800 million and is renowned for excellent employee relations and low turnover.

On the other hand, I've seen green-as-grass Personnel Assistants establish themselves as quasi-psychologists and vet excellent candidates as poor fits. Some insist on managing all communication between candidates, department heads and recruiters. It's a power issue parading as professionalism. It slows the process.

Personally, I would try to make contact with both the functional manager and the HR people. You can cover yourself politically and increase the odds of finding a champion.

How do you get names?

• Directories. There are excellent reference books available in the business section of most libraries which list the names of key individuals in small and large companies. These directories are

updated yearly and cover most industries. Still, you should always verify that the information is current before firing off a resume or making a call.

• The Web. Many companies have their E-Mail directory, complete with individuals' titles, at their web sites. Talk about easy.

• The receptionist. Some (not all) receptionists are happy to give out names, particularly if you are up front about your intentions and assure them that you are not a headhunter. They might not connect you, but they'll at least give you a name.

• Subterfuge. Many receptionists take their gate keeping responsibilities very seriously indeed. Some have a finely tuned radar system which enables them to identify and destroy recruiters and job seekers instantaneously. Faye M., who answers the phone at a Plymouth manufacturing company, can smell a headhunter through the phone lines. This calls for creativity.

Tell the receptionist that you just want to pop an advertisement in the mail to the controller, chief engineer or plant manager. There is a large element of truth in this since a resume in nothing more than an advertisement.

Call after the receptionist has gone home. There is usually some poor snot like me still hanging around at 7:30. This person probably doesn't care why you're calling and will cough up the name you want without a second thought.

Let's be clear: HR people are not evil. In fact, they can even be helpful. But there is more than one path into most companies.

Send questions to George Hayes, Job Search, P.O. Box 2497, Southfield, MI 48037. Mr. Hayes is president of Emplex Corporation, a consulting firm offering recruiting, testing and outplacement services to U.S. and Canadian manufacturing companies.

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1997 EXPLORER XLT 4X4

4.0L V6 engine, air conditioning, power steering, power brakes, defroster, AM/FM stereo, 122 speakers, chrome wheels and more. STK# 3355

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