

CHAPTER 42

INTERVIEWING

The job market is rapidly becoming more and more competitive due to virtual teams, economic changes, internet job posting, and globalization. Your competition for a job can originate from local, national, or even global sources. The result is employers often have many engineers applying for a single opening. This overabundance of candidates provides more choices for employers and allows them to be highly selective when making a job offer which results in significantly increasing your competition.

All this competition comes to a peak at the interviewing stage that is the main event in the job search process shown in Figure 42-1. All the engineers selected for an interview are considered very good choices to hire and pretty much equal. The purpose of interviewing is to determine which one of these engineers is the best one to hire. At this point, it all comes down to how well you present and sell yourself or how good your interviewing skills are.

Your interviewing skills are your means to stand out from all the other engineers selected for interviews. In this chapter, we will discuss how to develop and enhance your interviewing skills so that you clearly stand out from all the other candidates during the interview process. Putting significant effort into developing and refining your interviewing skills is well worth the effort and will pay great dividends.

PREPARING FOR THE INTERVIEW

The interview is the main event of the job search process and all eyes will be on you at this point. Consequently, you must spend time preparing and practicing your interviewing [1–9]. The first step is to collect the tools you will use for the interview: your resume, portfolio, job ad, and any other information you have about the company or people interviewing with you. With these items in front of you, your next step is to develop your personal theme statements.

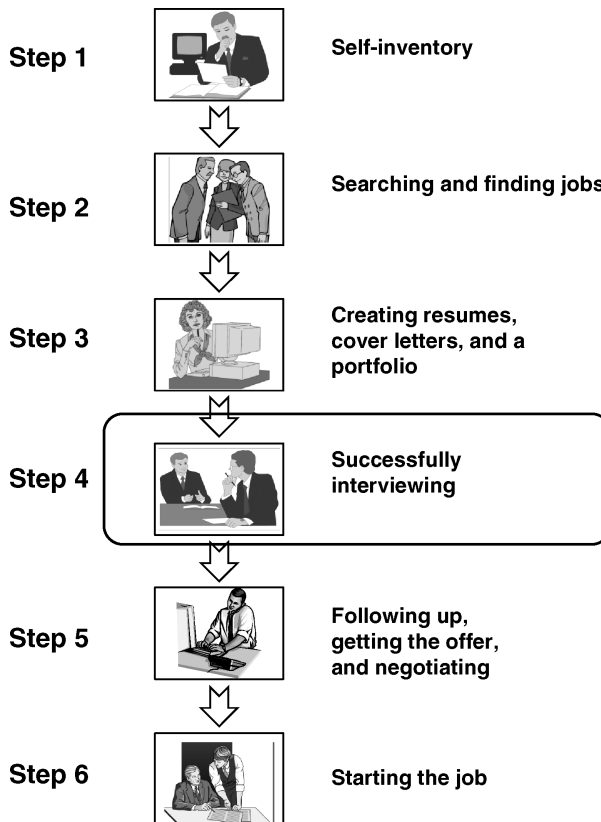


FIGURE 42-1 Job search process step 4—successfully interviewing.

Personal Theme Statements. Your personal themes are highlights of your skills, experience, and accomplishments you think the company will be most interested in and make you stand out [6]. These could also be your cover letter highlights.

Write up your themes in simple sentences. Your theme statements are how you summarize and verbally communicate to the reviewer what is special about you. It is what you want them to remember when you leave and they think of you when they go through the selection process. Here are some examples to help you develop and refine your theme statements.

- Consistently rated a high performer with a proven track record of on-time delivery and within costs.
- Superior technical designs that meet or exceed all requirements while implementing the latest technology.
- Team player with excellent communication skills who is always willing to take on those difficult assignments.

- Innovative and always looking for new methods to improve and enhance products.
- Problem solver with high energy who can drive until the project is a success.

To help generate your theme statements, look at each major assignment or skill you have listed on your resume and think of the benefits this offers to the company. Choose to state your benefit or personal theme in terms of key-words from the job ad. You are literally translating the meaning of these parts of your resume into terms the interviewer will understand and can easily identify as excellent reasons why you should be hired.

Once you have developed your theme statements it is on to the next step in preparing by practicing.

Practice, Practice, Practice. You will need to practice your interviewing at least 10 times before you go on your first interview. Practice by yourself first, just like you are on a real interview, walk into room, practice your greeting and then sit down just like you would during a real interview and start presenting. Use your resume as the talking document and start from the top and go through the parts you want to talk about.

After you have done this 10 times, it is time to practice with another person. Find someone who will help you practice and have them play the role of the interviewer. Give them a list of questions to ask you and see how well you can answer them.

You may want to videotape yourself during practice and then play back afterward to see how you did. Watch for body language, tones, facial expression, and how well you discussed your qualifications. You will not believe how you look and all the things you are doing without even knowing it. The first time I videotaped myself I was appalled at all the facial expressions I made without realizing it. Especially the squint and closing of my eyes reaction when answering a difficult question. I did not realize I was doing this and it looked terrible. I would have never even hired myself after reviewing the video.

Don't erase the videos, save them. The reason is at the end, when you think you have practiced enough, go back and play the very first one you recorded and then immediately watch the last one again. You are going to see a world of difference and this is going to give you more confidence than you can imagine. If you do not have a video recorder, then sit in front of a mirror and practice.

Timing. The next very important reason for practicing is to get a sense of timing. How long does it take to make all your points? Are you taking too long? Your goal is to be able to run through your resume and make all your key points and theme statements within the time allotted. Your time with people can range from 30 minutes on the short end to 2 hours on the long end. In the short interviews you need to make your points and move on. Practicing will give you a sense of timing and help you determine the pace you need to get everything in.

Dressing for the Interview. The next thing to prepare is your physical appearance. Haircut and dress in a professional manner. Dress up for the interview. For the men it is easy to remove ties and open your shirt if you come overdressed. But if you are underdressed you have no options. You have to project the right image for job interviews; the aim is to look very professional. If you feel uncomfortable wearing a suit and tie, try wearing a suit for a couple of days before the interview so that you get used to it. And remember to polish those shoes, carry an attractive briefcase or professional-looking portfolio.

DIFFICULT QUESTIONS YOU WILL BE ASKED

Now for the hardest part of interviewing: skillfully answering difficult questions [9,11–13]. Since all the candidates' resumes indicate they are all excellent candidates, the company must come up with a way to discover which one is the best. They do this by asking difficult questions to see how the candidates respond and who gives the best answers.

So here are some typical questions you might expect interviewers to ask you. Tell me about yourself?

The answer to this one is very simple; you just start going down your resume. You start at your highlights or 30-second commercial and then move into your present position or most important skill. You can transition and talk with your resume once you get through your highlights/30-second commercial by saying, "as shown on my resume I am presently at" and then pull out your resume and point to what you are talking about.

Here are some more questions you should be prepared to discuss:

Why are you looking?

Can I contact your present employer?

What are your likes and dislikes?

What are your career goals?

What are your weaknesses?

Tell me about a project that went bad and what you did about it

Why do you think you would make a good candidate?

What are your strengths?

Why are you interviewing with our company?

Why should I give you the job?

How soon can you start?

What salary were you looking for?

This is only a very short list of questions that can be asked but some of the more common ones. Peter Veruki in his book, *The 250 Job Interview Questions*

You'll Most Likely Be Asked and the Answers That Will Get You Hired, is a good resource [11]. Also the book by Vicky Oliver, *301 Smart Answers to Tough Interview Questions*, is another excellent reference for handling the difficult questions [9].

Where do company interview questions come from? Most engineering managers are not in the interviewing business and therefore rely on the Human Resources department to come up with tough interview questions [10]. More than likely, if you visit a local bookstore and research interviewing questions, you will probably be looking at the same books as the Human Resource department is looking when they research interviewing questions. Therefore, by researching the possible questions you will have a high probability of knowing what they are going to ask long before you ever get to your interview. Like in engineering school, it sure was easier when you knew what questions were going to be on the final exam before you took it.

QUESTIONS YOU SHOULD ASK

Sometimes you can stand out from the crowd by having a couple of questions of your own to ask that show you are really thinking about the position. Here are some you might consider asking if the opportunity presents itself.

- Why did you choose this company and what do you like about it?
- What is the last person who had this job doing?
- What are the job responsibilities?
- What skills are most important for the job?
- What kind of training is provided?
- What are your company benefits?
- Who will I be reporting to and in what organization?
- What opportunities of advancement are there?

These are all good questions to ask but in order for you to make a decision whether you to work for the company you are going to need answers to some very basic questions about the job and the company so that you can compare it to other opportunities. These questions are usually answered best by the hiring manager or Human Resources representative.

- What is the salary range for the job?
- How soon before you can make me an offer? (always a good question to end with if you want the job!)
- How soon after the offer do you need an answer?
- When would you like me to start?
- What are the benefits? Do you have a package I can take with me?
- How much vacation do I get?

Does the company have a savings plan?
What are the pension or 401k benefits?
If necessary, do you pay for relocation?
If they flew you in to interview, how do you get reimbursement of expenses?

One good tip is to write up the questions you have and check the list to make sure you have all the answers you need before you leave for the day. That night after the interview fill in the answers before you forget.

CONTROLLING THE INTERVIEW IN YOUR FAVOR

The interviewers you will encounter all have their own style of interrogating you. At one end of the spectrum are those who believe it is up to you to impress them and they will have no set agenda other than to say “Tell me about yourself.” They want to see how well you are organized and how good you can present your case. At the other end of the spectrum, there are those who want to control every moment of the interview and will ask you questions in their order and expect you to simply fill in the blanks. If you try and deviate from their agenda, they see this as negative and more than likely will score you low if you try to take control and change anything. For these interviewers you have no choice but to follow along and let them control the interview.

In the event you have the opportunity to control the interview, there is an order to how best to exchange information that favors you and here is what I recommend you do.

Greeting and First Impression. When you first meet the person, introduce yourself (name and title) and shake hands. (American tradition). Exchange business cards and listen to the interviewer’s name and title. Repeat it three times quietly to yourself before you sit down. From the title, determine the interviewer’s background. This is extremely important for reasons I will point out later in the chapter.

Company First. At this point, if possible, ask if the interviewer could give you a brief (2 to 3 minute) overview of the job opening and its requirements. I tell them it is best if they first share information about the position so I can then show them how my qualifications match their needs. Pay close attention to the keywords they are using. It is amazing when you do this; hidden information is often revealed which was not mentioned in the job ad.

If you talk first and go on about qualifications that they are not interested in, you are missing the mark and killing your chances. By letting them talk first you will know exactly what they are looking for and you can highlight the exact qualifications that you have that match their needs.

Next You. After they are done talking you immediately and enthusiastically start to review your resumes and highlight assignments and

qualifications that match their needs. Remember to flash your portfolio as you go through your resume. Be prepared for the tough questions at this time. Make sure to pace yourself and look at your watch if possible, so that you know how much time you have left.

Company. After you have covered your resume it is time to regroup and ask a few questions of your own. Get the information you need to make a sound decision as to whether you want to work for this company.

Ending the Interview. You must end the interview on a positive note. Summarize why you would make a good candidate by highlighting how your qualifications are such a good match to their needs. You can repeat your theme statements. Thank them for their time. Express how you are looking forward to hearing from them. Shake hands and make sure they have a copy of your resume with a means of contacting you. Finally, ask for the job if you like it.

HOW TO IMPRESS ALL THE INTERVIEWERS

The most impressive interviewing skill is interweaving your resume, theme statements, keywords from the job ad, and your portfolio, to answer a question or present your point. For example, if the ad is looking for a lead engineer to oversee a project and have excellent communication skills, you might decide your theme statement is

"Proven record of success as a lead engineer with excellent team skills."

You might discuss your present assignment as listed on your resume by weaving your theme in. Your verbal response on the description of your present assignment could follow along the lines of:

In my present assignment I am a lead engineer on the \$12M design project overseeing 24 engineers. I have learned, as a leader over this very diverse group, to be successful requires excellent communications skills. I have taken special training in leader communication and consider myself successful since my team received the company's highest award last year for their efforts. My excellent communication skills helped get the team through some very difficult times.

For this example the theme statement is interwoven with the description, and keywords are inserted from the ad to help the interviewer understand how your present work demonstrates that you have the skills needed for their job.

Then, flip your portfolio to the page that shows a photograph of you accepting the award from the president of your company, and on the page next to it is your award certificate with your name in large print.

This is the optimum combination of personal theme, keywords, and pictures, coming together. You relate to their needs, you weave in your theme so you stand out, and then you show physical evidence by a photograph of

you, and an award certificate. It is almost like the interviewer is there at the award ceremony watching you receive the award. Your ability to combine all these clearly shows you have excellent communication skills.

The benefits of interweaving your theme statement, keywords, and job description, manifest later on during the selection process. Interviewers will be able to look at your resume and point to your present assignment and say, "this person has clearly demonstrated the key skills we need on their \$12M design project. The candidate received an award for project leadership and has excellent communication skills."

Tailoring Your Interview to the Person and Their Background. To assist managers in selecting the best candidate, a team of people with different backgrounds generally conduct the interviews. This team may contain Human Resources people, managers, technical staff, and other engineers working in the group who will have to work alongside you. You will interview with all these people and afterward they will fill out evaluations and provide input on which candidate was the best from their perspective. So now let's look at how you need to tailor your interview to best fit these people.

Hiring Engineering/Business Manager. This person is strictly business-oriented. They usually have a managerial background and are not that interested in the technical details. They leave the technical details up to the technical experts in the group. Their consideration is how well you will fit into the group. How soon you are available and what salary are you looking for? Can they afford to hire you? At the top level they are concerned about your technical background and work experience. Does it show that you are dependable and able to produce good results?

For this person you may want to stress your team skills, communication skills, and ability to get along with other people in the organization. You also want to stress how your people and technical skills can contribute to the organization and to its bottom line. You probably do not want to talk about social items, such as company picnics and hobbies you enjoy unless they bring it up. Think strictly business, controlling cost, and generating profits.

Human Resources. The Human Resources personnel are nontechnical and have a psychology background. They mostly do not understand the technical jargon. You might as well be speaking a foreign language in most cases. They are on the team to assess your people and social skills. They are looking to see if your personality fits the company and will you fit in socially. They want to know: Do you have good social skills or are you a potential problem?

For this person you may want to stay away from all the technical jargon and focus on your social skills, hobbies, and company volunteer activities you participated in. Stress your ability to get along with people and how you like the people side of engineering. If you only talk technical to these people they more than likely will rate you low in the people and social skills area.

Technical Experts. You may be asked to interview with a staff engineer or technical expert. These are the most technically knowledgeable people in the organization and are only worried about the engineering or science of their

work. They are similar to an university professor whose interest is with technical issues and who couldn't care less about people and business issues. These people are interested in what you have to offer technically and want to measure the breadth and depth of your technical knowledge. Do you have any advanced degrees and from what institutions? They are all about educational credentials.

For this person you may want to stay away from social, hobby, and business discussions. Stick to your technical background and discuss how you can contribute technically to the group. Discussion showing how you understand the science involved in their group, and how your technical background might help them along with any advanced technical training you have received, is excellent. Discuss any difficult technical problems you encountered and how you solved them. Do not shoot from the hip with these people and try to wing it; stick to what you know technically.

Future Coworkers. More than likely you will be asked to interview with other engineers in the group who could be above you, at the same level, or below you. They may also have different technical backgrounds than yours. For these people you want to focus on your technical background and your experiences—what you have learned which you feel makes you more valuable. They are considering if you are the right type of person to come into the group and really help out or are you going to be a problem to work with. For this reason, you want to emphasize how you are easy to get along with. For the people below your level, they are trying to determine if they would like you as their new lead engineer. For the people above you, they are wondering how well you take direction and what you bring to make their job easier. For the people at your level, they may possibly be wondering if you are going to be more competition for the next promotion, as well as how you can contribute to help out and make their job easier.

By now it should be intuitively obvious how important it is to tailor your interviewing to the person. The engineer who gets hired is rated the highest by all the evaluators. If only one interviewer rates you low it could knock you out of the running.

How do you get rated high by everyone? You determine the person's background, emphasize and highlight your skills, capabilities, and performance that they are most interested in and relate to. You do not interview exactly the same way for each person but tailor your presentation to match their background. Everyone you are interviewing with is evaluating you for different reasons; you must be a versatile presenter and change your presentation for each. And last, make sure you get every interviewer's business card so that you can send them a "thank you" note.

Body Language, Tone of Your Voice, and Attitude. The next area where you can stand out from the others when interviewing is through body language, tone of your voice, and attitude. Body language says many things about you. If you sit up, lean forward toward the person with open arms, a smile on your face, looking them directly in the eyes, and nodding occasionally in a positive manner when they speak, you are sending the best body language.

Contrast this with a person that leans back, folds their arms, and stares at the ceiling when talking; this is totally the wrong body language.

Next is the tone of your voice. Your tone should be upbeat, confident, positive, energetic, and show enthusiasm for the job. You should be clearly pronouncing your words and not mumbling. This is the best tone. Examples of this are:

Yes, I can easily handle that. . . .

Absolutely, I have done that before and know exactly what to do. . . .

No problem. I would welcome the opportunity to show all I can do about. . . .

That sounds exciting and something I would love to work on. . . .

I am always willing to try something new. . . .

If you are mumbling your words and casting doubt, these are the wrong tones. Stay away from saying:

I am not sure if I

Never did that before. I wouldn't know what to do, but I think I could figure it out if. . . .

Gee, I am not really sure. I never considered. . . .

I wouldn't have to do if I accepted the job

I am not going to do that if I accept the job because. . . .

It all depends; I guess I could do that if you want me to.

The next way to clearly stand out from the rest of the interviewees is your attitude. You need a great attitude. People will be watching your attitude about interviewing and your attitude about the job. Your attitude is being assessed from the time you start interviewing and keeps on going until the final handshake goodbye. Your attitude comes out in the way you act and talk about things. Here are some great things to say which indicate you have a great attitude:

Glad to meet you, thanks for the opportunity to interview, I really appreciate your taking time out of your busy schedule to talk with me.

I look forward to hearing from you, I can't wait to start, everything sounds so exciting. . .

Your company and the job are very impressive and I would like very much to join the team.

I find this kind of work exciting and enjoyable; I can't wait to start.

Now let's look at some bad attitudes that you do not want to convey during job interviewing:

It was a miserable commute getting here and traffic was terrible. Is it always that bad?

Fill out the forms? Can't you take the information from my resume?

Do I have to interview with all these people. Can't you just make the decision?

So what do you want to know about me?

Can you see the differences in attitudes and how your attitude can be sabotaging your interview?

TELEPHONE INTERVIEWS

Some companies do phone interviews of candidates prior to actually inviting them to the office for interviews. If this happens, you will need to be prepared and set yourself up up for success when interviewing over the phone [6,7,8]. Here are some great tips to follow:

1. If they call at a bad time when you are not prepared, it is best to ask if you can call them back in a few minutes so you can get to a place that you can talk. Most companies will understand this and gladly let you call them back. If you do this make sure to have their number and call back exactly when you said you would.
2. Go to a place where you can talk openly and without being interrupted. A room or office where you can shut the door and other people will not walk in on you.
3. It is best to have a copy of your resume, cover letter, and the company job ad in front of you. Also any other information you may have found out about the company.
4. Turn off your computer and any other items that may distract you. If you get an incoming call during the phone interview ignore it and let it roll over into voice mail.
5. Most often the person calling is the hiring engineering manager and they have a stack of resumes in front of them. Their job is to determine the 2 or 3 they should invite for an office interview. Therefore, your interviewing highlights should be focused to a manager—strictly business.
6. Check to make sure the phone line is clear and they can hear you ok. If it is not, hang up and try another line.
7. You start out the interview just like you would a face-to-face interview with introductions. Get their name and title. Write it down immediately. Once you have completed the introduction it is like a normal interview, and you should conduct yourself accordingly as previously mentioned.

You should practice phone interviewing many times just like you practiced face-to-face interviews, only over the phone. Have someone call and practice phone interviewing. Make sure you get feedback on how you sounded and your tone. One excellent way to practice a phone interview is with a mirror so that you can see your facial expressions. This visual feedback will let you know if you are frowning, rolling your eyes, or wincing. These facial expressions are associated with bad tones in your voice. Smiling and nodding are good facial expressions associated with good tones in your voice.

HOW COMPANIES DECIDE WHICH PERSON TO HIRE

Once you leave, the interviewers are required to fill out an interview summary sheet on you. A sample is shown in Figure 42-2. The summary

Acme Engineering

Interview Summary Sheet

Candidate Name:

Date Interviewed:

Person Conducting Interview:

Phone:

	Poor	Fair	Good	Very Good	Outstanding
Theoretical Understanding					
Analytical Ability					
Technical Knowledge					
Practical Experience					
Judgment					
Ability to Express Her/Himself					
Initiative Indications					
Attitude					
Appearance					
Personality					
Leadership					
Capacity to Grow					
Estimate of Potential					

Remarks

Recommended for Employment

Yes

☐

No

☐

Other

☐

If "No" or "Other" Explain

This form must be completed on the interview date and returned to personnel

FIGURE 42-2 Sample interview rating sheet.

sheet is used as an aid to help the interviewer summarize their thoughts about you and give you a rating. Let's look closely at the form and what they are asking the interviewer to rank you on.

You will notice in this sample form that there are 13 criteria to rate you on. The first 4 of 13 are concerned with your technical ability to perform the job. You will be ranked on how well you communicated your technical skills and how well they fit the company's needs. Most engineers think this should be the only criteria. However, the remaining nine criteria are concerned with your people skills. For these criteria you will be ranked on how well you communicated your people skills. It is interesting that there are more people skills than technical skills. Can you guess why? Most forms are made up by Human Resources departments whose primary focus is on people skills. The message here is, during the interview you need to clearly exhibit your technical and people skills to stand out from the others.

Following this is the remarks section and then comes the bottom line. Recommended for hire or not. And anything marked other than "yes" requires an explanation. This is only a sample summary and not meant to reflect that all companies use this exact form. Each company will have their own interview summary sheet and they are constantly changing.

After all the forms are filled out, several different things can happen. The hiring manager can collect them all and make the decision on who to hire. Or the manager may call a meeting and go through all the summaries with the team and hopefully reach agreement with the team who to hire. A second candidate may be identified in case the first candidate rejects the offer. Once the selection is made, the offer is usually extended to the candidate.

SUMMARY

The job market is rapidly becoming more and more competitive due to virtual teams, economic changes, Internet job posting, and globalization. Your competition for a job can originate from local, national, or even global sources. All this competition comes to a peak at the interviewing stage that is the main event in the job search process. At this point, it all comes down to how well you present and sell yourself, and how good your interviewing skills are. You must spend time preparing and practicing your interviewing. Develop your themes and practice, practice, practice.

To stand out from others during the interview process interweave your themes while you discuss your resume, remember to describe your skills in terms from the job ad, and show physical evidence by using your portfolio. Tailor your interview to match the background of the interviewer. Do research and be ready for those difficult questions. Your body language, attitude, and tone are all being judged as you interview; let them see you at your best.

Have you identified any career actions you want to take as a result of reading this chapter? If so, please make sure to capture these ideas before you forget by recording them in the notes section at the back of the book.

ASSIGNMENTS AND DISCUSSION TOPICS

- 1 How do you prepare themes?
- 2 How long should you spend preparing your themes?
- 3 Where is the best place to find answers to difficult interview questions?
- 4 What questions do you consider most important to ask interviewers?
- 5 What do the body language and actions of the interviewer tell you?

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