

Six Secrets to Successful Interviewing

A Special Report prepared by Louise Kursmark

Your efforts have finally paid off—you're scheduled to meet with an executive recruiter or hiring manager to discuss a job that's a good fit for your experience, expertise, and career interests. Congratulations! But don't relax yet. You can increase your chances of earning a second interview and, ultimately, a job offer by spending some time preparing for that interview.

Keep in mind, interviews are all about assessing the fit of your talents, knowledge, experience, strengths, leadership style, and much more with the specific opportunity and unique culture of the hiring organization. To succeed, you must demonstrate that you are a perfect fit in as many areas as possible.

Don't spend your preparation time memorizing answers to questions you think you'll hear—that approach will make you sound less than genuine and will leave you flat-footed when, inevitably, you're asked a question for which you haven't practiced an answer. Instead, invest your time working on six key areas of interview study that will leave you prepared for any question you're asked and give you an edge over your competition.



1. Elucidate your core values.

What is the greatest value you offer? What makes you unique? What sets you apart from others? Spend some time thinking about these questions, then jot down five or ten core value statements—phrased in terms of value to the company. For example:

If your greatest strength is leadership, rather than stating “I have great leadership skills,” expand on that in a meaningful way: “I am able to deliver exceptional results—such as double-digit profit increases and 10% revenue growth in a down market—by inspiring and leading people to put forth extraordinary effort and do it with joy and passion.”

If your technical expertise is a great asset, bear in mind that knowledge and expertise in and of themselves are not valuable; it's what you do with those assets that counts: “I've repeatedly gained competitive advantage for the company by introducing industry-leading technology that works right the first time and is consistently months or even years ahead of competitors.”

When choosing your core value statements, consider either of these simple formats to be sure you're including both pieces—the skill or expertise and the benefit:

- 1) “I am able to [do something for the company] through [ability / expertise / knowledge / experience / talent].”
- 2) “I have [ability / expertise / knowledge / experience / talent] that results in [benefit to the company].”

These core value statements collectively paint the picture of “who you are,” so for the most part they will be consistent from interview to interview. But you can emphasize some over others, depending on the situation. For instance, if you’re a senior financial executive seeking either a CFO or CEO role, in interviews for financial positions you’d stress those core capabilities, while your big-picture executive talents will be more important in a CEO interview.

By crystallizing your value into half a dozen areas of strength, you create a template of the key points to make during an interview—to be sure you’re clearly communicating the total picture of what you have to offer.

2. Develop CAR stories.

The CAR (Challenge-Action-Result) story-telling format is highly effective in communicating concrete examples to support general statements. Rather than simply telling the interviewer that you have excellent communications skills, tell a CAR story that illustrates the point. When asked how you “would” handle a situation, present your theory, then back it up with a CAR story that drives home the point.

CAR stories provide insight into your leadership and problem-solving style and often elucidate the “how” behind the “what” that’s on your resume. Using this format, you’ll find that you can tell your story naturally, without sounding rehearsed, and will often be able to quickly call to mind a story that illustrates a key point in the interview, even if you haven’t prepared it in advance.

3. Bone up on “standard” questions.

Don’t talk yourself out of the position before you’re five minutes into the interview! There’s no excuse for “fluffing” such common interview questions as “tell me about yourself,” “why are you leaving your current position,” “why do you want to work here,” “what is your greatest weakness,” and so on. Bookstores and libraries abound with interviewing guides that present a long list of common questions and offer advice on how to answer them. When possible, incorporate one of your core value statements into your answer.

4. Prepare for different interview scenarios.

No longer are one-on-one interviews the only way candidates are assessed. Group interviews, role-play scenarios, behavioral interviews, problem-solving tests, and other methods are commonly used to find out as much as possible about you, your work style, how you handle stress, how you prioritize tasks, how you relate to teams, and other insights that are hard to convey on paper or in a simple Q&A interview. Be sure to ask the recruiter, HR person, or senior executive about what you can expect from the interview process. And make certain you’re at your physical best—well rested, well fed, well exercised—before a long, grueling day during which you’ll want to perform at your peak.

5. Do some homework.

You’ll give yourself a solid advantage in any interview if you take the time to research the company—its challenges, growth opportunities, recent news events, strategic growth plans—and the industry. Then use that information in your interview, relating your achievements and capabilities to the company’s current situation rather than simply stating them without context.

6. Prepare to overcome objections.

Seldom is a candidate a “perfect 10”—an exact match for everything the company’s looking for. Inevitably during an interview you’ll be asked about areas where your qualifications aren’t as strong as others’. Keep in mind, you can’t possibly know how important that trait is to the company, so don’t assume your honest answer will kill your candidacy. But do try to bring the discussion back to an area of strength, and if at all possible refer to one of your core values in addressing the issue. Here’s an example:

“You’re right, the largest organization I’ve headed was about 200 people. But if you look at all the areas where I was involved, I think you’ll agree it was kind of a microcosm of your current situation. I repeatedly was able to deliver results through a variety of leadership activities—restructuring the organization, developing leadership talent from within, communicating the vision, and in some cases leading the execution of key initiatives. I feel well prepared to perform in a larger environment, and I’m confident I’ll exceed your expectations through similar leadership activities—which really are all about getting the most from the people and resources of the organization, whatever its size.”

An interview is a high-stress activity where it’s crucial to perform your best. Preparation is key to peak performance in any endeavor. Don’t skimp on the preparation, and be sure to practice in the areas that will give you the greatest payoff.

Louise Kursmark is an award-winning resume writer, president of Best Impression Career Services (www.yourbestimpression.com), and one of the most widely published authors in the careers field. Her 18 resume and career books can be purchased at online and traditional booksellers and directly from the author via this web page—<http://www.yourbestimpression.com/books.html>.

Louise works with executive job seekers to develop powerful resumes and related marketing documents and to craft efficient and effective job search strategies. She can be reached at 888-792-0030 or by email at LK@yourbestimpression.com.

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