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Career Advice

## Tooling Up: 15 Minutes to a Better Interview

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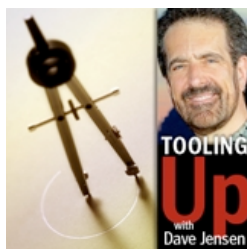
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A few years ago, I learned the hard way how important the basic rules of job interviewing are. I had been invited to a multibillion-dollar chemical company to sell my recruiting services to a panel of bigwigs and human resources staff. They all sat across from me at a conference table--except for one woman, who sat off to my left.

After what I thought was a great interview, the call came telling me the company wasn't going to use my services. It turns out that the decision-maker was the woman next to me--whom I rarely turned to during my pitch. I had blown it--especially embarrassing for a person who has written about the importance of eye contact in job interviews! Why didn't I remember to turn and "visit" her during my presentation? Most likely, it was because I didn't stop to review all the basics before I went into the meeting.

This month's Tooling Up is a "read and print for later" column for the job applicant--one simple list of all those items you should remember to do before, during, and after the interview. It's not an exhaustive treatise on the subject, and it will take you only 15 minutes to read and digest. But don't let the simple, somewhat basic, nature of these items turn you off: Even an old pro like me needs to review the basics now and again.

### Before the Interview



- 1) Get an interview agenda ahead of time that shows the names and titles of people you will meet with during the day. This will usually come from the HR department.
- 2) Read as much as you can about the company, including the work of people whose names show up on the interview agenda. At a minimum, study the company's Web site and look for additional articles and information on sites such as [Yahoo Finance](#).
- 3) Prepare several copies of your curriculum vitae to take with you in case the HR department has not provided them to your interviewers.

4) Make sure you know exactly where the company is located. If it's local or you're in town with a rental car, do a drive-by so you'll know the specifics about the drive time and parking.

5) Come up with a list of questions that you'd like to ask about the company and the job. Bring a notebook with you for the occasional note-taking and write your list of questions on the first page.

6) Know [those common interview questions](#) that you should consider preparing for in advance.

### During the Interview

1) Walk into the interview with a confident, upright posture. Shake hands firmly, giving your name first. Make sure

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you take your hand out of your pocket well before you'll have to use it; a sweaty hand makes a poor first impression.

2) Be alert but comfortable. Use your hands, eyes, and head to emphasize what you say. Lean forward slightly in your chair while listening; your body language should indicate a general attitude of "attentive interest."

3) Smile and laugh when appropriate. People who smile are seen as likely to be fun to work with and are assumed to have confidence in themselves.

4) At the same time, don't be a joker. That rarely works in your favor. One candidate reported to us that his favorite joke was so well received that the marketing vice president had him repeat it three times to others. He didn't get the offer--they all thought he was a fun guy but not serious enough about his work.

5) Don't make extensive notes during an interview unless the interviewer suggests you write something down. Constant note-taking can make you appear disengaged.

6) It's important for everyone you talk to during the interview to feel that you were listening well. Although people have different ways of listening and concentrating, good eye contact with everyone in the room will send the right signal.

7) Treat everyone in the company with the same high level of courtesy.

8) Find out early what the interviewers are interested in and then talk about it. If they ask questions about your interest in gene expression in yeast, don't continue talking about *E. coli*. Your job is to spark interest--and then to maintain it.

9) Although you may want to use some responses you've practiced in advance, don't forget to vary the tone of your voice and avoid speaking in monotone when you are rattling off an answer you've thought a lot about.

10) Remember that the interviewer may be just as uncomfortable as you are. Rather than concentrating on your own insecurities, try concentrating on the person in front of you. Make the interview go smoothly for her and you will find that you've conducted a great interview. Honest smiles and a friendly approach can make a great deal of difference.

11) Get the names, with proper spelling, of all the people you interview with over the course of the day. Better yet, get their business cards.

12) Although you always want to focus on your strengths, never inflate an area of weakness. You may be inclined to go on about a particular subject you don't know all that well, but if you get caught, it's a deal-breaker.

13) Avoid radiating a "What can you do for me?" attitude.

14) Avoid politics, religion, and controversy of any kind. If a hiring manager asks you about the new president, respond with a generally positive comment as opposed to telling her that you were the head of the political action committee for Obama on campus.

15) Remember that a well-placed pause after an important question is worth its weight. This "thinking pause" doubles the value of whatever your answer might be. Even though you may have the answer right on the tip of your tongue, it is better to pause and reflect briefly before responding.

16) Never say anything negative about a previous employer or a former colleague. Everyone knows this, and yet it's all too easy to fall back on negative comments when asked why you left a lab or an earlier job.

17) If you have some sort of skeleton in your closet, get the answers to probing questions sorted out in advance. Never expect that you'll be able to hide that terrible relationship you have with your adviser or the fact that it took you 9 to 10 years to complete your degree.

18) Assume that everyone you talk with on interview day will be involved in the decision to hire, no matter how they are introduced. Answers to the "candid" questions you're asked by prospective peers often make it back to the hiring manager. You are interviewing no matter where these conversations take place--in the hallway, the lunchroom, or while walking through the plant.

19) Don't be overly concerned with details when the HR department starts to rattle off company benefits. You can find out how many weeks of vacation you'll get when an offer is made. Benefits are not the focus of your day.

20) Raising salary questions in an interview will send the wrong signals. Let them bring up this subject first, which would generally come as they are considering you for an offer.

21) Lastly, don't leave the interview without asking specifically where the process stands. Know the timetable on which they are working and when you will hear their decision. Express your eager interest one last time!

## After the Interview

1) E-mail a thank-you note to each of the people you interviewed with that day. Make it brief, expressing your desire to work with them and answering any questions that they might have had during your interview that you didn't answer or that you agreed to answer more fully later. Consider an actual letter in the mail to the person who was your champion for the day.

2) Call your main contact at the company, either your prospective boss or an HR person, at the time frame they suggested for a follow-up. For example, if they said, "We'll get back to you in 2 weeks," then call in 15 days. During that call, stress your positive feelings about the job but don't apply too much pressure, because if they don't have a ready reply for you, they're probably still in the interview or decision process.

3) No matter what the result of the above (which will be either "We have a continued interest" or "Sorry, we're going in another direction"), set your sights on where you'll find the *next* interview. Never count on anything until it becomes a signed offer in your hands.

Images. Top: Comstock Business Impacts. Middle: Kelly Krause.

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