

Five things you should always do in interviews - Advice for interviewers and interviewees

Author: Keith McNulty . October 2021

I have seen more interviews than the vast majority of people on this planet.

Over 20 years, I've designed interviews, conducted interviews, observed interviews, and trained people in how to interview. I stopped counting years ago, but whether it's for my employer, my clients, or various charitable organizations I have volunteered in, I have played a role in thousands of interviews.

It's a fun thing to do. I've not been short of entertainment. There was a time in Shanghai when I interviewed someone only to find that they had mixed up the company name and we're interviewing for the wrong firm. Then there was the time in San Francisco that I was drafted in as an emergency replacement for a lady who had walked into the interview room, saw last night's blind date, and thought better of it.

Unsurprisingly, many people have asked me for the best tips I can give them for their interviews. But I always promised myself that when I gave tips, they would be two-sided. Finding a successful match is as much about the interviewer's skill as it is about the interviewee's ability.

So here are my top five tips for both interviewers and interviewees. Some might sound obvious, but read a little deeper and it might make you think.

Top five tips for interviewers:

Interviewers should have to work just as hard as interviewees when it comes to identifying top talent. Too many interviewers get lazy and rest on a position of power, not making an effort to bring out the skills of the person they are meeting. Instead, they sit back and expect the interviewee to do all the work. Here are my tips to becoming a great interviewer:

1. **It's not a power game.** This is not about you showing how successful, smart, or powerful you are. This is about you providing an opportunity to someone and giving them the best chance they can to take advantage of that opportunity. *Leave your ego in the hall before you step into the room.*
2. **Don't play hard to get.** If you can explain to your interviewee what you are looking for, you have a greater chance of finding it. Describe the context of your question, and why answering it relates to the job they have to do. *If you can't explain why it's the wrong question!*
3. **There is no stopwatch.** If you ask someone a tough question and you want a well-thought-through answer, give them time! Someone who has had a couple of minutes to think about an answer will articulate it better, making it easier for you to understand their thinking and evaluate their suitability. *Who wants a job where there is no time to think?*
4. **It's not all business.** The worst interviews I have ever witnessed are where the interviewer gets straight down to business, with no time for pleasantries or getting to know each other. Inevitably the dynamic is stunted and weird, and the interviewee struggles to find their footing. No matter how many boxes there are to tick, always take at least 5 minutes to forge a connection. Ask a question. Dive into something interesting in the CV or resume. Seize any chance to find common ground. *Find a reason for you both to smile!*
5. **Ask for details.** When people are asked general questions like 'What kind of a leader are you?' it is in their nature to give an equally general answer like 'I'm an inclusive leader!'. This kind of dynamic helps no one. Ask them to tell a story that illustrates their answer. That way you can actually see what they would be like as a colleague. *Don't make a judgment without evidence!*

Top five tips for interviewees:

If you are embarking on a job search, here are my tips to get prepared. As a human process, it is unpredictable, but these tips are a great way to increase the odds that you put your best foot forward.

1. **Do your research!** My biggest frustration as an interviewer is when interviewees come completely unprepared for the questions I ask, despite the fact that these questions should not be surprising if they did their research. What does the job involve? What skills will I need to have? What are the most relevant things I have done in the past? More often than not, your potential employer has lots of information that you can research on the web or in materials that they directly send to you. *Don't look a gift horse in the mouth!*
2. **Listen to your interviewer.** Throughout the course of the interview, your interviewer will say things that can help you help them! At the beginning, they may speak about the things that they are looking for from a great employee. Or when they ask a question they may provide important details that help you answer that question. Listen carefully and take notes (yes, always have a pen and paper!). *If you don't clearly know what is being asked, how can you answer it effectively?*
3. **Well, don't claim!** If you want to illustrate what you are good at, tell a story that demonstrates it. For an interviewer, there is a huge difference between being told that someone is good at something and being provided with an example that demonstrates that they are good at it. *If you want to prove you are funny, don't say 'I'm funny!' Tell a joke!*
4. **Take your time!** Easier said than done when you are the interviewee, but no interviewer should expect an instant answer to a tough question. If you need time to think, ask for it. Write down a few notes, and take the time to give an organized, coherent answer. *Don't be afraid of silence – it will soon be forgotten if the answer is good.*
5. **Interview the interviewer!** You have your own unique mix of talent and ability and in the end your career is all about your own choices! If you get the job offer, what would you want to know to accept it? Don't leave it until after the fact – ask now when you have a chance to deliver your questions one on one and you have a better chance to get honest answers. *Can your interviewer answer your questions as well as you answer theirs?*

I don't write these tips lightly. Every point I make here has a basis in research. Interviews are interactions between humans and as such, they are full of flaws on both sides. If both parties take this advice, there's a greater chance that a genuine match can be found. Good luck!

The post "Five things you should always do in interviews – Advice for interviewers and interviewees" was first published by Keith McNulty here <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/five-things-you-should-always-do-interviews-advice-keith-mcnulty-1/>

About Keith McNulty

I lead McKinsey's internal People Analytics and Measurement function. Originally I was a Pure Mathematician, then I became a Psychometrician. I am passionate about applying the rigor of both those disciplines to complex people questions. I'm also a coding geek and a massive fan of Japanese RPGs.

All opinions expressed are my own and not to be associated with my employer or any other organization I am connected with.

<https://thehumancapitalhub.com/articles/five-things-you-should-always-do-in-interviews-advice-for-interviewers-and-interviewees>