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Job Interview Post-Mortem: Deconstructing Your Interview's Highs and Lows

By Katharine Hansen

Is there any point in reliving a job interview you've just gone on? Can any good come from analyzing it and ruminating on it? While it's tempting to feel that there's no reason to cry over spilled milk, conducting a post-mortem exam on your interview serves at least two purposes:

1. The analysis of what went right and what went wrong will help you structure your thank-you letter (and yes, you do need to send one).
2. Your review of the interview will help you in your next interview.

First thing to do – just as soon after the interview as you can – is to jot down everything you remember about the interview, especially the content. Write down all the questions you remember being asked. Take some notes on how you responded to each question. Do you identify any information that you forgot to mention in your responses? Did you say anything you wish you hadn't said? Did any of your responses seem weak? You may want to revisit these content areas when you write your thank-you letter.

Note that it's also acceptable to bring a small notepad into the interview with you and take notes during the interview – but unless you can gracefully take notes without losing eye contact or distracting yourself or the interviewer, you are better off trusting your memory and writing down notes right after the interview.

The next critical thing to ask yourself is how good was the chemistry or rapport between you and the interviewer? I have long believed that if the chemistry is weak, the candidate will not get the job, especially if the candidate would be supervised by the interviewer if hired. And if you were not able to build rapport in the interview, you may not be able to salvage your chances. But you can try in your followups.

If you write your thank-you letter with a tone of warmth and mention how much you enjoyed talking with the interviewer, you may pull off the psychological trick of convincing the interviewer that rapport actually was strong between the two of you. Try to recall any personal interest the interviewer mentioned during the small-talk portions of the interview. If the interviewer gave you nothing verbally to latch onto, perhaps his or her office indicated personal interests. Did you spot any collectibles in the office? The point is, try to strike a chord with the interviewer by bringing up topics that show that you paid attention to his or her personality. For example: "How 'bout those Mets?" "I loved your collection of glass figurines. Have you visited that new shop on 6th Street? They have a wonderful selection there." "After you mentioned that article on branding in *Business Week*, I read it myself, and I agree with you about the impact these concepts will have in our industry."

Next, recall the interviewer's response to your answers to his or her questions. Can you distinguish the answers that seemed to be home-runs based on the interviewer's reaction? For example, did the interviewer's eyes light up, did he or she smile or nod during any of your responses? Did you detect a look of concern or a lack of connection during other responses? Your home-run responses are the ones you should consider emphasizing in your thank-you letter. For example: I'm so pleased that you agree that my senior research project in seismology provides me with excellent experience for this position."

The responses you gave that did not seem to elicit a positive response from the interviewer could be targets for damage control in your thank-you letter. Damage control must be considered extremely carefully and handled even more cautiously because you don't want to bring up negatives. An interview response you thought was weak might have seemed perfectly fine to the interviewer, so you don't want to call attention to it. Save damage control for situations in which you gave an off-base or incomplete response.

Instead of being negative or apologetic in your thank-you letter, simply state that you would like to give a more complete answer to the question, and then do so. If you left important information out of any of your responses, it's fine to add that information in your letter: "I meant to mention that my project-management skills have saved my current employer significant costs."

Now, reflect on what the interviewer really emphasized during your meeting. Finish this sentence: "Based on what the interviewer stressed in this interview, the most significant need I could fill for the employer is _____. " In your thank-you letter, demonstrate that you picked up on that need, you understand it, and you are ready to fill it. The interviewer's emphasis can also serve as a guide to what to leave out of your letter. You may have gone into the interview convinced of the importance of mentioning particular skills or accomplishments, but if the interviewer's emphasis was in other areas, you probably have no need to bring them up in your letter.

Did the interviewer voice any concerns about your qualifications? Did he or she raise any objections? If you didn't address these in the interview, confront them in your thank-you letter. And be sure in your next interview to ask whether the interviewer has any concerns about hiring you.

Did you ask all the questions you intended to when the interviewer opened up the discussion for your queries? If not, consider asking one or two in your thank-you.

How did the interview close? What next steps did the interviewer describe? Be sure you understand the process and reinforce your understanding in your letter; doing so will help propel the next step into action. If you aren't sure of the next step, try to find out, perhaps through a quick e-mail to the interviewer or a call to his or her assistant. (And if you didn't find out in the interview what the next step is, keep in mind for future interviews to always ask about the decision process at the end of the meeting.)

Finally, what is your overall gut feeling about the interview? Sometimes we walk out of a job interview absolutely confident we aced it; other times, we're pretty sure we blew it.

It's important to check in with how well you performed, measure that feeling against the hiring outcome, and diagnose what went right or wrong with the interview. For example, if you felt your performance was stellar, but you don't get the job offer or at least move on to the next step in the hiring process, your perceptions about your interview skills may be off base. You may want to do some mock interviews with friends or career practitioners to get their feedback. Of course, it's quite possible that your performance *was* stellar, but the employer found someone else to be a better fit with the job. If you don't get the offer, you can try asking the interviewer to critique your interview; however, most employers these days won't provide such feedback as they fear lawsuits. However, if you have a network contact inside the organization, you may be able to get feedback through that person.

Final Thoughts

While it's sometimes uncomfortable or even painful to relive a job interview, performing an autopsy on it is important to enable you to follow up effectively and to determine what you can do differently in your next interview. For example, are there recurring questions or topics that seem to cause you difficulty in interviews? Plan to polish those areas for future interviews.