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Best Bet for Interview Prep: Rehearsed, Mock, and Videorecorded Interviews

By Katharine Hansen

Perhaps you're a new entrant into the job market who is lacking experience in job interviewing. Or perhaps you're a job-market veteran whose resumes and cover letters yield loads of interviews – but you never seem to get the job offer. While these two groups may have the greatest need to polish interview skills, anyone actively interviewing for jobs can benefit from practicing interview skills. A study by the Society of Human Resources Management proved this point when it revealed that a candidate's background and qualifications were far less influential in their hiring decisions than interview performance and professionalism.

Practice will help you reduce interview anxiety, improve your interview skills, and in many cases, gain important feedback about how you interview. It will also help you sharpen your communication skills – and poor communication skills were the number one turn-off for hiring managers, according to another Society of Human Resource Management survey. This article describes several ways to practice before a job interview:

- Mock interviews
- Videorecorded mock interviews
- Interview simulations
- Rehearsal
- Informational interviews

Mock Interviews

Mock interviews simulate real job interviews and are conducted with a prospective job interviewee and an interviewer, often a career professional who can provide valuable input on your interview performance. The career pro will not only point out your shortcomings, but will acknowledge the areas in which you excelled, thus boosting your confidence. "Just one mock interview will result in a marked improvement in your interviewing skills," says *College Grad Job Hunter* author Brian Krueger, who recommends going through two such interviews (and, of course, the more you do, the more skilled you will become). For the inexperienced interviewee, mock interviews provide an excellent picture of what to expect.

Many career coaches and consultants offer mock-interview training, as do most college career-services offices.

Students who've undergone such interviews have praised them for their similarity to real interviews, their ability to build confidence, and their emphasis on the importance of tailoring interview responses to the job, as well as the need for the interviewee to

research the employer, develop examples that illustrate qualifications, and *ask* questions in the interview. Vault.com reports that some students schedule a mock interview just an hour or so before a real interview so the feedback is fresh in their minds.

Stephanie Milner, a diabetic care specialist doing pharmaceutical sales for Novo Nordisk, cites the value of mock interviews in preparing for the behavioral style of interview questions that most pharmaceutical firms ask. "These questions often vary and are rated," Milner reports. "When the interview is complete, they add up a score and determine if you are 'the right stuff.'" Mock interviews forced me to think! I had to think about the perfect experience. Companies want to see how you resolve issues. The S(T)AR form of answers was wonderful, because you have to give the results. That is what companies want!"

Procedures may vary as to whether you're required to wear interview attire for the mock interview, but it's always best to do so because you'll come closer to simulating a real interview. You'll find out how it feels to wear your "dress-for-success" duds in an interview situation and perhaps get a confidence boost from how spiffy you look.

While it can be helpful to conduct the interview in a venue where you won't be interrupted, you may actually want your interviewer to create some interruptions to better simulate an actual interview. Take the mock interview seriously, and try to think of it as the real thing. Ask your interviewer to hit you with the trickiest and most difficult questions an employer might ask you.

Consider conducting mock interviews with a variety of people to get some different perspectives. If you've been doing them with career professionals, add friends to the mix and vice versa. Your friends may be more honest with you about any shortcomings they see in your interview performance.

Videorecorded Mock Interviews

Mock interviews provide especially valuable preparation if you can have them videorecorded. A videorecorded mock interview that focuses on the non-verbal aspects of your performance – smile, enthusiasm, energy level, personality, confidence, voice, attire, posture, hand gestures, inappropriate body language – can be particularly worthwhile because many people exhibit behaviors while interviewing that they're not even aware of. I once had a student who had no idea during a mock interview that he kept swishing his hand back and forth across the tabletop, as though he were brushing crumbs away. Another sniffed loudly and rhythmically throughout the interview. Both were nervous habits that the interviewees had no awareness of.

After a videorecorded interview with a career professional, the pro will generally play the tape back so you can both watch and constructively review how you did. Yes, you may cringe at your blunders, but you will learn from them. After all, you may have little time in a real interview to make the right impression. The research of a University of Toledo psychology professor has shown that the interview outcome is determined in the first 30 seconds. "What makes the lasting impression are the silent signals, the facial expressions, the cut of the suit, and the beauty of the speaker," writes Jenni Laidman in describing the research.

Observing yourself on tape will help you deal with vocal issues, such as a heavy accent, a baby-soft voice, failure to articulate clearly, speaking too quickly or too slowly, and talking through your nose.

An important key while reviewing the videorecorded interview is to put yourself inside the employer's head and note how you come across to the viewer. Are you conveying the demeanor and message you want to? As you watch the tape, note the length of your responses, which should be two to three minutes.

Interview Simulations

Simulated interviews are generally computer-based, enabling you to practice interviewing, but with a virtual interviewer instead of a real person. You also must largely self-assess your performance instead of getting feedback another person. Such simulations are usually offered by career professionals, especially at colleges.

Rehearsal

Interview rehearsal is so closely related to mock interviewing that mock interviewing could be considered a subset of rehearsal. But rehearsal also includes the concepts of verbally rehearsing solo for an interview, as well as mentally rehearsing and rehearsing in writing.

Experts frequently cite rehearsal's positive effect on the interviewee's self-assurance. Seitz and Cohen write that "through mental rehearsal, job seekers can practice interviews with a successful outcome until the unconscious mind believes it has already happened."

One technique is to rehearse these responses aloud by yourself, enabling you to hear how your answers sound and adjust your verbiage as needed. Recording these rehearsals and then listening to the recordings from the employer's perspective can help the prospective interviewee refine and polish substandard responses. You can also try rehearsing in front of a mirror to check out your nonverbal mannerisms.

Written rehearsal is another effective technique. Composing and then practicing responses to likely interview questions will yield greater security during the real interview.

Rehearsal as a technique for successful interview preparation is the entire premise behind *The Interview Rehearsal Book* by Deb Gottesman and Buzz Mauro. They advise practice in telling stories about, for example, accomplishments, but caution against memorization, which will result in the candidate's sounding "stilted and mechanical" in interviews. "Instead, ad-lib from your memory of what you've written," the authors recommend. Research on memory has stressed the role of rehearsal and repetition.

Mental rehearsal, for many years espoused by sports psychologists and practiced by athletes to relieve anxiety, contains the important element of visualizing success. Peak-performance expert Peter Murphy, who notes that rehearsal's success in preparing interviewees is based on neuro-linguistic programming, recommends that you mentally rehearse both from the interviewer's perspective and your own. "In your imagination," Murphy writes, "visualize yourself at the interview comfortable and at ease meeting

people, feeling relaxed and confident.” Positive self-talk will help ward off any self-doubt that may creep in during the rehearsal.

Not Job-Interview Based, But Still Good Prep...

Another technique to help prepare for job interviews is informational interviewing. An informational interview is NOT a job interview, but you can use an informational interview to inquire of your interviewee: “I know this isn’t a job interview, but do you observe anything about my demeanor or communication skills that you think might present a problem in a job interview?” Informational interviews are also good prep simply because you can build confidence and gain experience in a one-on-one interview situation.

Final Thoughts

Will you enter your next interview with that “deer in the headlights” look or with a confident, successful aura? One or more practice interviews could determine how you’ll appear to your next interviewer.