

Tooling Up: On Interview Day

By [David G. Jensen](#) Nov. 19, 2010 , 10:00 AM

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It's hard to write about the specifics of interview day because there are as many different interview styles as there are scientific fields. Every company has its own way of managing the process. One employer's interview might consist of a job talk followed by separate meetings with six employees. Another will have you spend the afternoon in a panel interview with six interviewers simultaneously.

In short, you need to be prepared for whatever your future interviewers have in store, which is why, in this month's Tooling Up column, I'll focus on basics that apply across the board. Study these tips before your next interview and you'll come out looking much more confident and -- hopefully -- more relaxed. Both attributes are keys to "winning the interview."

Think of the job on offer as something very dear to the company; they will hire only someone who treats it with the reverence it deserves.

A game with winners and losers

The phrase "winning the interview" is used often in hiring circles because, just as in a board game, there can be only one winner. And like a lot of games, there's an element of chance, it isn't always fair, and the process doesn't always reward virtue.

"The job-search process is completely artificial, and the interview is the prime example. Putting on a suit to sell myself as some kind of solution to a problem -- this isn't natural for me and certainly isn't something I'm comfortable with as a scientist," one postdoc told me after a job-search seminar.

My response is, then and now, "Get over it." Yes, it's a game. It's unnatural, and the winner isn't always the best scientist. Job interviewing is a part of our culture. Expectations and required behaviors take precedence over your work with CHO cells in automated reactors. It is what it is, and cynicism -- and especially anger -- about the process is a handicap you can't afford. The first rule of improving your chances of winning on interview day is buck up, be happy, and play the game according to the rules.

Before the interview

As I wrote above, companies can go in many different directions on interview day. But there is something you can do to prepare once you have an invitation: Work with your contact at the firm to have the interview agenda e-mailed to you as soon as it is available. It's very useful to know in advance whom you will be meeting with and in what format. Companies will always supply this information if asked but often don't bother if the candidate doesn't request it. Asking will help you prepare. It will also look good because it shows you're meticulous and are taking the interview seriously.

Better human resources departments will supply you with a biosketch describing your interviewers, or at least their position titles. If you have only a list of names and times, go to work on Google or LinkedIn to find out who they are and what their roles are in the organization. You'll discover common interests and possible icebreakers you can use on interview day.

Next, be sure to take along a stack of business cards; even if you are a grad student or postdoc, you need cards for your big day. Reaching across and offering a business card is a professional next step after the

handshake and -- crucially -- ensures that you will get a card in return. You'll use that card after the interview when you send out thank-you notes and requests for LinkedIn connections. Now there's one more person you know in the industry. Your network grows.

Here's my last pre-interview tip: Have your interview wardrobe purchased and hanging in your closet, ready for that last-minute "Can you come this Friday?" invitation. This is a time to look your best. Always opt for a business suit and tie, or the female equivalent, unless advised otherwise by the company.

Interview day

My onsite interview advice has two main elements. First, your attitude is critical. People lose job offers all the time when the wrong attitude becomes apparent, so I'll provide advice on cultivating the right attitude. Second, I'll provide a list of actions that, if your background makes you competitive, will get you the offer.

Attitude

- Do not go into an interview expecting to be something other than an entry-level employee. Don't expect a "management job" just because you've earned a Ph.D. Everyone goes into an organization beneath their expectations, but then they rise, sometimes very quickly, when they perform well. You shouldn't express an interest in jobs *below* your level of expertise, either. If you have a Ph.D., don't pursue B.S./M.S.-level jobs. This will make it look like you have low expectations and don't think much of your own abilities.
- Show passion for your area of expertise combined with a strong interest in the job you're interviewing for. Of course you should be enthusiastic; you know that already, but you might not realize how important it is. Did you know that, given two qualified candidates, enthusiasm and desire often make the difference in who gets hired?
- Even if you have other opportunities, go in with the attitude that this is the job you are looking for. Don't discuss your interest in the tenure track, prospects at other firms, or anything except the position you are interviewing for. Think of the job on offer as something very dear to the company; they will hire only someone who treats it with the reverence it deserves.

Actions

- Do all you can to make the person on the other side of the desk comfortable. After all, many interviewers feel the same discomfort you do when meeting strangers. A warm, friendly person is much easier to hire than a standoffish sort; companies always hire people whom they consider to be easy to work with. A smile can go a long way.
- An interview is an opportunity for you to find your own fit in the organization by listening well and choosing examples that highlight what you can do for the firm. You may know you are interviewing for a research scientist position in a cell biology group, but that's too general. Listen for clues as to what that hiring manager needs to accomplish with this hire. Then reinforce the tie between what you can do and what that hiring manager is seeking.
- Be sure to get a business card from every person you meet with that day. When you return home, draft a short note to each of the people you have a business card from, thanking him or her for their time and mentioning something specific to that person so that the note has a personal touch.