



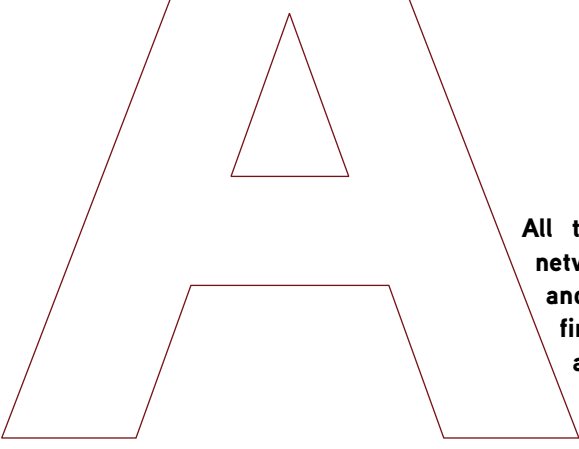
» BY DENENE BROX

MASTERING THE IN



INTERVIEW >>

Interviews won't feel like interrogations if you practice all those tough questions ahead of time.



All that time you devoted to networking, combing job listings and crafting your résumé finally paid off: You've landed a job interview.

"If they've brought you in for an interview, they're already interested in your background," points out Kelley White, Dedham, Massachusetts, USA-based onsite program manager for recruiting and human resources at Evergreen Solar Inc., a solar panel manufacturer.

But your work is just beginning.

With the official date on the calendar, it's time to seriously start preparing.

"Don't enter the interview and try to 'wing it'—even if you are a very experienced project manager," says James Berkeley, director of Berkeley Burke International, an employee rewards consultancy and executive coaching firm in London, England.

Being able to hit all your career highlights and still come off as charming and natural is an art form that takes some practice.

"Study the company, the technologies, the job description and potential interview questions so every answer is right at the tip of your tongue and you never feel like you're under the gun for an answer," says Ms. White, who is also a senior technical recruiter at Advantage Technical Resourcing, an IT and engineering project management consultancy. "If you're well-prepared, you will feel much more confident during your interview."

Lack of preparation is the top reason people fail in interviews, says Don Paullin, president of Hiring Firing Experts Inc., Libertyville, Illinois, USA. He recommends mock interviews with a job coach or professional colleague.

"Very few project managers have actually role-played before going into an interview," he says. "You have to understand—and this is very important—that second place in the interview is the same as last place. The best person wins the job. You can buy a new suit, but you've got to get with somebody who knows about interviewing and practice so that you hone your skills."

Most issues can be corrected through practice—if project managers know about them. Mr. Paullin gives the example of a project manager who had great credentials, "but he kept saying 'you know' and 'like' during the interview. If he were to practice with someone who knew what they were doing, that would have been something he could have eliminated and won the job."

Without that knowledge, candidates may be doomed to keep failing. "If you repeat the same mistakes, you'll never get hired," he says.

Monica Yao used mock interviews to help her land her current position as a Shanghai, China-based project manager and team leader at Mercer, a financial services consultancy.

"It helped me examine my weaknesses when being interviewed and also helped me think about the types of questions



> TIP

Let recruiters leave a message. The job interview starts from the first phone call, and you can't afford to fumble through your first impression. If you've submitted résumés and know organizations may be calling, let your calls roll to voicemail so you're not caught off-guard.

"Most companies call for a phone screening," says Don Paullin, Hiring Firing Experts Inc., Libertyville, Illinois, USA. "Leaving your answering machine on gives you a chance to hear the name of the company so you can look it up before you call them back. By then, you've had time to refresh your memory with the details and can come across as much better-prepared."

they would ask and prepare my answers,” she says.

THE BIG EVENT

Your résumé obviously caught the hiring manager’s attention. Consider the interview as your time to bring those words to life with great tales of struggle and triumph.

“I’ve heard a lot of project managers talk about things like difficulty with scheduling or getting international teams scheduled,” Ms. White says. “They need to talk about how they handled that and how they did a good job at what they needed to accomplish.”

Highlight timelines, the number of people you led, and budgets and schedules in terms of delivery. For example, you were able to complete a project three days ahead of schedule or 10 percent under budget.

“If candidates are vague, it’s not going to bode well for their candidacy. You want to talk about numbers and specifics—things like what your role was in the team, the scope of the project, project size, technologies used, specific milestones, achievements and things you’re proud of,” Ms. White says.

In today’s climate especially, focusing on ROI makes you look good while showing people why offering you the job will make *them* look good. You want the interviewer to walk away thinking you’re the best candidate to help the organization achieve its strategic goals.

That often means tailoring your approach based on your audience. You might be really excited about risk registers or work breakdown structures, but hold back on the nitty-gritty details if your interview includes time with executives.

“Senior management wants to hear about results,” Mr. Berkeley advises. “Only mid- and lower management get excited about your methodologies or approach.”

No matter whom you’re talking to, keep the focus on how your skills align with the specific job you’d perform. “When an interviewer hears these types

of things, it translates to ‘I should hire this person,’” Mr. Paullin says.

LEARNED BEHAVIOR

Obstacles come with the territory in project management, of course—and the interviewer *will* ask about them.

Go in armed with ready answers to tough questions: “How have you handled working with someone who has a difficult personality?” “What has been the most challenging project you’ve led, and how did you deal with it?” Or the dreaded, “What’s your biggest weakness?”

“A potential response could be something like, ‘I tend to take a lot of tasks on myself and become so incredibly focused on a project that I have difficulty shutting off at the end of the day,’” Ms. White says.

There are worse things than being viewed as a workaholic.

Known as behavioral questions, this interviewing technique can often be the deciding factor in whether you get the job. “Interviewers will ask behavioral questions just to see how you’ll react to them,” she adds.

Under no circumstances should you be the slightest bit negative in your response, she warns. And don’t make the mistake of complaining about former employers. No one wants to hire someone who’s perceived as cynical, bitter or a “loose cannon,” Mr. Berkeley says.

Instead, give even the worst situation a positive spin.

“You could say, ‘One manager felt that I had spent too much time on the client’s website and needed to spend more on preparing for our presentation,’” Mr. Paullin suggests. “You can point out that the client felt you knew more about them and their concerns—and that you were able to gear the presentation to their specific problems.”

Finally, realize it’s just an interview and it won’t be the end of the world if you don’t land the position. “If they want you, it’s great,” Ms. White says. “If they don’t, it’s their loss. Consider that interview good practice for the next interview.” PM