

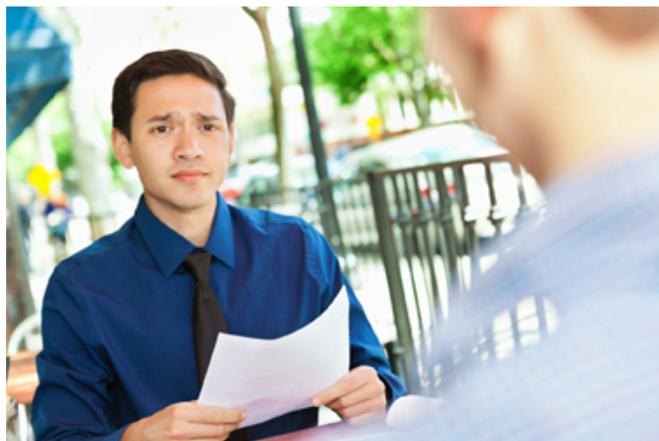
Career Compass No. 26: The Art of the Interview

by Dr. Frank Benest

9 July 2012

In this issue of Career Compass, Dr. Benest offers his sage advice on being your best in the job interview.

I am looking to advance in my local government career and have been applying for mid-manager positions for which I qualify in other local government agencies in my state. I have seven years of solid experience and my resume has gotten me screened into several interviews. However, I have not done well in the initial interviews and therefore have not been called back for any final interviews with the manager doing the hiring. Do you have some suggestions on how I can improve my interview skills?



Many professionals do not perform well in an interview. Some common mistakes include:

- A lack of apparent knowledge about the requirements or demands of the position
- Talking on and on
- Not providing concrete examples
- Nervousness
- Telling jokes
- Appearing “cold”

The good news is that you seem to have the appropriate experience, your resume adequately reflects your background, and you have been selected for the initial interviews. Resume writing is an art (see [Career Compass No. 11: Frank’s Rules for Resume Writing](#)) and so is interviewing.

13 TIPS

Here are some tips to enhance your interview skills:

1. Practice, practice, practice

Interviewing is like any other skill—you get better with practice. While you do not want to apply for positions that don’t interest you (wasting your time and the time of the agency), you do want to get some real-world practice. The more interviews and therefore the more practice, the better you will become.

2. Prepare—but not too much

The purpose of conducting research prior to the interview is four-fold:

- To identify if there is a “fit” between your skills, capabilities, and interests and the specific demands of the position as well as the culture of the organization
- To craft your responses so they correspond to the requirements and challenges of the position and therefore resonate with the interview panel or the hiring manager
- To formulate questions to ask of the hiring authority that will determine if you want the position
- To demonstrate to the interviewers that you have in fact researched the position and the agency, thus indicating that you truly care about the opportunity

To adequately prepare for the interview, you should research the following: the position, its duties and demands; the local government organization; the person to whom you will report; and the key challenges facing the department, the organization and the community. The initial source of information is the job announcement which typically includes the “ideal candidate” profile.

3. Identify your competitive advantages

To help you prepare, it is a good idea to develop and keep updated a list of accomplishments. You can then weave the achievements into your responses to the interview questions. However, it is not sufficient to simply promote your achievements. You need to also highlight your competitive advantages.

After you do your research, you should be able to identify what you have to offer the agency, the department as well as the larger organization. In other words, what are your competitive advantages? Given the needs of the agency, you want to select no more than three advantages. For example, do you offer:

- A wide array of technical or administrative skills or project experiences
- A diverse background in public, private and/or non-profit sectors
- Experience in managing different kinds of people
- Budget skills
- Ability to build an effective team
- Learning agility
- Leadership capabilities even if you do not have formal authority

During the interview you want to respond to the interview questions in such a way to assert these competitive advantages. At the very end of the interview, you may want to summarize by briefly listing what you uniquely offer.

4. Prepare responses for the classic questions

During my numerous interviews to become a first-time city manager, I got good in anticipating some of the classic questions. In advance of the interview, you too should identify any number of traditional questions and prepare bullet point responses. Then practice your responses.

Some classic interview questions can be found at:

- <http://jobsearch.about.com/od/interviewquestionsanswers> or
- <http://www.jobinterviewquestions.org>

Here is my list of traditional questions:

1. Could you tell us about yourself?

2. Could you give us a quick overview of your professional experience?
3. Could you describe a particularly difficult personnel or discipline situation that you had to address as a supervisor?
4. Have you led a diverse team? What were the circumstances and results?
5. What is your budgeting experience?
6. What is your experience in engaging the community in a difficult or controversial issue? How did you go about it? What were the outcomes?
7. How would a subordinate or peer describe your leadership or management style?
8. Could you tell us about a situation in which you engaged members of another department in solving a difficult problem?
9. Could you give us a specific example of a failure and how you dealt with it? What were the lessons that you learned?
10. Can you give us a specific example of how you have tried to improve your communication and interaction with a difficult supervisor or peer?

After an interview or two, you can revise your own list of key interview questions and fine-tune your responses.

5. Give concise responses yet fully respond

In responding to a question, you should not ramble on and on (a common mistake especially if you are nervous). Give a general response to the question but also provide one specific example from your experience that supports your general response. The specific example or experience should showcase how you produced or helped produce a positive result.

6. Convey a professional yet friendly demeanor

You want to portray a professional demeanor yet come off in a friendly and personable way. A little humor is acceptable but stay away from any jokes.

Your goal is not only to demonstrate your professional knowledge and skills, but to also create a connection with the interviewers. Try to connect with people by firmly shaking hands (don't break any fingers), looking from one person to another as you answer questions, and smiling as appropriate. Connecting on a personal level is even more important when you get a second interview with the hiring manager.

7. Be truthful and authentic

Do not try to be someone you are not. For example, if you do not have direct supervisory experience, you need to acknowledge it when asked. However, you can also provide an example of leading a group over whom you did not have formal authority or provide a situation in which you exerted a volunteer leadership role in your non-work life.

While the focus is on your professional qualifications, you want to convey who you are as a person. Let the interview panel get a glimpse of your human side. If the questions allow, you can briefly mention to the panel something about your family or key interests. Sharing some personal information may be more appropriate in a second or final interview.

8. Practice with a coach or colleague

To practice your responses and get feedback in order to enhance your performance, you may wish to schedule a mock interview with a coach, colleague or friend who acts as an interviewer. Or you can videotape your responses and a coach or colleague can critique your answers as well as general demeanor.

9. Debrief immediately after the interview

Immediately following an interview, you should jot down the questions asked and outline how you responded. Then critique your responses and note perhaps a better way to respond or a different example. A coach or colleague may help you craft a better answer to a troublesome or difficult question.

Oftentimes, the same basic questions asked in a different way will be posed to you in a follow-up interview. You want to be ready to respond in the best way possible.

10. Get feedback from the interviewer or the executive recruiter

To enhance your performance in future interviews, it is very helpful to get feedback from someone on the interview panel or from either an HR representative or the executive recruiter who sat in but did not participate in the interview. Phrase your request for feedback in the following manner—“So that I can do better in future interviews, could you give me any specific feedback on how I could improve my interview skills or better respond to the questions posed by the interview panel?” Or, “I felt that I rambled on too much. What did you perceive?”

11. Always thank the hiring manager

If you get to meet the hiring manager, always send a personal note thanking the person for the opportunity to interview for the position. In this electronic age, a personal hand-written note will help you make an impression and perhaps be a way to connect in the future even if you did not get the position.

12. Ask a few questions yourself

Based on your research, you may wish to ask—if time permits—one or two selected questions at the end of the interview. Sometimes, the interview panel will ask you if you have any questions. If there is not an opportunity to do so in the first interview, your questions are certainly appropriate in the second or final interview. Therefore, take some care in selecting one or two questions in order to demonstrate that you have done your homework. For example, you may ask:

1. “The county has a structural deficit of \$35 million. How will budget reductions affect your department and how do you plan to redesign your services?”
2. “Some members of the development community seem to have complaints about the development review process. How will this position be involved in resolving any valid concerns?”
3. There apparently has been discussion about consolidating Finance and Human Resources into a single Administrative Services Department. How likely is a merger and what are some opportunities posed by such a restructuring?”

Some of these questions may be more appropriate for a second interview.

13. Create a closing statement

Always end with a brief closing statement. In the closing statement, you can underscore your interest in the position and why, succinctly identify your competitive advantages, and thank the panel.

NEGOTIATING ANY KEY DEAL POINTS

If you have any critical issues or deal points, you should pose them in the final interview (not before). Some typical issues may include a minimal starting salary; some flexibility in your schedule so you can complete your masters program or attend to an important family responsibility; or a commitment from the manager that you can finish a committee or officer assignment with your professional association.

Let's say that you want a minimal starting salary. In asking the hiring manager to help resolve your concern, you can try the following sequence. First, you should reiterate that you are excited about the position and energized about the challenges. Second, you should state that you need to identify a key issue (in this case, starting salary) that must be resolved if you are to accept any offer. Third, you should indicate that you want to work with the hiring manager (typically the division head or department director) in order to resolve the issue. Finally, if the hiring manager cannot seem to say "yes" or solve the problem, you may wish to suggest a "Plan B" that provides another way to address your issue. For instance, in this case, you may suggest an added week of vacation upon starting the position or the opportunity to receive a 5% increase after you pass your probationary period in 6 months.

PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT

To get selected for my first city manager job, I went through 75 different recruitments. . .until I finally found a city that did not know how to do a background check. By that time, I could anticipate approximately three-quarters of the questions that any interview panel would ask. And I had honed my responses. Practice does make perfect.



Career Compass is a monthly column from ICMA focused on career issues for local government professional staff. Dr. Frank Benest is ICMA's senior advisor for Next Generation Initiatives and resides in Palo Alto, California. If you have a career question you would like addressed in a future *Career Compass*, e-mail careers@icma.org or contact Frank directly at frank@frankbenest.com.