



Are Your Interview Skills In Tune With The Times?

By Chris Wanyama

Part of any effective job search includes preparing for that all-important interview, but are your interviewing skills up-to-date? What were considered correct responses in the 1990s could actually prevent you from getting a job these days. Why? Because the job climate has shifted and employers have different expectations of a prospective employee than they did even five years ago. So how do you demonstrate that you're in touch with the business needs of today and aren't a throwback to former times? The following describes the major shifts occurring in the interviewing process and suggests ways to help you respond. You'll gain insight into the mind of today's typical interviewer and ensure that the questions you're asked don't catch you by surprise.

- **Don't worry about your career aspirations five years from now; *show what you are capable of doing now.***

Just a few years ago, you walked into an interview nearly certain that you'd be asked the question: "What would you like to be doing five years from now?" The anticipated answer demonstrated a combination of loyalty and ambition -- you expressed a desire to remain with the same organization over a period of time and to step into roles of ever increasing responsibility.

Once a standard part of the interview process, this query is fading from use. Given today's tumultuous economic and social climate, employer concerns about longevity have been replaced with a desire to see rapid results. Three-year plans are practically unheard of, which means you need to show that you're capable of getting up to speed immediately and that you have the skills and experience to solve complex problems effectively and without hesitation. Instead of discussing where you plan to be five years from now, be prepared to answer something like: "How would you characterize a 90-day plan to meet the objectives of this position?"

- **Demonstrate your ability to create synergy.**

Five years ago, when asked to describe your management style, you could impress an interviewer by talking about using performance-management techniques, setting expectations, measuring feedback and rewarding performance -- evidence that you knew how to manage. Now the situation is more complicated -- and more urgent. In addition to showing that you're a



capable leader, you must prove that you know how to encourage individuals to work together to accelerate problem-solving.

In the past, team-building was recognized primarily for its ability to shape culture. However, given today's accelerated pace, you must show that you understand how to navigate in a complex environment, where how well you work with other parts of the organization is what ultimately produces results.

Show that you're a decisive leader who's learned from past mistakes. "How have you solved problems in the past?" Once, this question was best answered by demonstrating that you operated by a model, something like: "I solve problems in a linear fashion. I gather facts, I consider all approaches for solving the problem, I make recommendations, I implement them and I follow up." Several years ago, there was value in being right 100% of the time, but employers are beginning to recognize the importance of having failed and subsequently learned from your mistakes. Your ability to articulate the reasons for your choices, the circumstances contributing to the failure and the lessons learned to eliminate a repeat performance will help you to outshine an equally qualified executive, who lacks experience in dealing with adversity.

In addition, the executive who gets ahead can demonstrate decisiveness, the courage to take a stand and the ability to adjust to change and forge ahead to produce results.

Use storytelling to convince an interviewer that you're the perfect person for the job. "Why are you the ideal candidate for this position?" In the past, when asked this question, you were expected to simply regurgitate your resume. You proved you had the necessary ability by referring back to prior roles. However, showing that you're experienced is no longer enough. Now, you need to provide a detailed account of relevant experiences you've encountered in your career and how they relate to your skills. In other words, you need to show real-life problem-solving in action -- which is probably the most valuable interviewing skill. How do you do this?

Before an interview, think about the skills you want to showcase and prepare an example of how you've put these skills to use. For instance, if you're a chief information officer and you want to display your technical ability, talk about your former company's out-of-date point-of-service system and how you devised an innovative solution to speed checkout and increase profits.



Use this same approach for each skill you want to highlight. Remember to:

- *Lay out the problem you faced;*
- *Explain your solution; and*
- *Discuss the results.*

While doing this, take the interviewer into your world. Paint a vivid picture. In other words, "*show, don't tell*" that you're the ideal person for the job. Show that you'd *fit into the company culture*.

Having the technical skills to do the job is just the price of entry. What really determines whether you'll get the offer is fit. An interviewer gauges this by listening not only to what is said, but also to the way it's said. Being articulate shows you're credible and aren't making things up as you go along. Speaking passionately shows you're discussing concepts you've spent time pondering. Asking thoughtful questions means you're naturally curious and a good listener who takes others' views into consideration.

In the end, all interviewing boils down to one simple query, whether it's asked overtly or simply implied: "Will this person make the company a better place?" Show that the answer is yes, and you'll ensure that you're the one who gets the nod.

Ace Behavioral Interviews By Telling Powerful Stories

Behavior-based interviews have been around for more than a decade, but if you aren't prepared for them, they can throw you for a loop. You know that you're in a behavior-based interview when most of the questions begin with statements like, "tell me about a time when..." and "describe a situation where...."

- The premise behind behavior-based interview questions is that past performance is the best predictor of future success. To determine past performance, candidates are asked to provide specific examples that show interviewers whether they have key skills and experiences needed in the job. Usually, these questions are framed around the specific job description.
- Michael Rosenband, president of jobjob! LLC, a career-management firm in Chicago, coaches job hunters on how to prepare for these interviews. The key, he says, is to identify the examples that you want to use beforehand and learn to recount them as stories so that you don't get caught flat-footed



during the interview. Make sure that you do your homework, not have responses that are all over the map.

Think Strategically

- Unlike traditional interviews, a behavioral interview usually requires you to provide specific examples of how you acted in the past, instead of sharing your opinion or thoughts. To prepare effectively, think about what you've done or experienced that most closely relates to what your potential employer needs to be successful.
- It helps to get as much insight as possible into what the employer is seeking. "Review the job description to figure out what the employer is looking for so that you're able to relay skills and experiences that are on-point," says Mr. Rosenband.
- To prepare for job interviews, first spends about 20 to 40 hours researching a company. He studies its Internet site and replays audio interviews or Web casts that are often available on sites of publicly traded companies. Read the last four or five questions and listen to the speeches given by senior managers," says Mr. Lorelli. "Listen to how people speak. It will give you a good sense for tone, cast and character of a company."
- "Read everything you can, even the footnotes," he advises. Hoovers.com and other Web sites that profile companies also can provide information about potential employers.
- This kind of targeted information allows you to home in on what a company is looking for, eliminate extraneous anecdotes and position yourself as a very focused candidate who understands an employer's needs and priorities.

Organizing Your Stories

- Once you know what examples to use, how should you organize them? One way is to apply a Problem (or Situation)-Action-Result formula (PAR), says Kenneth Widelka, acting general manager of Pearson Reid London House, a Chicago-based human-resources services provider. When interviewing candidates, Mr. Widelka always asks them to provide examples of how they've used certain strengths. He analyzes the stories based on the PAR format, as follows:



Problem: Start by describing the problem or situation that you faced.

Example: "Because of the escalating price of ingredients in our products, we needed to rethink our production, pricing and marketing strategies and processes."

Action: Describe the action that you took.

Example: "I took a leadership role in meeting with the purchasing, production and marketing managers - both individually and collectively -- to determine whether we needed to revise our product formulas, develop new brands and open up new channels of distribution."

Result: *Describe the results.*

Example: "When we discovered that our product was too expensive for its original target market, I was able to work with the purchasing manager on a strategy to identify, solicit and negotiate less expensive contracts. I also worked closely with the marketing manager and the marketing team to reposition our product for a more upscale clientele. This resulted in a \$200,000 decrease in expenses and \$250,000 increase in net revenues."

- Don't Skimp on the Problem: Too many candidates jump into a description of their actions without fully describing the problem or situation, says Mr. Widelka. This makes it seem as though they don't understand the larger business picture or appreciate how their actions contribute to the firm's business goals and strategy. He says, "Candidates need to spend as much time describing the situation or problem as they do describing their own actions, Some people get so caught up in the description of their activities that they never even get to the results."
- When you advance to your actions, always recount your most significant accomplishments or contributions, advises Laurie Anderson, an organizational psychologist in Oak Park, IL. "And talk about why it was so challenging," she says. "If it didn't get hard, it wasn't a real accomplishment."
- She emphasizes the importance of recounting your behavior as a story. "Your actions always speak louder than your words. Don't tell me who you are; tell me what you did," she says.
- Interviewers usually frame their questions around the traits or skills deemed essential for success in the position or organization. At Morgan Marshall, Mr. Rosenband prepared to conduct interviews by developing a



checklist of behavioral questions. "I was looking for two primary things: cultural fit and ability to perform the job," he says.

- To answer the question of cultural fit, he looked for a "can-do attitude." Could the candidates execute? Or did they get mired in the details?

Fine-Tuning Your Delivery

- How you tell your stories will say as much about your performance as what you tell. If you can't tell a story comfortably, you probably shouldn't be telling it at all. It's important to know why you are using a particular example and what you want it to demonstrate. Don't recount a story that lacks a happy ending or portrays you as ineffective.
- One information-technology professional wanted to demonstrate "execution skills" during a behavioral interview. But when describing how he implemented certain financial software programs and processes, he got so bogged down in the details about the implementation that he never described the results. Leaving out the results is like leaving out the punch line to a joke. The listener won't appreciate the value of the story.
- It's impossible to anticipate every question, so knowing how to think on your feet is important. Give thorough forethought to the stories (or examples) you want to relate and then rehearse until you can tell them flawlessly. "The best stories are those you can tell with energy, enthusiasm and confidence," says Mr. Rosenband.

Stick to the Positive

- Although you may be understandably anxious when confronted with a behavioral interview, don't sabotage yourself by being negative. When you say negative things about yourself or anyone else, you introduce an element of hostility into the interview. By putting a positive spin on your answers, you keep the tone of the interview positive.
- After you tell your story, ask for feedback. Is this the kind of information that the interviewer was looking for? Or would they like you to give a different example? Don't be afraid to say "I don't know" or "nothing comes to mind" when you're asked a question. You can't invent experiences (positive or negative) that you don't have.



- Interviewees also can use stories to demonstrate character traits. When a candidate for a job as a high-school football coach was asked about his dedication and commitment, he described a hectic two days when he took an injured player to the hospital and waited in the emergency room until nearly 2 a.m. for the player to be released. After leaving the hospital he took the player home, dropped off the next week's game film to another coach, picked up two other players from their homes and drove them to their SAT exams. During the SAT exam, he watched and analyzed a game film and returned the film to someone more than an hour away before picking up and taking the players home. He got the job.

How to Blow A Job Interview

- The candidate's background, experience and education were exactly what the company wanted in a new executive vice president. "On paper, there was no better match," says Don Clark, a recruiter in Fort Worth, TX. "But after interviewing him in person, we knew we'd have to keep looking." Wearing a rumpled suit and dirty shoes, the candidate's appearance was the first strike against him, Mr. Clark says. His poor posture and big mouth were the final nails in the coffin. "The candidate didn't look or act like an executive," the recruiter says. "What's worse, he lectured me for 45 minutes on what my client was doing wrong and why he was just the man to fix the problem."

- Though unemployment may be rising, many companies are still hungry for talented managers. But even the best candidates won't get offers if they bungle their interviews with prospective employers or recruiters.

- No longer a perfunctory chitchat session, the interview is the ultimate test of a candidate's suitability. This is where a candidate's appearance, manners, charisma, communication skills, strategic thinking and fit with the company's culture are scrutinized and evaluated.

- A strong personal interview often can compensate for a weak resume. While conducting a search for an executive vice president, Todd Noebel, president of the Noebel Search Group in Dallas, interviewed a candidate with a conventional resume and lukewarm reputation. "Contrary to my expectations, he was distinguished and composed," he says. "He asked probing questions that showed he had researched the client's strategic situation. Most importantly, he seemed genuinely interested in my client." Mr. Noebel strongly recommended the candidate, who was hired and is performing successfully.



- Candidates with superior credentials sometimes mistakenly believe that showing up and answering questions is all that's required to secure an offer. Even if you've been solicited for the position, you easily can take yourself out of the running.

Don'ts

- **Don't act disinterested:** Headhunter Jack Clarey of Clarey & Andrews, a Chicago search firm, was seeking a CFO for a publicly held technology company headquartered in a rural community. During an interview, Mr. Clarey's strongest candidate questioned him repeatedly about the difficulties of uprooting himself and his family from a large city and whether he would be happy in a rural location. "Needless to say, we rejected him," says Mr. Clarey.
- **Don't bother to interview unless you have some interest in the position:** The recruiter or company may have called you first, but you're expected to demonstrate curiosity and enthusiasm when you interview.
- **Don't go unprepared:** You can't ask intelligent questions if you're in the dark about the employer's industry, operations and performance. Reviewing the company's annual report and web site is the absolute minimum amount of research you should do before the interview. Don't ask questions that are answered plainly by these resources.
- **Don't talk too much:** An internal candidate for a position at a major investment bank ideally matched the position's specifications, according to recruiter Jac Andre, a partner with Ray & Berndtson. But he was disqualified automatically when he talked for more than an hour without making a single point. "He rambled on and on without answering my questions," says Mr. Andre.
- **When responding to a question or making a comment, get to the point:** Nothing demonstrates your insecurity more than endless commentary that goes nowhere.
- **Don't talk too little:** You're expected to be an active participant in the interview, not simply a head nodder. One-word answers brand you as uninterested, scared or uppity.



- **Don't display bad manners:** Ann Peckenpaugh, a recruiter with Schweichler Associates Inc. in Corte Madera, CA, was convinced a candidate was a perfect fit for her client, a high-tech company in Silicon Valley. "He was ideal on paper, and unlike many 'techies,' he was a good communicator on the phone," she says. But when she met him in person over dinner, he horrified her by picking up his roast chicken dinner with two hands and eating it off the bone. "We were waiting for him to growl," says Ms. Peckenpaugh.
- **Don't knock your current (or past) employer:** Badmouthing a boss is perhaps the ultimate interview offense. Recruiters and employers know that if you air dirty laundry about your firm, you're likely to be a malcontent in your next position as well. Even if you're convinced your boss is a felon, stick to your own accomplishments and the resulting performance when discussing your situation.
- **Additionally, don't assume interviewers aren't listening if they stop taking notes:** Some recruiters pride themselves on generating confidential, personal information through "stealth" meetings over meals, where candidates tend to lower their guard. "When I put my notepad away, candidates say amazing things," says Bob Clarke, principal with Furst Group/MPI, a recruiter based in Rockford, IL. "That's when they're likely to run down their current employer, drop names inappropriately or even use foul language."
- **Don't take credit for things you didn't do:** While it's important to explain your role in accomplishing results, don't overstate your authority or responsibility. Your claims are likely to be checked with current or former colleagues, customers or bosses. Avoid saying "I" as much as possible: no one in a corporate environment does things single-handedly.
- **Don't hide holes in your resumes:** Don't follow the example of the candidate who advised to avoid calling him at work because the voice-mail system was being changed. "Naturally, I called right away," says Mr. McCreary. "The receptionist told me he was no longer with the company."
- **Periods of unemployment and falsified dates and degrees also are simple to detect:** Address resume gaps or other potential concerns directly and have an explanation about why they made sense and what you learned from them.



- **Don't show lack of confidence in the prospective employer:** Steven Darter, president of People Management Northeast, a recruiter in Avon, CT, once interviewed a candidate who spent an hour itemizing the potential employer's problems. "He told me he could get it all turned around, but couldn't give me any specifics," says Mr. Darter. "We crossed him off the list the minute he left the room."
- **You can express concerns about some aspect of the potential employer's strategy, product line or operations – particularly if you can suggest a better approach:** But don't let the interview deteriorate into a critique session. Employers want managers who are excited by opportunities, not dismissive of past mistakes.
- **Don't negotiate too early:** If you raise the issue of compensation, it's clear to recruiters and employers that your primary interest is money, not opportunity. Wait until they bring up the topic, and don't negotiate during the interview – take a day to formulate your response.