



A Candidate's Guide to a Killer Interview

By Scott Sette

I remember my first professional interview. I was a senior in college and I was interviewing with one of the Big 6 public accounting firms for an Audit position. The interviewer asked some basic questions and, fortunately, spent most of the time talking about the position and describing the company culture. When he asked me if I had any questions, my response was, "So, what kind of benefits do you have?" Embarrassing. The point is this: I didn't know what to ask. I hadn't done any research on the art of interviewing, so I was completely unprepared. Since I was a naïve 22 year-old college kid on his first interview, I am certain that I was given substantial leeway. Otherwise, I would have been promptly removed from that interview process.

Today's job market is very competitive for candidates. With near double-digit unemployment, there is an abundance of qualified people interviewing for each available position. Therefore, it is more important than ever to be at the top of your interviewing game so you can differentiate yourself from the other applicants. Having spent the last 14 years in the search industry, I am much more knowledgeable about the interview process now. So, here is a crash course guide to successfully nail the interview.

Do Your Homework

There is no excuse for going into an interview without any knowledge of the company or the person with whom you are interviewing. With all the internet tools at our disposal, you should, at a minimum, know some basic information about what the company does, who their major competitors are, and any current news about them. You can get a lot of this information from the company's own website. Further, you should do some investigation about the interviewer. Again, the company's website should have some information (especially if that person is an executive). If not, then search their name on Google, LinkedIn, or Facebook. You might be surprised to find out that you have some common ground with the interviewer and that always helps build rapport.

Answering the "Tell Me About Yourself" Question

This is typically the first question you will be asked in a professional interview. It is important to know how you will respond to this question because it will set the tone for the rest of the interview. I could write an entire article about just this

topic, but let me give you the basics. When asked this question, they want to know about who you are professionally. This is not an invitation to recount your entire childhood. Instead, construct a concise summary of your professional life, highlighted by several quantitative accomplishments to show that you are a results-oriented achiever. Here is an example:

I am a Revenue Cycle leader with 25 years of experience in healthcare. During my career, I have directly overseen all aspects of the Revenue Cycle, including Patient Access, Patient Accounting, and Medical Records. I have led many initiatives that have improved the financial position of my hospital. In my current position, I reduced the Days Outstanding by 20 days, increased POS collections by 200%, decreased denials by 30%, and improved Registration accuracy to over 96%. Since your hospital is experiencing many of these same issues, I am excited to hear more this opportunity and potentially bring these successful results to your organization.

The 2 Salary Questions

Salary will be brought up during the interview, at some point, especially if you are meeting with someone from HR. There are 2 ways that salary can come up. The first way is by asking you, "What is your current compensation?" If you are asked this question, then you should answer it accurately and truthfully. Tell them your exact base salary and incentive compensation, if applicable. Some people feel that you should not be exact because it will hurt your ability to negotiate the best offer later in the process. My experience has been different. In feedback from our clients, we have learned that candidates who answer this question with ranges or generalities come across as shifty, like they are trying to "pull one over" on the client. That is not a good impression to leave.

The second salary question that you could be asked is, "If you come to work here, what compensation are you looking for?" This is a very different question than the first one. As a result, we want to answer it differently. In this case, you should not answer with a specific number. Instead, we want to leave this open. Your answer should be something like this: "Since this is my first interview, I really want to find out more about the opportunity today. However, if we get to the offer stage, then I'm certain that we can

work out a compensation package that is mutually agreeable." There are several reasons for being vague here, but this is the most important one: it is too early in the process for you to accurately answer this question. The reason you go on the interview is to find out more information about the company, the position, and the people with whom you will be working. How can you know what kind of compensation you are looking for before you know what the job entails?

Major Accomplishments

Another question you are sure to be asked is about your biggest accomplishment. This is another area for you to differentiate yourself from the other applicants. The best way to do this is by citing some *quantitative* accomplishments. Specifically, tell them how you made your company money, saved your company money, or improved a process that had a measurable result. Be prepared to describe the accomplishment in great detail. If your accomplishment solved a problem, then walk them through it, step by step. Tell them how you identified the original problem, what you did to solve that problem, and what the end result was. By describing the process in detail and concluding with a quantitative result, you build major credibility with the interviewer.

Questions to Ask

You should always write down a bunch of questions that you want to ask the interviewer. Sometimes, candidates are unsure of what questions they should ask and what they should avoid. Here is the general rule: you can ask anything you want, but avoid asking salary or benefits questions, especially on a first interview. The questions you ask can be as big-picture or as detailed as you want them to be. Some question topics could include:

Company information

- Competitive landscape
- Profitability
- Strategic direction

Position-specific information

- Keys to success
- Major upcoming projects
- Promotion opportunities

Information about interviewer

- Career background
- What brought you to this company?
- What are your top priorities in hiring for this position?

Make sure to write down the questions you want to ask and bring that list into the interview with you. It is perfectly acceptable to refer to your list of questions during the interview, so you don't forget anything. Additionally, it is also acceptable to take notes throughout the interview. Just as it is difficult to remember everything you want to ask, it is more difficult to remember all the answers.

Ending the Interview

This is one of the most important parts of the interview because many people don't do it very well. Therefore, it is another way to differentiate yourself from the other applicants. As the interview is coming to an end, the last thing the interviewer should hear from you is that you *want this job*. Simply imparting your interest to the interviewer will leave a positive and lasting impression about your candidacy. An example of what you could say to end the interview is:

John, thank you for your time today. I got a lot of great information about the company and the position. Based upon what I've heard, I am very interested in this opportunity. What is the next step?

Thank-You Notes

After each step in the interview process, you always want to send a thank-you note to each person with whom you met. There are a lot of schools of thought about thank-you notes, so here is mine. A handwritten thank-you note will always trump an email. By sending a hand-written note, it shows that this job is important to you. Also, think about how you feel when you receive a hand-written note. Would that be more impactful than receiving an email? You bet it would. Your thank-you note should be a concise message, similar to the ending of your interview. You should thank them for their time and, again, impart your interest in the opportunity. Here is an example:

*John,
Thank you for taking time on Wednesday to meet with me. I appreciated your openness in discussing your Revenue Cycle issues and the strategic direction of your hospital. I am very excited about the opportunity to potentially join your team. I will look forward to meeting you again soon.*

*Sincerely,
Bob Smith*

Interviewing is an art that requires practice and repetition to become proficient. The more you practice and prepare, the better your results will be. Take ample time to prepare before your interview. Write out some of the responses to the questions you will be asked and practice those responses so you can deliver them comfortably and confidently during your interview. Get a friend or family member to role play with you. If you follow these basic guidelines, then you will be prepared for having a successful interview and landing the job of your dreams.

Scott Sette, CPC is a Consultant with Witt/Kieffer, the preeminent executive search firm that identifies outstanding leadership solutions for organizations committed to improving the quality of life. Scott can be reached at 713-266-6779 or ssette@wittkieffer.com.