

Interview Tips for College Students

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We teach college students how to interview all the time. I was recently asked for the unique things that today's college student must know and do to succeed in interviews. What I realized is that because students have almost no job interview experience, students don't know what they don't know. With help from our career counselors, here's my list of Top 10 interview tips for college students.

1. Do your homework on the job, the organization, the competition and the industry. Reading the website is the minimum. Tap your college and/or high school alumni network and your parents' network to get the inside scoop. Most students don't read business magazines, newspapers or trade journals, so when you do, you'll stand out from the crowd. Doing this homework will prevent you from asking really obvious -- and naïve -- questions.

2. Anticipate and prepare for the typical questions with strong personal answers. "Tell me about yourself." "What are your strengths and weaknesses?" "Tell me about your greatest accomplishments." "Share a time you failed and how you responded to the situation." "Why do you want this job?" "Why this organization?" Have your answers and examples so well rehearsed that it's natural.

3. Develop 5-7 adaptable stories from your resume related to the job you're seeking. Start with the situation by describing the context and problem. Then explain what you did to improve the situation and describe the results in quantifiable terms. This demonstrates that you understand the importance and the impact of your personal contributions. With these stories prepared in advance, you can adapt them to various questions.

4. Frame your answers to show how you will add value to the organization. Many students too often focus on why they want the job, what they will get out of it, and why it will be good for them. Turn the tables and explain how and why you can and will benefit the organization. Find ways to tactfully mention what they'd gain if they hired you (or how much they'd miss out on if they didn't).

5. Use the right vocabulary. Surprise an employer by actually being able to translate how your academic or extracurricular experiences have helped to prepare you for the role you're interviewing for -- using words in the job description. Very few students can do this. For example, if you're a theatre major, describe how you managed and promoted a play or musical production using your project management, creativity and sales skills.

6. Prepare two or three 'go-to' questions that demonstrate you prepared in advance and your strategic thinking. There's a difference between "Tell me about the culture" and "Tell me about how major decisions are made here and provide an example of a recent decision and the process used." Or, "I read that the organization is changing its strategic direction. How will that affect this business unit?" Avoid questions where answers are on the website.

7. Practice interviewing out loud with mentors, adult fans or even in the mirror. Most students have not done many (if any) job interviews - and definitely not when under pressure. It's important to hear the words you intend to speak, including the tone, emphasis, inflections and facial impressions, so that you don't blow it when it really counts. It's rare to get a second chance.

8. Demeanor, humble self-confidence, personality and enthusiasm really matter. Smile! Allow your voice tone, words and body language to communicate your genuine excitement about the opportunity. It will be a significant decision factor for your interviewer. If you don't, your interviewer will question if you really want the job or if you're going to be committed to the organization. This is one of the top reasons why people do not get job offers.

9. Don't judge a book by its cover. Many students have difficulty getting excited about entry-level jobs because they feel overqualified or discouraged that the work will not be fulfilling. In each interview, your primary objective is to get invited back for another interview and to eventually secure an offer. As you progress through the process, many find that the job and organization are much more interesting than they originally thought.

10. Finish strong and follow up. Always close with a final statement that makes it crystal clear that you are genuinely excited and interested in the opportunity, including why you'd be a great hire and fit for the job and organization. Clarify next steps and the timeline. Email a thank you note less than 24 hours after the interview while it is still fresh on your mind. Articulate your fit and why they should hire you specific to the interview conversations. Every interviewer expects a thank you note from each candidate, so no note is a sign of no interest and no professionalism. To really stand out, also send a neatly hand-written thank you note soon after the interview.