INTERVIEW TIPS

One of the biggest hurdles in your job search has been cleared: you have been granted an interview with a prospective employer. Even the most seasoned professional is well-advised to review some of the essential interview Do’s and Don’ts.

The following suggestions are by no means exhaustive. There are a plethora of well written books, articles, and tapes that cover this topic. Rather, these tips are highlights of things you should keep in mind and have, in part, been specifically tailored for lawyers.

Good luck!

Before the Interview

1. Be Serious About the Opportunity

You should not pursue a job opportunity and accept an interview ‘just to see what’s out there.’ You should be open to accepting the job if what was disclosed to you about the opportunity is confirmed, the fit is good, and other factors (such as compensation) are in line with expectations.

2. Prepare, Prepare, and Prepare Some More

It is impossible to be too ready for an interview. This is particularly the case for lawyers, whose hallmark is preparation. Review publicly available information on the employer. The Internet is replete with sites (including the employer’s own) that are fertile sources of information. Talk to friends or colleagues who know something about the employer. The six degrees of separation theory is clearly in play here—you probably have connections that are only one or two steps removed. Find out with whom you will be talking and research them also, whether it entails a search on Martindale, LinkedIn, or a people search on Google.

3. Practice

There are some questions that you know will be asked (see below): the six-month gap on your resume, your biggest accomplishment, why you want the job, to name just a few. Knock these out of the park—practice your answers, especially if it is a difficult question for you to handle.
4. **Dress Appropriately**

This isn’t as easy as it used to be, as traditional attire, such as a business suit for men or suit and skirt for women may not be the answer. While you should not be under-dressed, most observers believe it is best to match the dress code that is followed by the employer, which your research should have revealed. If in doubt, err on the side of caution. In that regard, an interview is not the time to break out your wildest accessories or to go with the grunge look: be clean, well groomed, tone down the perfume and cologne, and don’t chew gum.

5. **Be On Time**

Absent catastrophe or some other extraordinary event, you absolutely have to be on time—in fact, plan on arriving 10-15 minutes early, to be safe. Your research should have revealed the best means to travel to the employer’s site—don’t scramble to figure this out on your way out the door. Assume there will be a traffic jam or that the train will be late that day!

6. **Be Ready When You Are Greeted**

Assume, once you walk in the door, that you could immediately be whisked into the interview. Thus, cell phones, PDAs, and all other electronic devices should be turned off. Your hands should be empty—no coffee, newspapers, or other materials that could be spilled or dropped should be in your grasp. If you have a briefcase, it should be closed and should not have papers spilling out of it. Be ready, with a smile on your face, to shake hands and say hello.

7. **Be Professional and Courteous to Everyone**

A prospective employer evaluates how you interact with everyone—whether it is the CEO, a junior lawyer, or the receptionist. It is a huge mistake if you “turn it on” for top brass and treat others without respect. It is axiomatic that companies and firms want team players—conduct of that sort will be conveyed to the decision maker and will doom your candidacy.

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**During the Interview**

1. **Be Upbeat, Positive, and Friendly**

While you have to be yourself, it is important to be positive. People respond better to those who project such an image, particularly since they are anticipating what it would be like to have you as a colleague, how you will do with customers and clients, and how you will react to tough times. If you can’t be friendly and upbeat now, what will you be like later?

2. **Be Honest**

Duplicity will come back to haunt you, whether it is detected at the offer stage or even years after you have joined the employer. Stories have abounded of executives, coaches, and professionals in all fields whose careers have been decimated by the discovery of a misrepresentation in their background. Don’t mislead the interviewer, even if it is a white lie. It just may be that the fact that terrifies you, such as a termination, may actually redound to
your benefit. How you handle a tough situation and demonstration of how you grew from the experience could actually separate you from others who have not experienced hard times.

3. Be Well-Mannered

While the arrival of a new millennium may have changed many things, it has not altered the need to be well mannered and to act appropriately. Greet your interviewer with a firm handshake and a ‘pleased to meet you’ introduction—leave colloquialisms at home. In that vein, do not use slang, say “yes” instead of “yeah” and otherwise be highly professional. When you enter a room, wait for the interviewer to ask you to sit down and say thank you. Do not interrupt, and thank the person again at the end of your interview.

4. Be Aware of Your Surroundings

While you don’t want to be nosy, pictures in an office, mementos, and other artifacts are there to be seen. A signed football, for example, or a young child’s painting, can be very good icebreakers that will allow you to get the conversation started on a good note.

5. Maintain Eye Contact

Failure to maintain good eye contact is a frequent criticism expressed by many interviewers. Meet your interviewer with good eye contact, but do not engage in a staring contest, as it is not a battle to see who will look away first.

6. Be Aware of Body Language

This, too, is a topic on which many tomes have been written. Some basics on your end: sit up straight, don’t fold your arms (it connotes you are closed minded and not at ease), move toward your interviewer (but don’t invade his/her space), and don’t be fidgety. Similarly, follow the clues from your interviewer: a frown in response to one of your answers or drumming of his/her fingers on the desk are signs that you are not connecting and need to get things on track.

7. Let Your Interviewer Set the Pace

Even the most no-holds-barred litigator would be well advised not to try and take charge of the interview. This raises an immediate red flag with the interviewer, who will wonder how well you can assimilate into a group. You are much better served to follow the interviewer’s lead and match his/her style. If he/she painstakingly walks you through aspects of the job, sit tight, and similarly discuss, in detail, how you would fit in. If the interview comes at you with banter and provocative questions, don’t be afraid to respond in kind.

There may be lulls in the conversation, or things may start off slowly. In such cases, getting your interviewer to talk about him/herself can be very beneficial, since it connotes interest and touches on a favorite topic of most persons: themselves. Keep such inquiries focused on business or readily apparent hobbies (such as golf if you see a framed score card) and do not probe into personal areas.

8. Be Understated
A real tension exists in any interview between “selling yourself” and maintaining humility. This need not exist, since it is expected, and desired, that you will review your accomplishments to demonstrate why you should be hired. In doing so, though, be humble and matter-of-fact as you tick off your successes. This will resonate with the interviewer, whereas braggadocio, especially with lawyers, simply does not work.

9. Be Ready For the Predictable and the Tough Questions

A list of some likely questions is attached. Take a minute to review these. Your interviewer will surely be puzzled if you stumble through your work history and cannot recall the top two or three cases or matters you have handled. Similarly, you don’t want to sweat or squirm when that tough question is asked, whether it involves the six-month gap on your resume or your three job moves in two years. Don’t be defensive—be prepared and calmly provide the answer that will quell concerns.

10. Don’t Be Critical of Others

You may have worked for Attila the Hun or toiled away night after night for the most reviled company. An interview with a prospective employer is not the time to unleash a cathartic torrent of invective against these miscreants. You inevitably will be tarred by your tale and the interviewer, no matter how sympathetic, may feel you are tainted. Instead, put a positive spin on things: talk about how you overcame some challenging situations, grew from the experience, and now feel that you are equipped to handle virtually anything that is thrown your way.

11. Don’t Disclose Confidential Information

Don’t yield to the temptation to share a juicy tidbit about a hot case from your summer internship or disclose some other confidential information that will allow you to curry favor with the prospective employer or will show how wonderful you are. This advice is doubly important for lawyers, who have a fiduciary duty to keep confidences. Think about it: won’t the prospective employer think you would similarly be careless if you joined his/her company?

12. Have Your Questions Ready But Don’t Fire Away

The first part of most interviews is one that allows the interviewer to explore your background and test how good of a fit you may be. The second stage is typically the time for you to ask questions; in fact, most interviewers will clearly ask if you have any such questions. Wait for that moment and be prepared for it. Ask cogent questions, particularly those that relate to the job and will allow you to better gauge whether this is a fit for you. In so doing, however, it is not time to live out your fantasy of being a 60 Minutes correspondent by blasting away with a series of questions that puts the interviewer on the defensive. Ask your questions, even tough ones that relate to a negative development, in a friendly manner and allow your interviewer to fully provide answers.

13. Do Not Raise Compensation

This is an area in which even some of the brightest and best make a fatal misstep. Do not raise the issue of compensation unless the interviewer first discusses it. There will be ample opportunity to explore this topic in depth—such as after an offer has been extended.
14. End on a Good Note

It is very important that you leave your interviewer on a good note. Shake hands, thank him/her for meeting with you, get a business card (so that you can follow-up), and offer to provide any further information that may be needed. It also is quite important, particularly when you are leaving an interview with a decision maker, to let him/her know (if you feel this way) that you are very interested in the job and want to work for the company. This should not hurt your bargaining power, as, unless you receive an offer, you have none. The objective is to get the offer, and, in a competitive job market, enthusiasm for the company and a sense that you very much want the job, are key factors that weigh heavily in the calculus of whether that offers will be extended.

After the Interview

1. Send Thank You Notes

It remains good form to send a note to those with whom you spoke thanking them for their time and expressing your interest in the job. In fact, you should still send the note, even if you are not interested, as it still reveals good manners and it is a small world, after all. Should you send a note on good paper or an e-mail message? You cannot go wrong with the former approach, especially with those who impress you as being “old school.” An e-mail should be fine with younger persons who use that medium and prefer communicating that way.

2. Express Your Continued Interest......But Don’t Be a Pest

Any number of things could slow down the process for you: a negative development in the company that stalls hiring, a change in the scope of the job which causes the company to interview others, or even the ascendency of another candidate. If things do drag on, you should make sure that the decision maker(s) know that you remain interested, as this will keep you in their consciousness and will demonstrate your commitment. Sending an e-mail a few weeks after you sent your thank you notes, and periodically thereafter are good ideas. Calling can put the decision maker on the spot, which should be avoided. Use your instincts and pick up on the vibes you receive to ensure that you do not overdo it, as this could impair your candidacy.

Sample Questions

There are many books, articles, and websites that provide extensive lists of questions that you are likely to encounter. Here are a few, including some that are most germane to legal interviews:

1. “Why do you want to work for us?”

As with cover letters, your response to this question should explain what you can do for the firm/organization as well as what the firm/organization can do for you. Before you even apply for a job you should have researched the firm/organization. Understanding what sets them apart from others is important to note in addition to your personal reasoning for pursuing the particular opportunity.
2. “Tell us about a difficult situation you faced and how you worked through it.”

Behavioral interviewing techniques are also gaining in popularity because they seek to identify which candidate will be the most successful in the job. This question is arguably the most often used because it can apply to any position. Have a short story prepared in advance, ideally one that not only demonstrates your abilities but also ties into the job you are considering. This could, for example, involve a litigation matter of the type that confronts the prospective employer or a matter in which your handling of it revealed a positive attribute that is important in performing the job that you are considering.

3. “Tell me about yourself…”

This is a wonderful opportunity for you to not only describe who you are, but to position yourself for the job. Succinctlycapsulize your skills, with an emphasis on those that fit the job that you are considering.

4. “What are your strengths/weaknesses?”

As to strengths, be matter-of-fact, but review those factors that make you a good lawyer, strong businessperson, and a valuable team member. Again, restrain yourself from bragging or boasting.

With respect to weaknesses, this is a question that should be carefully answered. This is not the time to blurt out that you’re chronically late, or temperamental. Rather, focus on something that the interviewer may see as a strength. Contact OCS for additional help with turning your “weakness” into a strength.

5. “Where do you see yourself in 5 or 10 years?”

Your focus should be on how you hope to develop and should hopefully paint a picture in which you would still be with the employer in 5 or 10 years. A junior law firm associate, for example, should focus on skills he/she hopes to develop, clients he/she hopes to work with at that point, and hopefully, how he/she would be on the road to partnership. An answer that suggests your real goal is to be in-house 5 years from now would obviously be problematic.

6. “If you could invite one person, dead or alive, to dinner who would it be?”
“If you were an animal, what would it be?”

Off the wall questions can come in many different forms. For many interviewers, this is intended to test how you handle being thrown off track and how facile you are. Keep your cool, do not be annoyed that you have been asked this silly question, and not one about your Law Review experience, and frame an answer. There clearly is no right answer to queries like this, so your response should hopefully be tied into your personal attributes and, if possible, something that relates to an aspect of the job.