

# Tips for a Successful Interview

By [Stephen E. Seckler](#)

The primary purpose of an interview is for an employer to measure how well you will fit into the organization. An interview also provides the interviewer an opportunity to see how well he or she can work with a particular candidate.

This is true whether you are an associate looking to make a lateral move or a partner thinking about moving a book of business to a new platform. It is equally true if you are looking to go in house for the first time or if you are trying to move into another in-house role.

In lateral hiring, it is a reasonable assumption that if you get called for an interview, the employer already has good reason to believe that you have the necessary skills and experience to perform the job. While questions will arise during the interview that help clarify your experience, what is most important at an interview is the non-verbal communication that occurs and rapport that is established. Hiring managers are looking for colleagues they want to see every day and individuals who they think will be a long term fit with their organization.

Establishing rapport at an interview is not easy. In many ways, an interview is like a blind date. Both sides want to be in a relationship; but the courtship is somewhat forced and unnatural. Since you have so little time to make a good impression, there are a few things that you should always do when interviewing for a new position. The items at the top of the list are probably already familiar to you but keep reading:

- Show up early in professional attire. Unless you are told otherwise, wear a suit (even if the workplace where you are interviewing is business casual). We've had senior partners show up in business casual and clients who are left scratching their heads.
- Be nice and respectful to everyone, especially the receptionist. They are part of the informal interviewing team. Many of our clients will ask the receptionist for feedback after the candidate has left.
- Bring extra copies of your resume or anything else that was sent to the employer. If you are a partner and don't have a resume, print out your bio and bring that.
- Review your resume beforehand and be thoroughly familiar with the contents (it is not unusual for an interviewer to ask you specific questions about something on your resume).
- Research the employer beforehand (with all the information on the web, there is no excuse for failing to do this). This means learning as much as you can beforehand about the firm's practice or the company's products or services (if it is an in-house job). If you do your research beforehand, you will be able to ask good questions at the interview (questions which demonstrate you have done your homework and that you are genuinely interested in the position).
- Try to find out in advance who will be interviewing you and research their background as well. Use law firm and company websites, LinkedIn profiles and general Google searches. If the person you are meeting is a litigator, use Lexis or

Westlaw to see some of the cases they have worked on. Each source may give you different information.

- Look for things you may have in common with the interviewer (school, where they are from or even personal interests you share). Knowing something about the interviewer's personal interests can give you more things to discuss with the interviewer – i.e. even if you don't happen to have that hobby or interest, you can still demonstrate interest by asking questions.
- Focus on the needs and concerns of the interviewer and how you can help meet those needs. Save the hard core “what's in it for me” questions for after an offer is extended or until it becomes obvious that the firm or company is very interested in your candidacy (e.g. don't ask about benefits, compensation, job perks, etc. in early rounds of interviewing). If you are working with a recruiter, they can often get that information for you.
- Decide ahead of time what are the 2-3 points you would like to get across at the interview. You will probably not have time for more. The “kitchen sink” approach of giving 20 reasons why you should be hired is less effective than going with your best assets (e.g. “I am a strong writer; I have written articles for MCLE/the ABA, etc.,” “I am a great negotiator and have had responsibility for negotiating million dollar deals;”, “I have \$800,000 in originations but I feel like I can grow this significantly with the right platform”; “The partners I work with have been giving me great feedback and tell me I'm on partnership track”).
- If you did not do so when you created your resume, prepare a selected list of transactions or client matters that you have worked on (or a litigation summary) and be prepared to discuss your role in these transactions (or cases). This is also a good exercise to help you focus on what you really want from a job.
- Listen, Listen, Listen. As lawyers, we are not trained to listen. Rather, we are taught to advocate or counsel. But being a good listener is probably the best way to develop rapport. A good sign that you are developing a good rapport with the interviewer is that the interviewer is talking 80% of the time. Ask open ended questions and listen carefully to the answers. If you are asked a question, ask clarifying questions to show you are listening and to be sure you are answering the right question. Make good eye contact and use body language that shows you are paying attention (e.g. nodding). Paraphrase some information that has been given to you by the interviewer (e.g. “It sounds like ABC Corporation sends you a lot of business;” “I bet your litigation department will be happy when the ABC case finally goes to trial”).
- Realize that you are probably starting from scratch with each person that you meet – i.e. more often than not, the interviewers will not talk to each other until after they have all met you. So, don't be afraid to repeat yourself from interview to interview.
- Be prepared with some well-rehearsed answers to interviewing question standards (e.g. “where do you see yourself in 5 years?” “why did you go to law school?” “why do you want to leave your current job?” – hint: answer with something positive that draws you to this employer rather than something that makes you want to leave your current firm – “what are your greatest strengths and weaknesses?”). While these questions may seem less relevant if you have 15+ years in practice, you may still get asked similar questions.

- If you lack experience in a particular area where the employer has articulated a need, try to show the employer how other experience that you have had is analogous to the experience they would like to see. Explain how you have taken on new challenges in your career and that you are a fast learner. Lengthy explanations about experience you lack are likely to sound defensive so try to keep it relatively brief.
- Don't make assumptions about what the employer is looking for. Ask questions to find out. Sometimes, different interviewers are looking for different things in a candidate. I recently spoke with a candidate who assumed that there was a lot of travel in the job. He planned to tell the interviewer that he liked to travel. In truth, there is little travel in the job.
- Don't bad mouth your current employer. Nobody wants to hire a disgruntled attorney and saying negative things about your current employer raises the inference that you would not hesitate to do the same if you were hired by this employer and things were not working out.
- Send a short thank you note to everyone you spoke with right after the meeting even if the meeting was arranged by a head hunter. Underscore your best-selling points and try to refer to something specific that the interviewer mentioned (about the firm, about a personal interest, about what they are looking for).

A good interviewer will try to make you feel comfortable at the beginning of the interview by discussing neutral topics and by making you feel welcome (“Is it still raining outside?” “Did you have trouble finding us?” “Can I get you something to drink?”) But the truth is that many professionals do not have good interviewing skills and may actually feel as insecure as you. Don't be surprised if you have little opportunity to get a word in or if the questions that the interviewer asks seem trite (“Why did you decide to go to law school?”). Adapt your communication style to theirs and be responsive. If they seem to like short focused answers, give them short focused answers. If they seem to like the questions that you are asking, keep asking questions. In short, try to make them feel comfortable if they do not seem to be able to make you feel comfortable.

Finally, show a lot of interest in the firm/job. You will have many chances to decide that you do not want to make the move. Articulating ambivalence at an interview is a good way to insure that you will not be invited back and it may even be insulting to the interviewer.

## **21 Questions You May (or May Not) Be Asked on An Interview**

**1. “Tell me about yourself.”** *Comment: this question is intended to break the ice. Be careful not to ramble and try to mention something about your professional life that is relevant to the job in question. It is also nice to include some personal information. Stay away from potentially inflammatory or controversial topics like politics or religion.*

**2. “Why did you go to law school?”** *Comment: even if you are 20 years out of law school, you should still have a good answer for this (just in case).*

**3. “What are your greatest strengths and weaknesses?”** *Tip: try to mention a strength that is relevant to the job. When discussing weaknesses, try to address a flaw which you have already done something about (e.g. "In the past I've had some difficulty with organization, but ever since I took a time management course, I have become much more organized.") Another strategy is to identify a weakness that might be perceived as a strength (e.g. "I'm kind of a perfectionist, though I know when to let go so the job can get done").*

**4. “Why do you want to leave your current job?”** *Tip: focus on why the current position sounds attractive and avoid negative statements about your current or past employer.*

**5. “Describe a difficult transaction you were involved with. What was the difficulty and how did you handle it?”**

**6. “Why do you want to work for us?”** *Comments: employers like to hire individuals who are excited about the company or firm – not employees who are disgruntled and unhappy at their current workplace. On the other hand, you may not yet know enough about the position to answer this question. You might want to get more clarification from the interviewer before you answer the question.*

**7. “What are the responsibilities of your current position?”** *Comment: if you don't know what the responsibilities are for the job in question, you might want to get some clarification. This way, you can tailor your answer to demonstrate that you have the necessary skills.*

**8. “Dealing with a difficult client is something we all go through as lawyers. Can you describe a recent situation where you had to deal with a difficult client? What steps did you take to address the situation?”**

**9. “What are your greatest accomplishments?”** *Tip: stick to professional accomplishments.*

**10. “Who is your favorite author?”** *Comments: this can be a tough question for someone who doesn't read. Actually, the best way to answer the question is truthfully. (e.g. "I'm not a big reader, but my favorite movie director is ..." or simply discuss some other interest of yours).*

**11. “Name your favorite attorney and what you admire about this individual.”**

**12. “What are the qualities of a good secretary? Paralegal?”**

**13. “Describe your work style.”**

**14. “Tell me about a time when you disagreed with your supervising attorney. What was the nature of the disagreement and what did you do about it?”** *Tip: stay away from saying anything negative about your former boss.*

**15. “Where do you see yourself in five years?”**

**16. “What would your clients say about you? Your boss? Your assistant?”**

**17. “Why should I hire you?”**

**18. “Describe a situation where you were faced with conflicting priorities. How did you determine what was important and the order in which you would get each task done?”**

**19. “Aren’t you overqualified for this position?”** *Tip: if you are, don't try to hide this fact. Instead, give a logical reason why you are still interested.*

**20. “Do you have any experience doing ‘X’” (where ‘X’ is something you do not have experience doing)?** *Tip: demonstrate how you have done things that are like ‘X’.*

**21. “Things can get pretty busy around here. Can you to be an example of how you are able to cope with setting priorities in another setting?”**



*Marketing and Career Coach to Attorneys. 20 Years of Success in Helping Attorneys to Advance their Careers*

[LinkedIn](#) • 617-244-3234 (o) • 617-851-2319 (c) • [CounseltoCounsel Blog](#)

Please listen to my podcast:

