Seckler
ATTORNEY COACHING
steve@seckler.com www.seckler.com
617.851.2319

Tips for a Successful Interview (rev. 1/25/2025)

By Stephen E. Seckler

"The only thing that matters is what happens on the field. Preparation is essential, but once the game starts, you have to adjust to what's happening in front of you. Bill Belichick" *Former head coach for the New England Patriots*

"Everyone has a plan until they get punched in the mouth." *Mike Tyson*

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 with 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. This is particularly true if you make it past the first round of interviews.

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.

Get in the Zone Before Showing Up

Most people find an interview stressful. Stress, however, is not necessarily a bad thing. You want to have a "performance edge" when you show up. At the same time, you don't want to be so anxious that you can't think straight.

Instead, you want to project an optimal level of enthusiasm and confidence when you show up.

Substantive interview preparation is one way you can control your stress (read on for tips on preparation.) Getting in the "zone" can also help.

When I say, "getting in the zone", I'm talking about mindset. What you actually say in an interview is less important than how you say it (and how you react when you do not have a good answer to a question.) The important thing is to be "present".

If you have a mindfulness practice (yoga, meditation, focusing on your breathing for a few minutes before the interview begins), that can help you get ready. You can also use these techniques during the interview (in a non-obvious way of course).

If this is not part of your daily ritual, find some way to get yourself centered. For some, that might mean going to the gym in the morning. For others, it could mean listening to some music that gets you a pumped up (or at the very least, out of your head). A walk around the block can also help.

Do some positive self-talk. Talk to yourself in the second person like a good friend is talking to you. Plan to focus on the positive.

Remember to keep the rest of your job search moving forward. If you have contacts you mean to reach out to, do that before you head to the interview. If you have any jobs to apply to, get those applications out if you can.

If you are waiting to hear back from an employer where you have already interviewed, drop a quick note to say that you are continuing to interview at other firms; but you remain very interested in their firm.

Knowing that you have other options will reduce some of the pressure.

[Note: If you do get an offer but you are more interested in another opportunity, use that as leverage. Let the other employer know that you have another offer, but you remain very interested in their firm/company. Let them know when you need to respond to the offer.]

Interviews Are Typically Like Blind Dates

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. If your interview is virtual, the first few suggestions may not apply:

- 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). I'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 my clients will ask the receptionist for feedback after the candidate has left.
- Turn off your phone or put it on silent.
- 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 and not just looking for a job).
- 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 (see If You Don't Like Sports, Try Becoming a Sports Fan Fan).
- Be authentic. Don't pretend you like sports if you don't. If you have a sense of humor, it is okay to let that show (in a tasteful way). Religion and politics are generally off the table. But note that there are times when certain topics that seem taboo may actually play to your favor (see Building Your Business Relationships through Religion, Politics, and Humor). If you are interested in pro bono, diversity, training opportunities, it is okay to ask about those topics towards the end of the interview (if the subject hasn't come up).
- 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 am a great negotiator and have had responsibility for negotiating million dollar deals"; "I have $400,000 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.
- Use anecdotes to illustrate the points you want to make. Keep them brief. As lawyers, we tend to get caught up in the details. But remember that you are having a conversation. You are not trying to "preserve the record" and convey the minutia. Simplify your stories so that they engage the other person's interest and curiosity and amplify what you want the interviewer to know about you.
- **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"). See Active Listening-Do I Really Need to Say This?
- Smile
- 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 (see below for more sample 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 (e.g. I haven't done much insurance coverage work but I've handled a lot of contract litigation.)
- Similarly, if you are asked a question and do not know the answer, it is okay to say, "can I get back to you"? It is also okay to pause, reflect, and even take a moment to center yourself by focusing on your breath.

- If you say something you regret or forget to say something, rather than perseverating on that, “get back on the train” and keep going. Just like a trial, there are no perfect interviews. All you can do is try to avoid “reversable error”.
- If you have something negative to communicate (e.g. you failed the bar, you were let go from a job, etc.), you should also avoid going into great detail. Have a tight and well-rehearsed explanation. The employer needs to know “the truth, and nothing but the truth”, but it doesn’t have to be the “whole truth” as long as it doesn’t distort the truth (e.g. “The job wasn’t a good fit.” You don’t need to also offer that the boss was a jerk, you were breaking up with your girlfriend at the time, or you hated the clients.)
- If the interviewer presses you on something negative (e.g. like why you left), be truthful.
- 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 was 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 headhunter. 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.

Prepare Some Questions in Advance

A good interviewer will always ask you if you have any questions. Make sure you come prepared. Here are some things you can ask to get the interviewer talking (these should all be in your own “voice”):

- Who is your ideal candidate? (this is a good question to ask earlier in the interview so that you can customize your later answers.)

- Why did you decide to bring me in for an interview (or Why do you think they decided to bring me in for an interview—if it is unclear whether the interviewer was part of that decision—e.g. if they are an associate and not a partner or someone in HR).
- What does it take to be successful at this firm/company?
- What do you like about working for [name of firm/company]?
- What's on your desk that I can help you with right now (if the hiring manager is conducting the interview and if you will clearly be doing direct work for the individual).

Your pre-interview research can also help you figure out some good questions. Mention something you read about the interviewer or about the firm. Being a good listener during the interview can also generate more questions for you to ask.

Tips for Zoom or Virtual Interviews

Many companies were conducting virtual interviews before the pandemic, but the use of Zoom and other platforms increased dramatically after March 2020. While a lot of the same rules apply, there is some nuance that is worth considering. In the real world, body language plays an important role in communicating to the interviewer your level of interest, confidence, and social skills. This is harder to demonstrate on a computer screen. If you find yourself on a Zoom interview:

- Log on a few minutes early to make sure you can download anything that needs to be downloaded and to make sure your computer is configured properly for whatever platform the firm is using. Sometimes you have the option of testing it out a few days before.
- Dress like you would for a live interview. You only get one chance to make a first impression.
- Make sure you are well lit. That means you should have front lighting and not back lighting. There are relatively inexpensive lights you can buy for this purpose if you the lighting is not good in the space where you will be interviewing. You can also sit in front of a window.
- Try to have a background that is solid or not very busy. Busy backgrounds can be distracting. It is okay to have your real office, bedroom or living room in the background; but make sure there is not too much visible clutter. Sometimes, items in the background can be a conversation starter (items in your background or their background.) Just make sure there is nothing too controversial in view.
- Avoid using dramatic virtual backgrounds that can distract.
- Consider wearing a headset for better audio quality. Make sure to test out whatever you are using in advance.
- Try making eye contact when you are speaking. In a virtual environment (and until the technology improves) this means looking at your camera rather than looking at the interviewer. While this may feel very unnatural, if you look at the other person on the screen, you will appear to be looking down.
- If the platform you are on allows for it, hide your "self-view". Once you have centered yourself on the screen and cleared off any food that is stuck to your shirt

collar, the last thing you want to be doing is looking at yourself. It would be like bringing a mirror to a live interview.

- Make sure your face fills a lot of the screen so that the interviewer can focus on you, not what is hanging on your wall or sitting on your bookshelf.
- If you have to look at something (notes, etc.), say something to the interviewer so they don't wonder why you are looking away (*excuse me, I just need to look at my notes for a moment).*
- Be extra sensitive to brevity. Zoom makes it harder for most of us to concentrate so keeping your answers short is likely to do a better job of holding the interviewer's attention.
- Close any apps that may display alerts on your screen
- If you anticipate there may be some household noise because you are doing the interview while others are home, say something in advance to the interviewer.
- Try to be a little more animated than you would be in real life. Do this with appropriate facial expression. While being animated is helpful, it is also best not to move around too much in a virtual interview. Hand gestures that might work in person are hard to pull off on a computer screen. Turning your head back and forth to look around a table when there are multiple interviewers doesn't work in this environment. Keep your head movement to a minimum, even if there is a group of interviewers on the screen.

Finally, regardless of whether you are doing a Zoom interview or a live interview, 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 ensure that you will not be invited back, and it may even be insulting to the interviewer.

22 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 unless you see something in their office that validates that you share similar views*

2. "Why did you 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 the weakness and say but…. (e.g. "I haven't done real estate lending, but I've done a lot of asset based lending").*

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. In other words, focus on the "pull" factors of the new job rather than the "push" factors of your existing or last job.*

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, by 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?" *Tip: make sure that in your answer, the job you are applying for clearly makes sense in your 5-year plan. Also, make sure you don't leave the impression that you are only interested in the job in order to move on to the job you really want.*

16. "What would your clients say about you? Your boss? Your colleagues? Your assistant?"

17. "Why should we 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?"

22. "What do you think might make you different from other people we might be interviewing?"

Conclusion

Interviewing is one of life's more stressful activities. There is a lot that is not in your control and depending on your circumstances, the stakes can feel high. Despite all of your preparation, things may not go the way you expect. But all that preparation you do will ensure that you can be nimble when it is game time! Most importantly, try to be authentic and have fun!