

How to shine in job interviews

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Job interviews combine so many different kinds of stress that Interview Coaching has become a niche profession of its own, in much demand by beginners and top players alike.

My view is that you can dispel about half the stress by simply reminding yourself what actually is an interview. In fact, it's a sales pitch in the form of a conversation - not just the informal discussion it appears to be. It is true that your conversational style will be under scrutiny, and you should try to work in two or three minutes of uninterrupted narrative, as a sample of your presentational delivery.

But your actual brief is to promote your potential benefits to the organisation, in a form that the employer will recognise and remember, and to suggest your likely advantages over other applicants. And although it is not a scripted recital (because you don't know what the questions will be), the key points should be itemised and memorised, and you should try to deliver all of them during the course of the interview.

This obviously needs preparation, not only with a few rehearsed mini-speeches that you hope you'll get a chance to deliver, but in the actual listing and delivery of those key, personal strengths. For it is remarkable how many people simply don't know what their own strengths and weaknesses are.

Here in Dubai, I once had to coach a high-powered but nervous applicant called Sabri. He was a market analyst in the soft-drinks business, who admitted he was never able to convincingly deliver his strengths, at interviews. His personality was not engaging. In particular, he had no sense of humour whatsoever. (Before one interview, he had been badly advised to rehearse a comic anecdote, but it fell hopelessly flat.)

I told him that humour was a somewhat over-rated virtue, liable to distract from the key issues. The main priority was always to establish his competitive strengths over his competition for the job.

His first answers were rather hesitant. So I got him to recount the stages of his career in sequence. It appeared that he had a gift for reading more into market research than other people did, though he attributed this to hard work, rather than talent. In particular, he had been able to demonstrate major export potential for some of the children's drinks, and these had started selling well abroad.

To me this sounded like "creative plus reliable" - an uncommon mix of qualities, much sought after in the marketing world. So I suggested that he rehearse his pitch around these key benefits. He was still slow and under-confident, so I just told him to memorise that three-word phrase "creative plus reliable" and make sure he slipped it into the dialogue at some point.

Later, he told me that that single short phrase had changed the whole climate of the interview, and that he had felt encouraged to develop the theme in a far more convincing way than he had thought possible.

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