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Landing gear

New grads: Equip yourselves with the interview knowledge to get the offer

Take a stroll along any college campus and it's apparent which students are in their final semester. They're usually the ones with an armful of books, mile-long to-do list in hand, frantically trying to squeeze in time for exams, final projects and last-minute get-togethers. Add to that the pressure of finding a full-time job and you've got yourself one stressed college student.



► Researching the job and the company and dressing the part are two key steps to making sure you are relaxed and confident during a job interview.

To alleviate some of the pressure of going into an interview for the first time, it's wise to take a few minutes to prepare yourself.

Essentially, a job interview is one big sales pitch - and the product being sold is you. That's why dressing the part, doing your homework on the company, and clearly outlining your skills, experience and potential is crucial.

Michelle Tillis Lederman, founder of Executive Essentials, a corporate training and coaching company in New York, says knowing the basic structure of a job interview will help build confidence and allow you to anticipate what the potential employer wants from you.

"Rapport-building sets the tone [and is] an opportunity to show your personality," she explains. "Introductory questions start with easy or overview questions. The core is a substantive segment where [employers] gather all relevant information and seek contrary evidence. This is when you show your strengths and ability to communicate clearly."

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The next stage of the interview process consists of a candidate question and answer, which allows prospective employees to get his or her questions answered.

This is an opportunity to show that you have researched the company, understand their needs and explain how you fit into the picture.

"The closing is the last-chance stage that ensures the employer knows enough about you to make a decision," says Tillis Lederman. "Did you get to highlight yourself? Ensure you know what to expect regarding next steps, timing and how to follow up."

"Following up" could include an e-mail, but most experts advise sending a handwritten thank-you note to everyone you interviewed with.

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Additionally, be sure to ask when you can expect to hear from them, or offer to send a follow-up e-mail in two weeks (or sooner) to get an idea of where you stand. This is often a wiser choice as many hiring managers have hundreds of applicants for one position.

Getting ready

A common element many first-time interviewees worry about is the questions he or she will be asked. While there is no standard set of questions that all employers ask, a little preparation can give you some insight into what may be asked of you.

"The way you respond to questions is often the difference-maker between equally qualified candidates," says Jim Bolton, CEO of Ridge Associates in Cazenovia, N.Y.

"Be prepared to answer questions about how you reflect the company's mission and values. Check the company Web site and try to find the mission and values statements, and, when you're in the interview, define the term for your audience and highlight your relevant experience."

Bolton adds that knowing someone who works at the company is always a plus and advises asking an alumnus of your college for an informational interview.

But despite who you know, he says, hiring managers are less concerned about "filling a spot on the roster" than they are of finding the best possible candidate who fits in well with the organization and will be a valued employee for years to come.

Dress the part

Certainly, a solid resume is a must-have for any potential employee, but etiquette and wardrobe are just as important, despite what some might think. Kathleen J. McCuen, director of career services at DeVry University in Addison, Ill., recommends wearing a suit and tie for men, and a dress or suit for women.

It's always best to err on the conservative side, so minimal jewelry and proper dress shoes are best.

Address your interview etiquette in a similar manner - answer questions fully, but don't talk too much.

"If you're sitting in the waiting room stand when the interviewer comes to get you," suggests McCuen. "Once in an office or interview room, wait to be seated until directed to do so. Bring additional copies of your resume, treat everyone with courtesy and do your research on the company."

McCuen's last point is an important one. Researching the company prior to your interview will help you to get a better idea of what the employer is looking for and how you can fit into the mix.

It's not necessary to memorize the company's entire history, but taking note of a few key points is well worth it.

"Be brief and to the point," adds Bolton of Ridge Associates. "Always remember that it's how you model their values and culture in the interview itself that will win the day."