

BASICS OF INTERVIEWING – WORDS

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What To Say

Honesty is not just the best policy, it is the only policy. Please, be certain at all times all information you give is accurate. There are no exceptions to this rule. If there is something you cannot or will discuss, just say, “I’m sorry, but that is something I cannot discuss.” and be prepared for the potential consequences of that statement.

Remember how small the legal community is and, if there is one thing most lawyers like to do, it is T-A-L-K. This “open communication” can work both to your benefit and your detriment. What you say and to whom can help build your image or mark you as a complainer, bearer of tales or breaker of confidences.

Examine yourself and your resume carefully. Know what you want to tell about yourself and how it relates to what you can do to enhance their practice. Do not focus on what this new job will do for you, but also do not sound too arrogant about “what I can do for you.” This is a fine line to walk, and you might write out and practice your response before the interview. You might also try out your answer on a skilled recruiter or trusted friend, one who will tell you the truth, not what s/he thinks you want to hear.

Example: “My prior experience in bankruptcy work coordinates well with the RTC work this position would entail. I have managed successfully more than two dozen bankruptcy cases on my own and assisted in the preparation of probably fifty more. Your firm’s strong leadership in dealing with RTC issues is one of the aspects of the position that first attracted me. I feel I can contribute my background and skills in this area in a significant way to the firm.”

If you are the interviewer, be sure you have prepared your questions, too. It still comes as surprise when we speak with someone after an interview who comments on the interviewer's lack of preparation. “Do you have any questions,” is a question you really should ask only once, and, “What should I ask you?” is a terrible question.

Be succinct but complete in your answers. Stay on the track of the question asked. Watch for lengthy answers, where the point may be lost. On the other hand, “yes” or “no” is seldom enough of a reply. And ... remember the old quotation, “No one ever lost a job by listening.”

Do not be afraid to show your enthusiasm for the firm/position. We have never received a complaint that an applicant was too interested in a firm. But, be certain your enthusiasm is genuine and in proportion to the situation. Enthusiasm does not mean you need to sound like “Chatty Chuck” or “Chatty Cathy.” Do not confuse conversation with chatter.

Do not **ever** assume a position is yours. Until a clear job offer has been made, you are a candidate, nothing more. No matter how encouraging your interviewers may have been, no matter how well you think things went, no matter what number interview it is. There may be someone else out there every bit as attractive as you. One of the most frustrating and often saddest situations we see is the able attorney perceived as “cocky,” “arrogant,” “taking this position for granted,” “complacent” about the need to “sell” him/herself. Save all of the “me” questions, (benefits, work hours, vacations, secretarial support, etc.) until the job offer has been made. The firm/corporation wants to see what you have to offer **them**, not what you want **from** them.

On the other side, no matter how enthusiastic the interviewee may seem, s/he probably is interviewing with other firms or corporations, some of which actually may be as attractive as yours. Don't take it for granted, even in times when it is a job buyer's market, that someone will accept your job offer if you haven't made the effort to tell them honestly and enthusiastically about the job and about your firm/corporation.

There is one other area we would like to ignore, but really cannot, as it is a question that arises again and again. "What do I do if an inappropriate or illegal question is asked?" Despite local, state and federal laws, not to mention professionalism or even simple good taste, there still are attorneys and firms (to a lesser extent, it would seem, corporations) who insist on asking questions about marital status, family plans, sexual orientation, etc. Often these interviewers will claim they are not asking such questions for illegal reasons, but just to be "friendly," or "to get to know the applicant."

There is no good or simple answer we can give you about such questions, so you should think carefully about what you might say. Such questions seem to appear more often for women than for men, although today more men are being asked about family time issues and related questions. You should prepare yourself with some answers, particularly about your marital status and family plans.

Some experts recommend defusing a particular issue by bringing it up yourself and getting it over with. Others will say to make it clear you refuse to answer because it is an illegal question. Unfortunately, the latter approach may cost you a job. You may say, "Well, I wouldn't want to work with them anyway." But, you might end up throwing away an excellent chance for a really good job because of one stupid question by one thoughtless individual. Think very, very carefully about how you want to handle these sorts of questions.

On the other hand, a blatantly sexual overture in the guise of interviewing must be stopped at the onset. If necessary, ask immediately to see the hiring coordinator or a more senior partner. It doesn't happen very often any more, but there are still reports of the, "Let's continue this interview over drinks and some dinner and see where it goes" comment to an interviewee, and, on at least one occasion, to an interviewer.