



By Veronica Pawlowski

## Five Considerations for Even the Most Confident Attorney

Throughout my years as a practicing attorney and now as a legal recruiter, I have come to realize that while some people are inherently confident about their interviewing skills, most people get very nervous about interviews. Thus, for the vast majority of us, it goes without saying that interview preparation is essential, helpful, and absolutely necessary.

But confident attorneys beware! The bottom line is that no matter how great you believe your interviewing skills are and no matter how many interviews you have “nailed” in the past, *everyone* benefits from proper preparation. Just as any competent attorney prepares for a client meeting, so too must the job-seeking attorney prepare for the interview.

As a helpful starting point, the following are five issues that even the most confident attorney should consider when preparing for an upcoming interview.

### 1. How will you answer the question “Why are you looking?”

Everyone who has ever made a lateral move has had to answer this question. It comes in many forms: “Why are you looking?” “What brings you here today?” “So, tell me about your situation.” Whatever form it takes, we all know it is coming. Yet attorneys are just as likely to struggle with this question as they are to struggle with the question that comes out of left field. Why is that?

One reason might be that the reasons for leaving a job often exist at a “gut” level. In other words, in your mind you know why you want to leave. But when it is time to articulate your reasons, the words do not always come out as smoothly as they exist in your mind.

Another reason this question can be difficult to answer is the “trying to impress” factor. Even if you *have* articulated your reasons for moving, chances are you have done so to a spouse, friend, or someone else you trust. But in an interview you are sitting in front of someone who is evaluating the words that come out of your mouth. Thus, you can’t very well say, “I want to leave my current position because I want to bill less hours” or “I don’t get along with the people in my group.”

Whatever the reason, attorneys struggle with this question. The best way to ensure that you do not fall into that trap is to prepare, prepare, prepare! Put *all* of the reasons you want to move down on paper and work on how you can articulate those reasons to a potential employer. And make sure you practice saying them out loud. Do you sound sincere? If not, you need to go back to the pen and paper. Repeat until the words that come out of your mouth are honest, are reasonable, and demonstrate that you have given this move the thought that it deserves.

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## **2. Do you have any nervous ticks and/or habits?**

Whenever I am nervous (or deep in thought), I twirl my hair. When I was a kid, I did it when I was having a hard time falling asleep. I did it during my SATs and every other important exam I took. I did it so much during law school that whenever I got started, one of my friends would say, "Oh, there goes Veronica, winding up her brain."

But I know myself well enough to know when I am going to launch into the hair twirling. So when I was fresh out of law school and working at the D.A.'s office, I used to wear my hair tied back whenever I was in trial. The same went for interviews – my hair was always tied back.

The moral of the story is "Know your nervous habits and control them." It sounds truly simple, but the stories I have heard of nervous ticks that sent interviews into downward spirals are endless. To name just a few: non-stop pen clicking; restless legs; talking with the hands; darting eyes; one word or expression that is used over and over again ("to be honest," "let me tell you," "actually," etc.); cracking fingers; and my personal favorite, hair twirling. These are all things that people do, and most often they don't even realize they are doing them. So know yourself and have a plan for controlling those nervous habits.

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## **3. Be ready to *listen* to the questions.**

To some extent, all interviews are predictable. Why are you looking to leave? What do you think makes you a good fit for our firm? What are your strengths? And so on and so forth. Now, add the fact that as attorneys we tend to think we know it all and can anticipate what comes next. The end result: even the most polished and gracious attorneys are capable of blowing interviews because they do not listen to questions before answering them.

Equally important is the need to answer the actual question that is asked. Again, as good as we are at anticipating what we will be asked, we also think we can anticipate what the interviewer wants to hear. Doing so can result in an absolute failure to actually answer the question.

The key to avoiding this is simple: listen to the question and take time to think about your answer before you start talking. Although a good interview should feel like a dialogue and not like a deposition, you should never find yourself interrupting the interviewer or talking over him or her. During your interview preparation take some time to literally visualize the interview and, in doing so, take care to visualize a scenario in which you carefully wait for the question to be asked. During the interview be extra mindful of any tendency you may have to answer the question you anticipated rather than the question that was asked.

By simply being mindful of the importance of listening, you will be much more likely to actually listen and answer the question that is asked.

## **4. What will you wear?**

As law firms and companies across the country shift from ultra-conservative to business casual, the unavoidable temptation is to question the need for formal interview attire.

Don't do it. Unless the hiring contact for the firm specifically instructs the attorney-candidate to wear anything other than a conservative suit, all traditional rules apply when it comes to interview attire. Even if the person who interviews you is in jeans and a polo, remember that *you* are the one asking to be hired.

When it comes to interview preparation, I highly recommend planning what you are going to wear so that you are not scrambling on the day of the interview. Even if you have 20 navy blue suits in your closet, identify the one you plan to wear and make sure it is dry-cleaned and lint-free. When in doubt, dress as if you are appearing before the most conservative judge in your district.

## **5. Do your homework!**

Making a connection with your interviewer is crucial. However, many people think that if they are “good with people,” the connection will happen naturally. While having natural rapport with people is a key factor, there is much more than that to a successful interview. Today’s job market is highly competitive, and as much as interviewers want to know that you are easy to get along with, they also want to know that you have given serious thought to your move and, more importantly, to *their* firm.

Thus, beyond thinking of how you will answer common interview questions and what you will wear, you must take the time to gather information that will enable you to convey interest in the particular opportunity before you. Know your interviewer; know the firm; and know what questions you are going to ask about the firm and the practice you seek to join.

Remember: interview preparation is absolutely essential in today’s job market. Do not allow yourself to fall into the trap of thinking you can “wing” it – your interviewer will know that you have done so and will undoubtedly conclude that you are not truly invested in your job search. By taking the time to think about the five issues presented here, you will know that you have covered the essentials of interview preparation, and that alone will be a tremendous confidence booster.

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