Preparing for and Succeeding at On-Campus Interviews

By Dawn V. Valencia, M.A., Director, University Outreach/Veterans Certification
Workshop Goals

• To provide an overview of recommended activity leading up to the interview.
• To review what to wear – and not wear, and how to physically prepare for the interview.
• To discuss what to say and not say at the beginning of an interview.
• To discuss selection factors taking place during the interview.
• To recommend an appropriate follow-up strategy for after the interview has ended.
Goal #1 To provide an overview of recommended activity leading up to the interview.

A: Read the entire listing in the bulletin:

• Job Summary: Read what the job does. Consider whether or if the duties match your personal interests.

• Essential Qualifications: The primary job skills/requirements are listed within the job description, generally in the order desired.

• Preferred Qualifications: All other things being equal, the candidate who meets the preferred qualifications has the advantage over the applicant who meets only the essential requirements.
Goal #1 To provide an overview of recommended activity leading up to the interview. (cont.)

B: Prepare a cover letter and a résumé that articulate how you are qualified and what the prospective employer will get if you are hired.

• Spend as much time on a well-crafted cover letter as you do on a résumé.
• Remember that the when your application material is screened, only information provided in the application is considered.
• Do not rely on the hiring manager/HR screening recruiter to “connect the dots” on how your skills can be transferred to the requirements of the position.
• Keep in mind that the hiring manager cannot consider information you do not provide.
Goal #1 To provide an overview of recommended activity leading up to the interview. (cont.)

C: Research the office where the position is being offered.

- Look at their website and/or social media pages.
- If possible, walk past the workspace prior to the day your interview. How are people dressed? How do people appear to interact with one another? What is the foot traffic like? How are (or are) members of the public greeted?
- Most managers will be unwilling to speak with you once a search has commenced. If you are interested in working in a particular office and want to talk with a hiring manager about career paths, make your request before a job hits the bulletin.
Goal #2 To review what to wear – and not wear, and how to physically prepare for the interview.

A: Consider that even if this is not your first chance to make an impression with an office, it is your chance to demonstrate how seriously you take the opportunity to interview.

• Consider wearing more conservative attire in solid colors such as blues, blacks, browns, whites, etc. Err on the side of covering yourself vs. revealing cleavage and/or wearing clothes that are too form fitting (too tight).

• Avoid high heels unless you are comfortable and experienced in walking in them. Avoid flip-flops or anything resembling flip-flops no matter how jeweled or sparkly they may be.

• If you choose to accessorize your outfit, avoid accessories that make noise, will tempt you to play with them when you are nervous, or that will distract the search committee.
Goal #2 To review what to wear – and not wear, and how to physically prepare for the interview (cont).

- If your nails are painted, ensure your manicure is neat and unobtrusive.
- Avoid perfume or strongly scented soaps the day of your interview.
- If you smoke, avoid smoking immediately before an interview, and ensure your clothes are appropriately aired out before your interview.
- Iron your clothes the night before your interview and/or remove tags from new clothing.
- You do not need to wear new clothes, but you do want to wear clothes that are nicer than what you would wear on an every day basis.
Goal #2 To review what to wear – and not wear, and how to physically prepare for the interview (cont).

• Gather a clean notebook, pencil/pen, a clean copy of your résumé and cover letter, a bottle of water, and something to carry everything in prior to your interview. Write down or type any questions you may have about the job or the department.

• Plan to arrive 10 – 15 minutes before your interview. Any earlier may be awkward, any later may not leave a good impression.

• Before you depart for the interview, TURN OFF YOUR CELL PHONE.

• If it is cold, or if your hands are cold because you are nervous, buy and hold a cup of hot coffee/tea.
Goal #2 To review what to wear – and not wear, and how to physically prepare for the interview (cont).

• Chew gum (preferably mint-flavored) for at least 15 minutes before your interview to relax your face and to moisten your mouth, but throw the gum away before entering the interview site.

• Practice, preferably out loud, the answer to the following question: “How do your skills and experience make you an excellent match for this position?” If your answer is longer than 3 – 5 minutes, do it again. Your response should contain information about your skills, an indication of your enthusiasm for working in the position, and it should emphasize what the hiring manager/department will get if you are selected for the position rather than how it will assist you to meet a personal/professional goal.

• Talk to potential references in advance of your interview. Share with them the job description and your application material if possible.
Goal #3 To discuss what to say and not say at the beginning of an interview.

Helpful Hints:

• Smile

• Even if (or especially if) you are familiar with one or more members of the search committee, prepare a 1 minute (or less) self-introduction that includes your name, some kind of statement about your enthusiasm for this specific position, and at least one reason why you applied for the position.

• Respond to small talk with small talk. In other words, be polite and friendly, but stick to non-committal responses and to general topics such as weather, campus parking, comments about accessories, etc. It is better to under-share during the small talk portion of an interview than to over-share.
Goal #3 To discuss what to say and not say at the beginning of an interview. (cont.)

Helpful Hints to Avoid:

• Do not try to negotiate salary, time schedules, or any other job factors before or during the interview.

• Do not respond to a question until the entire question has been asked – and unless you are confident that you understand what is actually being asked. (The correlation to this is do not be afraid to ask for clarification on a question)

• Do not speak ill of your current office, and/or of any current (or former) co-workers.
Goal #4 To discuss selection factors taking place during the interview.

What is going on with the search committee?

- The search committee has reviewed the credentials for many applicants. One of the primary goals during the interview is to connect a person with the paper credentials.
- If the search committee has had one or more interviews already, they will be comparing you to any candidates who came before you. (Always volunteer to interview early in the process)
- The selection committee has been given at least 3 primary selection criteria for the position. Other factors/criteria will be considered, but decisions will be made based on the pre-determined criteria.
Goal #4 To discuss selection factors taking place during the interview. (cont.)

What is going on with the search committee (cont.)?

• The search committee members may be considering the work they are not getting done while they are in the interview. They will be most respectful of those candidates who appear to genuinely enthusiastic about the job, who most clearly (and succinctly) respond to questions, and they are looking for the interpersonal skill set that most closely matches the need of the department.

• You may be nervous, they are likely not. They may be sleepy, bored, hot, cold, distracted, etc. Set a high enthusiasm level for your presentation and they are likely to be enthusiastic with you.
Goal #5 To recommend an appropriate follow-up strategy for after the interview has ended.

• You will almost always be given the opportunity to ask your own questions at the end of the interview. As mentioned in Goal #2, prepare at least some questions in advance. If all of your questions are answered during the interview, fine. If not, ask them at this time. Do not ask questions for the sake of asking questions, and avoid making questions up on the spot unless you are genuinely curious about something.

• Send an email to the search committee chair thanking them for the opportunity to interview and offer to provide additional information upon request. One good question to ask is how and when references will be checked.
Goal #5 To recommend an appropriate follow-up strategy for after the interview has ended.

- If you have questions about the status of the search after your interview, call HR and ask to speak with the recruiter for the referenced requisition number. Refrain from contacting the department directly.
- Contact your references to let them know they may be getting a phone call regarding your candidacy. Share with them any timeline information you learned in the interview.
- Bear in mind the following: After interviews are over, it can take two–three weeks (or more) before an offer is made. Between reference checks, a multi-stepped approval process, and daily workloads, search completion almost always takes longer than anyone plans. Even if it has been a couple of weeks since your interview, do not lose hope!
Closing Thoughts

• In almost every situation, on-campus applicants within a given bargaining unit are advantaged in the search process.

• Staff who are looking to move from one bargaining unit to another must demonstrate in their résumé and cover letter that they are already doing (or have done) work that meets all of the stated screening criteria.

• Just because there is an internal candidate for a position, does not mean an outcome is predetermined. If you are awarded an interview, you are a serious candidate.
Closing Thoughts

And finally,

Please think of any interview as a part of a mutual selection process. Visualize yourself as a part of the interview team and decide if that is a happy image for you or not. As you learn about the job determine whether or not the position is what you thought it was based on the job description. Most of all, bear in mind that the single guarantee in the selection process is that if you do not apply, you will not be hired.