3 Types of Interviewers and How to Handle Them

Get to know these hiring-manager personality types.
by Doug White, Robert Half International

Job seekers have long been advised to send targeted resumes and cover letters. By tailoring your application materials and playing up the skills and abilities most relevant to a specific position, you're likelier to pique the interest of employers. But your customization efforts shouldn't end there.

You'll also benefit from adapting your approach during job interviews. Not all hiring managers have the same style or level of interviewing expertise, so they shouldn't all be treated the same way. Here are three common types of interviewers, along with strategies for making the best impression with each one:

The Box Checker
Box Checkers aren't particularly personable. They want answers to a predetermined set of interview questions--and only those questions. They don't ad-lib or ask follow-up queries. Box Checkers are extremely process-oriented and never stray from the script they're following. This type of hiring manager will take lots of notes but make little eye contact.

Your strategy: When dealing with Box Checkers, keep your answers clear and concise. Don't drift into tangents, and resist the urge to over-answer. Hit your primary talking points--easily digestible sound bites that quickly address your strengths and how they relate to the position--and then let the manager move onto the next topic. Don't rush through your answers; you want to give the Box Checker enough time to take accurate notes about your responses.

The Small Talker
Before getting around to posing the first job-related question, a Small Talker might wax poetic about the morning commute, a new bagel shop in town, or the fact that his or her brother-in-law's neighbor's son went to the same college as you. In between questions about your employment history, this interviewer may inquire about your vacation plans or your favorite TV show.

Your strategy: Try to go with the flow, at least to a certain degree. Small talk can help you build rapport with the interviewer. Plus, talking about nothing but business simply won't work in this situation. However, your goal should be to gently steer the conversation back to the subject of the meeting: what you can bring to the table as an employee. Establishing a good personal connection is important, but you're not applying to be the Small Talker's best friend. You want to be remembered as the most qualified candidate, not just a "nice person." Be friendly but stay focused.

The Ill-Prepared Interviewer
The Ill-Prepared Interviewer may not remember reading your resume. He or she likely didn't have much time to organize his or her thoughts before the meeting. Or maybe the person simply prefers to "wing it." Regardless of the reason, the Ill-Prepared Interviewer knows only a little about you and may not even have a good sense of the questions he or she will ask.

Your strategy: If you have diligently prepared for the interview, it can be upsetting when the person on the other side of the table has not. Don't take offense or let your frustration show. Instead, stay upbeat and strive to cover lots of ground. Make sure each of your answers packs an information-laden punch. Weave in lots of details about past roles, responsibilities, and accomplishments. Highlight any certifications you've earned, specialized training you've received, or awards you've won. (And because you never know when you'll encounter an Ill-Prepared Interviewer, bring extra copies of your resume to every interview.)
Selling yourself in an interview requires great skill in the best of circumstances. But some situations require that you be even more nuanced and tactical. Being able to quickly get a read on an interviewer and alter your approach accordingly can make all the difference.

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