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How to Prepare for and Succeed at Panel Interviews

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A red flag went up for Sherri as she scanned the e-mail from a human resources manager who had invited her in for an interview. Although the agenda wasn't all that unusual, it included a "Group Interview" segment right after her seminar presentation. She called to ask the HR manager for more details, her discomfort showing.

"It's nothing to be concerned about, Sherri," the manager assured her. "In fact, it is something that we do to make people feel more comfortable with our firm. You'll meet in a private conference room with a number of scientific peers, as well as the director and her two supervisors. It should be a very stimulating conversation, and you'll learn a great deal about the quality of our team," he said.

He continued, "I expect you'll have six or seven of our people around the conference table. Frankly, we find team interviews more effective for certain technical discussions. And I believe that the best candidates enjoy the intellectual stimulation that comes from a candid meeting of this type."

It was obvious to Sherri that the HR manager was going the extra mile to make her feel comfortable, when in reality the process was going to be heavily loaded in the company's favor. The conversation hardly put Sherri at her ease.

But panel interviews are an increasingly common part of interview day at biotech and pharmaceutical companies. Because of their unique dynamics and the stress they can cause unprepared interviewees, you--like Sherri--should learn a little about why and how companies conduct panel interviews. Although you may never feel totally at ease in an atmosphere where you are getting questions from every side, you'll perform better if you know more about the process in advance.

Why Do Panel Interviews?

Companies conduct panel interviews for several reasons:

- It is easier to bring several staff together at once to interview a single candidate than to organize individual sessions.
- Panel interviews often include prospective teammates who would not be on the schedule for individual sessions.
- Some HR professionals believe that the "real" person emerges when an applicant is put under the intensive interviewing stress that a panel can engender.

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- Because panel interviews are often conducted following the applicant's scientific presentation to the company, this is the company's opportunity to ask questions that may not be appropriate in an open seminar.

How to Succeed in a Panel Interview

Next Wave writers have suggested several practices for interviewing over the years (see [Related Articles](#), below). Many of these are still valid in the panel interview. However, some of our suggestions in the past have involved interpersonal dynamics, and these may not apply here. For example, when you meet with a hiring manager one on one, you follow a particular set of rules for this developing relationship. The problem with panel interviews is that you have to throw most of those one-on-one rules out the window.

In the usual interview environment, you sit down with a future colleague or boss in her office, and the conversation starts with that all-important small talk to loosen things up. Then, you may move into some of the common ground that you both share in your work or personal lives, increasing the comfort level for interviewee and interviewer. The savvy candidate can look around the interviewer's office and get clues that could be quite important to establishing rapport--the photo of the family on skis at a chalet, the softball team's trophy on the credenza, or a diploma on the wall.

All of these normal artifacts of a one-on-one interview disappear in front of a group.

Most panel interviews take place in the company conference room, which is unlikely to be a warm and friendly space. This affects the proceedings a great deal. There will be a variety of people present and an equal number of viewpoints. There won't be a lot of small talk--after the introductions, the group will get right into the subject matter. And unlike the one-on-one interview, in which both sides may be uncomfortable, interviewers are much forthright when they're members of a panel. They won't be asking only about your technical and job-related skills, either ... equal weight is often placed on questions that try to draw out what kind of person you are.

Making Good Eye Contact

I had a group interview a while back, and I really blew it. I've written and spoken about the interview process for more than 15 years and consider myself an excellent interviewer. And yet, I went into this particular meeting and failed miserably as an interviewee. In fact, it is hard for me to write about this episode because it confronts my self-image so directly.

A large company invited me to present my firm as a possible resource for a major personnel expansion. My visit included a panel interview with three male VPs and a female director. Unfortunately, I ended up sitting at a rectangular table with the three VPs across from me and the director sitting to my left. Throughout the meeting, it was my natural tendency to make eye contact primarily with the people who were directly in front of me, and I neglected to provide sufficient eye contact to the person on my left. I found out later that this woman cast the "no" vote that cost my company the deal.

Be Prepared

So, now you know a bit more about why and how companies conduct panel interviews. Below, I'll list some tips to keep in mind before you head off to your next interview.

1. Always ask your contact at the company to give you your interviewing agenda in advance, so that you can find out whether a panel interview is involved. Don't be taken by surprise!
2. Remember the importance of eye contact (see sidebar). You must visually engage all interviewers, regardless of their locations in the room and their levels of seniority in the company.
3. Despite the fact that panel interviews are loaded in the company's favor, most firms will allow you a few minutes to ask questions of your own. Don't wing this. Make sure you have memorized a list of questions that will reflect positively on you. Try not to refer to questions you have written down; make your questions a more natural part of the conversation.
4. Although it is normal to be uncomfortable when being interviewed by a group, remember that you can't allow nervousness to take over. Concentrate on responding to the person who asks a question, just as you would in a personal interview with that individual. Take it one question, and one interviewer, at a time.
5. Always have a response ready for the "Tell us about yourself" question that often starts thing off in the panel interview. Have both a short version and a longer version, and ask the panel members how much detail they want.

In Conclusion

Sherri did a great job in her panel interview. Because she knew in advance that it was coming, she was

able to mentally prepare herself and was not taken off guard. Sherri knew that the same kinds of questions would be asked of her as in a "normal" interview, and that if she concentrated on one question and one interviewer at a time, she wouldn't get flustered. I hope she gets a job offer as a result.

For me, I'm still feeling a bit stupid because of my blunder with poor eye contact (see sidebar). But hey ... every mistake is a lesson learned, right? Besides, nothing adds more to my credibility as a Next Wave columnist than the fact that I've personally experienced many of the issues I write about!

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