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TOOLING UP CAREER ADVICE



Dave Jensen

Tooling Up: The Real Deal vs. Well-Oiled: Who Gets the Offer?

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United States
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It's extraordinary how much advice is available in printed form and on the Internet about the interviewing process. I've been reading this material for 2 decades, and writing some of it, and it never fails to amaze me how divergent the commentary can be. Interviewing advice tends to fall into two categories, both successful over the years, but each selling completely different ways to go about winning an interview.

Is it best to go into the meeting and be yourself? Or, do books with titles like "100 Snappy Answers to Tough Interview Questions" have the right idea? Which works best: earnestness and individuality, or insincerity and polish?

At a recent [AAAS Science Careers and Next Wave interviewing workshop](#) I moderated in San Francisco, panelists advocated both these methods depending upon the situation. It was clear that choosing your interviewing advice remains one of the thorniest job-hunt topics. Which of these two paths do *you* plan to follow?

The San Francisco Seminar on Interviewing Skills

Garth Fowler manages external relations for the AAAS Science Careers and *Science's* Next Wave outreach. He and the Next Wave team use a very successful format for teaching interviewing skills, originally developed by Lisa Kozlowski, who is now at Thomas Jefferson University. These seminars combine an interview-oriented skit with a panel of expert commentators to produce a "stop action" interview in which the audience experiences the dialog taking place between two scientists, a hiring manager and a postdoc, who conduct what is probably a very normal industry job interview.

It is normal, that is, except that our young postdoc makes more than a few errors--more, hopefully, than most of *you* make--giving the moderator and the rest of the panel an opportunity to offer recommendations. The San Francisco panel included two human-resources people, one from a growing, midsized biotech firm, and the other from a large research institution. The other panelists were a scientist/manager from a major biotechnology company and a physicist-turned-businessman from a

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Silicon Valley high-tech company.

It was a great program with a lot of positive feedback from the audience. What really got me thinking about this month's "Tooling Up" topic, however, was the commentary from two postdocs who approached me at the reception that evening.

"The interview process seems geared to people who are good at the razzle-dazzle factor," said one of them in confidence. "I get a sense that it is best to put on a different face, and go into an interview with a lot of prepared answers in response to the typical questions. And yet, I think this would just add to my general discomfort. I'm not that kind of person," he said.

The other attendee nodded in agreement, looked around, and then lowered her voice to tell me that "I've learned a lot tonight about how companies view scientists from academia, and it scares me. I've been on this track a number of years, and I have been indoctrinated by the culture. I'm not quite sure I can really remove every trace of my academic self. Are all company people expecting interviewers to have the perfect response to every question?"

These concerns took me back 25 years. For the first time in a long while, I remembered very clearly the confusion that set in after I read several books of interviewing advice. I'm not a person who can "fake it" easily. Like those two postdocs, in those days I was trying to decide how I should act in an interview. Should I be myself and roll with whatever comes up? Or, should I try and become a [walking, talking interviewing machine?](#)

The "Well-Oiled" Applicant

Here is something you should recognize about interviewing and interview advice: the interview is a living, breathing *thing*. While everyone I've spoken with admits that you can learn a lot about interviews by watching and dissecting, few things are still living and breathing once they've been dissected. It's one thing to see how all the parts fit together and another to bring an interview to life. Can you incorporate all you've learned from articles, books, and in seminars into a living, breathing interview?

When I was on the job market, I read all the available books and went to seminars sponsored by the company that had laid me off. Although I learned something from everything I read or heard, the advice was often contradictory. A few books, notably "Sweaty Palms: The Art of Being Interviewed," (see sidebar), which is one of my favorites, suggested that the best approach to an interview is to be confident in your abilities and to be yourself. Others, such as the bestselling series written by Martin Yate (the "Knock 'em Dead" books) maintained that interviewers are best influenced by practiced, scripted responses.

Two Prime Areas for Prepared Responses

H. Anthony Medley, the author of *Sweaty Palms: The Neglected Art of Being Interviewed*, has updated and revised this classic text, which has sold more than half a million copies since its first publication in 1978 (Warner Business Books, ISBN 0-446-69383-9). It was a key part of my first serious job search, in its very first edition. While the author is very much opposed to books that put someone else's answers in your mouth, he does describe a number of interview topics where self-knowledge can be combined with a practiced response. Here are two of the most important.

- *The "TMA Y" question.* Perhaps the single most important part of the early interview process, the request "Tell me about yourself" can have a huge

The person who uses the Yate approach is what I call the "well-oiled" applicant, and I believe they can be spotted a mile away. Following the success of the "Knock 'em Dead" books a dozen or so copycats were issued, all offering to fill your brain with pat and clever answers to common interview questions like 'where do you want to be in 5 years?' ("I'd like to have achieved the goals set out for me and to be in a management position"), and 'how do you handle pressure and stress?' ("Reading a good book or relaxing with friends can help me turn stress into productive energy"). Ever visited a tour-book-recommended, "off-the-beaten-path" vacation destination only to look around the train car or hotel lobby to see dozens of people carrying the same travel guide? See what I'm getting at?

I would avoid those books if I were you. Personally, I feel a bit insulted when I read something insinuating that the author knows more than I do about what should come out of my mouth. I have always believed that advice books need to give me guidance and help me understand the nature of an interview, and the nature of particular interview questions and why they are asked. That sort of insight can help me (and you) compose your own sincere-but-savvy response. But I don't have any faith in books that assume that I am too stupid to answer the question myself.

At the San Francisco seminar, all the panelists roundly dismissed these books and their rehearsed answers. Still, throughout the evening I caught myself putting *other* words into the mouths of our audience as I played Monday-morning quarterback and popped off my own 'snappy answers' to the interview questions the applicant was getting on stage, and I

impact on the successful outcome of your interview day. Read more about this in "Sweaty Palms" or on Next Wave, in [this Tooling Up column](#).

- *What have you done of which you are most proud?* I agree with the author who states that this question is asked because interviewers want to know how decisive you are. Many times this question causes stress for the applicant who struggles to choose an accomplishment to highlight. Medley says that a prompt response shows that you are a decisive person. Expect this question, give a moment's reflective pause, and then describe your top accomplishment.

This book is written in a style that conflicts with many other interviewing texts, and in most cases, "Sweaty Palms" end up the winner. My feeling is that if read with the understanding that you aren't going to agree with everything that H. Anthony Medley says, you can get some wonderful advice that will help you get more job offers. Just don't forget those thank-you notes. I still don't understand why he is so vehemently opposed to those in his book.

wasn't the only panelist doing this. As the evening wore on it occurred to me that perhaps the best approach is a little of each, combining some canned responses with fresh ideas to produce something new and authentic.

The "Real Deal" Applicant

The classic example of the canned interview response--I've heard this hundreds of times--is when the interviewer asks the applicant to describe their greatest weakness, and he or she replies with a version of this old saw:

"My greatest weakness? It would have to be that I tend to work too hard, and I need to find a way to achieve a better balance in other areas of my life."

How would you feel if you were the interviewer listening to this response? Would you object to the message itself, the need for balance in the personal and work lives? Hopefully not. But you *would* dislike its obvious phony ring. It isn't real. Its insincerity insults the interviewer's intelligence. That's the danger to being over-prepared with "book" answers.

On the other hand, what if you decided to go into the interview *knowing* that they would ask you to describe a weakness, and you already knew what it is, and had figured out a good way to word that response? Is that phony? Not at all - In fact, I call that type of applicant the "real deal" because he or she comes prepared to talk about all the obvious interview topics in a sincere and personal way. The preparation may be facilitated by a book, magazine article, or online career advice column, but the response itself isn't programmed. It is the result of a serious self-assessment and the advance knowledge of what typically happens in an interview.

Crafting a Sincere-but-Savvy Response to an Interview Question

There are only a few things to remember as you prepare and practice your interview responses. The overriding rule throughout the process is to avoid fabrication. (You might as well use book answers and save yourself some time if you aren't going to show them the "real you.") Always put a positive gloss on things, but remember that these questions need to be answered with style and grace, and not hype. And remember that the interviewer will react best to answers from you that have

an impact on his or her needs. "What's in it for me?" is always on the mind of the interviewer.

Most importantly, your response to an interview question needs to be the product of introspection, and that means that you can't toss these responses back to the interviewer like a game of tennis. Take a breath, look down at the floor in deep thought, and then respond. It will only add value to what you have to say.

Knowing what to expect on interview day, combined with your ability to do a candid self-evaluation and to answer sincerely in the midst of a living, breathing interview, puts you in a much better position than going in with your "book learning" evident and someone else's answers.