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CAREER DEVELOPMENT : ARTICLES

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Due to the high volume of questions received, the CareerDoctor cannot answer all queries on an individual basis. Look for an answer to your question published in this column soon! Thank you!

Beating the Interview Odds

Career Doctor
United Kingdom
28 November 2003

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Dear CareerDoctor, I've just started applying for jobs again and have found lots of advice on interview technique, but I want to prepare for rejection and get a better understanding of why I'm not successful straight away if this happens to be the case. I'm worried about losing motivation if I don't get the DREAM job that I hope I'll find out there. What should I expect in terms of how many interviews to go to before getting a job? I hope this doesn't sound negative, but when I've previously applied for jobs I found the rejections very demoralising, so I want to be prepared in case I'm facing that again. I.B.

Dear I.B.,

Being rejected at interview is really tough so it's great that you are planning a survival strategy to cope. However, it's important that you balance this with a healthy dose of self-belief. To the interviewer, any insecurity that you may have when it comes to *getting* a job often translates into a lack of faith in your own ability to *do* the job. Since your last experience of recruitment, you've gained more skills, experience, and possibly qualifications, so don't let those previous rejections knock your confidence.

Trying to find statistics on the chances of getting through each stage of the recruitment process has been a real challenge, but I was helped out by the Association of Graduate Recruiters ([AGR](#)), who conduct

regular surveys of their members. Figures collected in 2003 show that for every vacancy in the Energy & Water/Chemical & Allied sector (the most relevant to you, dear Next Wave readers) there were 42.1 applicants. Pretty intimidating, eh?

The last time figures were broken down into the different recruitment stages was in 2002, and the good news for you and anyone else who gets to interview stage is that most job seekers have already been passed over--over 80% are rejected at the short-listing stage. On average, eight applicants are short-listed, of which a couple are eliminated by early-selection tools such as psychometric tests and telephone interviews. That leaves just six people fighting to jump through the final hoops of interview and any further assessments. Slightly bizarre, each vacancy is offered to 1.3 people, particularly by the bigger recruiters, which allows for people who drop out or accept other offers.

However, bear in mind that these figures paint a general picture and focus on graduate recruitment. Smaller employers and highly specialised vacancies may attract fewer applicants. But I don't want to get too wrapped up in the numbers game. These data are useful to reassure you that rejection is a normal

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part of recruitment and from a purely statistical point of view, you could expect to attend six interviews before being successful.

If you are rejected from a job, you'll hear a lot of people say "don't take it personally." I used to find this really frustrating, particularly after an interview when I was obviously being personally rejected, because it suggests the whole process is beyond your control. Don't accept a rejection without asking yourself why--most people find it really helpful to understand why they aren't successful. The reasons are usually things you can accept as fair (another candidate with better experience or qualifications) or things you can change (being more enthusiastic or identifying more compelling evidence of skills).

Interviewees are now entitled to see any notes taken during an interview, whether successful or not. This is a relatively recent development, due to a code of practice under the Data Protection Act, introduced in February 2002. You will need to write to the recruitment office or human resources department in the organisation which holds the information (usually the employer unless they use agencies) to ask them to give you more details. There may be a small administration fee (around £10), but most employers have responded to the spirit of the Act and will provide feedback without you having to resort to this. An alternative is to ask your interviewers to give the feedback themselves, so make sure you take note of their names during the interview.

Another way to get feedback on your interview technique is to go through a "mock" interview with a careers adviser or someone with experience of recruitment. If you are a student or researcher at a university, most careers services will provide this service, but it is time-consuming and is often only available if you have been rejected at interview and have genuine concerns about failing to progress. You need to look into this well before any interview as it may take some time to get an appointment. If you are a graduate student you may be able to get a mock interview on a GRADschool as these are usually part of the [programme](#).

You may also be able to have a mock interview at conferences. If you know a careers adviser will be available (for example, I'll be at the [British Society of Immunology Annual Congress](#) next week), take along details of a job you are interested in and a tailored CV or application form and you may be able to get a taster interview focusing on areas which concern you. You may also be able to talk to recruiters about interview techniques at other careers events, such as the recent [Life Sciences Careers Days](#)--keep an eye on the [Event Calendar](#) for relevant meetings.

As you've found, there are many excellent resources on the Internet to help you prepare for an important interview. I hope you won't mind if I suggest a few of my favourites, just in case you have missed them. First is a great article on the [Guardian Web site](#) which covers a few "worst-case scenarios" and top tips for interview success. The [Windmills Programme](#) also contains some snappy advice in its "Be a Winner at Interviews" section. I've also found an article on technical interviews on the [Doctor Job Web site](#) and some general comments on the [GRAD site](#).

Next Wave Advice for a Winning Interview

- [How to Prepare for and Succeed at Panel Interviews](#)
- [Interview Skills for the Job Hungry](#)
- [Surviving Tricky Situations: Interviews That Went Wacky](#)
- [Academic Job Interviews: The Good and the Bad](#)
- [Managing First Impressions at Interviews](#)
- [How to Present Your Weaknesses During Interviews](#)

Rather than repeat any of this advice, I'd like to finish with a few tips on motivating yourself if your morale starts to slip. The first tactic is to always overlap your applications whenever possible--try to apply for a job every few weeks so there is a constant stream of vacancies in the pipeline if you are knocked back. Get feedback on your applications regularly by visiting your careers service (if you are in a university) or talking to your professional body. If you can get to know an adviser, they will be able to reassure you that not having early interview success doesn't necessarily mean that you are unemployable and help you to reflect on any feedback that you get. Most careers advisers are in the job because they want to help people, so use the support that they can offer. Remember also to network with people working in your chosen field as they can advise you on recruitment processes and the key things to emphasise at interview.

I'm sure that with careful preparation and a positive, enthusiastic attitude you'll quickly convince an employer that you have the right stuff for their vacancy.

All the best in your career,

The CareerDoctor

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