



## Mastering The Interview

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**ANDY CORELLI NEVER DREAMED** that one day his mid-sized litigation firm, Holmes & Watson, would go under. As the senior associate and, by everyone's estimation, the firm's best litigator, Corelli was on a fast track to partnership. But as the firm's half-hearted marketing efforts failed, its client base eroded, and downsizing soon followed. Instead of moving into a comfortable corner office, Andy found himself looking for a new job.

**At first, Andy's hopes were high.** After all, his superior litigation skills and verbal abilities made him a hot commodity. In addition, Andy had developed a good resume to showcase his excellent credentials.

**Andy easily finagled a number of informal meetings** with other litigation firms. But for some reason, these exploratory sessions resulted in no referrals and only one callback for a formal interview. After that meeting, Andy was pleased to learn that he was one of two finalists. The other candidate was a younger associate from Holmes & Watson, also out of work. The final blow came when this lawyer was offered the position and Andy received a limp thank you note saying that his resume was on file. What went wrong?

**The problem** was that Andy, like many lawyers before him, assumed that he knew all about interviewing. After all, how hard can it be to answer an interviewer's questions when you're thinking on your feet all day in court and preparing witnesses for cross-examination? Because his verbal abilities were high, Andy felt he could talk his way through any interview. In fact, until his layoff, Andy had not interviewed for a job since law school. He failed to understand that job interviewing is an acquired skill, not an innate ability. Successful interviewing requires the right attitude, an ability to anticipate the interviewer's questions, and well-prepared answers.

### Attitude is Everything

Preparing for a job interview means learning and then practicing several behaviors simultaneously. You must dress well; watch your body language; maintain eye contact; and answer questions correctly, smoothly, and with confidence. As a result, for those who have the time to read them, there are many excellent job-interviewing books on the market. They count the ways you can improve your interviewing skills by:

Explaining your job search positively, even if you've been fired

Talking confidently

Conquering "sweaty palms"—your fears and anxieties



Knowing all the right answers to the worst interview questions

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**This information is important**, but these books may be overlooking the obvious. The analogy here is the classic film *Cool Hand Luke*. In this movie, Paul Newman plays the role of a convict in a Southern chain gang. He fights the system to his own detriment, almost losing all hope of parole, until one day the warden hitches up his belt and gives Newman's character some honest advice: "Son, you've got to get your mind right."

**Get your mind right** is a wonderful mantra for job interviewing. In other words, change your focus. Job interviewing begins, not with techniques, but with a fundamental change of attitude, of perspective. To interview successfully, you reverse the way you look at the whole process. You focus your attention, not on your own concerns, but on the employer and his or her needs. Find out the employer's needs, or priorities, and then apply that age-old marketing maxim: **match needs now**.

**An example:** If you are selling fruit and vegetables in some farmers' market and I come along looking for tomatoes, it makes sense that you do not sell me peaches, although peaches happen to be your favorite fruit. You sell me tomatoes. Why? The customer wants tomatoes—Marketing 101: match needs now. But how often do law firm interviewers hear this kind of answer when inquiring of young lawyers why they want to work in this or that particular firm: "Well, I am very interested in family law (or commercial litigation, or criminal law, or securities law, etc.), and I thought this would be a great place to start."

**Law firms are not day-care centers.** To a young lawyer, working for a certain firm may be a great learning experience, but law firms are not in business to help job applicants find their purpose in life. Firms interview and hire because of their needs, because there is something in it for them. At the back of every interviewer's mind is always the unstated question "What can he or she do for our firm?" And an interviewee's task, as described earlier, is to find out what that "something" is and match the needs of the interviewer. That is how you make the sale. That is how you land the job. To paraphrase President Kennedy's oft-quoted line: "Ask not what the firm can do for you, but what you can do for the firm."

### **Anticipate the Interviewer's Questions**

**When we face the unknowns of an interview**, we worry most about those questions that come out of left field, those we never expected. So we waste our time and effort by trying to bone up on the best answers to the worst interview questions. There's an easier way.

**Remember, almost all the questions job interviewers** ask can be reduced to five basic question areas. Therefore, an easier way to get ready for an interview is to think about question *categories* and prepare answers for five known question types, rather than for dozens of individual or specific questions. If you reduce the number of questions to five, and write out answers for each one of those five categories, then you are prepared for approximately 90% of all interview questions and can take a lot of anxiety out of anticipating your interview. Prepare for these five basic interview themes, and you will have beaten the system:



Question # 1: *Tell me something about yourself*

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**The interviewer may frame this question** in several different ways:

*Describe yourself.*

*Walk me through your resume.*

*Why don't we review some major points of your career?*

*Could you give me a brief sketch of your background?*

**The "Tell me something about yourself"** question is asked, not only to gather information, but also to assess your poise, your use of language, your style of delivery, and your communication abilities. But however many times and in whatever situations it is asked, you always answer smoothly, unhesitatingly, with the Profile Statement that you prepared previously in your reading.

Question # 2: *Why did you leave your last job?*

**Alternatives:**

*Why are you looking for a job?*

*Why are you in the job market?*

*Why are you leaving Holmes & Watson?*

**In general**, you answer this question with words that describe your decision to leave or your termination (if that is the case) in the most favorable light. You choose the correct words, write your answer out beforehand, and practice it with friends until it sounds just right.

**An example:**

*Well, like some mid-sized law firms, Holmes & Watson recently went through a downsizing; so I'm looking for an opportunity to offer my considerable litigation skills to another firm.*

*I had five productive years at Holmes & Watson and accomplished all my goals, but with its recent downsizing, I figured it was time to move on.*

**You speak the truth**, but keep in mind that there is a difference in speaking part of the truth and the whole truth. Andy doesn't blame Holmes & Watson, although word in the local legal community, as his interviewer well knows, is that the firm's downsizing was a direct result of its failure to define its niche and successfully market its legal product. Andy's understated answer scores points.



**The cardinal rule: Don't complain; don't explain.** When asked why you left your last job, respond with an answer that is short and reasonable. Then move on. Don't go into long explanations. A client who finds him or herself stuck for an answer as to why he or she is leaving his or her current firm can always use as a crutch the acronym COG: Challenge - Opportunity - Growth.

### **A Special Situation - Termination:**

**Things just did not work out.** Perhaps your firm's performance expectations were unrealistic, office personalities clashed, or the position just wasn't the right fit. Legal employees are laid off for many reasons. But no longer, as a matter of course, are lawyers provided with office space and secretarial help until they find a new place to roost. More likely, when they're out, they're out. And no matter how creatively (or how blandly) a firm writes a nice letter of recommendation for a dear, departed former employee, most interviewers read between the lines; they know the score.

**It is important to anticipate the firing question,** to meet the issue head-on. Keep your explanation short and upbeat, or at least neutral. Indicate a lesson learned by the experience, and show that you're ready to move on. In other words, you want to address the issue, but ease the interviewer's concerns without being defensive or resentful.

**Write out your explanation beforehand.** Run it past some trusted friends for their comments. Arlene Hirsch in her excellent book, *Interviewing*, offers several of the key features that should be incorporated in a firing explanation: **First**, your performance was good; **second**, the problem happened for some other reason; **third**, you emphasize an important lesson learned from the experience and your intention to move on.

**A hypothetical:** Victor is a young lawyer with an insurance defense firm. He is hired as in-house counsel by Pelagian Pharmaceuticals. Pelagian wants to resolve some outstanding employee complaints against the company. In an unusual arrangement, Victor reports to a senior executive, the Vice President of Personnel, who supervises his work. Victor, seeking to avoid protracted litigation, begins to reduce the case backlog by negotiating as many settlements of employee issues as are reasonably possible. The Vice President soon questions this strategy as too tolerant of employee complaints, and she insists upon reviewing, on a case-by-case basis, Randall's professional decisions. Victor finds this close supervision suffocating. His resentment soon contaminates their relationship. Out of the blue, on a Friday afternoon, Victor is called to her office, given two weeks' severance, told to clean out his desk, and is escorted out of the building by a security officer.

**Victor's Explanation:** *"Although my legal work at Pelagian Pharmaceuticals was outstanding—I managed to reduce the pending case backlog by half—there wasn't a good personality match in my department. I usually fit in very well when working with a legal team, but at Pelagian, I reported directly to a Vice President of Personnel, who insisted on reviewing my settlement decisions on a case-by-case basis. This arrangement was not conducive to a creative working environment, and unfortunately, the company came to that realization sooner than I. Nevertheless, this experience taught me an important lesson about myself: I work best in a professional environment with legal*



*peers, and I need a clearer understanding, before I accept a job offer, of an employer's expectations for my job performance. Can you tell me a little more about your firm?"*

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Question # 3: *Why should we hire you?*

**This question will almost never be stated** in exactly this way, but it lurks, waiting for an answer, in the back of every interviewer's mind. It also underlines many of the performance questions that make up the majority of job interview questions, such as:

*What are your strengths and your weaknesses?*

*Describe your day-to-day responsibilities.*

*What did you like best in your last job?*

**No matter how well prepared you may be**, pause reflectively before answering and then answer these kinds of questions by elaborating on your abilities—tailoring your answer, of course, to your own situation. Frame your response in a manner similar to this:

*I would have to choose between two skills. I'm very proud of my considerable litigation experience and my overall file management abilities. At the same time, I possess excellent analytical and problem-solving skills. For example . . .*

**Note the way accomplishment stories are woven into this answer:**

**Not:** *I possess excellent analytical and problem-solving abilities. Period.*

**But say:** *I possess excellent analytical and problem-solving abilities. For example . . . "*

**You will find the exercises in this book** very useful in the development of accomplishment stories for interviewing. They can also be used quite effectively in answering the behavioral style of questioning that is sometimes encountered when interviewing at the corporate level. For example:

*Would you describe for us a time when you had to deal with a particularly difficult client. What was the situation you faced, what steps did you take in dealing with the client, and how was the problem successfully resolved?*

**Use expansive, rather than monosyllabic answers.** This is often a failure of people who are used to dealing with factual situations. When asked, for example, about your time-management abilities, don't just respond:

*Yes, I'm extremely well organized.*



Rather, elaborate your answer:

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*I'm extremely well organized. For example, at Holmes & Watson, I had responsibility over. . .*

**In her book *Strategies for Success***, Adele Scheele illustrates the power of words. A friend, who was the director of a psychoanalytic institute, had just given an oral quiz for a fellowship to two psychiatrists in training. The same question was asked of each of the candidates in this final examination: "What would you expect a one-year-old child to do if his or her mother, after bringing the little one to your office, had to leave the room for a few minutes?"

**The failing answer:** *"I'd expect the baby to cry, being separated from its mother."*

**The passing answer:** *"I'd expect the baby to cry, being separated from its mother. Now, separation anxiety is a complex issue, particularly at the age of one. There are conflicting psychoanalytic interpretations. According to those who hold with . . ."*

**Any serious interviewer** does not measure an interview just on a candidate's knowledge of facts. The failing psychiatrist gave an answer and waited obediently. The passing doctor framed a probable answer and then elaborated on the facts to reveal how he came by his answer. He spoke as a colleague to a colleague and was therefore more likely to be a credit to the institute.

**Watch Your Words.** In your answers to interview questions use "offer" verbs—phrases such as, I can bring to this position, **provide, contribute, add, make available, give**, etc. All these verbs focus on the needs of the employer and, in a subtle way, demonstrate the value that your hiring will bring to the firm.

**Negative Questions.** Then, there are those questions that probe for your weaknesses, greatest failures, disappointments, etc. As a general rule, never admit anything negative about yourself during an interview. Be careful letting down your guard, no matter how friendly the interviewer, no matter how simpatico he or she may seem. Do not contribute negative descriptive phrases about yourself to interviewers' memories or vocabularies

**How do you handle negative questions?** This advice may be as old as the hills, but it still works. The best response is to take a workplace value the interviewer may prize and present it as a negative:

*I'm probably too insistent that people be in on time and start work on time.*

*I guess I'm a bit of a perfectionist; I am not satisfied until things are done correctly.*

*People who've worked with me say I am too conscientious, but I've learned to work smarter.*

**Another question** with negative implications:



*What did you like the least about your last job?*

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**Mention an area of responsibility** that is far removed from the areas of the job you are now applying for; indicate that you either performed the assignment well or learned something useful. For example, a lawyer who was fired from a District Attorney's office because she was not aggressive enough as a prosecutor was applying for a position as Executive Director of a battered woman's shelter. When asked by a member of the shelter's board why she had only spent six months with the D.A., she replied, quite honestly:

*I guess I'm not a go-for-the-jugular type.*

**A perfect answer.** The last thing one would want running a battered woman's shelter would be a go-for-the-jugular director.

*Question # 4: What kind of a salary are you looking for?*

**Don't give away a negotiating advantage; never quote a specific figure.** It is in your best interest to postpone salary negotiations until late in the game, if possible. Usually a sophisticated interviewer will not bring up the salary issue early in the interviewing process, until every informational area has been covered. But not all interviewers are that sophisticated. If the salary question is introduced early in the interview, it indicates either that the interviewer is inexperienced or that the firm is using salary as a screening device.

**If the salary issue is introduced early,** respond by saying honestly that you can't really answer that question until you have a better feel for the job description and the expectations for the position. This is only fair, as there is a difference between 1,800 and 2,100 billable hours, between a 40- and an 80-hour workweek.

**Alternatively, say:**

*My salary requirements are negotiable. Your firm has a reputation for compensating employees fairly, and I'm sure you would do the same in my case. I'm very interested in finding the right opportunity, and I'll be open to any fair offer when I do.*

**Another way** to handle the question is to answer with a question:

*What is your range?*

*How much have you budgeted?*

If really pressed, if your back is to the wall, then based upon your salary research, give them a **range:**



*Well, I understand that the Center City figure for this type of position is in the \$95,000 - \$120,000 spread.*

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**You might also say:**

*Of course, with my abilities and experience, I would expect to be in the upper range of those two figures.*

**NEVER** give a specific number. Always conclude by saying in some way that it's the job, not the salary, that really interests you:

*My salary requirements are negotiable. I am interested in finding the right opportunity and will be open to any fair offer when I do.*

*Question # 5: Where do you see yourself in five years?*

**This is a truly dumb question**, as most of us have no idea where we will be or what we will be doing in five years. However, uninspired interviewers still sometimes ask the question. What is particularly annoying is the interviewer's hidden agenda, the question behind the question. The interviewer is really asking, "If we offered you this position, will you make a commitment to us?" Never mind that if it did not suit its purposes, the firm would not make a commitment to you for the next five weeks, let alone the next five years.

**But if the question is asked, play the game. Say something like this:**

*That really depends upon the firm I join. I would like a position with some responsibility and room for growth. The key is the right challenge. I intend to make a significant contribution and grow with the firm.*

And you will resist the temptation, won't you, to look the interviewer in the eye and ask, "Where do you see your firm in five years?" That would be the unkindest cut of all.

**Illegal Questions**

**Certain questions**, lawyers well know, concerning age, race, marital status, and personal characteristics protected under anti-discrimination laws are off-limits in an interview. As a general rule of thumb, be wary of the legality of any question that is personal, does not concern an occupational qualification, and does not relate directly to the job.

**If you are asked what seems to be an illegal question**, do not necessarily assume malice. Oftentimes, it's just ignorance, even on the part of law firm interviewers, who should know better, but sometimes don't. If asked a seemingly illegal question, you have three choices:

**1) You can answer**, knowing the question is illegal, but your disclosure may hurt your hiring prospects.





**2) You can refuse to answer** because the question is illegal, but you risk being labeled a troublemaker by the interviewer.

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**3) You can try to identify the question behind the question** and answer that. For example, to an illegal question about marital status, one might respond:

*If you are asking if I can occasionally work overtime, I'd be glad to answer that question.*

**Sometimes, too, a bit of humor**—if used sparingly—can ease the strain of an out-of-line question without alienating the interviewer. A lawyer in her early 50s, returning to the workforce, was interviewing for a position with a certain firm. “We have a rather young workforce,” said the interviewer. “Would this be a source of concern for you?” “No,” replied the lawyer. “Not unless you were violating child labor laws.” She was hired.

### **Questions After the Interview**

**Interviewer:** *Well, that about wraps up the interview. Do you have any questions?*

**Asking intelligent questions** after an interview can show your interest in the firm or company and will go a long way toward making you memorable as a candidate. There are two categories of questions you want to ask after a job interview:

**a) About the firm or company.** Note that one should avoid touching on topics such as vacation time, benefits, and salary. These important questions are best brought up after an offer is on the table. Ideally, you will have done your homework, thoroughly researched the potential employer, and asked the appropriate questions with sufficient specificity. The answers will suggest themselves to you at the proper time. However, if all else fails, you can adapt a few from the list that follows and put them in your own words:

*How is performance measured?*

*How often are performance reviews?*

*What sets this firm apart from its competitors?*

*Would you tell me a little more about your own role within the firm?*

*What would be a typical career path for a lawyer moving laterally into this firm?*

*Do your new clients come generally through referrals or through the firm's marketing efforts?*

**b) About the interviewing process.** Do not leave the interview wondering what comes next or spend the next few weeks sitting by the phone waiting for it to ring. Before you leave, find out about the next step:



*What will be our next step?*

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*I believe I could make a significant contribution to your firm. Where do we go from here?*

*How soon do you plan to make your decision?*

**If you do not hear** within a few days after an indicated time, then it is a perfectly acceptable social convention to call your interviewer:

*I just wanted to touch base with you and find out where we are in the process.*

### **Summary**

**Attitude is everything. Focus on the employer and his or her needs.**

**Reduce your interview preparation time by developing answers for the five basic question areas.**

**Postpone salary discussions, and never offer a specific figure.**

**If asked an illegal question, do not presume malice. Answer the question behind the question.**

**Before you leave the interview, find out the next step in the process.**