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## The Walking, Talking Interviewing Machine: Don't Let the Dark Side of Interview Preparation Suck You In

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Yes, those books you've read are correct. Interview preparation is important--*very important*. However, there is one thing that many books don't tell you: Although most homework in this department is very beneficial, there is a certain type of interview preparation that is a kiss of death. Understanding this can have a make-it-or-break-it impact on your interview day.

Recruiters and human resources (HR) people sometimes snicker about applicants who sound like "walking, talking interviewing machines." Would you like to be considered in this category? Of course not! However, all it will take are a few responses that sound phony or overprepared, and *wham!* You are off the A list.

### Two Good Reasons to Prepare Well and Be Yourself

The right kind of interview preparation should help you know yourself better and become

more knowledgeable about your prospective employer. Self-analysis is great for preinterview preparation because it helps you present yourself more articulately. A good review of your strengths and weaknesses also helps you pinpoint areas where your skills dovetail with the needs of the employer. And, because questions are certain to come up about your weaknesses (ugh!), you should reflect on your softer areas as well.

Here are some good ideas that deal with both the self-analysis and company-research aspects of interview preparation:

### **Know Yourself Better**

- Do a "SWOT" analysis to understand your strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. (See "[How to Present Your Weaknesses During Interviews.](#)")
- Prepare a skills inventory to identify the tools and techniques that you bring with you to a new employer. (See "[Planning Your Career to Improve Marketability](#)" and "[Self-Assessment Exercises.](#)")
- Take your mentors and former bosses out for coffee; find people who know you well and who can guide you to the type of work that they feel you would do best. Don't be afraid to ask them the tough questions, such as: "Am I the kind of person who could succeed alone at the bench?" Or, "Do you think that I would do well in a job that involved intensive written communications?"
- Develop a full list of your accomplishments, starting with the oldest ones and working up to the most relevant current items. Every employer will want to hear about your skills, but the best way to describe them will be in the form of your various successes. Read and reread this list just before the interview, for you must be able to discuss these achievements in a clear, succinct manner. (The Challenge-Approach-Results format makes this very easy. See "[CVs That Open Industry Doors.](#)")
- Sit down in a quiet place and do some introspection about what type of environment you work best in, what types of people you like to be around, and what circumstances are best for your overall quality of life. Do you prefer to work in a large or small company? Do you want to stay in your local area, or does relocation figure into your equation? When going on an interview, you can count on being asked, "Why do you want to work here?" To avoid sounding like an interviewing machine, your answer must come from the heart.
- Prepare to answer the question, "Tell me about yourself." You might need different versions of this response, for example, one for technical interviewers and one for HR specialists. Regardless, the question is almost certainly going to be in your future, so preparing for it is essential. Try not to make it sound too "canned." (See "[Interviewing Skills: What to Do When They Say 'Tell Me About Yourself.'](#)")

Going through steps like these is only half of the homework. You will also need to do a lot of research on any organization that offers to interview you. This is true even for the

telephone interview. Never take a phone call from a hiring manager on the spur of the moment, if you can avoid it. Ask to call that person back at a time of mutual convenience, and then aggressively seek background info on that company before making the call.

## **Know Your Prospective Employer**

Here are some tips on researching companies, which would be appropriate homework for any type of position:

- Surf the Web to find out all that you can about the company's current product offerings, research programs, and financial status. Use the employer's Web site, as well as industry portals such as [BioSpace.com](http://BioSpace.com), [Bio.com](http://Bio.com) that feature descriptive pages on each biotech company. Check out financial bulletin boards such as [Yahoo! Finance](http://Yahoo! Finance). Important sections from the employer's site include management bios, investor relations information, and company history.
- Have questions that can't be answered online? Don't hesitate to contact the company's business development department or investor relations groups by telephone. People in these departments are often easy to speak with, and they may be able to clarify some of what you are missing. This works best with public companies, as privately held firms may be more reticent about certain information.
- Check out the competition for your prospective employer. Find out whom the firm competes with in each of its main development programs, and then do your homework on those companies as well. Your knowledge of the entire market of companies pursuing a given therapeutic area will give you a definite edge on interview day.
- Get the company's annual report. Human resources departments will often be happy to send this to you once they have confirmed your interview day. Smaller companies may have what is known as a "Nonconfidential Executive Briefing" about the firm, often in a PDF format that they can e-mail to you.
- External recruiters can also help you prepare for interviews because they know their clients well. If you were an agency referral, make sure you tap all of the agency's resources before you see the employer. The best recruiters won't let you get far before they schedule an "interview prep" phone call!

## **The Dark Side of Interview Preparation**

It isn't a compliment to get a reputation as an interviewing machine. Company HR people and recruiters consider these to be the worst kind of candidates--those who have so overprepared for the interview that they are willing to say or do anything to get the job. These people are not representing their true interests. Instead, they are representing the thoughts of countless books on interviewing, with names such as "*100 Snappy Answers to Tough Interview Questions*." Whatever you do, be yourself. Don't sound like this:

"My major weakness? I guess it must be that I sometimes work too hard. I've got to learn to spend more time on other aspects of my life."

This is a tired response to the classic interview question. If you are a hiring manager and hear this in an interview, you want to run as fast as you can in the opposite direction. Many scientists don't realize it, but those candidates who read books for their "canned" interview responses are as easy to spot as the applicant wearing a big hand-painted tie.

By doing the right kind of interview preparation, you'll represent yourself fairly with straightforward and honest communications. That's the kind of person companies want to hire.

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