

16 Common Sense Interview Tips



When we refer to something as “**common sense**,” we usually mean that it’s something we think everyone should know. Often, though, it turns out that what may seem like common sense to one person doesn’t to someone else. Similarly, because human-resources professionals constantly screen and interview candidates, what may seem like a common-sense interview tip to them might not have crossed a job seeker’s mind.

On the following page are “common-sense” interview tips straight from the experts’ mouths.

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1. Your Resume – know it and bring it

You should be prepared to answer specific questions about the information on your resume without having to look at it. Bring at least 4-5 copies of your resume printed on firm, above-average paper and carry it in a simple folder or small briefcase. Have a copy handy for anyone who asks.

Before you start interviewing, take 5 minutes and look at your resume one more time. Be able to quickly and accurately give a timeline of your employment history, including why you changed positions, along the way. Be able to name your supervisor and your co-workers in case your interviewer asks. They may know your company and people who work there.

Be able to list at least 3 major accomplishments you made at each place of employment and be able to discuss them at length. Be able to recall your greatest challenges and how you overcame them.

Know your references in advance. You should be able to list 3 professional references, how you related to them in the workplace, why you chose them, and what they are going to say about you up front. Companies want your previous supervisors, co-workers, and customers to be able to accurately describe your work habits and your inter-personal skills.

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2. Be presentable - Appearance and Aroma

Shower the day of. A fresh haircut or trim is always a good idea, but you don't want to sample a new hairstyle or hair color the day before your interview. While you should always wear deodorant, try to avoid perfumes and colognes. You never know who will be allergic or just downright averse to your scent. "A hiring manager once told me the story of how he didn't select an incredibly well-qualified candidate because she wore the same perfume as his ex-wife!" says Danielle Beauparlant Moser, a career coach with Blended Learning Team." He said the second she walked into the room, his only thought was how to get her out as quickly as possible because all he could think of was his ex-wife."

Men, wear your best "power suit" unless otherwise specified. Look sharp, you only get one shot at this so look like you mean business. Even if the entire office is business casual and you feel out of place, your interviews will appreciate it. Dress slacks and a button down shirt with sport coat work fine as well and it's always safe to go with a simple tie. A light blue or white button down shirt with a simple tie is a better choice than a bright colored shirt and tie with heavy patterns. Your belt should match your shoes. Never wear white socks; black socks are the professional standard.

Women, your options are a bit more dynamic than your male counterparts, but as a general guideline go with a business professional outfit that fits, is tasteful and will not draw unnecessary attention. We suggest either business slacks and a nice blouse, although a matching business skirt/jacket combo is feminine and very professionally appealing as well. Most importantly, no inappropriately-fitting extra tight blouses with buttons busting at the fasten or bottoms that are overly tight and reveal the outline of your undergarments. Make-up should be conservative and tasteful. Skirts should not rise more than 2 inches above the knees. Low-rise close-toed heels are always safe. No heels above 3 inches should be worn. Neck scarves or pearl necklaces are a nice accessory. Moderate earrings, such as metal or pearl studs are fine. Stick with these guidelines to ensure professional dress. You'll look sharp, and feel sharp.

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3. Arrival Timing

While you should always arrive to your interview a few minutes early, it should not be more than 15 minutes before your scheduled interview time, advises Ben Yeargin, a manager at Spherion Staffing. “Arriving early will lead to anxiety on the candidate’s part because they have to sit and wait for an extended period of time, and it may lead to frustration on the hiring manager’s part because they might feel rushed with the project that they are trying to accomplish prior to the interview,” he says. If you find yourself arriving to the building earlier than you thought, review your notes in your car or take 5 minutes and look at your resume one more time.

4. Do your research!

Once you’ve got your foot in the door for that first interview, it’s critical to have general knowledge about the company so you can make a good impression. Run a quick Google search and review the latest news. “It’s important to gather information and understand how to use the company info you find to your benefit”, says Cynthia Shapiro, a Woodland Hills, Calif.-based career expert. By researching the company:

1. You will be able to more fully demonstrate your enthusiasm for the career field and the organization.
2. You will be able to articulate how your skills, knowledge and values match those of the organization and industry.
3. You can determine if this is an organization to which you would want to devote the next few years of your work life.

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5. If possible, know whom you're meeting with

"Know the name of the interviewer so that you can ask for that person at the receptionist's desk," advises Cheryl Palmer, president of Call to Career, an executive coaching firm. "It's embarrassing when the receptionist asks, 'Who are you here to see?' and you can't remember. Have this information either in your head or write yourself a note that you refer to prior to arriving in the waiting area," Palmer says.

6. Remember: You are being interviewed as soon as you walk in the door

"Most people would never think of the receptionist as being an interviewer, but it's true," Palmer says. "It's fairly common that the receptionist will report back to the hiring manager how candidates behaved in the waiting area. Don't be remembered as the one who ate all the candy out of the candy dish or spoke disrespectfully to the receptionist." Making a great first impression and establishing a real connection is everything. Smile, make eye contact, be enthusiastic, sit forward in your chair, use the interviewer's name.... Be yourself, but be the best version of yourself you possibly can. We all want to work with people we like and who like us.

7. Set a hook

A sad truth of interviewing is that later we might not remember a tremendous amount about you -- especially if we've interviewed a number of candidates for the same position. Later we might refer to you as, "The lady who runs marathons" or, "The guy who went to the same college as us." Sometimes you may be identified by hooks, so use that to your advantage. Your hook could be clothing (within reason), or an outside interest such as an instrument you play, or an impressive fact about your upbringing or career. Hooks make you memorable and create an anchor for interviewers to remember you by -- and being memorable is everything.

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8. Eye Contact is King

“One of the most obvious mistakes interviewees make is with poor eye contact, and it costs a lot of people a lot of jobs,” says Barry Maher, who owns a California-based career coaching firm. “Eye contact is simple,” he says. “Any given eye contact should last about three-five seconds at a time with each interviewer in the room. If there’s only one interviewer, make eye contact with him or her about 60-80 percent of the time.” More than 80 percent is intimidating. Less than 60 percent comes off as shifty and perhaps insincere, even dishonest.

9. Remember your Manners

You are a guest in someone else’s environment so behave properly and courteously like you would at your Grandma’s house. For example, it’s common courtesy to sit only after being offered a seat. While sitting, maintain good upright posture. Don’t slouch or lean back in your chair with your arm draped over the backrest. If offered a beverage and you do not want to accept, graciously reply, “Thank you, but no thanks I’m fine.” If invited to lunch and you have time, obviously accept. Breaking bread together is a great way for the interviewer to explore your personality without the confinements of a formal interview setting. Keep in mind, you are still being interviewed! No matter what, soft drinks only. You will never be looked down upon for respectfully declining an alcoholic beverage. You can say, “Thanks, but I better not. If I am selected for the job I am sure we’ll have plenty of time to do drinks in the future.”

10. Convert the interview into a past performance review

Whenever possible, ask about the major performance expectations for the job and then share examples of your best relative accomplishments to show you’ve done work that is comparable to the duties of the job you’re interviewing for. At the same time, don’t create negative sound bites. Interviewers will only remember a few sound bites, especially negative ones. If you’ve never been in charge of training, don’t say, “I’ve never been in charge of training.” Instead say, “I did not fill that specific role, but I have trained dozens of new hires and created several training guides.” Basically, never say, “I can’t,” or “I haven’t,” or “I don’t.”

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11. How to answer questions

In an interview, you're judged not just on the content of your answers, but also the quality of how they're presented. The best answers are 1-2 minutes long. If your answers are too short you're assumed to lack ability or insight, or interest. Worse, you become long-winded. Interviewees who talk too much are considered self-absorbed, boring or imprecise. Worse, after two minutes the interviewer tunes you out and doesn't hear a thing you've said. If an even conversation is flowing, run with it otherwise short, sweet, and specific is best.

12. Don't talk money!

Don't talk salary at this point, save it for the final negotiation when they've made an offer. You know the salary range, they know how much you're currently making. You've got nothing to win by talking money. The best thing to say is "Money is important, but I think it's more important for us to get to know each other and to determine if we are a good fit for each other, and if we are, the money will work itself out."

13. Stay cool, you're almost through

You should leave your cell phone in the car or on silent. Not vibrate, silent. Don't fidget or look at your watch or phone. Some people have a tendency to bounce their knees or feet when they are anxious, nervous, or sometimes for no reason at all. Try to control these types of things or any other "twitchy" habits you may have. Block at least two hours of time for the interview, says Cindy Loftus, co-owner of Loftus O'Meara Staffing. Loftus also advises keeping your schedule relatively clear on the day of the interview, to avoid feeling the need to rush. "Don't create distractions to your interview," she says.

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14. Ask questions which indicate a genuine interest

Focus on making sure the job is a good fit: Who you will work with, who you will report to, the scope of responsibilities, etc. Interviews should always be two-way, and interviewers respond positively to people as eager as they are to find the right fit. Don't be afraid to ask several questions. As long as you don't completely take over, the interviewer will enjoy that initiative and remember your keen interest.

15: Ask for the job!!

If you want the job, tell the interviewer so! It's a fact that fewer than 1 percent of all candidates actually ask for the job. It's almost as if they assume their interest in the job is presumed. But it's not. Those who take this extra step will put themselves far beyond the rest of the competition and greatly increase the probability of an offer either on the spot (it does happen) or in the very near future. By the end of the interview you should have a good sense of whether you want the job. If you need more information, say so. Otherwise, if you truly feel the position is a fit ask for the job, tell them why, and tell them you would like to move forward. Focus on specific aspects of the job: for example, explain you work best with teams, or thrive in unsupervised roles, or get energized by frequent travel. Ask for the job and use facts to prove why you want it -- and deserve it.

16. Follow up afterwards!!!

Reinforcing a connection with follow-up is key. Email follow-ups are fine. Handwritten notes are better if there is a longer timeframe for the position and the notes are mailed express. 2-3 sentences thanking the interviewer for their time and expressing your interest to move forward is great, however following up based on something specific you learned during the interview is excellent. For example, consider including a link to a subject you discussed (whether business or personal). Never underestimate the power of gratitude. This should always be done within 24 hours after the interview.