



Interviews That Work

I. Preparation

A. Research the employer

- ◆ Knowing facts about the employer/interviewers will impress the interviewers and give you good questions to ask.
- ◆ You will avoid damaging remarks. Ex: Expressing an interest in practicing bankruptcy law when the firm doesn't have a bankruptcy practice. This shows that you don't care enough about the employer to find out what they do! This also makes it appear that you just want "a job," not that you want to work for this specific employer -- an important point to make.
- ◆ You will be more confident and relaxed during the interview.
- ◆ Get basic information, aka "Hard Information," on who the firm is, what they practice, where their offices are located, etc.
 - Visit www.martindalehubble.com to look up firm and attorney information
 - The State Bar of Texas website will allow you to look up individual lawyers
 - Consult the firm's own website or literature
 - LexisNexis and Westlaw will allow you to search under many databases for firm and attorney information, including Martindale Hubble. You can narrow searches by criteria including practice areas, firm size, and law school and/or undergraduate college attended.
 - The Texas Legal Directory (available in the CSO library and online at <http://legaldirectories.com>) has a biography section
- ◆ Get more subjective information on firm and lawyers, the "Inside Scoop."
 - Ask friends & colleagues; former classmates and professors
 - Go to LexisNexis or Westlaw and search the "Legal News" database using the name of the firm and/or lawyers. This will bring up articles by/or about them in Texas Lawyer, Texas Bar Journal, National Law Journal, etc.
 - Go to LexisNexis or Westlaw and search under "Verdicts and Settlements." This will tell you if they have recently won or lost a big case – you may see quotes from partners, get a feel for culture of the firm, etc.

*A caveat on research: it is possible to research an interviewer too thoroughly. Telling the interviewer you know where his house is, what her husband does, or where his kids go to school (unless you have a prior personal connection with the interviewer or their family) crosses the fine line between "research" and "stalking." Confine your research to professional background and achievements.

Knowing About the Employer Permits You To Show Honest Enthusiasm

B. Assess Yourself and What You Can Contribute to Employer

- ◆ Employers are interested in what you can do for them, not what they can provide you (i.e., experience with a great firm.)
- ◆ Make a list of your specific accomplishments, skills, and talents so you can highlight what you can do based on what you have done in the past. Match up your accomplishments/skills with the employer's needs. Answer the question, "Why should we hire you?" For example:
 - You have negotiated real estate contracts for a large corporation for retail property all over the country, and the new potential employer represents a major builder/construction company. You can say in your interview that you can negotiate deals for this major client because you have negotiated over 55 real estate contracts.
 - You have taken 25 depositions in Vioxx product liability cases. That proves you can do it.
- ◆ Be ready to "spontaneously" state in the interview what you can do for the employer. Have a 2-minute "Infomercial"¹ stating clearly what you can do. This is your chance to market yourself. Fit it in anywhere or when they ask, "Is there anything you would like to say or tell us?"
- ◆ The purpose of the infomercial is to market yourself and get a job offer! You want to convince the employer that you will be a great employee and that you can do the job exactly the way they want it to be done, as well as to show them you are the kind of person they want to work with.
- ◆ To develop your infomercial, pick out 3-5 job-related strengths you have and the things you have accomplished that prove you have those strengths. (We will show how these strengths can be repeated in the employer's practice.) Translate those strengths and accomplishments into 3-5 valuable job-related skills.
- ◆ For example: having good judgment; having good research and writing skills; having good people skills; being a team player; being thorough; persistent; resourceful, etc.
- ◆ Be mindful of the audience (i.e. big firm, solo practitioner, government office). Tailor the infomercial to the employer based on your research about the employer. For instance, an employer who does a lot of pro bono work may be impressed if one of your strengths is your desire to help the downtrodden as well as the financially successful.
- ◆ Put together your strengths, accomplishments, and skills in a short infomercial. Memorize and practice it until you can say it comfortably and without hesitation.

¹ There is great discussion of Infomercials in Kimm Walton's Guerilla Tactics for Getting the Legal Job of Your Dreams available at bookstores and on-line.

- ◆ One of Kimm Walton's examples was with a young man who had a good sense of humor. His infomercial said: "One of my best traits is my sense of humor. In fact, I was elected Class Clown my senior year – along with Valedictorian – on the basis of a humor column I wrote for my high school newspaper. I have had lots of jobs where I've worked in tense situations and my sense of humor that given me the ability to ameliorate the stressful situation with a little humor."

D. Practice Answering Questions That Might Be Asked

- ◆ Think of yourself as an expert witness in a trial. Be ready for *any* question.
- ◆ Be well rehearsed so nothing comes as a surprise.
 - ◆ You will come across professional, relaxed and confident.
- ◆ The whole interview process is designed to "weed out" those who do not fit in to the firm culture, so you will want your answers to show that you will fit in. This is not the time to get in a political disagreement or express your strong feeling against ostentatious materialism if you are in the sumptuous offices of a big firm!

E. Dress and Grooming

- ◆ Remember that most legal employers are conservative, so you can't go wrong dressing and grooming conservatively.
- ◆ If you have some dress or grooming issues, talk to a friend or a salesperson at a shop, and get the issue resolved.
 - For instance, one lawyer told me she hated suits, and couldn't stand being "bound" in them, so she wore loose fitting jackets instead. They did not look neat and professional. This type of thing hurt her in interviews.
 - Facial hair can be an issue for men.

F. Check with your references and see if they know the people you will interview with. This may be an "ice breaker" for you. "Mr. Thomas – how are you? By the way, Judge Smith said to tell you hello and asked if you are going to play in the DBA Golf Tournament."

G. Miscellaneous

- ◆ Know exactly where you are going. Use Google Maps, Yahoo Maps, or Mapquest for driving directions. Call the employer and ask where to park if it is not obvious. Ask what street the entrance to the parking garage is on. (For instance, the street address of the firm may be 707 Main Street, but you have to be going west on Commerce to enter the parking garage. With one-way streets in downtowns, you can easily get turned around; you see the building, but find it hard to get there).

- ◆ Leave plenty of time to arrive. You can sit in your car for 20 minutes if necessary. It is much better to be early than late. Weather, traffic or any number of things can cause you to be delayed. Plan ahead!
- ◆ If you have to wait after you get to the office have something “lawyerly” to read. Look organized, serious, and interested in the law.
- ◆ Take extra copies of items they have asked for:
 - Resume
 - Writing sample
 - Transcript
 - References

II The Interview Itself

A. The Mystery

- ◆ Everyone conducts interviews differently and there is no way to know how it will be done until it starts. The best advice is to be flexible and prepared for anything!
- ◆ You may interview with 1 person in his or her office, or with 6 partners at once in a big conference room.
- ◆ Everyone may know your name and have read your resume, or they may act like they didn't know you were coming.
- ◆ You may be asked the traditional, “Can you tell us about yourself?” at first, or some strange hypothetical, such as, “If you were a D.A., and your uncle was convicted of murder, could you support the death penalty?”
- ◆ Some interviewers are organized and methodical. Others seem to expect you to do it all. This is your chance to use your infomercial and market yourself. Don't miss it.

B. Tough Questions

Examples of Tough Questions they might ask you:

- ◆ Why weren't your grades better? Why did you go to school in Fort Worth if you want to work in Dallas? These questions are meant to see how you will react under pressure as well as to get answers. How should you respond?
 - Take a deep breath
 - Pause briefly
 - Respond with a short answer
 - Move on (perhaps turn it around with a related question that gets the attention away from the topic). Example: “Why weren't your grades better?” Answer: “I was working full-time while attending school and had limited study time. However, I did particularly well in Civil Procedure and you probably know that Prof. George is considered one of the toughest profs. I believe he has given a CLE for your firm, hasn't he?”

- If none of your grades were good, pick some other accomplishment and state it and move on.
 - The way you answer is more important than what you answer.
 - Don't be defensive.
 - Don't bring up your negatives if the employer doesn't (Remember, these are not professional interviewers).
 - Don't give your family history.
 - Don't be boring. Smile and show enthusiasm. You want the interviewer to want to work with you.
 - Don't apologize for your credentials.
 - Don't go on and on and on -- make your points and move on.
- ◆ What are your weaknesses?
- Pick a past weakness and tell how you corrected it. If, for example, you had an issue with meeting deadlines in the past, you could say, "I had trouble meeting deadlines in high school and undergrad, so I read several books and took a course in time management, and in law school I haven't missed one deadline."
 - Another answer: "chocolate"
 - Another answer: "company picnics. I can't play volleyball."
 - Another answer: Pick a course that this firm or office is not interested in, such as "bankruptcy -- but I am working with Prof. Jones on that."
 - Do not say:
 - "I don't like research," or worse, "I am bored with law school."
 - "I can't write and don't like it."
 - "I am always late."
 - "I can't say no."
 - "I'm a night owl -- I don't get rolling until 10:00 am."

DO NOT SAY ANYTHING THAT SHOWS YOU CANNOT FUNCTION AS A LAWYER

- ◆ Be very careful if you cite your own flaws such as, "I don't like numbers." You may think that is not job-related, but keeping billable hours and other parts of the work can include numbers.
- ◆ An interview is not the place to talk about your drinking problem, even though it might be your greatest weakness.
- ◆ DO NOT SAY NOTHING.
- ◆ What are your strengths?
 - Use your infomercial.
 - Do not cite a strength that is not related to the employer you are interviewing with.
- ◆ Why should we hire you?
 - "I can do this job because of my experience, exposure and abilities as shown by (refer to accomplishments, jobs and activities)"
 - "I will do this job because of my willingness to work long hours, my thoroughness and"

- Such as:

Easy to work with
Get along with people
Persistent

TRANSFERABLE SKILLS

- ◆ What do you see yourself doing 5 years from now?
 - The question really is: “If we make you an offer, are you going to accept it and are you committed to staying with us into the foreseeable future?
 - It takes a legal employer 3 years to earn back the investment in training you.

Answer: Working for “an employer” like you.

- ◆ There are some questions that just about everyone dreads. “Mr. Jones, why did your grades stink?” “Ms. Smith, everyone at our firm graduated from an Ivy League school, why should we consider a person from a “regional university?” Why did it take you 4 years to graduate?” You can prevent that dread from tarnishing your interview by preparing the answers to any question you are worried about.
 - ◆ Write down your answer(s). Edit. Rewind. Say it out loud. Settle on a brief, to the point, common-sense sounding answer and then memorize it. And practice saying it out loud until you are comfortable with it. Take the emotion out of it.
 - ◆ At the interview, use your answer. As soon as you have said it, ask a question and move on. You will most likely find that the interviewer accepts your answer and doesn’t dwell on it.

- ◆ **Question** “Mr. Jones, I understand you recently left Smith, Frederick & Smith – involuntarily, I assume.” Yikes

Your facial expression → Don’t frown, wince or roll your eyes!

Answer “Yes, you are correct. Smith lost its biggest client and laid off four associates on one day. But they were most generous and I have time to look around for just the right fit. I think your firm is just that, Mr. Partner.”

- ◆ Incidentally, don’t speak poorly of any prior employer, even if the interviewer starts it.
- ◆ While you want to tell the truth, you don’t have to tell “how the sausage is made.” For instance, you don’t have to say that the 4 associates who were laid off were the 4 who had the lowest number of billable hours!

C. Questions for New Lawyers

Question: Often new lawyers are spooked by the question: “Mr. Jones, what type of law do you want to practice?”

Answer (truthfully): “Frankly, Mr. Partner, I don’t know. I seem to prefer transactional law but in terms of a particular area; I haven’t settled on one yet. I do know I am open to try any area in which you have needs.”

Question: “Ms. Smith, I really think we need someone with more experience than you have.”

Answer: “But Mr. Partner, I spent 2 semesters in clinical programs, using my 3rd year Bar Card to its fullest. Even Judge Mac commented on my abilities.”

D. Questions for Experienced Lawyers

Question: “So, you have been out of the practice of law for five years Mr. Smith?”

Answer: “That is correct, Mr. Partner, but I have kept up on the various areas by taking the State Bar’s Annual Update in Estate Planning every year. I am up to date on the law.”

III After the Interview

- ◆ Within 24 hours write a thank you letter to each person who interviewed you and did anything particularly helpful (such as the administrative assistant who scheduled your travel plans).
- ◆ I like handwritten notes, but it is fine to type it. Email could be okay if the firm has initiated correspondence on email. However, an email is unlikely to get printed out and put in your file.
- ◆ Try to remember something said in the interview that you can mention and that will remind the employer of you.
- ◆ For instance:

Dear Mr. Partner,

I appreciated your taking time out of your busy litigation schedule to visit with me about your firm. You confirmed my research: your firm practices law at an extraordinary level.

I continue to believe my experience at Smith, Frederick & Smith would allow me to “hit the ground” running.

*I hope you and your family enjoy the Aggie homecoming and your reunion.
Gig ‘em.*

*Sincerely,
Sam Jones*

- ◆ Refer to the Career Services handout on thank you notes for more tips and examples.