

How to finesse the interview

Be gregarious and sell yourself, but don't be pushy or dishonest

By Alan Radding

Increasingly in MIS hiring, interviews turn on business issues, not technology. Even at entry-level positions, the current emphasis is on the candidate's Communications skills and broader perspective. "Bits and bytes are a part of it," says Jane Hunt, an administrator at the corporate staffing unit of Aetna Life and Casualty Co. in Hartford, Conn. "But in the last few years, we've wanted to see communications skills, business savvy and a customer-service orientation,"

At high levels, technical competence usually can be determined from the resume; the interview focuses almost completely on business matters, "I want to see if the candidate has a business perspective rather than a technical perspective. I want to see if they have made the transition from being a techie to being a business person " says Bruce Walton, executive director of Russell Reynolds Associates in New York.

Walton is hired on retainer by large corporations to screen high-level MIS candidates- He might ask the candidate to discuss how information Systems fit into the overall scheme of things at his previous position or what challenges a corporate strategy might create for the information system. "I want to see if they answer in business terms or if they always come back with narrow technical details," he says.

Certain questions always come up, says Jack Erdlen, president of the Erdlen Bograd Group in Wellesley, Mass, a human resources consulting firm. Tell me about yourself, is often the first question asked, Erdlen says. To answer this question, the candidate should be prepared to talk about his strengths and achievements.

The self-destructive interview

The following are common reasons job candidates are rejected, according to a survey of managers.

1. Failure to sell oneself
2. Excessive salary demands
3. Lack of enthusiasm
4. Terse response to questions
5. Lack of preparation for interview
6. Poor explanation of shortcomings
7. Lack of career direction

Source: Erdlen Bograd group
CW Chart: Frank C. O'Connell

"Tell me about your weaknesses?" is another frequent question. To Michael Thorsen, director of MIS at Datacard Corp, in Minneapolis, "the perfect answer is to identify some weaknesses in the past and describe the steps you have taken to correct them,"

Some candidates prefer' to describe a weakness that is unrelated to the job under consideration, For instance, admit a weakness in distributed processing when you are being interviewed for a centralized data. base position,. The reasons for leaving a previous job can be a touchy issue. Be careful about portraying previous bosses or system users as being at fault. "That is always a red flag for me," Thorsen warns.

Instead of bringing up personality conflicts, the candidate can relate how he failed to get choice assignments or how his interests changed, Erdlen adds. Often an interviewer will ask about other job offers or interviews. The candidate wants to answer this question honestly, but in a way that does not suggest he is undesirable.

Unless the candidate is indeed pursuing other strong possibilities, consultants advise him to relate that he is just beginning the search or that he is looking for the best challenge or opportunity for his skills and interests.

Salary issues must be handled carefully. "Salary questions are usually used to screen people out," Erdlen warns. The best answer, at least until one has a specific offer, is to say that the salary requirements are open.

The term “open” implies a more flexible attitude than “negotiable,” which can suggest a more adversarial stance, an effort to extract a specific amount.

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Paul Veltre
Genstar Stone Products

Straight talk

“We expect a straightforward answer when it comes to salary history because we can verify that. For future salary, we’re more willing to leave that open and come back to it later,” Thorsen says.

The most common reasons candidates are rejected, according to Erlen’s survey of hiring managers, are that they fail to sell themselves, make excessive salary demands or lack enthusiasm.

Other common failings include responding with short answers, showing a failure to prepare for the interview, making petty excuses for shortcomings and lacking career direction.

“In addition to avoiding these pitfalls, Arnold advises job seekers to make sure they arrive on time for the interview and then send a thank-you note promptly.

Saying the right thing during a job interview often means more than merely answering questions properly. Some managers expect candidates to make their own case.

“I like to just talk to people, ask a few questions, but really let the person talk about himself or herself,” says Paul Veltre, director of information resources at Genstar Stone Products in Baltimore, a manufacturer of construction materials.

As a candidate talks, Veltre gauges how well the person will fit with the rest of the MIS team he has assembled. “I like to see how we are relating person to person.” He explains. Short terse answers are not acceptable.

“If the person just sits and says nothing, then that’s dead meat,” he concludes.

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