

PREPARATION IS KEY: YOUR INTERVIEW MOTTO

CAREER DEVELOPMENT 3 Here's one that should find its way onto the fridge door of any teacher thinking about a career move.

ALAN JERMAINE of KEA Education, is back to help take nerves out of the interview equation.

You get to an interview through the quality of your documentation and you win the job through interviewing well and obviously, better than the others.

Successful applicants have usually spent time developing and enhancing their curriculum vitae but they also spend time preparing for their interview. People who miss out at interview may well find that their lack of success relates quite directly to their lack of preparation for the big event. It is very common for people to be nervous when being interviewed.

Applicants who have done their preparation for their interview soon lose their nervousness and immerse themselves in the situation – perhaps even revelling in it. People who lack self-confidence and who don't prepare for an interview may display nervousness for the entire interview. So the question is, "what's the best way to go about preparing for an interview?"

DO YOUR RESEARCH

Firstly, you should have researched the school thoroughly by studying the school's website and reading as many ERO reports as you can – not just the most recent (trends can emerge from an examination of historical reports) – and of course, visiting the school. Visiting the school should always happen after you have completed your study of the website and ERO reports, so you arrive at the school with reasonable and relevant questions – just remember that not everyone showing you around will necessarily have the answers you seek. If you are applying to 20 schools, then you are going to be pushed for time!

Use the visit to familiarise yourself for interview day – where do you park, where are you likely to wait to be called, and if possible, have a look at the likely place for your interview: principal's office, boardroom, staffroom. This will help settle you on the day. As part of your preparation, get to know the names of the people likely to interview you. Secondly, questions you are likely to be asked tend to fall into categories.

These may include: vision, strategic planning, leadership, curriculum, assessment and evaluation, relationships, and so on. If you have been interviewed, you should be recording the questions you have been asked under category headings so that you can develop an item bank of interview questions. If you haven't been interviewed, then consider what might be asked in these categories.

Think how you might answer these in a reasonably concise manner. An important fact to consider is that interviews are time constrained. Everyone should get the same amount of time as anyone else. The longer you take to answer one question, the less time you may have available for another. In

other words, if you can answer well and concisely because you have prepared thoroughly, you will not only get credit, you will finish on time.

Thirdly, many interview panels like interviewees to give a presentation on a given topic and they usually stipulate a time limit. The best advice is ... do a verbal presentation, with perhaps a few visual aids, and leave a pamphlet behind summarising your key points or elaborating on the points you have made. Keep away from audio-visual presentations unless you are bringing your own equipment – the time it takes to set up eats away at your overall time.

Trying to get set up using the school's equipment can be frustrating and may result in failure. In such a situation, you can feel the fear and the panic. Can you do your presentation without your aid? Keep it simple: prepare your presentation, edit it judiciously so that it is powerful, then time yourself presenting it. If it is too long, edit it and try again until you are within the time limit, using a measured pace of delivery. Then practise, practise, practise! You will win kudos for a compact presentation that hits the target and stays within the time allowed.

HAVE QUESTIONS READY

At the end of formal questioning, it's fairly certain that you'll be asked if you have any questions. This is the time to do two things. Firstly, ask questions that are really significant to you and of a highly professional nature – don't ask about any special perks! It is not the time to show off by asking questions that no one facing you can answer; you will get points taken off for making the panel look ignorant! Secondly, ask the panel if you can talk for a few more minutes about matters that the panel might not know about you. This statement should provide information that you have thoroughly prepared in advance that 'sells' your case to the panel. A sort of summing up of what the panel will be getting if they employ you. As it is your final chance to make a favourable impression, make it interesting and make it memorable.

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KNOW HOW TO RESPOND

In the world of interviewing, there is considered a structure for answering questions that is regarded as good practice. Naturally, there are many variations on the theme. Think about the question, and before you answer, ensure that you really do understand it. If you don't, ask for it to be repeated or seek clarification. The first element in the best practice approach is to start by giving a general statement that outlines your answer.

This provides a structure that the panel can follow. Secondly, elaborate on your opening by giving, say, four or five general principles, factors, or elements, then give specific examples or evidence for each of these. If you can enhance your answer by providing recognised researchers in the field – John Hattie is always a great touchstone – then do so.

If people on a panel have been trained to conduct interviews, they know that the purpose of an interview is to conduct a conversation with you doing 90 per cent of the talking. They should want to

know as much about you as possible so they can make a good decision. They need, therefore, to ask questions designed to get you to talk freely and fluently. By 'freely', I do not mean a meandering ramble, nor do I mean a torrent of ideas cascading upon the ears of the panellists who cannot process your answer in a meaningful manner. You must communicate your answer at a pace that enables the panel to assess your answer and to make notes. A good paced answer can also lend a certain gravitas. In talking with people who have recently been through an interview, one dilemma keeps coming up.

Do you answer a question giving the panel what you think they want to hear, or do you answer according to your own beliefs? The answer is simple; you cannot possibly know what the panel individually or collectively wants to hear. You must be authentic and answer according to your own beliefs. If they don't like what you believe in then perhaps that's not the school for you.

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Some questions may be designed to put you under pressure, yet you find that you're able to respond appropriately. Such a question might look like, "tell us about your greatest weakness?" Now, there's a dilemma! Are you going to expose yourself by giving the honest answer, "I hate administration!" Well, honesty is admirable, but it won't get you the job. Then there's the 'nonanswer' – also real – "that's for me to know and for you to find out." Gales of laughter, but no job.

The accepted best approach is to acknowledge a past weakness that you identified and then did something to turn a shortcoming into a strength. The classics are: claiming to be a workaholic or to have poor time management skills, or to be technophobic. Now you have work-life balance, have superb time-management skills, and are a computing whizz.

APPEARANCE COUNTS!

Now for the nitty gritty. First appearances do count, so you must look like the professional the panel are hoping to employ. You must turn up well dressed and well groomed, and that means being groomed before you get in your car to drive to your destination, or if you prefer, to your destiny. Appearances can count even as you get out of your car. Arrive about 10–15 minutes early so you can settle your nerves, which requires making an allowance for traffic conditions. When you enter the interview room, you must make a great and memorable first impression.

During the interview, keep your posture alert, positive, and energised. Don't appear to patronise a questioner with a "well, that's a good question." It sounds much better to say, if you feel you must say anything, "well, that's making me think!" However, it really is better not to comment on the quality of the questions. Final appearances can be important, too.

Farewell and thank each panellist as you leave. If you are being escorted out by someone, then keep alert and professional because they may well give feedback on anything that slipped out while on the walk to the car park – for example, "did Bruce buy that ghastly yellow and red tie or did his wife select it for him!?" Be assured: such a comment will be repeated once the person returns to the interview room.

EVERY INTERVIEW IS THE FIRST

A reality is that every job you go for will produce a different panel and a different field of applicants. Every application is in reality like your first time. You may prepare for the interview quite thoroughly and then leave the interview feeling you had excelled yourself only to find you missed out. Chances are, someone else had likewise prepared thoroughly and had done or said something that just tipped the balance in their favour. That's reality. Pick yourself up; ask for feedback on your application materials, your presentation, your interview and anything else that might have been taken into consideration in the panel's decisions. Then do something about it.