

Who's Going to Hire Me?

How to Ace a Job Interview Even When You're Over 50

Todd Bermont

Ten Step Corporation

August 1, 2006

Special from Bottom Line/Retirement

As you grow older, you need to change your job interview tactics. Once you learn the strategy, it's as easy to ace an interview when you're over 50 as it was when you were in your 20s.

First move: Weed out the losers -- the companies that probably won't hire you because of your age.

You might persuade a biased company to hire you, but you can greatly improve your job chances by concentrating on businesses that welcome older applicants. The best way to find them is to be up front about age on your résumé. Most companies with an age bias won't even schedule an interview.

Too often, however, older applicants try to hide their age by omitting dates, especially those of college graduation and/or early jobs.

My advice: Put the dates in, and don't worry. The companies that call you back to schedule an interview are usually those that know the value of older employees.

LAYING THE GROUNDWORK

Your résumé is likely to be the interviewer's only information source before talking with you in person. That's why it pays to research the company and tailor your résumé accordingly. The object is for the person who schedules interviews to read your résumé and say something like: "Here's a perfect candidate! I'll schedule an interview immediately."

Visit the company's Web site and download brochures and the annual report, or phone and ask the firm to send them to you. If possible, talk with someone you know who has worked for the business, and also look for information on the company in magazines, newspapers and on the Internet (using Google or another search engine). Also check the AARP Web site of the best companies to work for at www.aarp.org.

What to look for: Information about the company's goals and what it values -- technology, customer relations, growth in certain geographical areas, etc. With this information in hand, you can write a résumé so it shows that you possess the skills a company values.

Examples: If applying for a job at a retail chain that values customer relations, mention how your experience in this area benefited previous employers. Or if a company is targeting the Hispanic market, emphasize how a previous employer profited from your knowledge of Spanish.

Keep your résumé to one page -- many human resources (HR) managers don't read the second page. If you need a second page, list several major accomplishments near the top of the first page.

Examples: Saving an employer a large sum of money or making a crucial sale.

Explain these and other achievements at greater length later on in the résumé. It's unlikely that résumés of competing job candidates -- particularly younger ones -- will start with a list of attention-grabbing accomplishments.

When you find an opening at a company you would like to work for, phone the HR department and ask about the position. *Helpful question:* "What are some characteristics of people who have succeeded on your team?"

Most companies designate a person in the HR department to answer questions about specific job openings. But even if you reach a low-ranking assistant, it pays to ask, "What kind of person is your boss looking for?" You'll often pick up facts about the job that other candidates don't know and that will be useful in the interview.

Examples: The job requires traveling, computer skills aren't important or the company would consider a part-time employee.

GETTING PSYCHED

Hiring managers -- the people who decide whether to employ an applicant -- rarely admit it, but the first minutes of an interview are crucial. It's then that they decide whether to consider the candidate seriously or just get the interview over with as quickly as possible.

With that in mind, it pays to prepare to make a great first impression for the interview...

● **Wear standard business attire** -- even if most employees dress informally. That means a dark suit and tie for men and a professional business suit for women. Above all, don't make the mistake of wearing clothes that, in your mind, will make you look younger. They usually

have the opposite effect.

- **Wear your hair in a traditional style** -- nothing unusual.

- **Practice in front of a mirror.** Do this several times during the days before an interview. Smile and say to yourself, "I'm great!" It sounds corny, but the technique actually works. It shows you how much better you look with a smile on your face and lets you practice the smile so it comes naturally when you walk in for the interview.

- **Practice shaking hands firmly** and looking the other person in the eye when you speak. That's what to do at the beginning of an interview, and the gestures should also come naturally.

- **Visualize the interviewer extending a hand and offering you a job.** Doing that puts you in a positive frame of mind that you'll automatically telegraph with body language during the interview.

PLAYING YOUR ACES

Get the edge on other job candidates by asking questions that let you talk about ways in which the company will benefit by hiring you. *Examples...*

- **What are the characteristics of your ideal candidate?** Many interviewers will be delighted by the question, and the answer gives you an opening to point out how many of the characteristics you have.

If the interviewer mentions a qualification you lack, it may turn out that the company can help you with it -- learning a computer program, example. Immediately stress the point that someone with your accomplishments couldn't have succeeded without a willingness to learn and adapt to change.

- **What projects or challenges are involved with this job?** The answer gives you another opportunity to relate your skills to the work that will be expected of you.

- **What accomplishments will I have to make in order to get a perfect score on my yearly performance review?** This works because it assumes you're already hired and shows a positive attitude. And again, use the answer to talk about your qualifications and skills.

It's best to keep your statements short and to let the interviewer do most of the talking. If the interviewer fidgets, avoids eye contact or crosses his/her arms, you're talking too much.

The interviewer is interested in what you're saying if he smiles, nods frequently or moves forward in his chair. But even then, don't drag out your answers. If there's any doubt, ask the interviewer if you've given enough information. Don't ask about salary or benefits (unless the interviewer brings up the subject). If you need information, ask HR after the interview. If you have problems with the compensation package wait until you get an offer and then negotiate.

Bottom Line/Retirement interviewed Todd Bermont, president, Ten Step Corporation, a Chicago-based company that counsels job seekers. He's also a business development manager at Lee Technologies, a computer security provider for corporations and other large organizations. His latest book is *10 Insider Secrets to a Winning Job Search* (Career).

ID=42991