

**LIGHTSOURCE CONSULTING**  
**503-226-3777**  
[holly.cundiff@lsconsulting.net](mailto:holly.cundiff@lsconsulting.net)

## **I. Interview Preparation**

Changing jobs may be one of the most stressful times in your life. Next to death and marriage, this experience ranks as one of the most traumatic periods for most people. At the same time, it is also one of the most rewarding and exciting times in your life. No one says that a job change has to be a trying experience, and the following information is dedicated to making this transition as easy and productive as possible. One of our objectives is to reduce the amount of stress you'll experience by "walking you through" the process.

If your career runs true to form, you will experience at least three job changes during your working life - and more likely as many as five. The reason, very simply, is that very few employers can provide all of the work experiences that good employees need to become well rounded individuals. In modern industry, employers value diversified experience more than stability, and the ambitious employee is often left with no choice but to change employers in order to advance his career and make himself more marketable.

Growth is never comfortable; but there is no real growth without change. Career growth requires adaptability, mental toughness, focus and a long term perspective. We believe it is important to identify and deal with many of the emotions that surround the decision to make a job change. In our many years in the search business, we have seen many logical choices sidetracked by emotions of loyalty, allegiance, commitment, fear and a million other non-issues that cloud a candidate's judgement.

As a fellow recruiter put it, "If there's a tie between logic and emotion, emotion will usually win - at least in the short run." It is important throughout this period to remember your original objectives and ask yourself what motivated you to launch this search in the beginning - Was it more money? greater challenge? greater stability? better location? or possibly a more compatible relationship with your boss?

Said another way, it is wise to ask yourself if you are running away from something negative, or are you going toward something more positive? While there are shades of both in most decisions, generally there is an overriding influence one way or the other. We submit that unless you hope to grow as a result of this change (rather than just to escape from something), you should reexamine your motivation. Career decisions should always be made in a positive light, unless those decisions are made for you, as in the case of a layoff.

## **Interview Preparation**

It is said that good employees return five times their salary to employers in the form of increased revenues or cost reductions. Said another way, employers want to hire people who are problem solvers. This section is dedicated to helping you package your strengths (or problem solving abilities) so that you can clearly present them to a potential employer.

First, you must know yourself. You can start by asking yourself: What are my career goals - both in the next job and 3 years down the road? What do I like (or dislike) about my current job? What experience do I want to gain in my next assignment? What are my key strengths and weaknesses? It might be good to rate yourself on a scale of 1-10 on the list of traits on the cover page - or to simply write down your positives and negatives on a piece of paper.

Second, you need to “package your positives” so they can be effectively presented to the employer. For instance, you might draw your current company or department organization chart to show where you fit, to whom you report and what your responsibilities are. Prepare a list of major accomplishments - (school, personal and work related). Be specific in terms of dollars saved, percentage increases, units produced, goals achieved, etc. Analyze the things you do well or enjoy the most. These are usually keys to job satisfaction in future positions. Prepare examples of your work to demonstrate your achievements during an interview (if the opportunity presents itself). Design drawings, project notebooks and letters of commendation are all good examples. Prepare a list of special training courses and seminars you've attended as well as degrees received with GPA. Request copies of transcripts you don't already have. In short, you need to assess your ability to help a potential employer solve his problems by reducing costs or increasing revenues!

Third, you also need to “package your negatives.” All of us have shortcomings or failures that we must deal with positively if we are to leave the impression that we have learned from those failures or are working to correct a weakness. While we can't deal with every possibility, we offer these key thoughts. Never speak negatively of a former employer - at best you will be viewed as a complainer. Try to find something positive that you learned from that experience and stress that in your conversation. When asked why you left a former employer a general “not happy there” is a poor answer. Acceptable reasons would include:

1. Lack of challenge
2. Poor location
3. Not enough advancement or opportunity
4. Inadequate compensation
5. Instability of employer
6. Lack of prestige, pride or acceptable working conditions.

Don't volunteer negative information or dwell on former failures. If asked, you should have a prepared response which is neither defensive or apologetic. Acknowledge the question, indicating that you learned from the experience and move on! If there is a "skeleton" in your closet - like a criminal record, a personal situation, dismissal or other serious negative, make us aware of it, before your interview, so we can help you and the employer deal with it! Above all, you must communicate the idea that you are aware of your shortcomings and are striving to overcome any deficits that occurred in previous positions - and that you are open to suggestions for improvement. You should have a list of references readily available complete with home and work phone numbers. Peers and supervisors are the preferred references.

Fourth, learn as much about the opportunity as possible. We will help in this regard, but together we should know the following before an interview: Name of company and if they are a division of another firm. Company outline - (number of employees, locations, sales volume). The position for which you are being considered and its main responsibility. Who you'll see, their titles and for whom you'll work directly. Employer profitability, stability, major competitors and future prospects. The library has many reference manuals to supplement the data we will provide, but asking others in your field about the company's image is another excellent source of information. Directions to (and time for) the interview - plus a phone number in case you are detained.

Fifth, prepare a list of questions. Be ready to ask them at the logical time during the interview, but be sure to listen carefully to the answers. Generally, it is best to keep your questions until later in the interview so that you can tailor them to the pertinent topics - or so you can show active listening by asking for amplification or clarification. Examples of questions that stimulate open-ended conversations with employers may include the following (asterisk denotes excellent questions to ask during the first phone interview):

- What are the most important responsibilities of the job?
- To whom will I report and what is his or her background?
- What support or training will be available to help me learn what I need to know to be successful? Will I mainly inherit projects or initiate them?
- Is this a team environment or individual contributor role?
- What is the most important thing I can do to help your firm in the first 90 days of my employment?
- Why did my predecessor leave - or is this a new position? What criteria are used to evaluate my performance? Is there a formal evaluation process? Will I have subordinates? If so, what are their strengths/weaknesses?
- What aspects of my background make me right or wrong for this position?
- What will my work setting be like - (private office, common area, etc.)? How much will I be expected to travel? What is a typical work week? With whom would I interact most? (peers, customers, vendors, etc.) What would be the next logical position after I successfully complete this assignment? What kind of timetable do you foresee? What brought you (the interviewer) to this firm and what is your background? Why would I want to come to work for this firm?

Sixth, have a well prepared briefcase or note book. First of all, limit yourself to one hand-held item (briefcase, purse, or portfolio). Carry it in the left hand so that you are prepared to shake hands with the right without shuffling. In it, you should have: A note pad and 2 pens (black or blue ink is best for completing employment applications). Extra copies of your resume (at least 3) and a few extra business cards. Be sure you verify spelling, grammar and content of your resume prior to this interview. Any gaps in employment must have a ready explanation. Breath mints and any minor medication needed during the day. Information about the employer so you can do a final review while waiting. This booklet, which can serve as a last minute refresher on interviewing skills. Examples of your accomplishments such as design drawings, project manuals, video tapes, etc. (in case an opportunity to use them presents itself). Copies of your transcripts and diplomas. Your complete reference list and letters of recommendation. Copies of your last two performance reviews (if possible).

Now you are ready to visit the employer - except for a couple of very critical things! Arrange your schedule to get a good night's sleep the night before the interview and avoid the use of alcohol which will leave your skin with an unhealthy pallor. Likewise, overeating or rich foods taken the day before will take a quiet but exacting toll on your energy level the day of the interview.

## **II. Handling Interview Questions**

Every interviewer has a different style based on his or her personality and the role they play in the interview scheme. Some firms prefer group or team interviewing techniques while others prefer a series of individual interviews. Most interviewers try to put you at ease in a casual setting but others will test your poise through the use of a very formal situation or stress interviews.

Whatever the environment, all interviewing revolves around the use of questions. How well you handle those questions may very well determine whether or not you achieve your final objective, soliciting an offer! The first thing you should do when asked a question is to be sure you understand what is asked. Be a good listener and do not interrupt unless it is appropriate to do so. Sometimes this will require a question by you in order to clarify exactly what the interviewer wants to find out with his inquiry.

Once you're sure what the topic is, you can formulate a meaningful answer. This reverse questioning or repeating of the question is called reflective communication and it will demonstrate the ability to listen and reach mutual understanding. This will also buy you time to formulate a meaningful response. Every question can be answered in shades of black, white or gray. If you do not have the skills being asked for, simply state that you have not yet been exposed to that learning experience but that you are confident you can learn given some time and support.

“Yes” or “No” answers should not be used since they eliminate your opportunity to “sell” your abilities or fully explain your answers. It is important to be specific and concise in your responses. Answer all questions in a direct manner, truthfully and briefly. Don't

stray from the subject or ramble on. Also, avoid using nebulous phrases or hyperbole (for example, “I produced huge cost savings in a short time”). Being specific (“I generated cost savings of \$800,000 in my 1st 7 weeks”) enhances your credibility and helps the interviewer focus on your specific problem solving abilities.

This is an excellent opportunity to introduce examples of your accomplishments or achievements. But keep in mind not to come on too strong. Confidence misplaced comes across as being pompous. Treat your interviewer as an equal. Remember, he or she may be just as inexperienced or nervous as you and a peer approach puts most people at ease readily. If stressful questions are used, remember that they are being asked for the purpose of evaluating your ability to think on your feet and show poise. Accept them as such and answer straightforwardly. Should a flagrantly prejudicial or controversial subject be raised, simply state that you do not see how your views on that subject could affect your ability to handle the obligations of the job.

If you handle such situations calmly, the skilled interviewer will move on to other subjects without being offended. It is also important that you:

1. Be alert and display a natural expression of genuine interest and sincere enthusiasm. However, do not try to be someone else.
2. Project confidence, but do not imply that you can do everything or that you are a miracle worker. Keep cool, but remember nervousness is to be expected and is not unusual. In fact, a little nervousness will keep you on your toes.
3. Make sure your strong points get across to the interviewer.
4. Attempt to express some knowledge of the company, which shows you have enough interest in them to inquire about the firm prior to the interview.
5. Assist the interviewer in developing a positive understanding of your expectations and ambitions.

Above all, it is important to practice your responses to normal interviewer questions. For that purpose, we’ve listed below some sample questions that you should become proficient in handling before your face-to-face interview. The use of a tape recorder and a practice partner will make this preparation easier and more effective. Feel free to discuss with us any question that you think you might have trouble handling. Be prepared for at least one very open ended or surprise question right at the start such as:

- Why are you interested in working for our company?
- Tell me about yourself - who are you, really?
- What can you do for us?

Other questions might include:

- What could your current company do to be more efficient?
- What things are important to your job satisfaction?
- What accomplishments in your current job are you most proud of?
- What are your most difficult (or most rewarding) job responsibilities now?

- What particular strengths and weaknesses do you have?
- What do you know about our company?
- What are your short and long term career goals & how do you plan to reach them?
- How would your associates describe your personality?
- How do your spouse and children feel about this career move?
- Why should we hire you?
- Why are you leaving your current company?
- Which of your past jobs did you like the least (or the best)?
- What did you like (or dislike) about your last supervisor?
- What kind of people do you find most difficult to work with?
- Why aren't you earning more money?
- Tell us about your past salary progression. What do you expect to earn?
- What is your typical day like?
- What kind of decisions are most difficult for you?
- How has your current job prepared you to take on more responsibility?
- How do you manage to interview while still employed?
- Tell me about one of your biggest mistakes and how you handled it.
- What are some of the things you and your supervisor disagree on?
- How would you rate yourself on a scale of 1 to 10 in terms of ambition?
- What are you looking for in the next job?
- What aspects of your job do you consider most crucial?
- How did you choose your college?
- How did you pay for it?
- Do you prefer working with others or alone?
- Describe the work environment in which you felt most comfortable?
- Have you ever resigned or been fired from a job? Why?
- How well do you take direction or coaching?
- How long have you been thinking of changing jobs?
- How many hours per week do you currently work?
- How would you define a conducive environment?
- How willing are you to travel or relocate after being hired?
- Can you work under pressure?
- Describe a situation where your work was criticized. How did that make you feel?
- Are you a leader or follower?
- Why have you changed jobs so frequently?
- Why have you been out of work so long?
- Do you prefer staff or line work? Why?
- If you could start over, what would you do differently in your career?
- What do your subordinates (supervisors, peers) think of you?

Fielding questions on salary requirements is particularly difficult for many candidates. The odds are said to be 6,000 to 1 of your guessing the exact figure that a potential employer has in mind while talking with you. In addition, you have the advantage of having a 3rd party (us) who can serve as a go-between to insure that both your needs and the needs of the employer are met.

You should use this advantage wherever possible by avoiding the conversation altogether. We have already provided the interviewer your salary history and you most likely won't be asked to interview if there isn't a way for the employer to make it worth your while. It's also in your favor to postpone the discussion of money for as long as possible so that the employer sees all the reasons why you can help them solve their problem. The objective is to convince them that your salary is an "investment", not an "expense" If asked directly about your salary requirements, simply reiterate your current salary and say that you're sure they will make you a fair offer after evaluating what you can bring to the party. If pressed further, you can give a range of \$5,000 beginning at your current (or last) salary level. Normally, anything over a 15% salary increase will be considered high, unless you are working from a low base or are looking at a major career move. It is best to ask for 24 hours to get back to the employer on expected salary level. This allows you time to think about the overall opportunity, confer with us and have me call the employer back!

### **III. Body Language & Interviewing Attitudes**

The experts tell us that your visual impression or body language - as well as your attitude - are just as important as what we actually say when it comes to the overall effect we have on others. Generally, it is important to convey the image of a person with whom the interviewer would like to work. Enthusiasm, interest level, sincerity, openness and warmth go into the "chemistry" that often makes or breaks a hiring decision.

We all need to be aware of the little things that others see in our facial expressions, postures, energy levels and gestures. Generally, we should be dynamic and friendly but one notch less than the person interviewing us. It is obvious that interviewers prefer those who smile vs. those who frown, so smile! However, your facial expressions should change to reflect the mood of the conversation. Nodding agreement encourages others to talk as well as to let them know that you understand what is being said. Your head should be held erect (not tilted or stiff) during the interview and you should keep your hands away from the face or neck area while talking. Eye contact is one of the best aspects of body language. Good eye contact with the interviewer sends a message of trustworthiness, confidence and credibility while fostering open discussion.

On the other hand, poor eye contact often reflects a lack of self confidence, a low self image and lack of enthusiasm. It is particularly important to maintain 10-15 seconds of eye contact when first meeting a person before looking away. Do not stare into the other person's eyes but come back to the eye contact often during your discussion.

Volumes have been written about a firm (but not crushing) handshake. In our society, a handshake is a non-verbal message that we are genuinely happy to meet or see the other person. A limp version of this greeting sends a very weak message to the other person so it is important that our grasp reflect the interest and enthusiasm we want to convey. No more than two shakes are ever required and one is preferred for most business meetings. Again, be sure that your purse or briefcase is in your left hand to accommodate a sudden introduction.

Never sit until asked to do so by an interviewer and when you do, sit erectly with both feet on the floor. Don't fidget or change positions too often. Tapping your fingers, wringing your hands, looking at your watch or twirling your pen can only distract from the image of a professional communicator concentrating on the very serious task of evaluating career opportunities.

#### **IV. Interviewing Etiquette (Dress, Grooming & Manners)**

The best rule of thumb is to dress in a professional businesslike manner. Always wear what you would wear if your biggest customer were coming to visit! In most cases, that would require a suit or conservative sport coat and business slacks with tie. Although accepted practice is changing we still suggest that women should never wear pants. High heels should also be avoided since it is unlikely they will be the normal footwear for either a factory or the daily routine of an office. Shoes should always be polished and not severely worn. Men's suits should be blue, black or gray if possible as well as cleaned and pressed. Ties should not exceed 3½" in width and be conservative in nature. White shirts are still preferred but pastels are certainly acceptable if properly accented.

One of the side benefits of being professionally dressed is that it makes you feel more confident and at ease with a stressful situation. Skillful interviewers will often invite you to remove a coat or tie during the interview and you may do so if offered - especially on tours of hot or dirty areas. Safety glasses are generally required in these areas as well as ear plugs and safety helmets. As a guest, be sure to cooperate with these requests readily.

Obviously, it is important to bathe the day of the interview as well as to trim and clean fingernails. You know when and how to prepare your hair for "big events" like an interview so plan your haircuts, washing and styling accordingly. Always have your hair trimmed at least monthly, and men should avoid hair below the collar or over the ears. While a certain percentage of employers still object to facial hair, a neatly trimmed mustache or beard generally will not reduce your odds of interviewing success.

Avoid heavy make-up, colognes or perfumes! You are there to get a job, not a date! Also minimize jewelry to prevent projecting an image that will distract from the completion of your mission. You want to present a clean-cut, conservative image to a potential employer. Your appearance will be complemented by your manners and demeanor.

Be courteous, polite and appreciative (but not subservient) with all you meet - from the Receptionist to the President. You should project a confident (but not cocky) presence to all who meet you and you can easily keep your enthusiasm maintained by simply focusing on the potential rewards of this process, a better job!

Good etiquette begins before you arrive! If you are detained for whatever reason, stop and call. We will have provided you the number for that purpose and the old saying applies - "If you call, you're never late." Plan to be at the location 10-13 minutes early to allow enough time to find the interviewer's office and nearest lavatory. A last minute restroom stop is always in order and a few deep breaths will help diffuse any case of "the

nerves.” If you are asked to wait, make use of the time by reviewing information about the company, who you’ll be seeing, etc.

Drug tests are a way of life in American industry today. You may be asked to participate in one during a visit and should do so willingly. Cooperating with this and other requests will help form the image of the type of candidate with whom people like to work. Smoking is another “hot potato” these days. Avoid it even if the opportunity is offered - the odor your clothes will carry for the rest of the interview is too high of a price to pay. Likewise, gum chewing is off-limits and breath mints should be used only when you have time between interviews.

Applications for employment seem redundant to resume carrying applicants - especially when the company has even more extensive information about you from us. Nevertheless, if asked, you should cheerfully complete the employer’s application as requested. Having your resume and reference list at your command will expedite this process.

Unless pressed for specifics, always leave the “expected compensation” area blank or simply put “Negotiable.” However, you should always complete the “current compensation” questions with your total current compensation package spelled out (including base salary, bonuses, commissions and overtime).

Always address the interviewer as Mr. or Mrs. - until asked to do otherwise. This denotes respect for his or her position and does not rush familiarity. Try to remember the names of the people you meet. It is appropriate to give them a business card and to ask for one of theirs.

Interviewing during meals can be difficult because it involves two functions of the mouth that are not very compatible - talking and eating! There are, however, some hints that can make this a more positive experience. Order light foods that are not greasy or messy. Overstuffed sandwiches can be as deadly as spaghetti! Parallel your host’s tastes and price selection whenever possible. Ordering dressing on-the-side is a way of minimizing potential messes with tossed salads. Avoid finger foods or those requiring de-boning such as fish or fowl. Pause between bites to talk - and rest your utensils on your plate while you talk. The best practice is to never drink alcohol during a business meal. If pressed, order only one, and not exotic mixed drinks. A glass of white wine or a lite beer reflects the tastes of a much more disciplined person than an order for a double martini! Likewise, avoid smoking if at all possible, but if you must, limit it to after dinner. Be courteous and cordial to all waiters and serving people. Don’t offer to pay the bill - an employer would not have invited you if they did not expect to pick up the tab. Finally, be sure to thank your host for the meal and the chance to get to know him or her on a more personal basis.

## V. The Interview Close and Follow-Up

It will be obvious when the interview is drawing to a close. Only three things can happen at this stage:

1. You'll be asked back for a second interview.
2. You'll receive an offer.
3. You'll be rejected based on this interview.

Obviously, you want to leave every interview with either the first or second outcome. You'll recall that your objective in any interview is to solicit an offer that would make you want to accept the position. Put another way, you can't accept or reject an offer that is never made!

At the conclusion of the interview, there are 3 things you need to accomplish:

1. Tell the key interviewer (probably also your supervisor-to-be) that you are interested in working not only for the firm, but for him personally. Interviewers like to hear positive things, too. If the "chemistry" is good between you, he needs to know it so he'll go to bat for you.
2. Summarize what you can do to solve what you perceive to be the employer's greatest problem.
3. Determine what the next step in the process will be (2nd interview, tests, physicals, reference checks, etc.). It is critical that you have the correct spelling of the names of the people you have met, their titles and addresses. If a second interview is the next likely step, be sure also to get the names and titles of those who you'll see on that interview.

The close is an excellent time to probe the interviewer with questions about how they see your strengths and shortcomings. It is also timely to reinforce your abilities. Do not show disappointment if you don't receive encouragement at this stage - it can very well be one final test of your ability to deal gracefully with rejection. It is perfectly OK to ask when you can expect to hear from the employer, but you should not mention other opportunities for which you are being considered. We'll communicate that to them during our debriefing.

Close with a firm handshake and a sincere "thank-you" to the interviewer for his time. As soon as possible call us so we can effectively follow up in your behalf. Let us take advantage of our 3rd party status to learn about the employer's interest level and concerns.

Good taste dictates that you should mail a follow-up letter within 24 hours! It should be typed (or neatly written) and addressed to the main interviewer or the person to whom you'll report. The letter should again thank them for their time and consideration and ask for the job! It should portray you as being confident and ready to meet the challenges of

the position. By mentioning the others with whom you talked, it will be obvious that you were attentive, interested in the needs of the employer and anxious to be a member of their team.

The timing of this letter's arrival is critical since one of its purposes is to distinguish you from other interviewees the company may have seen in the interim. Another objective of the letter is to demonstrate your writing ability. It also presents an excellent opportunity to recap your problem solving abilities and make specific mention of major projects or tasks that the company wants to address in this hire.

Having said all this, it is good to remember that common sense is the most important thing you can bring to any interview. Interviews are, after all, a purposeful exchange between two parties with common interests. There is no substitute for good preparation and conscious effort in preparing for good interviews. However, your ability to "think on your feet" may well separate you from the crowd. You may not succeed on every interview but you'll clearly improve your odds of success with every good attempt you make!