

Feature article

Yeung at heart

What do interviewers look for during interviews? – Part I



By Dr. Rob Yeung

After finishing my undergraduate degree, I studied for a doctorate in psychology. Upon finishing my Ph.D., I decided that I wanted a job as a management consultant and was fortunate enough to get invited to an interview very quickly with a small firm that worked with clients from all over the UK.

When I arrived for the interview with the firm, the first question they asked me was: “Why do you want to work for a small management consulting firm rather than one of the large, established firms?”

Good question. The only problem was: I didn’t have a good answer. I can’t remember what I said at the time. But I remember that I could sense that I’d basically blown my chances within just the first five minutes of the interview.

Of course it was a silly mistake to make. It was a straightforward enough interview question. However, I just hadn’t done any preparation. Perhaps I had assumed that my great educational qualifications would be enough and that the interview was a mere formality; that any employer would be almost grateful to give me a job!

Since then, I’ve spent most of my career on the other end of the interviewing table, as an interviewer and a consultant who trains interviewers in the kinds of questions that they should ask candidates.

The good news for you if you’re looking for a new job is that even relatively little preparation can make a big difference to your interview performance. Just rehearsing eight stories about yourself will probably allow you to answer around 80 percent of the questions that interviewers might like to ask you.

The seven seminal skills

Before we talk about the questions that interviewers may ask and the answers that you should give, let me introduce you to the key skills – sometimes also called competencies or capabilities – that most employers are looking for. Of course, different organizations will be looking for slightly different skills, but broadly speaking the following list should cover the vast majority of what most employers want from their employees:



- **Communication skills.** Being able to convey information not only clearly and concisely in writing, but also in person. When communicating in person, this might be in a one-to-one situation, in a team meeting, or even in a presentation to a group.
- **Influence / persuasion.** Communication is a one-way passing of information. But influence and persuasion are about listening to the concerns and questions of other people, and being able to overcome their objections.
- **Team work.** This is a highly prized skill in almost all organizations. After all, employers want to hire people who can blend into a team and work with different people; they want employees who will not only do their individual work but also help out other members of the team too.
- **Problem solving.** Organizations face everything from minor challenges to outright crises. Of course employers need people who can come up with ways of dealing with such issues rather than simply waiting to be told exactly how they should respond.
- **Planning and organizing.** Organizations want to hire people who are not only able to plan projects and organize events but also prioritize and manage their own time when things are busy to ensure that the important work always gets done.
- **Adaptability / flexibility.** Organizations hate employees who get stuck in just one way of working. Economic and competitive environments change all of the time, and organizations prize employees who can demonstrate flexibility in not only the hours they work but also the ways in which they work.
- **Drive, commitment and initiative.** Employees should be able to work independently, using their initiative rather than sitting around passively waiting for their managers to tell them what they should be doing next.

Hopefully, none of those key skills should be surprising. So now that you have an appreciation of the top skills that most employers are looking for, how does that help you to prepare? I'll answer that question in the second part of this article, which will be published in the May issue of AAT Express.

Perhaps now would also be a good time to let you know how my own job search went after having been rejected by that small consultancy because I hadn't done enough preparation. Just five months later, I had passed nine interviews to get a job as a management consultant with the Boston Consulting Group, one of the most prestigious management consulting firms in the world. And when we come together again in a few weeks' time, I'll tell you how you can make sure that you shine during your next interviews too.

***Dr Rob Yeung** is a psychologist and executive coach at leadership consulting firm Talentspace and author of bestselling career and management books including The Extra One Per Cent: How small changes make exceptional people (Macmillan) and Personality: How to unleash your hidden strengths (Prentice Hall Life). You can follow his news at www.twitter.com/robyeung*