

Job Seekers: 7 Tips For A Successful Panel Interview

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A young woman I was mentoring called me with panic in her voice. The recruiter had just told her that her job interview had been changed from individual interviews to a panel interview.

Due to time constraints, instead of meeting individually with the hiring manager and then with two other managers, she would now meet them all at once in a 45-minute panel interview.

"Jackie" (name changed) was worried, because she'd never been through a panel interview. The thought of sitting across from three people while they rapidly fired questions at her was terrifying.

Many companies are changing their hiring practices to bring others into the process, and due to time constraints, this often means holding panel interviews instead of individual job interviews. At some point in your career, just like Jackie, you'll most likely have to go through a panel interview.

To be successful in panel interviews, you'll want to slightly modify your preparation as well as your communication style during the actual interview. Here are 7 tips:

Tip #1: Find out who will be on the interview panel. Ask the recruiter (or hiring manager) for the names and titles of everyone who will be on the panel. This will help you gain a better understanding of what will be important to each person. Are they in sales, service, marketing, operations, research and development, finance, process improvement, HR, etc.?

Tip #2: Brainstorm the questions each person might ask. Based on their role in the company, think through the types of questions they might ask you during the interview. For example, if you're interviewing for a job as a marketing manager and you find out that one person on the panel is a sales manager, figure out the types of questions he or she might ask, such as: When you create a promotional program, what is your process to ensure it will be successful with the sales teams? What are some of the issues you've encountered while working with sales teams and how have you overcome them? Etc. Then, practice your answers.

Tip #3: Introduce yourself to each person. When you show up for the panel interview, approach each person and introduce yourself while shaking his or her hand. Ask for a business card from everyone, so you can place these in front of you in the order in which they're sitting. If they don't have business cards with them, write down their names on a piece of paper (in the order in which they're sitting) and have this in front of you during the interview. That way, you'll know whom you're addressing as you answer questions.

Tip #4: Modify your communication style. In an individual interview, you would respond to questions by answering the person directly. But in a panel interview, you need to be careful not to exclude the rest of the panel during your comments. Look directly at the person asking the question and begin by answering to them, making eye contact. Then, look at the other panel members as you finish the rest of your comments, so each person feels included in the conversation.

Tip #5: Demonstrate that you're making connections during the conversation. Instead of just answering each person's question, see if you can make connections and demonstrate your active listening skills. Let's say that one panel member asked you to walk them through your process for creating a successful promotional program. Then, a little while later, someone asks you to "tell me about a time when something went wrong with a promotion you were running." You could refer back to your other answer by saying something like: "Joe, when you asked me to walk you through my process for creating a promotional program, one of the key steps I mentioned was to obtain feedback from the sales team and test the program from beginning to end with several members. Early in my career, I didn't realize the importance of obtaining feedback before rolling out a new sales promotion. I once tried to..." then tell how you didn't include that step, what happened, and what you learned from your mistake.



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Tip #6: Modify how you ask questions at the end of the interview. Just like you would for an individual interview, come prepared with your list of potential questions to ask at the end of the interview. Then, see if you can relate any of your questions back to what was discussed during the panel interview. For example, if one of the interviewers asked you to tell them what you know about the company's key competitors, you might relate back to that with one of your own questions, such as: "I know we discussed some of the company's main competitors, but I'm curious to know what each of you see as the biggest threat to the growth of the company. Is it a competitor, or is it something else?"

Tip #7: Follow-up with each person. As I mentioned in a previous blog, no, the interview thank you note is not dead. In the case of a panel interview, it means you should send a personalized thank you note to each member of the interview panel.

At first, a panel job interview might sound intimidating. But with the right prep work and by modifying your communication during the interview, you'll be able to increase your chances for a successful interview.

~ Lisa Quast, author of award-winning book, YOUR CAREER, YOUR WAY!. Join me on Twitter
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