

# Conscious Careering

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**Interviewing is like golf, gourmet cooking, or playing the piano; it's impossible to master without practice!**

Matthew B. Youngquist

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You know, for years I've wanted to get better at golf so one day I walked into the bookstore to do something about it. After scanning the books in the sports section for a few minutes, the intense yellow & black color scheme won me over and soon I walked out of the store the proud owner of "Playing Golf for Dummies."

Will it surprise you to learn that after reading through the book from cover to cover, I'm not a single iota better at the game of golf?

Along these same lines, I've seen hundreds of job seekers scour bookstores, career centers, and the dark depths of the Internet in search of current, cutting-edge interviewing advice. They are all hungry for just the right script, the right turn of phrase, to win an employer's heart and land the job offer. And this appetite is fed year after year as new titles come out claiming to offer the (pick your adjective: killer, foolproof, unbeatable, best damn...) "secrets" to successful interviewing. The problem with this approach, however, is that the secret to interviewing effectively can't be found in the pages of any book. It can only be truly achieved through an old-fashioned concept I like to call "practice."

Sounds simple, doesn't it? In real life, however, can you honestly say you've ever heard of somebody who seriously sits down and practices their interviewing skills? Amazingly, the majority of job seekers spend weeks and weeks sending out resumes, and when they finally get that one precious "hit" that might lead to a great job opportunity, they decide to go into the biggest sales call of their life—and wing it.

I can't tell you how many times I've had clients come in to my office seeking advice on improving their job search success rate, only to completely neglect interviewing as a major potential area of skill development. Sure, they're interested in getting their resume spruced up, and yes, they'd love to receive a comprehensive plan detailing how best to identify, cultivate, and approach job leads. But when it comes to the most critical stage of the game, the interview process, most people arbitrarily decide their interviewing skills are "just fine, thanks" and in need of no further retooling.

Sadly, this self-diagnostic often proves to be woefully inaccurate. It might take several "close

calls" to get the message, but I've found (hiring managers, back me up on this...) that a great many job seekers barely even rate as "mediocre" when it comes to interviewing and that many continue to make clumsy mistakes that cost them some outstanding opportunities. They're unfocused, they don't do their homework, they bomb the preliminary probe about salary requirements, and they stumble through even the most predictable questions like "why did you leave your last job?" or "what is your greatest weakness?"

To be honest, I'm not exactly sure what the barrier is that prevents people from taking the interview process more seriously. Is it an unwillingness to practice talking about themselves out loud? Is it a fatalistic attitude that convinces them they'll get the job if it's "meant to be", regardless of how they perform? Or could be a lack of perspective or insight into just how good some interviewers are—and how much better they, themselves, could be with a little spit and polish?

My suspicions are that each of these factors plays a role, with the latter being in some ways the biggest contributor. After 14 years in the career coaching business, I'm still amazed on an almost daily basis at how severely people tend to undersell themselves and how dumbfounded they suddenly become when you show them the true potential of how they could be presenting their background.

With the "why did you leave your last job?" question, for example, I'd estimate that roughly 95% of people deliver a succinct answer roughly equivalent to "well, our company went through a layoff, so here I am." This concise, fairly blasé answer not only disrupts the conversational flow of the interview, but it leaves out oodles of positive elements that could be thrown in to enhance your candidacy. You could talk about the parts of your last work assignment you enjoyed most, such as your co-workers or the training opportunities you encountered. You could mention new skills and abilities you picked up that will make you more valuable to your next employer. Or you could stress, in detail, your understanding of the business reasons behind the layoff so that your future employer sees you as somebody who understands the bottom-line and isn't taking the career setback personally.

Then, once you have a strategy in place to answer the most critical, challenging questions you'll be facing, you need to bear down and practice them—out loud. Until you actually try articulating your answers, to see how they come out, it's impossible to know whether you're prepared for the big leagues. You might find that you're peppering your answers with "ums" and "ahs" out of nervousness. Or you might find that you're forgetting your main talking points, leading to abrupt freezes or incessant rambling, both of which are likely to get you gonged out of the interviewer's office in record time. It's better

to uncover these bumps ahead of time, through a few practice sessions, than to learn the hard way by blowing the interviewing opportunity of a lifetime. You simply won't know until you bite the bullet and give it a trial run.

Once you feel you've made some progress, I'd highly recommend that you then partner with a willing friend, or an experienced interview coach, who can listen to your presentation and give you objective feedback about how you come across. This will make the simulation more realistic than just reciting answers to yourself, and your partner will likely be able to suggest a number of improvements you can make to your tone, clarity, and body language. For best results, pick a counterpart who has done a lot of hiring, themselves, and who has the egoic fortitude to give it to you straight and not gloss over any potential problems or trouble areas.

In the end, like most things in life, practice makes perfect. By setting the time aside to go through these exercises, and make a concerted effort to improve your communication skills, you'll exponentially increase your interviewing success rate—and confidence level—in the situations when it counts most.

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