



Successful Interviewing for Engineers & Engineering Managers

There are numerous approaches that might work... but, over the years, [Ashton Search Group](#) has refined a technique that works consistently. It involves understanding how to best represent your skills, abilities and experience.

Interviewers are all different, in terms of style, professionalism, approach and personality. Some interviewers go the extra mile to make you feel as comfortable as possible. On the other hand, some choose to turn up the pressure from the moment you introduce yourself... to determine whether you have confidence under fire.

WARNING

Some managers assume an adversarial role during the interviewing process - to identify the uncommitted or squeamish, people with low self confidence - or individuals who will never be significant contributors on a standalone basis.

Be prepared for the **deliberately adversarial** interviewer.

Managers also put candidates on the spot to determine if they have personal convictions, can be easily intimidated, and to test their willingness to defend their past decisions. The manager wants to challenge you for more comprehensive responses, and be convinced you are the right person for his or her requirement. It is their interviewing persona.

The truth is that the outcome of most interviews is decided in the first five minutes. The interviewer is evaluating your personal presence. How you make eye contact, your articulation, looking for a nervous laugh, body language... and most critical, sizing up your personality (as he or she sees it). Project a professional, thoughtful, confident and enthusiastic image. Interviewers need to be won over.

The key element to successful interviewing is **attitude**. Ask any manager who the most valuable member of his or her team is, and they will never point to the superstar technical guru, but to the person who is competent, who has the "can do" attitude, who can always be counted on to deliver... and is ultimately successful in any situation.

Sitting down with a total stranger for a couple of hours (that has the authority to decide on your value to the company) makes the interview process a pressure vessel even for many experienced engineers and managers. The following techniques will work well with any type of interviewer. It will relieve most of the pressure, because it provides the essential framework - just add your experience to the mix. It has three parts.

PART I:

Your primary objective is to **understand what they need from you**. Always take the time (at the beginning of the interview) to determine what is required for the position... **before you explain your background**. This happens when he/she says "Tell me about yourself?" In order to be successful, you want to extract as much information as possible, and address issues they consider relevant and

important. Respond with:

"Before I do that, please tell me about the area I would be working in, and what kind of person you need to successfully fill the requirement? Then I can focus on specific areas of interest, based on my own experience."

Memorize this - and be ready to use it. These two sentences can make or break the interview, in terms of understanding exactly what they need.

The interviewer will answer your question... and tell you everything you'll need to sell yourself. At this point, the key is to listen carefully and evaluate their response. It will allow you to make course corrections in your planned presentation, targeted precisely at what they want to discuss. It will also make the interview far more interesting for them.

Although uncovering details of the position is important, there is one element that is often overlooked - **personality**. Personality is frequently more important than any other single factor.

Interviewing is pure selling, and the candidate that interviews (sells) best gets the offer. Period. Non-negotiable. Many candidates have received offers when they were significantly underqualified - but never one who wasn't liked.

PART II:

As soon as you understand what makes the interviewer tick, you are ready to proceed to the second stage... describing your background. Remember, you want this description to address the areas he/she already indicated interest in — **because you asked**.

Provide reasonable detail, but stay away from the day-to-day minutiae. Talk about individual contributions and accomplishments (which should be a your resume), not what your team accomplished. When you feel that you have adequately finished providing a profile of your experience, and the answers they want... ask them if they need additional clarification on specific areas, or more general information. Give them an opening to follow-up.

Interviewers will appreciate this opening, which allows them to drill down for more detail... and you know they will. This part of the process is the most critical, because the responses you provide will determine how closely you fit their specific needs, and allow them to begin forming a favorable impression. Nervousness sometimes causes people to become chatty or opinionated. Don't ramble, stray off on unrelated tangents or pontificate. Answer the interviewer's questions in a manner that is accurate and succinct. If you need time to formulate a thought, ask a question to buy some breathing room.

Never discuss confidential information... like how to work around your company's software security with a backdoor you never removed... or that they are rolling out unannounced 'Product X' in a month. Unreleased products and other proprietary information should be considered off limits. Trade secrets have three important conditions for information to qualify: it must be valuable, secret and provide an economic advantage over competitors.

Many times, in order to put your experience in best perspective, you must discuss unreleased products. Do this generically, without mentioning model names, release dates, precise functionality or providing information that would violate a non-disclosure agreement. In other words, choose your

language carefully... but explain your skills thoroughly. Companies aren't impressed with a candidate who divulges their current employer's confidential plans and strategies. Feel free to say: "We're getting into an area that is proprietary to (*current company*), I'll be glad to explain my contributions, but I'll have to omit a few specific details". Now they're impressed.

PART III:

The third stage is the most difficult. You must ask a direct question:

"Based on what you know about me now, do you feel I would be successful here?"

The reason this question seems difficult to ask is that it invites criticism. Your natural instinct will be to avoid, rather than encourage, criticism. It is important to ask this question, because if the interviewer has any lingering concerns, miscommunicated an issue or missed addressing something of interest, you will never know until you probe for it.

When you ask the question, he or she will probably respond with: "I feel you are strong in most areas, but I'm really concerned about..." You now have an excellent opening to address these concerns, targeting specific areas for clarification. This is how you win on the interview... by explaining away their concerns, and adding additional facts that strengthen your position. While most candidates are following a random interviewing pattern, you are bringing structure to the process, which not only adds to your professional image, but provides a second chance to clean up any remaining ambiguities.

If his/her concern is valid, draw parallels to demonstrate your ability to adapt to their needs. Never exaggerate your background - it is better to reply by admitting that you don't have "that" specific experience, but have gained experience in similar areas of equal complexity (use examples), and feel comfortable in coming up to speed quickly. Most job postings are a manager's wishlist. Managers usually agree that no single individual will have every attribute they seek, and they always default to the candidate who they believe can make the transition successfully with the shortest learning curve.

Keep in mind that the person interviewing you spends very little of his/her time on this function. Many times, they will miss things that could heavily impact their decision to hire you. Help them through the process. It will also separate you from the competition.

Everything up to this point is straight forward. Determine what attributes will make you successful. Explain your background emphasizing the skills he told you he needed. Finally, at the conclusion of the technical interview, ask him if he feels you would be successful.

Inspect the corporate culture during the interview. Even if you can't blend into the woodwork, you can get a distinct feel for the culture by asking the right questions.

For instance, if the company works in teams, ask for an example of a recent project. How was the team selected? How were the tasks delegated? How successful was the outcome?

Now the real secret...

You can do everything right up to this point — and destroy your efforts if you mishandle the subject of money. The key to this is simple: You don't want to become attached to a specific amount, because once you do it can't be retracted. It's analogous to the judge instructing the jury to "strike that last remark". The jury never forgets, and the admonition doesn't work.

If you volunteer a number that is low, you will talk yourself out of some money. If you select a number that is high (or out of their salary guidelines), you will not receive an offer. The last thing you want to do is provide them with a range, because you will be aiming at the top, and they will migrate to the bottom. Instead, encourage them to prepare the best offer they can. To accomplish this, you articulate the following:

"I am extremely interested in your opportunity. I believe I would be successful here. Please extend your best offer, and I will give it serious consideration." Be prepared to use this.

[Ashton Search Group](#) recruiters have significant experience in salary negotiations at all levels, and can work with you and the hiring company to develop an offer that meets your objectives and expectations.

Other key points to remember:

- Be confident and enthusiastic at all times (never drop your guard).
- Maintain eye contact, smile and show expression.
- Speak briefly, answering questions directly and positively... don't ramble or digress.
- Don't be opinionated. Repeat. Don't be opinionated.
- Do not discuss religion, lifestyle or politics... you're guaranteed to annoy someone.
- Listen, listen, listen... understand his/her thoughts completely before responding.
- Dress in a conservative manner... even if you know they don't require it.
- Don't slam your current or previous employer... *even if they deserve it!*
- Show interest in the position, ask relevant questions. Probe. Probe again.
- Don't dwell on peripheral issues like relocation, vacation and benefits... once an offer is generated, it is time to address these issues.

Don't ever make comments like (and these are real deal-killers taken from debriefing interviewers):

- "I want to be paid for weekends if I spend time thinking about work" (the most outrageous)
- "I can commute from Cleveland to here (Atlanta) for a few months" (no commitment)
- "I feel I am grossly underpaid, and expect my next employer to correct this" (No one makes up for the sins of past employers)
- "Chicago is definitely not my first choice, but I suppose I would consider it if we can come to terms"
- "I don't know how your staff ever got product out the door. I can change all that"
- "I have a consulting practice on the side, so I can't be out of town much"
- "Beyond salary, what incentives would you offer to attract me?"
- "I have some things in the pipeline with my current employer. If they materialize... I'll likely stay"
- "I'm just looking around, more curious than serious at this point... but make me an offer and we'll see"
- "I have to finish up a big project I'm working on... I could start in about three, maybe four months"
- "I would rather do research than product development. Just being truthful" (interviewing for a product design position)

These are the all time most incredible (or stupid, depending on how you look at it)... **but one off-the-wall remark can destroy any chance of an offer.** No matter what the interviewer asks you (within reason), don't allow yourself to become annoyed, put off or antagonized.

A VP of Engineering at a Fortune 100 summed it up very well: *"You either believe in yourself or you don't. Successful people believe in themselves... and will never be intimidated. They understand business and engineering issues... they know what drives their company. They are astute, and relaxed explaining their skills... because they are confident about their abilities. This guy, who was definitely qualified, was easily bruised... he could never adjust to us."*

Have a spouse or friend interview you (with a list of anticipated questions, also found on our site), and critique your responses for content, sincerity and general presentation. Ask them to provide both positive and negative feedback, so that you can fine tune your presentation. Ask them to watch for uncomfortable body language and hesitation.

An objective that you must never lose sight of... **you are there to get the offer.** Even if the description doesn't sound that appealing, you should sell yourself thoroughly, because total scope and responsibilities can (*and usually do*) change after you have convinced the hiring manager that you're their benchmark candidate.

THE EXIT

Before you leave, find out what the next step is in their hiring cycle. When can you expect to hear from them? Do they need anything more from you?

Thank them for their time, and **let them know you're interested in moving forward.** Make it clear that you are interested in the opportunity. Never assume that they think you are. A manager is not going to prepare an offer if he thinks it will be declined. You don't get another chance - reconfirm your interest and availability... and ask for the offer.

One manager commented "We liked him, but he never once pushed us for the offer. That was a fatal error in our opinion." The candidate thought it was "too aggressive and presumptuous", the manager perceived it as lack of interest. This is important repeating: always ask for the offer.

Small talk (when leaving the interview) will impact their decision. Use this time to provide one last positive comment - that will help them make an informed decision to extend an offer to you. If you have other pending offers, let them know that you are under time constraints to begin making decisions.

You can't retract anything you do or say in the interview. You want them to remember significant and positive information that will result in an offer.

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