



How to Shine in a Panel Interview

By: Marianne Grady, SPHR, SHRM-SCP

Panel interviews are when multiple people ask questions and assess you at one time. Sometimes you know you will be interviewed by a panel. There are other times, when you arrive at the interview, expecting to sit down and speak with each member of the interview team, one-on-one and SURPRISE, there they are, all together as a panel.... now what? Whether you know in advance or walk in for your interview and see 3 or more people waiting to "interrogate" you, a panel interview can really throw you! Should it? ABSOLUTELY NOT!

If you are prepared for an interview, whether it be one or four interviewers, you got this. Though the panel can create a little added anxiety... just take a deep breath and sit down. This type of interview is not designed to rattle you, it is usually just a time saver for the company. Employers can gauge if you are able to build rapport with multiple interviewers and if you have the agility to handle a very tough communication situation.

For purposes of this article, we will assume you have done your basic interview homework and research on the panel members and the company. Once your homework is done, use the following tips, so you can quickly adapt and be ready for the panel interview.

INTRODUCE YOURSELF TO EACH PERSON AND KEEP THEM STRAIGHT

Keeping things straight is key. Write down each interviewers' name across the top of your notepad in the order that they are seated. Then, keep any pertinent notes, in their respective columns. Do not mix up the interviewers. Call them as they introduce themselves. No assumptions... if someone introduces himself as Michael, don't call him Mike.

KNOW THE JOB DESCRIPTION INSIDE OUT

Be sure you really understand the job description and how your experience relates to the job. Be able to clearly connect your experience to the job description. This makes it easy for each interviewer to see why hiring you makes sense. If you do this for the interviewers, you make it easier for them to choose you.

LISTEN BEFORE TALKING

Make sure you pay close attention to what each person talks about. What is each individual looking for? What is their pain point (the reason they need you)? Keep minimal notes so you can focus and keep strong eye contact throughout the interview and when the opportunity presents itself, let each interviewer know how you will address their concerns. When responding to questions, begin by looking at the person who asked the question. Next, look at the others, and finally, return to the original person as you finish your response.

JOIN THE TEAM

Let them know you can be part of their organization by interacting as though you are already part of the team. Relax, smile and be friendly and conversant.... show that you can manage this interview with ease. Make sure you pay attention to all of your interviewers. One of the reasons they conduct this type of interview, is to see how you interact with their team.

WIN OVER YOUR TOUGHEST CUSTOMER

You may be inclined to direct your conversation to the smiling, head nodding interviewers who seem to be supporting you. Remember, you need to get everyone's vote. Try your best to

address the naysayer in the group... don't let them intimidate you. Continue to speak with them, asking questions and showing that you can handle all types of people.

WATCH BODY LANGUAGE - YOURS AND THEIRS

Your nerves may cause you to be stiff or closed; so keep calm. Be aware of your posture, gestures and eye contact. Relax and be as natural as possible in this unnatural situation. Also, pay attention to the body language of the interviewers. You can gain subtle clues to tell if these folks are with you. Are they smiling, are they open postured? OR, are they closed off... you may need to work on that closed off person a little more.

ASK QUESTIONS TO EACH INTERVIEWER

During your preparation, make sure you craft questions for each interviewer, even the quiet ones. Think about their position and department and that will help you decide what may be important to them. As the interview progresses, consider if your prepared question or one you thought about when listening to their concerns or pain point is the one you should ask during the interview. Do not exclude anyone.

DEVELOP STORIES

Storytelling is very important to make you relatable. Go through your resumé and be able to tell a short story or anecdote about each line. As questions come up, these stories are one of the key ways to stand out. They are very specific to you, your experience and your accomplishments.

CLARIFICATIONS, FOLLOW UPS AND PACING

Be prepared to repeat yourself, clarify your responses and answer follow up questions. With many people processing your responses, you will notice that some "get it" while others may need more info. This is natural given that each interviewer has a different agenda and will have different perspectives. If your interviewers interrupt you or each other, make sure you finish your thoughts and control the pace.

THANK ALL INVOLVED

Make sure you get a business card from each interviewer at the end of the interview. Reiterate your interest and enthusiasm for the position as it was described to you. Thank them for their insights and consideration as you say your good-byes.

Then, when you get home, send a thank you email or to each individual. DO NOT write the same sentiment to each interviewer. Try to incorporate an interesting, personal point, highlighting your specific connection with each person on the panel and remind them what about your background makes you especially qualified for this position (your value proposition). This helps differentiate you one last time. With all things similar, this can be the clincher that gets you hired.

PREPARATION = CONFIDENCE

Taking the time to do your homework will allow you to feel confident during ANY interview. I can't reiterate this enough. Most candidates do not prepare. They are accomplished, intelligent people who think they know what to do. As intelligent as they are, they have not thought through their responses to the most common interview questions. This leaves them communicating with stops and starts, um's and ah's and they don't have the polish to get the top jobs.