Interviewing Across Cultures

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Employment interviews are stressful whenever and wherever they occur. In one's own country or culture, it is easier to know what to expect and how to establish credibility. Interviewing in a country other than one's own can be an extremely challenging experience. Each company has its own criteria for assessing the desirability of a candidate. These criteria may reflect certain cultural preferences and expectations.
As you prepare for your interview in another culture or country, here are a number of specific questions you may want to consider:

- What will impress the interviewer?
- What are the local expectations for establishing credibility?
- Are these expectations different for local people than they are for foreign nationals?
- How do these expectations differ from what you are accustomed to?
- How can you adjust your behavior to be credible and effective in the interview?

The key to success is being prepared. Yet proper preparation is difficult if you are unfamiliar with a culture or country. You may want to read books on the culture of the country. Because there are relatively few books that focus specifically on interviewing techniques and situations, you may want to interview local nationals about the way interviews are conducted in their country. Be aware that it may be hard for local nationals to explain their own culture or something as seemingly commonplace as an interview to an outsider.

Points to consider in your preparations include understanding expectations regarding:

- **Dress and appearance.** Is there a standard interview uniform or outfit that interviewees typically wear? Are the standards of dress different according to the industry? For example, if you are interviewing for an advertising or marketing position, is the expectation that you will look "creative" or "flashy"? Is there such a thing as overdressing for an interview? In some cultures, the quality and sophistication of your dress is assumed to reflect your quality and sophistication as a person. In other cultures, being too well dressed can send an inappropriate message of elitism or arrogance to the interviewer.
- **Your role in the interview.** In some cultures, you are expected to "sell" yourself during the interview. Being proactive, expanding, and elaborating on your responses may be expected. You may be asked questions designed to test your creative problem-solving abilities. You may be expected to ask questions of the interviewer. In other cultures, your role in the interview may be more passive. You may be expected to follow the lead of the interviewer and, while being attentive, only answer the

questions you are asked and not take the initiative to ask questions. With the interviewer taking the lead, you may be expected to review the information, point by point, contained in your resume or curriculum vitae. If invited to ask questions, the expectation may be that the questions are more general, open-ended, and exploratory in nature rather than detailed and direct. It may not be appropriate to ask targeted questions about job responsibilities, working conditions, and payment unless specifically invited to do so.

- **Formality and the appropriate etiquette.** In some cultures, you may be evaluated more on how you behave than on what you know or what your credentials are. Often, the quality of a person is judged by his or her attention to social niceties and the details of etiquette. In other cultures, formality and a perceived over attentiveness to etiquette can be negatively evaluated. The emphasis, instead, may be on experience, competence, or credentials.
- **The atmosphere of the interview.** In some cultures, the tone of interviews may be very serious and formal. The interview is not a venue for lightness, joking, frivolity, or informality. Instead of friendliness, a certain degree of reserve is expected and admired. Behavior construed as superficial, insincere, or exaggerated will be evaluated negatively. The interview is treated as a test. Everything the candidate says may be questioned or viewed with extreme skepticism. In other cultures, friendliness and informality are expected and seen as appropriate behaviors for the workplace. The interview may be more social and relaxed and seem more like an easygoing conversation.
- **The pacing of the interview.** In some cultures, the interview may be part of a multistep review process. The interview may proceed slowly, involve lengthy questioning, and end in an ambiguous fashion. In other cultures, the interview may proceed rapidly with questions asked in rapid-fire fashion and answered directly and to the point.
- **Relationships.** In some cultures, the most important aspect of the interview may be who introduced the candidate to the company. The status of this individual or his or her relationship to the company or the interviewer may be crucial in setting a receptive tone for the interview. The interviewer may want to explore at length the history and circumstances of the relationship the candidate has with this third party. The ability to form and maintain relationships and networks may also be a key criterion in hiring. Questions asked in the interview may focus on how the candidate has interacted with colleagues, managers, and customers in the past. In other cultures, the focus may be more on achievements, experience, competence, and credentials. The emphasis is more on what the candidate has done than on the individuals one knows or networks one is a part of, based on class, educational, and/or family background.
- **The value of educational credentials, certifications, and intellect versus experience.** In some cultures, experience that can be documented through diplomas, certificates, and written references is the most valued. Experience can be explained only through objective and validated facts, figures, and other data. Subjective explanations, embellishment, and exaggeration of experience and background are totally unacceptable.

Displays of intellectual prowess may be expected. In other cultures, it is experience itself that counts. Often, it is the ability to articulate and position the experience that is critical rather than the supporting documentation and data. An overly intellectual approach may be perceived as too academic and not suited to the rigors of the business environment.

Finally, as you would in your own country, you should conduct research on the company you are interviewing with. Beyond basic company background, you may want to gather the following information:

Who will be interviewing you? Is the interviewer from the human resources (HR) department or a line/department manager? If the interviewer is from HR, does the company have a sophisticated HR function? Or does the company have one person who fills a wide range of HR-related functions?

Does the company have a standard protocol for conducting interviews? Does the company conduct tests of potential employees? Does the company conduct a multiphased interview process that may last a period of several months? Does the company utilize an assessment-center process?

How much exposure does the company have to foreigners? How many foreigners currently work at the company? How many foreign customers and vendors does the company have? How familiar is the company with people from your country? Does the person interviewing you have international experience? Was he or she educated, or has he or she worked, outside this country?

What is the relationship between your country and the country where you are interviewing? Is there a history of oppression, colonialism, and/or conflict that may affect your interactions with the interviewer, however indirectly? Are there any sensitive issues that may affect the interaction based on your cultural or racial background and that of the interviewer? What stereotypes do you have—positive or negative—about the country where you are seeking employment? What stereotypes might your interviewer have—positive or negative—about you? For example, when interviewing people from Latin America, U.S. Americans should be aware that Latin Americans frequently feel that U.S. Americans underestimate the sophistication and development of Latin America and are unaware of its rich history and culture.

What is the company's structure? Does it operate domestically within the country? Is it a company involved in import and/or export activities? Is it an international company with overseas offices? Is it a multinational company? Understanding the company's structure will help you assess the experience the company has with foreign employees.

INTERVIEW EXPECTATIONS ACROSS CULTURES

Asia: A Regional Analysis

The following are high-level generalizations about interview behaviors in the region as a whole. Actual interview behaviors and situations may vary country-to-country and individual-to-individual depending on the interviewer's international experience, contact with foreigners, age, and economic and educational background.

- The interviewer may expect the candidate to avoid direct sustained eye contact. Avoidance of consistent, direct eye contact may be perceived as demonstrating respect for the interviewer.
- The interviewer may expect the candidate to defer to the superior hierarchical position of the interviewer and other company representatives. Therefore, the candidate is expected to be extremely careful and/or hesitant in responding to questions and may try to give the answer he or she perceives the interviewer wants or that others have given in the past rather than answering as an individual.
- The interviewer may have a significant amount of personal and professional information about the candidate, beyond that contained in the curriculum vitae or resume, prior to the interview. This information is typically provided by a third party such as the individual who introduced the candidate to the company. This third party may be a former classmate or schoolmate who now works for the company, a professor or teacher who has a relationship with both the company and the candidate, or a family friend. During the interview, there may be a discussion about the well being of this individual, an examination of the history of the relationship between the candidate and this individual, or a conversation about activities of other people the interviewer and candidate may know in common.
- Because the interviewer may already know a significant amount about the candidate, the candidate is not expected to promote his or her own accomplishments and abilities. Talking too much about one's own accomplishments and abilities would be uncomfortable for both the interviewer and a local candidate.
- The interviewer would expect the candidate to take an extended period of time to formulate answers to questions in order to answer in the most thorough and complete manner possible. The expectation may be that the candidate will give considerable background in order to contextualize the answer. Answering questions in direct, bullet-pointed fashion may be construed as superficial, thoughtless, or irresponsible. In Asia, periods of silence may be perceived as mature thoughtfulness and an ability to engage in deep reflection. Hastiness and an inclination toward taking risks may also be perceived negatively.
- The interviewer may assume that the candidate knows the interviewer's background and experience. Again, this information may be obtained prior to the interview through third parties such as the individual who introduced the candidate to the company. While it would not be appropriate to explicitly state that the candidate has such knowledge about the interviewer, the interviewer might assume that this knowledge would help the candidate to prepare for the interview. The candidate is expected to use such knowledge to begin to build the foundations for a good working relationship with the interviewer, which would demonstrate the candidate's ability to forge successful working relationships with colleagues in the future.
- When interviewing in Asia, foreign nationals should be aware that people in Asia may be sensitive to perceived negative stereotypes of their countries and cultures. There is a sensitivity to the assumption that Asian

countries are "less than" other countries. Asians frequently feel that outsiders are unaware of the rapid modern development of Asia and unacquainted with its long history and rich cultural traditions.

Focus on Interviewing in Japan

As a foreigner in Japan, your experiences in a Japanese job interview may vary depending on the type of company you are interviewing with, the position you are interviewing for, and the level of international experience of the interviewer. Typically, Japanese interviews are multi-staged and group-oriented. Don't be surprised to find yourself being investigated by the company between your initial contact and your final acceptance into the company. This is especially true if you are pursuing a long-term professional position with an organization, less true for those applying for short-term language teaching positions. Private investigations are the norm in Japan when considering any kind of long-term partnership, from marriage to working together.

During the interview, you will be asked an abundance of personal questions—what is your age, what is your marital and family status, why are you in Japan and how long do you plan to stay, what are your future goals and career aspirations? Questions should be answered simply and clearly, without bragging or embellishment. A job interview is a serious affair, and joking or too much reliance on humor may not be appreciated. What will be appreciated are warmth, sincerity, and demonstrations of your willingness to work hard and be a team player. How well do you get along with others? Would you be willing to work on weekends during a busy time in order to satisfy customer needs? Are you flexible and other-centered, or are you rigid, selfish, and individualistic? Remember that your character and your fit within the company are often more important than your credentials.

Be aware that your character will be judged in very subtle ways throughout the interview. Is your attire neat and understated? Do you graciously accept the refreshments provided for you? Do you exchange business cards in an appropriate fashion and show proper respect for the cards given to you by the interviewing team? Do you demonstrate good manners and have excellent posture even when you are sitting in a room alone? Do you answer questions with humility and thoughtfulness? Do you adjust to the pace set by the interviewer(s)? Do you ask general exploratory questions about the job at the appropriate times? These behaviors are indicators of your quality as a person.

Do you interrupt the interviewer(s)? Do you ask very specific questions about how long the workday is and what the precise responsibilities of the job are? Do you demonstrate impatience with personal questions or the pace of the interview? Do you fidget, doodle, or play with articles on the table? Are you outspoken with your personal opinions? Do you come across as a person who wants to change things? These behaviors could be signs of your *lack* of quality as a person.

The interviewers may go through your resume with you point by point, reconfirming information with you. This process may seem repetitive, but avoid showing your impatience. In addition, the interviewers may ask you questions they already know the answers to in order to test your consistency and grasp of detail. Just because you have been asked the same questions multiple times, resist the urge to change your answers. You may want to add new information

incrementally, but make sure that the essence of your answers remains constant. Also, remember that changing jobs frequently is not looked upon positively by the Japanese. In fact, Japanese are impressed by perseverance and persistence. If you have had to leave a job, it is often better that the reasons be beyond your personal control, such as the company going bankrupt, needing to relocate, or as the outcome of a restructuring process. That you were not personally challenged in the job is not a good reason to leave it.

If you have been introduced to the company by an employee or mutual contact, be prepared to discuss your relationship to the person at length. Remember that your contact is taking a risk introducing you to the company, and you need to behave appropriately in order that your contact maintains face within the organization. Throughout the interview, try whenever possible to establish commonality with the interviewer. Do you have a school in common? Has the interviewer visited your country or hometown? Does your hometown have a sister-city relationship with a Japanese town? Have you visited or even lived in the hometown of the interviewer? In Japan, attending a prestigious university or business school may have more power in getting you a position than in other countries. However, avoid the appearance of name-dropping or bragging about your accomplishments. Let your resume and third parties speak highly of you.

Preparation is the key to successful interviewing in Japan. Learn as much as you can about the company, its culture, and its employees. Gather information about the company's affiliated businesses, banks, and suppliers and how it functions internationally. Learn about the company's historical role within Japan and about the character of its leaders and founder. In the interview, be subtle about what you have learned, and most importantly, listen well. Your receptivity to the ideas and thoughts of others may be your most important attribute in the eyes of the Japanese.

Europe: A Regional Analysis

The following are high-level generalizations about interview behaviors in the region as a whole. Actual interview behaviors and situations may vary country to country and individual to individual depending on the interviewer's international experience, contact with foreigners, age, and economic and educational background. There will be substantial variations as well as among the geographic regions of Europe.

- The interviewer may expect the candidate to challenge ideas and questions intellectually and engage in serious debate with the interviewer.
- The interviewer may expect the candidate to answer questions directly, without any extraneous personal or anecdotal information.
- The interviewer may expect the candidate to defer to the superior hierarchical position of the interviewer and use proper titles of respect and behave as a person possessing lower status. Such behaviors may vary according to the perceived hierarchical, social, intellectual, and organizational distance between the interviewer and the candidate. The assumption of equality between the interviewer and candidate may be very inappropriate in certain European cultures.
- The interviewer may expect the candidate to portray himself or herself as confident, intellectually astute, reserved, and serious. In northern Europe,

displays of personal warmth or friendliness may be perceived as immature or insincere. Hastiness and the inclination toward taking risks may be perceived negatively.

- The interviewer might expect the candidate to take an extended period of time to formulate answers to questions in order to answer in the most thorough and complete manner possible. A local candidate may also give considerable background and/or in-depth information in order to contextualize answers instead of responding in direct, bullet-pointed fashion. Superficiality or lack of depth may be perceived negatively.
- A local candidate might use sophisticated wordplay (such as metaphors, punning, and analogies), humor, and historical and/or cultural references to demonstrate his or her intellectual acuity.
- In some cultures, such as in the United Kingdom, there may be an expectation of an understated style of communication and a tendency toward modesty. It may be considered rude to flaunt one's achievements or take credit for work performed by others.
- While modesty is valued, being able to hold one's own is also essential. It is important to be able to handle high-pressure situations while remaining calm, articulate, and in control of one's emotions. One will gain respect and credibility if one is not diminished or cowed by others.

Focus on Interviewing in Germany

Your experience in job interviews may differ according to the size and sophistication of the company. Small and medium-sized companies, especially those outside the major cities, may not have a developed human resources function. The interviewer may be an individual who has only partial responsibility for salaries, administration, and allocation of vacation time. Interviews in these companies may not be well structured and there may be some sense of the interviewer talking at you. In newer, larger, or more modern companies with an established human resources function, the interview process, which may be quite lengthy, is structured and systematic and conducted by highly trained individuals. It is crucial to arrive at your interview well prepared to answer detailed questions about your career over the past 10 to 20 years. Your attire should be conservative and understated unless you are applying for a position in media, marketing, or advertising. In those fields, it is appropriate to be slightly flashy. Everything you say must be in complete agreement with what is written on your curriculum vitae and your supporting application documents, such as letters of reference and certification of skills and training. Be sure to have a precise grasp of the sequences, dates, and numbers related to your career to date. The facts related to your experience need to be solid and unchanging. The interviewer may go through your curriculum vitae methodically point by point. A German interviewer may ask questions such as:

- Tell me about the first job you ever had.
- What did you do? What were your areas of responsibility?
- What was your position in the organizational structure? What were your reporting relationships? What were your areas of influence?
- Why did you leave your position?
- What is your career plan?

- How do you see yourself as a professional?

To be considered competent in a German context, your career needs to appear to be the result of careful planning, not the result of chance or random opportunity. Job-hopping is not positively viewed. Yet young Germans often take one job after graduation from college to gain experience and then move on to another company to broaden their experience after two to three years. Appropriate reasons for leaving a job are that you were not challenged or that you reached a ceiling within the organization and there was no room for advancement. The inability to apply the knowledge you have gained is also a good reason for changing jobs. Each change in position needs to be a logical, well-considered career move. There needs to be "a red thread going through it," to quote a German saying.

You may also be asked what you consider your two most important achievements in your last position. This needs to be answered without appearing to critique your current employer or last company. Acceptable answers relate to solving management, technical, or functional problems common to many companies. For example, if you have been a manager or worked in human resources, solving a problem related to high absenteeism due to sickness would be appropriate. Or if you are in a technical field, implementing a new technology or control system would be a good answer. It is crucial when answering such questions that you not appear to be boasting or use superlatives in describing your accomplishments. Emphasize the fundamentals; be serious, committed, self-confident, and assertive but not aggressive or too outspoken.

Beyond detailed questions about your work experience, be prepared to answer personal questions related to your marital and family status, hobbies, and special interests. Women should expect questions about their plans to have children and raise a family. Questions about hobbies and special interests will be asked to gain insight about your character. Are you social or not social? Group-oriented or individualistic? Depending on the type of position you are applying for, these considerations may be relevant to determine your fit within the organization.

Finally, be prepared for multiple rounds of interviewing, and expect that your potential employer will follow up on your letters of recommendation. Your patience, consistency, and persistence during this process will also demonstrate your worthiness for the position.

Latin America: A Regional Analysis

The following are high-level generalizations about interview behaviors in the region as a whole. Actual interview behaviors and situations may vary country-to-country and individual-to-individual depending on the interviewer's international experience, contact with foreigners, age, and economic and educational background.

- The interviewer may expect the candidate to demonstrate an ability to form effective work relationships through sharing a combination of personal and professional information with the interviewer. The ability to communicate genuineness and respect is essential.

- The interviewer may expect the candidate to behave in accordance with his or her family's status in the social and economic hierarchy. Backgrounds, schools attended, and family contacts are talked about in order to establish a common social ground between the interviewer and candidate. The well being and activities of mutual contacts may be discussed at length. Taking pride in one's family, social position, educational background, country, city or region of origin, and accomplishments is expected.
- The interviewer may have a significant amount of personal and professional information about the candidate, beyond that contained in the curriculum vitae or resume, prior to the interview. This information is typically provided by a third party such as the individual who introduced the candidate to the company. This third party may be a former classmate or schoolmate who now works for the company, a professor or teacher who has a relationship with both the company and candidate, or a family friend. During the interview, there may be a discussion about the well-being of this individual, an examination of the history of the relationship between the candidate and this individual, or a conversation about activities of other people the interviewer and candidate may know in common.
- The interviewer may expect the candidate to use wordplay (such as metaphors and analogies), humor, or historical and/or cultural references to demonstrate his or her intellectual acuity and cultural sophistication. In Latin America, displays of eloquence, personal elegance, and style may be perceived positively. Speaking in bullet-pointed fashion may be considered rude, unsophisticated, and/or superficial.
- The interviewer may expect the candidate to behave graciously in interactions with the interviewer and those in assisting roles, paying close attention to etiquette, the giving of appropriate thanks and acknowledgments, as well as the use of proper titles to communicate respect. Female interviewers and assistants may be complemented on their appearance.
- When interviewing in Latin America, foreign nationals should be aware that people in Latin America may be sensitive to perceived negative stereotypes of their countries and cultures. There is a sensitivity to the assumption that Latin American countries are "less than" other countries. Latin Americans frequently feel that outsiders underestimate the sophistication and development of Latin America and are unaware of its rich history and culture.

Focus on Interviewing in Mexico

While credentials and expertise are critical components in being hired to work in a Mexican company, your personality and quality as a person will be carefully scrutinized as well. Warmth, genuineness, and humanity are highly valued in Mexico. In this sense, humanity refers to your approach to human relationships. The ability to form and maintain deep friendships over time, especially since childhood, is respected, and attentiveness to immediate and extended family is the norm. From the Mexican perspective, *buena gente* (which literally translated means a "good person") is one who accepts and fulfills

obligations to others, including economic support, assistance in finding jobs, and involvement in the social life of family and friends. Personal pride—pride in one's family, town, country, and culture—is essential. Yet, this pride should be demonstrated with consideration for the dignity of others and in accordance with your role in the social hierarchy.

Those who appear casual or disrespectful in their approach to others or who are lacking close friendships and human relationships may be perceived as superficial and not deserving of respect or confidence. When you are with people, you should be fully present. Listen respectfully; do not be distracted by thinking of your next appointment, an impending deadline, and so on. Such immediacy says much about your humanity. Human interactions should not seem like a task or something to be checked off a to-do list.

A "good person" is courteous and displays excellent manners at all times. In Mexico, there is a more formal approach to greetings and shaking hands, and to extending courtesies to women (such as opening doors). First impressions are based on your manners, appearance, and personal style, such as the quality of your shoes, clothing, briefcase, pens, and notebooks. Graciousness and dignity are expected; attentiveness to small details that smooth human interactions is greatly appreciated. It is critical to consider the feelings of others and avoid causing people to lose face. While it is important to be accurate when answering questions, you may want to exercise a more indirect, diplomatic, and deferential approach in interview situations. If you have been introduced to the company by an employee or other contact, remember that your behavior will reflect positively or negatively upon that person. In a sense, this person is present at the interview with you and is being judged as you are being judged. If your contact is highly respected, you may be given more latitude, but try not to take advantage of this.

Finally, a "good person" knows his or her place in the hierarchy and acts appropriately within it. Respect is shown to elders and superiors. The ability to show deference to those in authority is critical. Use cultural resource people to learn the symbols and behaviors that are appropriate for a person of your status. Your position carries with it certain expectations, and acting within these expectations will make others more comfortable with you. For example, if you have been working in a managerial or professional position, emphasizing your ability to be hands-on or do physical labor may be inappropriate. Acting out of your role may cause anxiety and confusion even though your intentions may be good.

Be aware that hierarchy is also accorded to you based on your educational affiliation. Mexicans are impressed by people who have graduated from prestigious universities. However, Mexicans may not be aware of the educational system in your country or understand the rank and status of your university or college. It may be important for you to respectfully explain, without being condescending, about your institution's place in your country's educational hierarchy and what aspects of the institution (i.e., courses of study) are famous, both nationally and internationally.

Interviewing in the United States

Job interviews in the United States pose particular challenges for foreign nationals. While job interviews in other countries may tend to be more structured

and predictable in nature, the style and content of job interviews in the United States may be more random and reflect the individuality and personality of the interviewer and the corporate culture of the company. For example, a person seeking a position in a financial services firm in Boston, Massachusetts, may have a very different experience in a job interview than a person applying for work in a high technology start-up in Northern California's Silicon Valley. Just as people seeking work in the United States may tailor their curriculum vitae or resume to emphasize certain aspects of their experience when they apply for a job, you may have to think about how to customize your style to the expectations of the company where you are interviewing. Research and preparation are essential to understand the regional, organizational, and functional differences among companies in the United States. Be aware that while you may be interviewing for a job in Georgia, the person interviewing you may originally come from a Midwestern state like Minnesota, so a basic knowledge of U.S. geography, regional communication styles, and culture will be helpful to you in presenting yourself most effectively to the interviewer or interview team.

Another challenge to the foreign national interviewing in the United States is that while the nation appears to be very multicultural and ethnically diverse, interviewers may actually have little knowledge of your country's culture and political, economic, and educational systems. It is best not to take offense at the interviewer's lack of knowledge but to develop strategies to explain quickly and concisely the relevant aspects of your background.

For example, your university may be quite prestigious in your own country, but the U.S. interviewer may not have heard of it nor recognize the difficulty of entering such a renowned institution. Do not assume knowledge on the part of the interviewer. A Japanese man interviewing for a position in a chemical company in the United States was quite astonished to find out that the interviewers he met had no idea that the university he graduated from in Japan was attended primarily by the royal family and members of Japan's aristocracy. Graduation from this university, while not the most famous in terms of academic credentials, carried with it a great deal of status and said much about his background and upbringing. Therefore, in preparing for your interview, consider what might be well known and respected about your educational institutions or the companies you have worked for in your own country that will be important to convey to your U.S. interviewer. Practice delivering this information in terms that will be relevant and understandable to the interviewer.

Job interviews in the United States are all about selling oneself. The candidate is expected to be able to articulate the benefits and skills he or she will bring to the company. The tone of the interview is expected to be upbeat, positive, optimistic, and enthusiastic. You should avoid making self-deprecating or negative comments about your background, abilities, or experience. A typical U.S. interview is no place for humility and hesitancy. You need to answer questions honestly, but avoid focusing on the negative or difficulties you have had in the past. If an interviewer specifically asks you about what has been most challenging for you in other positions, it is best to focus the answer on things you would like to learn or skills you would like to acquire so that you can resolve those challenges in the future. In fact, the interview itself might be very future oriented. An interviewer may ask questions such as, "What are your career plans and

goals?" or "What do you see yourself doing in five years?" Questions from you about the direction the company is taking may be highly appreciated.

During a U.S. interview, you should be confident and assertive and exhibit a can-do approach. In fact, the interview may focus more on what you have done, as opposed to your academic credentials or certifications. While it is important to state that you enjoy working with others and are a good team player, you may need to focus on what you have done as an individual as opposed to what you have done as part of a team or group. Taking credit for making changes, solving problems, or developing new initiatives is highly valued. Be prepared to quantify your work experience. Did you manage to cut costs in your last position? How much money did you save your company? How much money did you make for your company? How many training programs or language lessons did you conduct? How many people did you train? What was the volume of sales you achieved? How many clients did you serve? Knowing the numbers attached to your experience will help you be more persuasive in selling yourself.

Another quality that U.S. interviewers look for in candidates is spontaneity. It is unlikely that a U.S. interviewer will review your curriculum vitae or resume with you point-by-point, step by step. In contrast, a U.S. interviewer may jump around, asking you questions out of sequence to see how quickly you respond and how flexible you are. He or she may ask you many questions about one aspect of your experience and virtually ignore the rest of your background. You may be asked questions about how you would solve or approach particular problems. U.S. interviewers are often looking for people who are "quick on their feet" and "think out of the box." Your willingness and ability to try new things may be assessed during the course of the interview; depending on the position you are applying for and the company's culture and area of business.

Speed of communication is often critical during an interview. One high-technology company in the United States has a saying that if something cannot be said in 30 seconds it is not worth being said. While this may be an extreme example, most U.S. interviewers expect quick responses to questions. U.S. Americans often communicate in a somewhat truncated bullet-pointed fashion. The expectation is that the most important information in an answer comes at the very beginning. Keeping your answers simple and to the point is a common expectation, especially when time is limited. Avoid packing your answers with too much detail or background information. If a U.S. American wants to know more about a certain topic, he or she may ask you questions rather than assuming you will give a thorough answer. Try to read your interviewer's verbal and nonverbal cues. Is he or she impatient with your answers? Does he fidget, tap his pen, or look frequently at his watch? Does she interrupt you when you are speaking? If you are being interviewed by a team, do they look at you when you are speaking or do they look at each other? These behaviors may be indicators that your answers are too lengthy and you are not focusing on what may seem to the interviewer to be the most important points. Efficiency and time management are highly valued in the United States, and you should avoid any behavior that may make the interviewers think they are wasting their time.

U.S. Americans expect initial friendliness, openness, and the appearance of equality. While it is true that the interviewer and other company representatives are in the superior position during the interview, their preferred

style of interaction may be quite informal with the use of first names, humor, and an easygoing, relaxed attitude. Being too formal and reserved may be misinterpreted by U.S. Americans as arrogance or coldness. The best approach is a balanced one. Try to adjust as much as is natural for you to the style and tone that the interviewers set, but avoid becoming too relaxed and familiar, especially if that style is unnatural for you. The interviewers may try to make you comfortable throughout the interview with informal gestures and jokes. These are not meant to be disrespectful or condescending but simply are how the U.S. Americans may prefer to be treated themselves. Also, try not to take offense if the U.S. American appears unfamiliar with the details of your curriculum vitae or resume during the interview. Depending on the rigor of the screening process or how your name came to the attention of the interviewer, he or she may have spent only a few minutes reviewing the key points of your background as opposed to scrutinizing your application in great detail. The person who selected you to be interviewed may not be the same individual now tasked with interviewing you.

In a U.S. curriculum vitae or resume, people tend not to list personal interests such as hobbies and activities. However, during a job interview, you may be asked about your outside interests and memberships in professional and service organizations. In many U.S. companies, you may be asked about your volunteer, community, or service activities. There is a tradition in the United States of helping those in one's own community or those in need. From a young age, many U.S. Americans spend time on a weekly or monthly basis volunteering in hospitals, schools, antipoverty programs, or literacy programs; fund-raising to find cures for diseases such as cancer or AIDS; supporting the arts; or working to preserve the natural environment or endangered species. They may do these things individually or through a service organization, church, or community group. Many people gain excellent organizational skills through their involvement in these activities that may benefit them in school or on the job. In fact, colleges and universities often use volunteer and extracurricular activities as criteria in evaluating students for admission. A well-rounded person is thought to have interests extending beyond work and/or school. Other cultures may not place the same emphasis on these types of activities, and if you are asked about volunteering, you may want to explain how the expectation in your country differs from that in the United States.

Finally, talking about the connections and networks you have may not be as valued in the U.S. business context as in other countries and cultures. If you have been introduced to the company by an employee or third party, the interviewer may briefly ask you about your relationship to this person, but do not expect the discussion to be in detail or go on at great length. You will be judged more as an individual, although connections will definitely help you get the opportunity to be interviewed in the first place. Finding common ground with your interviewer such as attendance at the same university or involvement in a professional organization is helpful, but discussions of this nature tend to represent a small proportion of the time spent in an interview. Try to avoid the appearance of name-dropping or talking about well-known family members, friends, or connections you have in your own country or region. While some U.S. Americans may be impressed, others may judge you as arrogant or elitist, preferring to focus on

what you personally have accomplished and what talents and abilities you may possibly bring to the company. Others may have no idea of what you are talking about and judge you negatively for wasting their valuable time.

Finally, make sure that you thank the interviewers for their time and the opportunity to meet with them. Reiterate your most relevant credentials by linking them with the requirements of the position. A follow-up letter containing the same points always reflects positively on your candidacy.

About the Author

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Pamela Leri recently joined Mellon Financial Corporation's Human Resources leadership team. In her position as the Manager of Organization Effectiveness, she is responsible for training and development, performance management, succession planning career development and global diversity at the corporate level. Prior to joining Mellon, she was an Associate Principal of Buck Consultants and led the global diversity consulting team of the Organization Effectiveness practice. Ms. Leri began her career working in Japan at an Osaka-based advertising agency where she planned, developed and wrote culturally sensitive promotional materials. She lived in Japan for seven years and Southern Africa for one year, and has extensive short- and long-term travel and work experience in Asia, Africa, Europe, the Middle East, Mexico and Canada. Ms. Leri is based in New York City.

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