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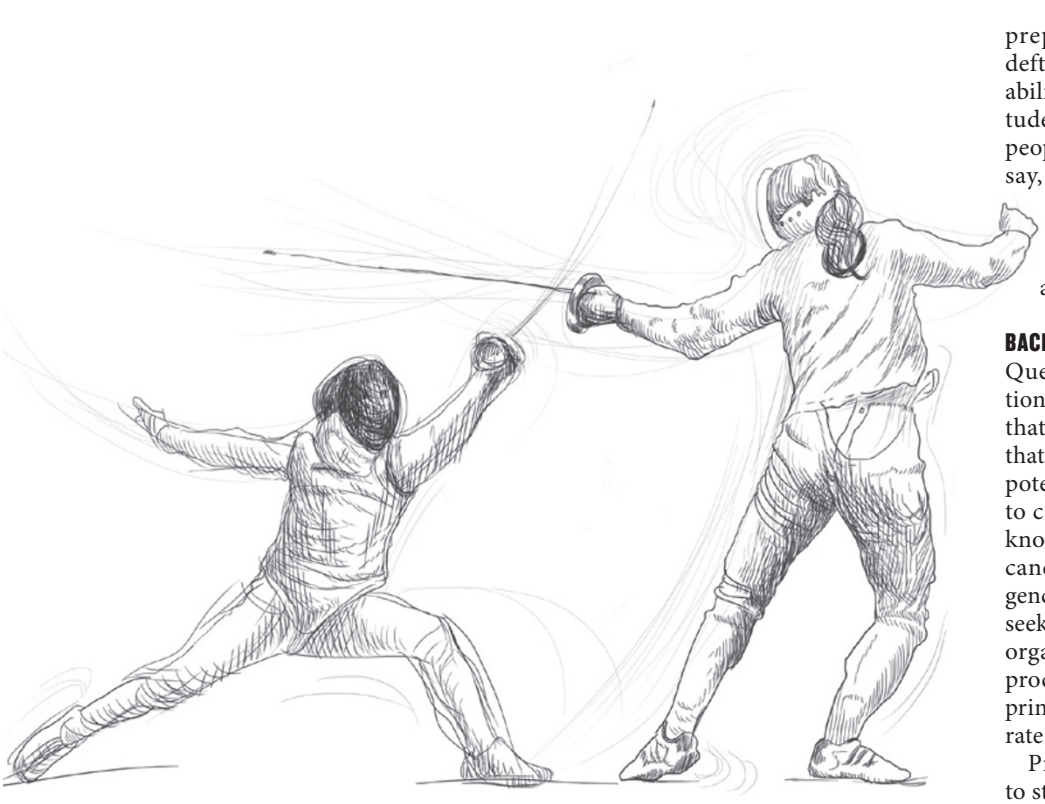

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INTERVIEWS

En garde

Navigating discussions with potential employers requires preparation and maintaining grace under pressure.

BY KAREN KAPLAN

It was the interview moment that everyone dreads — the killer question, then the pregnant pause. With a PhD in environmental biotechnology and years of experience as an environmental researcher and consultant, Henry Roman knew his subject well. Before his interview with the South African government's Department of Science and Technology he had spent hours reviewing that country's environmental legislation and international agreements on climate change.

But none of that stopped his mind from going blank when he was asked how he might develop a South African water-use policy. "I was coming in from a pure science background, and I'd had no experience in a policy environment," he says.

Yet Roman kept his cool. He asked his interviewer for half a minute to gather his thoughts, breathed and pulled it all together. "I drew on all the legislation I was aware of and on relevant international treaties to put the policy question into an international context," he recalls. He is now that department's director.

Invariably, early-career scientists who are on the interview circuit for any position will find themselves confronting a knotty interview question that they have no clue how to answer (see 'The 1-2-3 of interviews'). Hiring managers and other veteran interviewers say that, at such times, success depends on a hotchpotch of factors: ample advance preparation, excellent communication, deft interpersonal skills and a finely honed ability to keep calm. But above all, the attitude of the candidate is key. "I don't think people are censured for specific things they say, but because of the way they say them — nonchalant or arrogant or dispassionate," says Amy Cheng Vollmer, a microbiologist and department chair at Swarthmore College in Pennsylvania.

BACKGROUND CHECK

Questions that seek speculative information about what a candidate can accomplish, that ask about extracurricular activities or that broach seemingly extraneous topics are potentially flummoxing. But they are likely to cause less of a stumble when recipients know to expect them. Before an interview, candidates should gather as much intelligence as possible about the position they are seeking and about the institution, agency or organization that is hiring. This discovery process might uncover particulars about a principal investigator's priorities or a corporate drugmaker's focus.

Preparation can also help a candidate to stay in the running. Interviewees whose answers show that they are uninformed about their potential employer can expect to disqualify themselves. Richard Foust, a chemist at James Madison University in Harrisonburg, Virginia, points to his own place of work as an example. "What kills most candidates is, they don't understand that we're a predominantly undergraduate institution," he says. "Our first obligation is to fill the teaching position. Some candidates do the hard sell on their research — what they're working on as a postdoc. We weed those people out."

But to really get the dirt on what questions might be asked during an interview, candidates should try to obtain more information about the interviewer and their approach, ideally from current and former colleagues, mentors, advisers, supervisors or other trusted contacts. Juan Francisco Abenza Martínez says that he might have performed more effectively during a postdoctoral-research interview with a principal investigator a few years ago — or might have decided to scrap the interview altogether — had he known in advance about the person's rapid-fire interviewing style. Martínez, now a junior researcher in biophysics and genetics at the University of Cambridge, UK, was asked for an 'elevator presentation' — a ▶

five-minute explanation of his work. He blundered through his answer and didn't get the post. "I wasn't prepared for that," he says.

Debojyoti Dhar faced a similar curve ball in 2009 during an interview for a research post with a life-sciences company in India. It was his first experience with industry — fresh out of a postdoc at the University of Massachusetts Medical School in Worcester, Dhar was gobsmacked when asked if he could discover a drug target or vaccine and develop it in just six months.

"Scientists generally do not know the intricacies of business," he says. "I had no clue what to expect. I lost out." He later discovered that not all companies have such a "short-term-gain mentality", including the one for which he now works as vice-president, Leaf Cleantech in Bangalore.

STAYING COOL

No matter what the interview question, a calm, contemplative reply will win out almost every time, say hiring professionals. It reflects poise and an ability to maintain grace under pressure, instead of a panic to provide the 'best' answer.

But although being calm is paramount, memorizing replies for fear of losing one's cool or of giving the 'wrong' answer usually backfires, say interviewers. They can tell when an applicant is reciting — whether through notes (when interviewing by phone or video-conference) or from memory. "It's OK to be polished and practised, but I'm a person trying to have a conversation with you," says Jennifer Hobbs, director of training grant support and postdoctoral affairs at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois. "I need a sense of who you are."

"It's OK to be polished and practised, but I'm a person trying to have a conversation with you. I need a sense of who you are."
Jennifer Hobbs

Playing it safe doesn't win points either. Candidates who are relaxed and self-assured enough to step outside conventional interview protocol — whether by asking for more time or by turning the tables and asking the interviewer a question — are likely to stand a better chance of getting an offer.

Senior programme manager Marina Ramon recalls being pleasantly surprised by one applicant's quiet, composed response when asked how her short- and long-term goals aligned with the mission of the society she was seeking to work for. "She said, 'I can't answer this question immediately — I need time to think about it and to synthesize all the different elements that I want to incorporate'," says Ramon, who works at the Society for Advancement of Chicanos and Native Americans in Science in Santa Cruz, California. Ramon agreed that the candidate could e-mail a reply within several hours. The candidate did just that, and got the job.

"There are questions that require some thoughtful consideration. It is fair to ask for time to think about a question."
Marina Ramon

"It isn't that you have to think on the fly," says Ramon. "There are questions that require some thoughtful consideration, and whether you panic, or stand back and contemplate, can make a difference in whether you're offered the position. It is fair to ask for time to think about a question."

Ideally, candidates will remain self-possessed enough to stay a step ahead of the interviewer, a quality that sold Keith Micoli on a candidate for an assistant-director post at New York University (NYU). A job candidate turned the tables on Micoli by serenely posing a question that he had never thought to ask himself.

"She asked me what I would consider a successful first year for the person who was hired," says Micoli, director of the postdoctoral programme at NYU Langone Medical Center. Taken aback, he realized he had not decided exactly what the new hire would do. "It instantly made her the successful candidate in my mind." The question, to Micoli, reflected a sincere interest in the job and a desire to succeed. He hired her.

Since his own job interview back in 2011, Roman has himself interviewed many applicants for posts in the South African ministry. He recommends that candidates who are struggling with a tricky question ask the interviewer to repeat it, which helps to ensure that they had heard it correctly. The strategy also buys the candidate time to consider a thoughtful response. But he agrees that behaviour and demeanour are ultimately more significant than the answer itself.

"I look for someone who doesn't get flustered and who can remain calm," he says. "No matter what they say, if they can convey that they're at ease, confident and sure of themselves, it's all good." ■

Karen Kaplan *is associate Careers editor at* Nature.

THE 1-2-3 OF INTERVIEWS

Steps to success for researcher applicants.

1 THE ODD QUESTIONS

Here are possible ways to address tricky questions reported by early-career scientists:

- **What was your favourite story in today's *New York Times*?** If you don't actually read that newspaper, just say non-defensively that, as a scientist, you get ideas from many sources, and discuss a story or post you read that day. You could also ask the interviewer whether there was a particular story that they found interesting.
- **How would you describe yourself?** Such a vague, cryptic request can be puzzling. You can talk first about your work and research experience, but you should also bear in mind that this is a way of getting at who you are as a person. It can therefore be useful to explain how you work well as a team player — give examples of collaborations or other teamwork — and provide some personal information, such as hobbies, and how they relate to the job.
- **What is your three-year plan?** You should know from the job advert (and some background research) what the organization's mission is, so discuss how your plan aligns with that mission.
- **What do your parents do for a living?** You might ask the interviewer why he or she is asking the question as it is quite personal. The question might be a reflection of a poor or misinformed interviewer. Or it might be intended to see whether you can remain diplomatic and keep your head.

See more interview questions and ways to handle them at go.nature.com/elnmcp.

2 INTERVIEW INTELLIGENCE

Here are ways to find information about your potential employer and about the person or team who will interview you.

- Visit the employer's website (the university department, the principal investigator's laboratory page or the agency or company's website) for an overview.
- Look at business directories, scientific publications and newsletters. Read news sources to learn about research funding, corporate mergers and product launches, recommends Deb Koen, a career strategist and *Nature* Careers columnist in Rochester, New York.
- For anonymous employee reviews of companies and institutions, see sites such as www.glassdoor.com and www.jobitorial.com. But remember that postings are the opinions of individual employees and might not accurately reflect views overall. Compare this feedback with insights from other sources, says Koen.
- To get a sense of the organization's culture, examine its social-media presence, including on Twitter, Google+, Facebook and blogs, advises executive coach Louellen Essex in Minneapolis, Minnesota.
- Ask the recruiter or person who scheduled your interview (by phone or e-mail) to disclose who will be interviewing you and their positions. Look at their web pages, academic publications and social-media presence.
- Reach out to contacts from LinkedIn and other social media, as well as to graduate-school fellow alumni, former labmates and colleagues from scientific societies, for information about the organization and your interviewers.

3 STAYING COOL

Winning at the interview game often depends on staying composed and calm. Below are some suggestions for mitigating stress during the exchange.

- Look at careers websites for examples of difficult or puzzling questions that interviewers across all sectors have posed in the past, says Lee Miller, a career coach and columnist in New York City. Rehearse for the interview with a friend or colleague, and practise different ways to respond to those questions.
- Bring your CV and prepare a list of questions to ask the interviewer at the end of the discussion. Make notes to yourself on the list to breathe, slow down and pause, and refer to these notes during the interview.
- If you are completely in the dark about how to respond to a question, say: "Before I answer that, let me ask you this," and pull out a related question from your list. Or ask for more time or for the next question.
- Counter self-sabotaging thoughts, says Koen. Change "I'll never be prepared enough for this interview. It will be a disaster with questions I don't know how to answer" into "I am prepared for this interview. If I'm unsure of an answer, I will remain calm and make a positive impression overall."
- If you're not satisfied with one of your responses in the interview, you can re-address it in your follow-up thank-you letter or e-mail, notes Koen. K.K.

MENTORING

Balancing act

Just one-fifth of US clinician–researchers report receiving guidance from mentors on achieving work–life balance, finds a survey (R. DeCastro *et al. Acad. Med.* **89,** 301–311; 2014). The authors polled 1,227 researchers who received National Institutes of Health career-development grants in 2006–09. They found that although 52% of female respondents and 40% of male respondents were dissatisfied with their work–life balance, only 22% of all people surveyed received advice from a mentor on balancing the two. Researchers should not fear initiating discussions about such issues with their advisers, says co-author Reshma Jagsi, a radiation oncologist at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, who adds that mentors may not be aware of their mentees' work–life conflicts. "This is not an illegitimate concern," she says.

DEGREES

Enrolment slowdown

First-time enrolment in US professional master's degree (PSM) programmes continues to rise, but the rate of increase is slowing, finds a report from the Council of Graduate Schools (CGS) in Washington DC. Enrolment rose by 2.2% in 2012–13, compared with increases of 11.7% in 2011–12 and 14.7% in 2010–11. The drop corresponds to a slowdown in enrolment in all US graduate programmes, says Jeffrey Allum, director of research and policy analysis for the CGS. He notes that a 2013 CGS survey found that 91% of PSM graduates were working in their field of study and 68% of full-time employees had annual earnings above US$50,000.

TRAINING

Support means success

Junior researchers need stronger career-development support and training, says *The Global State of Young Scientists,* an analysis by the Global Young Academy in Berlin. It surveyed 650 early-career researchers aged 30–40 worldwide in 2013. Respondents said that solid mentoring relationships are vital for career success, in part by providing access to research groups and opportunities for giving talks and publishing papers. But many respondents described existing adviser support as inadequate. Co-author Catherine Beaudry, associate professor of innovation economics at the Polytechnic School of Montreal, Canada, counsels researchers to seek support from many senior colleagues.