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# Winning the Interview Game

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**EVERYTHING** You Need to Know to **LAND** the

Alan H. Nierenberg

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# **Winning the Interview Game**

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# Winning the Interview Game

EVERYTHING You Need to Know to LAND the JOB

Alan H. Nierenberg

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Nierenberg, Alan H.  
Winning the interview game : everything you need to know to land the job / Alan H. Nierenberg.  
p. cm.  
Includes bibliographical references and index.  
ISBN 0-8144-7279-6  
1. Employment interviewing. 2. Job hunting. I. Title.

HF5549.5.I6N54 2005  
650.14'4—dc22

2004029946

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*Printing Number*

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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*To Marsha, Tara, and Erin,  
the most important people in my life*

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# PREFACE

If you are planning to interview for a job, then you have found the right book. You may be graduating from high school or college, transitioning between jobs, or seeking a new job while employed. Regardless of age, level of seniority, or area of expertise, this book will give you a strong competitive edge over the hundreds or thousands of competing candidates.

## **An Overview**

*Winning the Interview Game: Everything You Need to Know to Land the Job* presents the interview for what it is—a game. There are many players who affect the outcome of this career game and you must learn how to deal with each group. Competing candidates and the judges representing everyone on the other side of the hiring desk are the major players. You must defeat your competitors and convince the judges that you are the one who can perform the job and should get the offer. The role of these players in the interview game and how you should interact with them are discussed in the book.

In describing how to prepare for and play the interview game, *Winning the Interview Game: Everything You Need to Know to Land the Job* will provide information not widely known by most job seekers. You will obtain first-hand knowledge from my experience on the other side of the interview desk as the current owner of an executive search firm, with previous experience as a vice president-human resources and a corporate hiring executive. I was also a job seeker several times in my career. I have personal experience with every approach presented in the book and have coached numerous job seekers whose interview experiences are reflected throughout its pages.

Although each interview is different, there are many components that are the same or similar. This book takes advantage of those similarities by providing a step-by-step approach to achieve your most important objective: to convince interviewers that you have the skills required to perform the job being discussed and that you are excited about applying those skills at the interviewer's company.

### **Empty Your Mind**

Before learning a new system of self-defense, an aspiring martial artist must succeed in removing old habits from his or her mind. The student needs to absorb the philosophy and choreography of each class session, learn the basics, and not improvise in the early years of instruction. Adaptation to the student's physical abilities will occur over time. And so it is for this text. Prepare for the interview, develop and execute your strategy, apply proven tactics and you will be able to adjust your approach for each interview after you master the basics.

And don't be afraid to explore every opportunity to play the interview game. Put out of your mind previous negative experiences and prejudices as well as self-imposed obstacles that may prevent you from finding a new job. Do not say that you will *never* work at another startup, another Fortune 500 company, or another company that requires driving more than an hour to the office or one that requires mass transportation to get there. Go with the flow and you will be pleasantly surprised with the outcome.

Many self-imposed restrictions in a job search usually are based on previous experiences that went bad. Move through the search process as quickly as you can and analyze each situation in which such obstacles are slowing you down. In virtually every interview opportunity, you should be able to identify job acceptance criteria that will be strong incentives to accept a particular position, regardless of the perceived negatives. For example, if you were a casualty of a dotcom that ran out of funding, you should now be prepared to reduce the risks in a new company by insisting on a sign-on bonus and a higher salary before accepting an offer. Do not refuse to in-

interview for a job that might be a three-hour drive from home. If you succeed in getting an offer, you have the option to demand temporary living expenses for a period of time, home visits each weekend, a telecommuting option, and a subsequent relocation with your family. If the company refuses to satisfy your request, you have the ultimate power to reject the offer and continue your search.

Very often job seekers will not go on interviews if the title is one level below their previous title or compensation is 10 percent or 20 percent below what they recently earned. This is the wrong move. Do not let either of these issues stop you from going on a first interview, which is so difficult to obtain. You might exceed your expectations by impressing interviewers and causing a hiring manager to realize that an upgrade in title and/or salary is warranted. Consider every opportunity to schedule an interview before eliminating any job possibility.

## **The Game**

The more you play the interview game, the better you will get, and the more job offers you will receive. As in any game, you must learn the rules, understand the players, and know how to reach the finish line. The book is organized into three parts.

### ***Part I: Let the Game Begin: The Preparation***

This part of *Winning the Interview Game: Everything You Need to Know to Land the Job* prepares you for your first interview. Chapter 1 describes the rules of the game and follows a hypothetical job seeker named Susan who has just scheduled an interview. The chapter identifies information to gather and knowledge to acquire before the interview.

### ***Part II: Game Plan: Interview Strategies and Tactics***

Part II takes you almost minute-by-minute on Susan's interview. This part provides insight into the typical interview and its common vari-

ations. Chapter 2 describes the initial ten minutes of the interview where the first and most critical moves of the game are executed. These early moves are important because they create a great first impression, establish rapport, and set the tone for the remainder of the interview. Chapter 3 describes how to respond to the barrage of questions throughout the middle of the interview and provides guidance on how to deal with sensitive and difficult issues interviewers like to address. Chapter 4 takes place in the last ten minutes of the interview and includes how to leave a lasting impression. The chapter discusses how to handle the different types of interviewers, such as peers and subordinates. In addition, advice is provided for winning in other interview settings, such as a telephone or videoconference interview. Chapter 5 provides guidelines on how to maneuver through second and subsequent interviews and how to differentiate yourself from the competition.

### ***Part III: Winning Move: Enjoy the Moment***

Part III describes the final hurdles for job seekers to overcome before an offer is presented. Chapter 6 addresses salary and reference issues and walks you through the landmines of negotiating, juggling, accepting, and rejecting an offer. A description of background checks and an approach to convince the company psychologist you have the right personality for the job are also presented. The chapter and the game end when you show up on the first day of work and make the wonderful transition from being unemployed to being a success in your new job. The last valuable piece of information presented in the book is how to plan for the next interview game while you are in the process of settling into your new job.



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# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you to my many close and personal friends and family too numerous to mention whose support was caring and continuous.

The following individuals deserve a special thank you.

**Nick Battista**, a great friend, inspired me to write this book. He was my mentor and provided encouragement and advice throughout the project. The book would not be in print without him. I am truly indebted to his support and wish him the best in bringing his four novels to print.

**Bob Diforio** is an agent only superlatives can describe. I am very fortunate to be the recipient of his persistence and personal reassurances that led to placing this project with AMACOM, the highly regarded publishing arm of the American Management Association.

**Ellen Kadin**, Senior Acquisitions Editor at AMACOM Books, had the wisdom to recommend revising the scope of my first proposal to what appears in this book. The professionalism and support of the AMACOM marketing, sales, publicity and administrative staff are also very much appreciated.

**Members of the Executive Forum**, a select group of senior executives devoted to sharing expertise as they move through their careers. It has been and continues to be a privilege to be a job search resource for Executive Forum members, and I will always appreciate the support and encouragement that I received from the membership throughout this book project.

**Dr. Genie Laborde** for taking the time to provide insightful advice on Neuro Linguistic Programming concepts, which she so clearly presents in her book *Influencing With Integrity*.

**Ken Meyer**, a prominent executive recruiter and former human resources executive, who reviewed an early draft discussing these important gatekeepers and provided valuable suggestions.

**Julie Jansen**, a friend, speaker, coach, trainer, and consultant, who provided a book on proposal writing and offered helpful and ongoing advice resulting from her own success publishing *I Don't Know What I Want, But I Know It's Not This, A Step-By-Step Guide to Finding Gratifying Work*.

**Joanne Pobiner**, Certified Image Consultant, President of Paramount Image Management, and professional member of the Association of Image Consultants International, who contributed her outstanding advice on how to step forward with a winning appearance and achieve a notable first impression.

**Chuck Duvall**, a specialist in videoconference systems, who provided excellent advice for interviewing at a videoconference center.

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**PART I**

**LET THE GAME BEGIN:  
THE PREPARATION**

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**Prepare for Perfection:  
Before the Interview**

Susan finally got her first job interview after an intense four months of searching. Four months of searching to get a one-hour job interview is a realistic statistic in these times. It could be another few months, or more, before she has the next interview. This places immense pressure on her and other job seekers to learn and apply effective interview skills.

Susan must convince the first interviewer, and possibly additional five or ten interviewers, that she is the candidate who should receive the coveted job offer. Read on to uncover the secrets of getting beyond the front-line human resource professionals and executive recruiters (the gatekeepers) to the hiring manager and a job offer.

**How Susan Got the Interview**

One morning Susan received a call from a friend she contacted a month earlier, “Hi Susan, it’s Tom. An acquaintance of mine is the vice president of human resources at a local company, and they are looking for a marketing manager. If you are interested, I will give you the contact information.” She obtained the contact name, Scott Gilbert, vice president-human resources and graciously asked Tom if she could assist him in any way. Susan was excited when she hung up the phone. She immediately reviewed the company’s web site and called Scott to introduce herself as Tom’s friend. Scott’s administrative assistant, Amanda, answered the phone and requested that Susan e-mail a copy of her résumé. Within an hour, Susan received a call from Scott’s internal recruiting manager. The purpose of that call was for the recruiting manager to ensure that Susan had the experience necessary to warrant an interview with Scott. The telephone interview and other interview formats are discussed in Chapter 4. Susan made a compelling case for an interview with Scott, and she had

one week to prepare before the scheduled interview. This was the call Susan worked so hard to receive. The following chapters walk you through the steps she took to win the interview and a job offer.

### **Rules of the Game**

Interviewing is like a board game—competing players all have the same starting point and the winner is the player who accumulates the most points along the way. The starting point for the interview game is when a job seeker has a scheduled interview with a company executive or search professional who is trying to fill a specific job. The game ends on the first day of a new job.

The rules are simple. An interviewer hosts the meeting in an office setting where a friendly conversation takes place between two people. The interviewer takes the lead role and asks candidates a series of questions mainly about qualifications to perform the job. Other topics include delving into personality and determining how likeable the job seeker will be to the staff. The interviewer evaluates each response and determines if the candidate will be invited back for another interview. From the candidates' perspective, they must respond to each question with completely honest answers. Any lies appearing in a résumé or told to an interviewer will automatically disqualify the candidate at any time. If misinformation is uncovered after a new job begins, the new employee will most likely be fired.

Job seekers must focus on the end game of getting a job offer. Contrary to a commonly held belief, the best qualified candidate does not always win this game. Although an offer can be attributed to many factors, such as who a candidate might know, the winning candidate usually exhibits the following qualities:

- Possesses basic skills and experience required for the position.
- Satisfies the needs of the recruiter, human resources professional, hiring manager, and other interviewers.
- Establishes rapport with interviewers and creates the perception of being like them.
- Exhibits impressive displays of energy and passion.

- Demonstrates a personality compatible with the hiring manager and the responsibilities of the position.
- Possesses qualities that differentiate the individual from competing candidates.
- Presents a detailed understanding of company products, culture, industry, and politics better than most employees.

If you have these qualities, you are among possibly three to ten competitors who are at the starting gate and waiting to be interviewed by company management. Arm yourself with inner confidence and knowledge of the interview journey that lies ahead.

### **Game Preparation**

Winning players begin the game with an intense interview preparation. How the newly acquired knowledge gained as part of the interview preparation is used during the interview separates the great players from the rest of the group.

Capable management consultants have a particular skill that is extremely relevant to interviewing. Sarah just joined the consulting staff of a prestigious management consulting firm. She has an M.B.A. from a top school and four years of information technology experience at a manufacturing company. She completed her company's consulting orientation program and was given her first assignment. She had three days to prepare for an initial meeting with the vice president-information technology at her first client. The company manufactured battery products, and Sarah knew nothing about the battery business. What was she to do? Sarah had been told that her company's clients expect consultants to know all about their business, and she had to convey that impression at a meeting in just three days. She spent most of her waking hours learning everything about the company, industry, product lines, management, and customers. Consultants do this all the time. In her first client meeting, Sarah was able to create the perception that she had a good understanding of the industry, its strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. Why did Sarah go through this grueling preparation?

- To satisfy client expectations of understanding their business.
- To instill self-confidence.
- To perform her consulting assignment in a stellar manner.

Job seekers should have the same motivation to convince interviewers that they understand and value the company's business. Hiring managers prefer candidates with a passion for and an understanding of their business over candidates who have no idea what the company does. Spend hours and days of research gathering information identified in this chapter with the objective of learning more than your competition. Use this knowledge to differentiate yourself and to create a perception of extensive knowledge. Your goal in this preparation is to know as much or more than most employees in the company you are about to interview with.

All job seekers should have a good understanding of the industry in which they work and the functions performed in the position for which they are interviewing. Sufficient knowledge and background information must be demonstrated to convince interviewers that you understand the business and will have a very short learning curve to become productive. Conveying information during an interview is like answering a question on a final exam—it makes no difference if you learned the answer the night before or the month before, as long as you have the correct answer. To ensure that a comprehensive approach is taken to conduct the required research, organize this project around the company and its industry, the profile of the people you might meet, and the pertinent aspects of the position for which you are interviewing.

### ***The Company and Its Industry***

This information is helpful regardless of the job being sought. It makes no difference if you are interviewing for the most junior or the most senior position or for any functional area of expertise, such as administration, financial, marketing, human resources, or sales. You will acquire an aura that differentiates you from common candidates.



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