INTERVIEWS II: THEORIES AND TECHNIQUES

10. PANEL AND GROUP INTERVIEWS

10.1 Background Information

There you sit alone in front of the room, waiting for the assembled strangers to attack you with interview questions. It's really not quite that bad. In fact, there is an upside to panel interviews. You'd probably have to talk to each of these people individually at some point in the process this way, you get it over all at once. Panel or board interviews are often characterized by a standard set of questions for all applicants. Typically formal and organized, this interview format is often used in academia and government or for high level executives. Occasionally, you'll encounter a panel interview for other positions in a company. Because of their unique dynamics and the stress they can cause unprepared interviewees, you should learn a little about why and how companies conduct panel interviews. Although you may never feel totally at ease in an atmosphere where you are getting questions from every side, you'll perform better if you know more about the process in advance.

A group interview takes place when a candidate is interviewed by more than one interviewer at the same time. Alternately, it can mean that a group of candidates are interviewed at the same time by a hiring manger. The first type of group interview is when each job applicant is interviewed by multiple interviewers. The group (or panel) of interviewers typically includes a Human Resources representative, the manager, and possibly coworkers from the department where the applicant would be working, if hired. The other type of group interview is when a group of applicants for the same position are interviewed together, by the hiring manager. In this scenario, you and other candidates would be interviewed together, in group. A group interview, sometimes known as a panel interview, is different than a one on one interview, because it is conducted by a whole group of people. If you know you are facing a group interview or if you think it might be a possibility, learning more about what you can expect from a group interview is a good idea. There are two basic types of group interviews:

- **A Candidate Group**
- **A Panel Group**

In a candidate group interview, you will most likely be put in a room with other job applicants. In many cases, these applicants will be applying for the same position that you are applying for. During a candidate group interview, you will definitely be asked to listen to information about the company and the position, and you may be asked to answer questions or participate in group exercises. In a panel group interview, which is much more common than a candidate group interview, you will most likely be interviewed individually by a panel of two or more people. This type of group interview is almost always a question and answer session, but you might also be asked to participate in some type of exercise or test that simulates your potential work environment. Panel interviews can be a feature of graduate assessment centers, but they can also be a standard interview method for professions such as teaching and other areas of the public sector. While it may seem daunting to face a group of interviewers, they can actually be fairer and sometimes easier than the normal one to one. If a solitary interviewer doesn't take a shine to you, you're sunk, but in a panel, consensus can overrule. Having several interviewers can also make the experience more relaxed, as there is often more opportunity for friendly chat or discussion. If there is opportunity for you to ask questions, you'll have a range of personal views.

Another multiple type interview is the team or good cop/bad cop interview. The team is usually made up of two interviewers, one who asks the questions and one who takes notes. The two typically trade roles, which can be confusing if they have different styles. Keep in mind that these inquisitors are working together toward the same end, so treat them equally. Although these interviews can be stressful, interview practice and preparation can pay off. When you rehearse your answers and your physical presentation beforehand, you will feel more confident no matter how many people you have to face.

10.2 Rationale

Why do panel interviews? Companies conduct panel interviews for several reasons:

- It is easier to bring several staff together at once to interview a single candidate than to organize individual sessions.
- Panel interviews often include prospective teammates who would not be on the schedule for individual sessions.

- Some HR professionals believe that the "real" person emerges when an applicant is put under the intensive interviewing stress that a panel can engender.
- Because panel interviews are often conducted following the applicant's presentation to the company, this is the company's opportunity to ask questions that may not be appropriate in an open seminar.

An increasing number of companies are using group interviews to screen job applicants. This change could be attributed to the desire to reduce turnover and the fact that teamwork is becoming more critical in the workplace, but the easiest way to explain it is that two heads are almost always better than one. When there is more than one person doing the interviewing, the chances of a bad hiring decision being made are reduced. Group interviewers look for the same things other interviewers look for. They want to see a strong candidate who knows how to work well with others and behave properly and competently in a work environment. Specific things that group interviewers scrutinize are outlined here:

- **Your Appearance -** Attire, hygiene, and anything else that relates to your physical form will be judged. If you wear too much make-up or cologne, at least one of the interviewers will notice. If you forgot to put on deodorant or match your socks, at least one of the interviewers will notice.
- **Your Presentation Skills -** Interviewers will be paying special attention to how you present yourself. Do you slouch or fidget? Do you make eye contact when you converse? Did you remember to shake hands with everyone in the room?
- **Your Communication Skills** - No matter what type of job you are applying for, you will need to be able to communicate. Specific skills that group interviewers look for is your ability to listen, follow instructions and get your ideas across.
- **Your Interest Level** - From the time the interview starts until it ends, interviewers will be trying to assess how interested you are in the job you are applying for. If you seem bored and unengaged during the interview, you will probably be passed by for someone else.

10.3. Interview Preparation: Don’t Be Ambushed

Find out what type of interview you can expect. The recruiter setting up your job interview can probably give you an idea ahead of time. If you have the opportunity, ask how long the interview will be and who will be on the panel. You

can better tailor your answers when you understand the interview conditions. And remember that no matter how uncomfortable the interview situation you are there as a professional to learn just as much about them as they are eager to learn about you. How do you deal with so many interviewers in one sitting? The best way is to take them one at a time. The board or panel is not one entity, but several individuals coming together with the common goal of hiring the best candidate for the job. At the same time, each person has his own agenda or department's interest at heart. For example, the HR manager will be checking to make sure you are a good fit with the culture and people working at the company. The hiring manager will want to know about your technical skills or business know how. And the person from accounting will want to know if you are savvy enough to operate a business budget.

You may be asked to speak about instances when you demonstrated particular behaviors or skills that are key to performing your desired job. This form of interviewing, known as a behavioral interview, relies on the premise that past performance is the best indicator of future behavior. Always be prepared to provide a sort of elevator pitch, a brief summary of who you are and your career goals. This message can include your overall mission, top level skills and interests, but not a recitation of your life's history. Be ready to share your concise message at the beginning or end of the interview. Practicing for the interview with a video or audio recorder is extremely helpful. The best interview answers include examples that are compelling, on target and spoken with interest and some enthusiasm. When speaking, don't hesitate to lean forward. Check your posture at a table and lean forward to demonstrate interest in the position. Remember to look at each person who asks the question, and then shift your eye contact to the other members of the interviewing team. Lastly, make sure you get each person's business card, hopefully at the beginning of the interview, so you can address each person by name and follow up with individual thank-you notes afterwards.

Group interviews usually involve having to answer the same standard list of interview questions that you would for one on one interviews, except you are sharing your time and attention with other applicants. Usually there will be a panel of interviewers to evaluate the answers of each applicant since it is difficult for one person to remember each person's responses. In this situation, don't panic about the large number of people in the room. Usually the interviewers will take turns asking questions, and positions will alternate between the first applicant to respond to each question. You will each have a chance to answer a question first and last, so be prepared for all circumstances.

Preparation is the key to success in any interview, but this is especially true for group interviews. If you make any mistakes, at least one of your interviewers is bound to notice. Here are a few tips to that will help you make the best impression possible:

- Greet all of your interviewers individually. Make eye contact, say hello, and if possible shake hands.
- Don't focus on any one individual. You should make an effort to engage everyone in the group when you are asking or answering questions.
- Don't show surprise or annoyance when faced with a group interview.
- Prepare for the group interview by making a list of questions that you may be asked and practicing how you might answer them.
- If you are interviewed with other candidates it is better to lead than to follow. Interviewers may not remember you if you blend into the background.
- Skills you will be expected to demonstrate during group interview exercises include leadership skills, your ability to handle stress and pressure, teamwork skills and how well you take and give criticism. Be sure to keep this in mind when you complete the exercises.
- Thank everyone who interviewed you and remember names and titles so that you can send a written than you note afterwards.

10.4. Success Tips

You applied to the job and they liked your resume'. You passed the first step of getting the interview and being able to talk to the company's job recruiters. You are excited to show off your knowledge and dedication to the position. Then you receive an email saying that the interview is actually a group interview in which you will be competing with two, three, or maybe even fifteen other people for the exact same position. When you meet with a hiring manager one on one, you follow a particular set of rules for this developing relationship. The problem with panel interviews is that you have to throw most of those one on one rules out the window. In the usual interview environment, you sit down with a future colleague or boss in their office, and the conversation starts with that all important small talk to loosen things up. Then, you may move into some of the common ground that you both share in your work or personal lives, increasing the comfort level for interviewee and interviewer. The savvy candidate can look around the interviewer's office and get clues that could be quite important to establishing rapport, like the

photo of the family on skis at a chalet, the softball team's trophy on the credenza, or a diploma on the wall.

All of these normal artifacts of a one on one interview disappear in front of a group. Most panel interviews take place in the company conference room, which is unlikely to be a warm and friendly space. This affects the proceedings a great deal. There will be a variety of people present and an equal number of viewpoints. There won't be a lot of small talk as after the introductions, the group will get right into the subject matter. Also, unlike the one on one interview, in which both sides may be uncomfortable, interviewers are much forthright when they're members of a panel. They won't be asking only about your technical and job related skills, either as equal weight is often placed on questions that try to draw out what kind of person you are.

So, now you know a bit more about why and how companies conduct panel interviews. Listed below are some tips to keep in mind before you head off to your next interview;

- Always ask your contact at the company to give you your interviewing agenda in advance, so that you can find out whether a panel interview is involved. Don't be taken by surprise!
- Remember the importance of eye contact. You must visually engage all interviewers, regardless of their locations in the room and their levels of seniority in the company.
- Despite the fact that panel interviews are loaded in the company's favor, most firms will allow you a few minutes to ask questions of your own. Don't wing this. Make sure you have memorized a list of questions that will reflect positively on you. Try not to refer to questions you have written down; make your questions a more natural part of the conversation.
- Although it is normal to be uncomfortable when being interviewed by a group, remember that you can't allow nervousness to take over. Concentrate on responding to the person who asks a question, just as you would in a personal interview with that individual. Take it one question, and one interviewer, at a time.
- Always have a response ready for the "Tell us about yourself" question that often starts thing off in the panel interview. Have both a short version and a longer version, and ask the panel members how much detail they want.

10.5. The Cons of Panel Interviewing

If there's one truly divisive aspect of the hiring process, it's the panel interview. Some companies swear by it, claiming that this stressful test is a good way to test a candidate's mettle. Other companies decry it as nothing more than an ineffective and off putting leftover from the HR manuals in your grandfather's attic. Interestingly enough, opponents of the panel interview have recently become much more vocal than the supporters, and today more and more companies are turning away from what some have called the firing squad interview format. To help understand this new phenomenon, several anti-panel HR pros to explain their theories on why this traditional hiring device is bad for business. Here's what they had to say.

Panel interviews can be incredibly stressful for candidates, much more so than one on one conversations. This added burden tends to affect their behavior, making them appear to be much less confident and competent than they really are. The panel style interview can be intimidating to candidates, especially if questions are asked rapidly with minimal opportunity for the candidate to ask his or her own questions. This could result in the candidate not performing at his or her full potential, thus causing the company to miss out on a candidate that may actually be qualified. Imagine what it would feel like standing in front of a shooting squad. That's what it feels like to many when they are faced with a row of people ready to take aim and fire their questions. You'll get much more honest answers when candidates are relaxed and their guard is down.

Also, as the saying goes, too many cooks spoil the broth. This is especially true of job interviews. When you've got multiple hiring managers providing input, it's far too easy to end up ignoring the best candidate and settling instead on the one candidate that everyone agrees upon. This is because, people interpret information differently. While one interviewer may receive a candidate's response positively, the next might mark the response as a red flag. To add to the problem, panel interviews rarely end up being fair assessments. Several experts testify that, more often than not, one interviewer dominates the questioning. This leads to a one sided interview, and a clouded impression of the candidate is the result. When most of the interviewers are following the leader of the panel, you aren't going to be able to make a fair judgment about the candidate.

Interviews are a two way street. While they help you determine whether a not a candidate is a good fit for your company, they also help that candidate determine if your company is a good fit for his or her career. Panel interviews are not

conducive for building rapport between the interviewer and the candidate. In some panel interviews, the candidate often sits in silence while the panelists furiously take notes. It sends the message that the candidate's time is not valued. A panel interview compromises the two way assessment. Even worse, it sends signals to the candidate that the hiring entity lacks sophistication. Though experts all have their own opinions on why panel interviews aren't as effective as other interview formats, they all seem to agree on the best alternative. Instead of interviewing by panel, using a two person team instead has been suggested.

That sounds like solid advice. By keeping your team small, you can learn more about candidates while simultaneously giving them a better impression of who you are and what you do. So if you're looking to hire a new employee for your company, it might be a good idea to put the panel interview to rest. If these HR pros are correct, you'll be surprised to discover just how easy it is to find quality employees when you abandon the firing squad.