

Acing Your Tech Interview

Three essential tips to getting through your tech interview and getting the job

By Jennifer Rae Atkins

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You might think technical-job interviews are no different from interviews for non-tech jobs, but in fact, they're special situations with unique potential pitfalls. The three tips that follow will help you better prepare for them.

1. Be prepared to prove yourself

Your resume will be examined from top to bottom, taken apart and put back together. Make sure you know what's on it, and make sure you're telling the truth. Edith, a business analyst at a technology-consulting firm, says "It may be tempting to load up your resume with experience you wish you had, but as soon as the interviewer asks you for more information, you've blown it."

David, a systems administrator, is adamant that the biggest mistake you can make in a technical interview is to try to fake your way through it. "If you don't know something, don't BS about it." And Johanna, a recruiter, warns that interviewers may even ask you questions that are impossible to answer, just to see if you'll admit what you don't know.

The best way to prepare is to review your resume and practice expounding on each and every part of it. If you say you know Java, can you prove it? If you say you have network administration experience, can you talk an interviewer through the process of setting up a mailbox and giving multiple users access to it? Be prepared to answer questions about how to build a particular application or tackle a specific problem.

The questions themselves, of course, depend on the specific position. But you can be sure that your interviewer won't just take your resume at face value.

2. Watch your attitude

Perhaps the worst mistake you can make in a tech interview (besides lying or trying to convince an interviewer that you know more than you really do) is to be arrogant. Techies often get a bad rap for lacking social skills, particularly when they're dealing with non-techies. Be confident, yes, but don't try to talk over your interviewer's head and don't be condescending. "You should come across as knowledgeable, relaxed, and sure of yourself—never arrogant," says David, the systems administrator.

Don't be careless in your dress, either. The rule of thumb for dressing for any interview—wear a conservative version of what you'd wear for the job one level above the one you're seeking—applies to tech jobs, too. Sure, you might wear sweatpants and pocket T-shirts once you've got the job, but the interview is not the time to be casual. Emy, a dot com recruiter, says "It's not necessary for a man to wear a tie or for a woman to wear a suit, but it sure does impress me."

3. Ask well-informed questions

At the end of each interview, when the interviewer says, “Well, that’s about it. Do you have any questions?” don’t say no. (That’s a good rule of thumb for any interview, not just for tech jobs.) But make sure that you ask questions that show you understand the business, not just the technology.

Johanna, the recruiter, says “Show you’re not only interested in money, but in what the position has to offer. Ask questions such as ‘What new markets does this company intend to go after, now that you’ve conquered this market? Looking to the future, how do you see me fitting into the company?’ Make a big deal out of the big picture. Don’t be too narrowly focused.”

It’s also a good idea to ask to meet people in other departments. Talk to members of the company’s marketing or business-development teams to find out how they represent the company to potential clients. You’ll show that you’re interested in learning how the entire company functions and that you’re not planning to hole yourself up in the server room all day.