

# Making the Job Interview Work for You

**Here are some tips to help you distinguish yourself from the competition.**

**By William N. Bockanic, J.D.**

All of the hard work has paid off: You've completed your undergraduate degree and perhaps the 150 hours of education that might include a master's degree. Now you're ready to sit for both the CMA® and CPA exams and are on your way to start a career in financial management. Here comes the tough part: You need to find employment worthy of your achievements and, equally important, that will generate enough earnings to help pay off those college loans. After you submit myriad applications, you receive the call you've been awaiting—an interview for an entry-level position in financial management with one of the top organizations in town. Of course, you're nervous; you want to make a good impression. The purpose of this article is not only to help you make a good impression, but to help you distinguish yourself from the intense competition and avoid critical mistakes job seekers often make during their interviews.

## Dress Appropriately

This may seem very simplistic, but first impressions set the tone for the interview. Remember, this is an interview for an entry-level position in financial management, and conservative dress is important. To project a conservative look, women should wear a skirt or dress of an appropriate length or a tasteful business pantsuit and avoid excessively high heels. Men should wear a dark business suit and tie. If the interview will take place at breakfast, lunch, or dinner and the interviewer suggests business-casual attire, follow their advice. You don't want to create the impression that you can't or are unwilling to follow instructions.

Next, make sure the apparel you're planning to wear coordinates, so you should avoid a potpourri of colors. After all, the interviewer isn't looking to have a psychedelic experience. If you're as color blind as I am, have someone else confirm that your tie, purse, shoes, shirt, blouse, and so on, coordinate. Again, when it comes to clothes, the key is to be tasteful, coordinated, and, most important, conservative.

Beyond the clothes, details matter when making a good impression. Regardless of gender, your haircut and style should be appropriate for the type of employment you're seeking. Both men and women should have well-kept, trimmed fingernails (you might even consider a professional manicure). Just as men should avoid excessive aftershave lotion, women should avoid excessive makeup and perfume. Neither men nor women should wear excessive jewelry. Keep it simple with no more than a watch and ring for men and a tasteful pair of earrings added for women. Also, avoid visible body piercings, gold chains, and tattoos.

One last point on dress: Don't wear religious symbols (Crucifix, cross, or Star of David) or service club pins (Shriners, Masons, Lions Club, or Rotary Club) in plain view. Although we all certainly hope that religious discrimination no longer exists and, of course, is illegal under federal and state laws, you don't want to give an interviewer the opportunity to exercise any latent discrimination that they might harbor. Also, if you're wearing a Lions Club pin and the interviewer and partners belong to the Rotary Club, there could be some subconscious thought that you're different and, thus, not a good fit for the organization.

## Be Prepared

Before the interview, thoroughly research the organization so you know its mission statement; the type of clientele it

serves, if available; and the major businesses and individuals that use its services. You don't want the interviewer to think you chose the firm as a result of throwing darts at a board with various company names on it. The more you know about the organization, the better impression you'll make. You can be sure that the interviewer will ask you why you're interested in working for this particular company.

## Educate Yourself on Dinner Etiquette

It's possible that all or a portion of your interview may take place at lunch or dinner instead of an office. You're terrified of spilling liquid, dropping food or soup on your clothes, or picking up the wrong fork, glass, coffee cup, or spoon. Dinner etiquette has some importance, and, while it isn't the overriding factor in securing the position, you shouldn't ignore it.

When the server asks for your order, you could always say, "No, thanks. I'm not hungry." That would temporarily solve your problem, right? Be assured, your statement might make the interviewer wonder how well you would interact with one of their clients at a dinner meeting, and thoughts like that might harm your chances of securing the position. The better approach would be to obtain some advice about proper dinner etiquette and practice picking up utensils in the proper order. Memorize the layout of other table settings so you know which water glass, wine glass, and coffee cup are yours. This is a much better approach than waiting until everyone else has claimed their place setting, then taking whatever is left or, even worse, looking up an etiquette website on your iPhone while at the table.

When you do order, know what to order and what not to order. When it comes to price, don't order the most expensive item on the menu. If the interviewer orders a \$50 steak, look for something in a somewhat lower price range—say \$30 or \$35. As for the choice of food, pick items that are utensil-friendly and not messy. For example, avoid foods such as spaghetti with red sauce or soups. And don't order alcohol—you're already going to

be nervous, and additional impairment is probably *not* going to work in your favor.

Since the dinner meeting is an interview, invariably there will be questions and conversation. Thus it's best to cut your food into small pieces so you can chew and swallow inconspicuously while quickly responding to questions. Naturally, you shouldn't attempt to respond when there's food in your mouth. Also, watch out for foods that squirt juice when you bite into them, like those little, round, whole hot peppers that come in some salads. They're quite juicy and can easily arc across a small dinner table. Likewise, avoid whole cherry tomatoes unless you can cut them with a surgeon's touch. Alternatively, you can place the entire tomato in your mouth (if you're able to do so without looking like a chipmunk) and quickly clamp it shut to avoid spraying the interviewer or any other unsuspecting dinner guests.

A couple of last bits of dinner advice: Don't salt your food before you taste it. A scrupulous interviewer might conclude that you're not a logical thinker by your assumption that the food wasn't sufficiently seasoned without first investigating such. Be sure to thank the server when they bring each course to you. Finally, thank the interviewer for the lunch or dinner, and let them know it was a pleasure.

## Don't Ask the Wrong Questions

At some point during the conversation, but most likely at the end, the interviewer will ask if you have any questions. This will be their opportunity to somewhat surreptitiously determine why you're interested in the position. It's just as important to be sensitive to questions that shouldn't be asked as it is to know what questions to ask. But keep in mind that not asking any questions might be just as damaging as asking inappropriate ones. The interviewer might conclude that you haven't come prepared for the interview or even that you're not truly interested in the job. Here are some examples of questions you should absolutely avoid:

### **What's the compensation for the position?**

Wait until you're offered the position. The interviewer may think you're overconfident and that you believe you have the position "locked-up," which might make you appear arrogant or, even worse, greedy.

**How many sick days per year are employees given?** Do you feel the flu coming on already? The interviewer is probably wondering whether you're looking to plan out the days you'll be absent. Maybe you should just give the interviewer the baseball, football, and basketball

games or concert dates now so that the company can plan its work schedule around your anticipated days off. Shouldn't you be more concerned with what you'll be doing as opposed to when you won't have to be doing it?

**How many vacation days per year do employees receive?** Refer to answer above.

### **Will I get to travel (including internationally)?**

Are you looking to visit various countries at the expense of the employer? It would be better for you to be giving the interviewer the signal that you're interested in learning the job and not seeing the world.

**How much does the employer contribute to my 401(k) or other retirement plan?** Are you ready to retire so soon? You haven't spent even one day on the job. The interviewer is probably thinking, "Nothing! We don't contribute to retirement plans for nonemployees."

**What are the types of activities that would result in termination? Are there warnings given to an employee before termination and, if so, how many?** If you ask these questions, you likely won't be hired. Consider yourself fired before being hired.

**How often do employees get salary increases, and what has the average increase been during the last five years?** Maybe you should be thinking about how you'll prove to the firm that you merit an increase when the time arrives. This isn't the time to be asking about a compensation increase because you don't have any compensation yet.

From the previous questions, it would be readily apparent that the prospective employee is only interested in what the organization can do for the job candidate, but the interviewer is looking to see what the applicant can do for the firm. Employment is a two-way street, so don't lead the interviewer to believe that you think the employment is all about you. There'll be plenty of time to address compensation and fringe-benefit issues once you secure the position. Your first objective is to give the company a reason to hire you, not the other candidates.

## Ask the Right Questions

To convince the interviewer that you're a good fit for the firm, pose questions that will lead the employer to believe that this issue is important to you. The following list will help you achieve that result. Even if you don't secure the position with the company, the interviewer's answers may be helpful to you in future job interviews. Keep in mind that you're the applicant, not the interviewer. You should ask questions when given the opportunity, but don't turn the tables so that it appears you're conducting the interview.

**Based on my research of the company, my résumé, and this interview, I believe that I would fit well within this organization. Do you see me as a good fit for the company?** A “yes” from the interviewer will indicate that at this point you’ve made a positive impression. If the interviewer hedges on that question or indicates that they will need more time for assessing that point, it may indicate negativity in the interviewer’s opinion of you. If the firm doesn’t hire you, it’s critical that you ask why the interviewer didn’t see you as a good fit. The answer should help you prepare better for your next interview.

**What do you see as my greatest strength or strengths?** Even if you don’t receive a job offer, the interviewer’s answer will help you capitalize on those strengths and prepare you for your next job interview.

**Do you see any significant weaknesses or areas where I could improve?** This question will send a signal to the interviewer that you’re open to constructive criticism and are interested in growth. The answer will give you an assessment of areas in which you should immediately take corrective action.

**Based on my research of the firm, I have discovered that it has an impressive list of high-profile business and individual clients. Do you believe that I’d be able to interact in a positive manner with those clients, and could you perhaps give me a reason or two why you believe I either would or would not?** This question will indicate that you’ve spent some time in preparing for the interview and are sincerely interested in fitting into the organization.

**In your opinion, what characteristics or qualifications would the ideal candidate for this position need to have?** Such a question will give you a considerable amount of information and, depending on the interviewer’s answer, may very well give you some insight into whether an offer will likely be forthcoming.

**Since I’m applying for an entry-level position, could you please tell me what others who have held the position are currently doing?** You should be very interested in the interviewer’s response as it might indicate the potential for both advancement and future entrustment of greater responsibility within the firm.

**In other companies, entry-level employees are exposed to a series of different experiences by being rotated through various departments in their first year. What technique does your**

**company use to give new hires a variety of experiences?** The response will indicate whether you’ll have an opportunity to learn various job functions and responsibilities that will eventually allow you to carve out a niche area in which you may excel within the company.

**How frequently is a new hire given performance appraisals? I understand that in some firms mentors are assigned to new employees to ensure that they’re progressing as expected.**

**What technique do you use to see that the new employee is moving in the right direction?** This should signal whether you’ll receive the appropriate guidance from the firm to ensure your success and whether there’s significant potential for upward mobility.

## Follow the Steps for a Successful Interview

Beyond tips on attire, dinner, and appropriate questions to ask and not ask, I have a handful of other suggestions to ensure a successful interview. Speak clearly and say, “yes,” not “yeah.” Don’t be afraid to smile (preferably not randomly or in response to an interviewer’s serious statement, such as he just received a call that his car was stolen). Maintain good eye contact, appear attentive and interested, and always open and close your interview with a good, comfortable handshake. Be courteous, and express your gratitude for the interview.

In addition, turn off your cell phone or turn it to vibrate during the interview. If it vibrates and there’s a family emergency, you can always ask to be excused and check the message if necessary. Also, never make status updates, check Twitter or Facebook, or text. The last thing you want to do is to appear rude, uninterested, or distracted.

These lists aren’t exhaustive. They’re offered as an aid for the recent graduate who’s seeking an entry-level position in financial management. While I used some light-hearted humor in certain illustrations, this shouldn’t be taken as an indication that the interview process should be anything less than serious. By using these techniques, you’ll distinguish yourself from the competition and, ultimately, land your first job. With most sincerity, I wish you good luck. **SF**

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