

INTRODUCTION

More and more schools are interviewing most or all of the applicants they are seriously considering admitting. There are several reasons for this. One is that the greater emphasis upon "soft skills" in MBA programs means that an applicant's personality and social skills are more important than they were in the past. A second reason is that a person's interviewing ability is a very good indicator of how attractive he or she will be to employers at the end of the MBA course. An applicant with good "paper" credentials will be unattractive to a school to the extent that he or she is likely to be regarded as a loser by employers later on. A third reason for interviewing is that schools can market themselves better by meeting individually with applicants. This is particularly relevant for the elite schools, which tend to feel that they are all chasing the same few thousand absolutely outstanding candidates. These schools welcome the chance to get a jump on their rivals by better assessing candidates and by promoting themselves to their top choices.

Interviews offer schools the chance to learn much more about applicants. Some things are not readily determinable



without a face-to-face meeting. These include your appearance, charm, persuasiveness, presence, and business mien. Interviews also provide an opportunity to probe areas insufficiently explained in the application.

Nevertheless, the interviewing policy of schools is not uniform. Kellogg and Michigan, for example, interview nearly all of their applicants, whereas Stanford and Texas interview none of theirs. Numerous other schools interview only those candidates who have passed their initial checks, whereas others interview only those who are borderline candidates — strong enough to warrant a close look, but not so strong that they will be admitted without an interview.

Some schools use only admissions officers to conduct their interviews, whereas others use alumni extensively, and still others use second-year students. The schools that rely on admissions officers alone are obviously unable to do in-person interviews with all applicants, due to the time and logistical constraints. For example, there is the problem of interviewing the candidate who is immersed in a round-the-clock project at a remote site on the north shore of Sumatra. Some get round this by doing telephone interviews; others simply evaluate the candidate on the basis of the file alone.

The need to do so many interviews results in (admissions office) concerns about the confidentiality of information revealed in the application. This is particularly true for those

schools that use second-year students to conduct interviews. Many schools resolve these concerns by giving interviewers nothing more than an applicant's résumé (and thus none of the essays or recommendations) prior to an interview. Others have students and alums sign confidentiality agreements concerning the content of applications.

SHOULD YOU INTERVIEW IF YOU ARE GIVEN THE CHOICE?

Most people feel that they interview quite well, but the reality is vastly different. To become a good interviewee, you need to understand in advance what points you want to put across, what questions you are likely to be asked, and how to maximize your presentation to satisfy your needs and those of your interviewer. The keys to doing all this are to analyze what you will confront and then to practice performing under realistic conditions. Doing this will help you to avoid going blank, letting slip things you intended to avoid, forgetting to mention important points, or being unable to keep the interview flowing in a comfortable fashion.

If a school requests that you interview with them, it is ordinarily a mistake not to do so. Failing to interview may be taken as an indication of a lack of interest in the school or a tacit admission that you do poorly in one-on-one situations due to shyness or nervousness (or worse). There are often logistical considerations, of course, and schools are aware that it may not be realistic to expect you to travel 5,000 miles for a Wednesday morning interview, since it might necessitate your missing several days of work. The logistical barrier is not as great as it once was, however, now that schools have their representatives travel to most major cities and regions on a regular basis, or use alumni representatives to interview on their behalf.

Although it is generally appropriate to interview, if you are sure to make a poor impression, either improve your interviewing abilities or maneuver to avoid an interview. The people who should avoid an interview are those who are pathologically shy, whose language abilities will crack under the strain, or who are so contentious that they will inevitably get into a verbal battle with their interviewers. (Unfortunately, nearly everyone thinks that he or she interviews well. Very few people will eliminate themselves on the basis of poor interviewing abilities.)

INTERVIEW THEORY

Interview theory, seen from the school's perspective, can help you to understand how you will be evaluated and why. The underlying tenet of selection theory is that past behavior and success are the most trustworthy factors for

predicting future behavior and success. Schools will attempt to determine how you acted in the past, and with what degree of success, in order to predict how you will act — and succeed — in the future.

BEFORE THE INTERVIEW: *ESTABLISHING YOUR OBJECTIVES FOR THE INTERVIEW*

The interview is important for all-too-obvious reasons. The fact that the school emphasizes the interview means that you have the opportunity to market yourself in a format in which most people do very little good for themselves. Some candidates are afraid of the interview and set themselves hopelessly limited objectives for it. They hope to get through it without embarrassing themselves. Or they hope that the interviewer likes them. You have the chance to make a very positive impression that will further your marketing efforts, so it is up to you to seize it. Do not simply hope to survive the interview; be determined to achieve positive results. Use it to reinforce all of your other positioning efforts.

You already have a marketing strategy in place, so go back to it when you are considering what you hope to accomplish in the interview. If you have positioned yourself as a true entrepreneur with great understanding of emerging technologies, for example, this positioning strategy will help you think through the interview and how to prepare for it.

Ask yourself the following questions at the start of your preparations:

1. How do you want the interviewer to think of you? What specific impressions, and information, do you want her to carry away from the interview?
2. How can you reinforce your strengths and address your key weakness(es)?
3. How can you show that you know a great deal about the school - that you are well prepared for the interview?
4. How can you learn whatever you need to know to decide which school to attend?

PREPARING FOR THE INTERVIEW

You should be mentally prepared to deal with four aspects of any interview. The first is understanding the format of a typical meeting as well as the special types of interviews that you may confront. You also must know what your objectives are, what the school offers, and what questions they are likely to ask.

TYPICAL FORMAT

No matter what type of interview is involved the format is likely to include:

- Welcome
- A few easy questions, perhaps about how you are, was it easy to find the location, and so forth
- Some comments about the school
- Detailed questions, perhaps tracking your educational and then work history, or your responses on the school's application form

- The chance to ask questions
- Conclusion

The first minutes of an interview may not involve substantive discussion, but they are likely to be important in forming the interviewer's impression of you. Therefore do your best to appear confident and pleasant even before you get to the heart of the interview.



The typical interview will last thirty to sixty minutes, although if it is with an alum it may be longer. In fact, alumni tend to differ from other interviewers insofar as they are generally chattier, more interested in selling the school, and less interested in "grilling" applicants than either admissions officers or students are. Admissions

officers, in contrast, tend to run a smooth interview, and are likely to be extremely focused and to keep interviews very short (typically thirty minutes). Students are typically less smooth, ask very tough questions, and tend to assess applicants in terms of whether they would be an asset to the student's study group.

DURING THE INTERVIEW

A considerable amount of the impact you have in an interview is achieved nonverbally; nonverbal messages may constitute over half of the message you deliver. As a result, it is highly appropriate to consider such factors as dress, physical comportment, and the like in order to maximize the chances of interview success.

DRESS

Business schools are inherently conservative places. The top graduates tend to go off into management consulting and investment banking, the professors consult to top multinational corporations, and the typical applicant is currently working in a corporate environment. This means that the style appropriate for a business school interview is a conservative one.

HOW TO READ THE INTERVIEWER

The interviewer's demeanor will help to reveal her reactions to the interview. Smiles and nods clearly suggest that she agrees with what you are saying, in which case, think about what you are doing right so you can do more of it. Perhaps your interviewer likes the fact that you are backing up your abstractions with solid examples. Maybe you are keeping your cool when being asked very tough questions.

Looking away from you, frowning, or constantly fiddling with papers or pens may reveal disagreement or a lack of interest. If you sense that you are losing the interviewer, try to get back on track by asking the interviewer a relevant question or making comments that are sure to be winners, such as some self-deprecating humor or mention of the incidents that you feel show you in your best light.

It is important to keep in mind whatever the interviewer says in her opening remarks, because they may give you good clues as to what she values.

If you are talking too much, your interviewer is likely to start looking away, looking at her watch, or asking such questions as "could you just summarize this part?"

YOUR QUESTION TIME

A failure to ask questions if invited to do so risks leaving the impression that you either did not do your homework or do not particularly care whether the school admits you. Asking questions gives you the opportunity to show how knowledgeable you are about the process and the program as well as that you are taking a proactive approach to your career future.

If you are asked what questions you have, do not rush into asking them. If you have not yet had the opportunity to make one or two key points, ask if it would be acceptable to go back to the earlier question and then mention what you have just accomplished (or whatever). Even if these points are unrelated to any prior question, feel free to say, "I am glad to have the opportunity to ask you a couple of questions, but I hope you will forgive my wanting to mention two things that have come up since I applied. I think they might be relevant to the school's decision making, after which I will continue with my questions." Briefly mention the one or two points. Then go on to your questions.

Try to avoid questions that call for a yes or no response. To understand an area in depth, plan to ask several questions about it. One good way to do so is to ask your interviewer to compare, for example, her school and a major competitor (one that you are actively considering). She will probably mention several points, after which you can ask about one or more of them in greater detail, or ask her why she did not mention subject X.

If you think that the interviewer harbors major objections to you, try to get her to confess what it is she is concerned about, so that you can address her concerns, assuming that you have not yet had the opportunity to do so.

Some appropriate questions, in case you are stuck for something to ask, include:

- How do you expect the school to change in the near future?
- Has the character of the school changed in recent years? How? Why?
- Which top professors will be on sabbatical next year? Who will take their place?

If one reason for attending the school is that a certain professor teaches there, by all means ask whether the interviewer knows him or her, and if so, what he or she is like as a professor.

After asking several questions, if necessary you can fall back on the old standby: "I had a number of questions when the interview started, but you have covered them all." Do not try to baffle the interviewer with questions you know she won't be able to answer. If she is an alum of the school, for example, she will not be privy to the school's rationale for its recent decision not to offer tenure to assistant professor X.

Being asked if you have any questions signals that the interview is coming to an end, so do not take too much time.

ENDING THE INTERVIEW

Be sure to smile at the interviewer, shake hands and thank her for seeing you, and leave with an energetic, confident demeanor.

Be careful not to be taken in by an old trick. Once you feel that the interview is over you may be asked a potentially revealing question as you are being shown out, on the assumption that you may have let down your guard at this point. Or the secretary may be instructed to ask a question such as, "How do you think you did?" in hopes of eliciting a telling comment. Assume that the interview is really over only once you have left the premises.

INTERVIEW COACHING

Many well-qualified candidates ruin their chances for acceptance to top MBA schools by missing a golden opportunity to sell their strengths or making a poor impression during their business school interview with an alumni or admission officer. Although they have top grades and excellent GMAT scores, they are unable to describe their goals, address specific weaknesses in their application, ask intelligent questions or even fail to demonstrate emotional maturity and common social skills. Many are unprepared for questions like "describe a situation of conflict and explain how you reacted".

Sadly, after years of painstaking preparation, several fail to gain admission to the school of their choice.

The best way to improve your performance is by engaging in a practice interview with an experienced interviewer. In a mock interview, our trainers will identify your weak spots and offer constructive strategies for positioning yourself to the admissions committee. Before you ever set foot on campus, find out whether your answers are convincing or whether your approach needs a little extra "tweaking" before the big day.

Compared to what is at stake, we think investing 2 – 3 hours in interview coaching is a wise decision. To book an interview coaching session, call us at **(069) 23 002 20**.