

Stacking the Deck in Your Favor

Story and photos by **Deanna Scrimger**



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After delays due to thunderstorms and mechanical problems, my flight finally landed in Cleveland, Ohio, at 2 a.m., six hours later than planned. Much to my dismay, my luggage had been lost and probably would not be delivered for 24 hours. As I left the airport, I decided that traveling to a second interview in my favorite pair of faded jeans and an old Michigan State sweatshirt hadn't been such a good idea. The suit I had packed for the occasion was lost somewhere in Chicago.

The next morning, my alarm clock buzzed at 6 a.m., interrupting my dream that the airport was delivering my luggage — no such luck. I arrived at the office several minutes before the scheduled interview time. I felt prepared, although I wasn't in the suit I had planned to wear. Instead, I was sporting an outfit that I had purchased at 6:30 a.m. at Wal-Mart.

The interview was a success, and I landed the position. The company understood my lost luggage quandary. They appreciated my tracking down a 24-hour store for an appropriate outfit and my enthusiasm during the interview on only a couple hours of sleep.

Lessons learned: It pays to think fast, aggressively go after the position you want, and always take at least a small carry-on bag when traveling to an interview.

Although you should always expect the unexpected, interviews don't have to be like rolling the dice. Don't gamble with your career path or settle for the luck of the draw. College students and others can start planning today to land the job of their dreams.

Read on to learn from a panel of agricultural industry representatives about job interview expectations, questions to be prepared for and what ace you should have up your sleeve. From résumé preparation to interview killers, insight from those doing the hiring will help you stack the deck in your favor.

Panel members included Mick Colvin, consultant and past executive director of Certified Angus Beef LLC (CAB); Mike Fordyce, divisional sale manager of Purina Mills; Larry Meadows, chief of meat grading and certification branch for the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA); Janet Maloney, human resources team leader for the National FFA Organization; Cindy Driver, human resources generalist for the National FFA Organization; and John Petz, president and CEO of Irsik and Doll Feedlots.

Cut the deck as many ways as you like — the bottom line is that the choices you make every day are all part of your career preparation process. From the organizations you belong to and the internships you serve, to the educational options and contacts you make, a carefully executed game plan will guarantee you're the dealer.

Future direction

If you are not sure how to answer the question, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" now is the time to start exploring the options. Fordyce encourages students who are interested in sales to ride with local representatives. Not only will you learn more about what the position entails, but that one contact will turn into 10 and may open doors to future internship opportunities or positions. Petz believes campus career fairs are an excellent way to meet representatives in the industry and learn what types of positions their organizations offer.

Although not a requirement for employment, internships and other work experiences were unanimously rated as an important element in gaining valuable real-world experience and exploring fields you may be interested in. USDA's internship program targets sophomores through seniors and boasts hiring 43% of their interns for full-time employment upon their graduation. The program also offers a unique college tuition reimbursement option.

Activities and organizations can be excellent

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ways to develop communication skills and gain experience. More important than membership is accepting leadership roles. "They don't have to be president, but they should chair a sale or event," Fordyce says. "It shows they are willing to take risks to better themselves. They're willing to jump in and make a contribution to the organization."

Colvin views leadership roles as an additional verification of an individual's abilities. "It's one thing to belong to an organization, but being president or chairman shows someone else had confidence in your leadership abilities," he says.

As you juggle leadership roles and work experience, don't lose sight of your grade point average (GPA). Although not looking for a 4.0 GPA, panel members agreed your GPA must be considered as one component in the evaluation process. The mid- to high-2.0 range seems to be the minimum that is accepted. A solid 3.0 or above, combined with experience and leadership, is as safe a bet as a full house. GPA is not evaluated independently. Employment and activities during the semester can also be assets.

Although requirements vary for specific positions, college course diversity is valuable to complement practical agriculture experience. Meadows, whose position focuses heavily on economics, encourages students to take accounting and management courses.

He also believes a speech class can be a perfect venue for developing communication skills. Whether explaining grading decisions to plant employees or to the president of a packing company, being able to communicate your position confidently and effectively is vital.

Colvin and Petz both say marketing and business courses are crucial for success in today's agricultural businesses.

Resumé planning

Your resumé is the first opportunity to lay your cards on the table and let the interviewer know you're not bluffing. Covering the basics is essential. Neatness, correct spelling and proper grammar are all musts. A resumé should be concise and highlight your industry experience, leadership roles and organization involvement, as well as your awards and honors. Driver

encourages students to include their GPA if it is at a level of which they are particularly proud.

An objective or opening statement should provide a personal sense of the individual, Petz says. "So many of them are canned." It is important that your opening statement be a true reflection of your goals and interest in the position.

Cover letters are standard and should accompany your resumé to provide additional information. Indicating contacts in an organization or the person who referred you to the position can be an important part of your cover letter.

Submitting résumés via e-mail is acceptable, and in some cases it is the preferred method. However, the preference was split among the panel with an equal number still preferring an original hard copy to complement the electronic version.

If asked to complete an application prior to or during an interview, it's essential to be as complete as possible. Applications are not just a formality. They are an important part of the process in many organizations.

"I can look at a form or written application and get an idea of the level of detail," Meadows explains. "If you are concerned enough to do a good job on the

application, then you will be more detailed at the job."

Interviewing

Admittedly the sorting starts with the resumé, but at the end of the day, it's still simply a piece of paper. The impression you make in initial phone conversations or during the first interview can be the deal maker or breaker.

When Fordyce meets a student who is interested in a position with Purina, he'll allow the student to take the lead. "If they say they'd like to learn more about opportunities with Purina, I'll ask them to call me to set up an interview," he explains. "This allows me to see how interested they are, how good they are at getting their message across and to evaluate their phone skills."

At the National FFA Organization, all résumés are responded to with an e-mail or postcard upon receipt and then reviewed by the human resources department. Qualified candidates are typically contacted within a week to schedule an initial phone interview.

"It enables me to have a better idea of what they have done. It's essential to make sure the phone call is not interrupted. I'm able to see how polished and professional the student is," Driver explains of her initial

phone interview goals. If you haven't received a response within two weeks of submitting your resumé, it is appropriate to call to verify that the company received your information and to express interest in the position.

Each organization varied as to interview length and the number of interviews required. However, it is overwhelmingly important, no matter what organization or interview you are showing up for, that you be on time and prepared. Have a basic understanding of the company and be ready with additional questions you would like to have answered.

"I really like them to ask questions. It is an indication of their wanting to learn about the organization," Colvin says. "It shows the ones who have done their homework. I like to see a deep, underlying interest in the organization." He adds that he believes a fifty-fifty balance between the interviewer and candidate asking questions is appropriate.

The questions a candidate asks



are definitely part of the evaluation process. "Do they ask questions and what kind? Too many or too few?" Petz asks. "Be careful not to overdo it. You get a sense of their judgment. You can always tell if they ask questions that pertain to the current discussion that they are a thinker."

Interview questions

You've done your research, you're on time for the interview and prepared with information you hope to gather from the meeting. But, what types of questions should you expect to be asked?

"I'm trying to understand more about them. Can they make decisions and think through projects? I'll spend more time on a specific project asking, 'How did you arrive at that decision? What was the outcome? Is that what you expected it to be?' This gives me a better understanding of how they will perform," Petz says.

Fordyce will focus questions on key areas that he considers essential for job performance. Typical questions he'll ask include:

"Are you organized? Give me two examples of what you are doing to stay organized."

"How do you get eight tasks done during the day with your other schedule?"

Fordyce also asks candidates to identify three weaknesses. He is not probing for negatives, simply looking for an honest evaluation and exploring areas that could be identified in the training process.

Behavior-based questions that ask a candidate to "give me an example of a time when you ..." are very common. Both Driver and Maloney encourage students to be prepared to give examples. At the same time, realize when asked a question, you don't have to dive right in. Take a moment to think through the question and prepare the answer. When answering questions, be enthusiastic and provide the information asked.

Attitude is paramount

Without a doubt, potential employers rank attitude as important as, if not more



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important than, work experience and leadership skills. It's essential that candidates are positive about the industry, the organization and themselves.

Through the years of building CAB, Colvin maintained a philosophy of hiring the person, not the experience. He believes that with the right attitude and leadership skills you can mold the person through training and experience. When rating the top qualities that drive a candidate's success, character and attitude lead the list, followed by imagination and persistence. Wrapping up Colvin's list is intelligence.

Typically, interviews will explore your past work experience. It's crucial that you maintain a positive, professional attitude. "If

asked about your experience with other companies, be professional about the answer. Never downgrade another organization," Fordyce says of how to explain that a previous employment option didn't work out.

If the interview process develops beyond the initial interview to finalizing the position, it's important to let the employer take the lead on salary discussion, which is typically done by the second or third interview. Your questions on the benefits package should be saved for this time as well.

Maloney realizes many students will use the Internet as a tool to develop their salary expectations. She encourages students to be sure they are accurately comparing job responsibilities, not just titles. Interviewing other professionals can also provide insight to starting salary levels.

The panel varied on views of negotiating salary from "acceptable" to "it's rare when it happens." Consistent, however, is their opinion that salary negotiations should be honest and typically based on having another job offer. Colvin feels an honest discussion is appropriate.

"It's acceptable for them to say 'I really like this position, and would be willing to work for X level. However, Y level has been offered by ABC Company. Would it be possible to split the difference?'" he says. It is essential to have sincere interest in the position and a desire to work for the organization, not just a quest for the greatest financial reward.

From résumés to phone interviews or the last minute of a four-hour interview, it's all part of being prepared to land the job of your dreams. Follow-through is a must. Thank you notes should be sent within 24 hours of an interview. Set your sights high and find the career that you will be truly passionate about.

Colvin says, "When asked what their future is with the organization, I will always tell them, 'Whatever you make it.'"

