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Strong interview skills make for memorable first impression

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Internships have a reputation for being competitive, and the prospect of an interview might be daunting for some students. The good news is there are ways to stand out in an interview that can help students land their dream internships.

“The economy is really tough and getting jobs is going to be tough. We know after spring break a lot of people are going to be worried,” said Executive Director of Career Services & Placement Kelley Bishop. “It’s not an impossible job market, but it’s much harder than we’ve seen in the past, so it’s important to put your best face forward.”

Before the interview

Most of the work that goes into an interview involves doing your homework, Bishop said. Knowing background information about the hiring company helps a candidate stand out from the mountains of résumés and cover letters reviewed by employers.

“You need to prepare. Do more than just reading (the company’s) Web site,” Bishop said. “Check out employees there, check out the company’s products, find out what awards that company won and why.”

Appearance also is key since it’s the first impression intern-hopefuls make on the employer, Bishop said.

“If you don’t know what to wear, it’s better to be more formal than less. It is never wrong to show up in a suit. If you show up and no one’s wearing a suit, you can always take the jacket off,” Bishop said. “If you show up in a T-shirt and shorts and everyone else is wearing a suit, there is no way to ramp up your image at that point.”

Lyman Briggs freshman Kimberley Van Ness has an internship with College Works Painting. Having survived three interviews before getting an internship as a district manager for the company, Van Ness said she agrees with Bishop.

“Definitely dress to impress. That’s their first impression of you, and you don’t want to look like a bum,” she said.

Interview tips

Follow these suggestions for a successful interview:

Do research on the company prior to the interview.

Dress professionally rather than casually.

Practice interview questions by doing mock interviews.

Be polite to the receptionist.

Turn off your cell phone.

Shake the employer’s hand firmly and maintain eye contact.

Use the employer’s name as often as possible.

Send a personalized thank-you letter to each person you spoke with during the interview.

Source: MSU Career Services Network

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Once research and outfits have been prepped, practice makes perfect. Bishop said doing mock interviews, such as those offered by Career Services, are a good way to polish interview skills.

“(Mock interviews are) a really, really great investment. There’s a learning curve,” Bishop said. “After doing three or four you get much, much better and comfortable and know how to do it. You can become confident and put your best self forward.”

During the interview

Van Ness, who will spend the summer running her own house painting business, said the most challenging part of the interview can be telling interviewers why you’re the right person for the job.

“Setting yourself apart is challenging because there’s a lot of people going through the interview process. When I applied, they recruited over 1,000 people and only chose 85,” Van Ness said. “You really need to work hard for whatever position you want. They’re going to recruit more people than they need, then weed the rest out, and you don’t want to be one of the ones weeded out.”

That means constant attention to the what you do and say during an interview. Bishop said a student’s interview begins as soon as he or she steps foot on the employer’s property.

“Anyone you meet, you should treat with absolute respect, whether it’s a receptionist or secretary. Treat them all like a CEO. It’s common practice for a seasoned interviewer to go to the front desk after the interview and ask the receptionist what they thought about the interviewee,” Bishop said.

Bishop also said to turn cell phones off, not on vibrate, and to shake the employer’s hand firmly while maintaining eye contact. He also said to use the employer’s name as often as possible “because a person likes to hear his own name.”

Kresge Art Museum Curator April Kingsley knows firsthand what employers look for in internship interviews since the museum hires a number of interns every year. Kingsley said interviewers like when students demonstrate a variety of skills that are in demand for a particular job, whether they are research, writing, computer or photography skills.

Kingsley said she remembered one particular intern.

“We had a student one year who was an Africanist. She redid our entire African section and the labels, she redid the colors and the whole thing. ... It gave her training and experience, but it definitely helped us,” she said. “Superiority in any skill that would help the employer is a big plus and makes a good impression.”

After the interview

Interviews don’t end as soon as the candidate walks out the door. After an interview, it’s appropriate to send a thank-you letter to each person that played a role in the interview, Bishop said.

“Get their names and business cards, even the secretary who you’ve been in contact with,” Bishop said. “The note should be personal, like ‘I really appreciate that you met with me and we talked about this or that,’ and add a ‘p.s. good luck on your fishing trip this weekend.’ Make it personal, not a formal letter.”

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