Interview Tips for Public Service Jobs

By Amy Kosterlitz, Professional Development Coach

adapted from article re tips for law firm interviews by Dan Binstock, Esq Managing Director of BCG Attorney Search’s Washington, D.C. office.

PRE-INTERVIEW PREPARATION

• The most impressive interviewees are those who can clearly articulate why they are interested in a particular organization and position, with specific reasons that are based on research.

• Be prepared to articulate what strengths and experiences you bring that make you a good candidate for the desired position and the organization.

• Before your interview, look at your resume and think of questions you would ask if you were interviewing yourself. Then, have good answers ready for these questions.

• The best attorneys are good researchers. You should try to determine who will be your interviewer(s) and research their backgrounds in order to tailor your approach.

• Do not discount the importance of writing samples. Those that review them take them seriously. Make sure you are providing your best possible work and triple-check for typos.

• If you have contacts at the organization, call them to find out the inside scoop. They can give you helpful information.

• If you know someone with contacts at the organization who can put in a good word for you, this may help you get the interview or be taken more seriously.

• Read the recent updates, press releases etc on the organization’s website so you can discuss current issues.

• Prepare a list of good questions as they show genuine interest and forethought. Questions that allow you to respond as good, such as “what qualities have made prior interns/clerks successful?” and then you can respond to this by stating how you have demonstrated these desired qualities in your life or prior work.
FIRST IMPRESSIONS/ETIQUETTE

- Being late is the kiss of death. Assume the interview is going to begin 30 minutes before the actual time, and grab a cup of coffee if you arrive early.

- Be polite and courteous to support staff such as secretaries, front desk receptionist, etc. They often have the ear of decision makers and will not hesitate to provide informal feedback on you, especially if you are not respectful.

- Turn off your cell phone and avoid other distractions. Good eye contact is key.

- Dress conservatively. You don’t want to distract your interviewer by bold fashion choices.

- The more you are relaxed and at ease, the more the interviewer will be relaxed and at ease.

- A firm handshake and winning smile are important. These are your first chance to show confidence and personality.”

THE INTERVIEW ITSELF

- Establishing a good personal connection is critical. Look for opportunities to create a relationship based on shared interests and values.

- Organizations are looking for people who are committed to their mission and who they believe they can work well with. Demonstrate your understanding of the organization’s work and its culture, and how you are a good fit for that.

- Feel free to start a conversation with your interviewer to break the ice. Remember that the easiest topic to ask someone (interviewer) about is him/herself - people naturally like to talk about their own experiences and accomplishments. Ask why they joined this organization, why they like it, etc.
• You will be asked to talk about your prior experiences, so be prepared to discuss each and every detail of your resume.

• Think about how your prior experiences qualify you for this position, even if they are not directly relevant (eg. how you were able to demonstrate organizational skills, responsibility, clear communication, writing skills, etc)

• Focus on how your skills, experience or willingness to “roll up your sleeves and dig in” can help make the lives of the attorneys at the organization easier, not just on what the position can do for you.

• It can be helpful to preemptively bring up and explain any weaknesses in your background but do not lead with this or over-explain things you perceive as weaknesses. Try to balance any discussion of weaknesses by featuring your countervailing strengths.

• If you have received very good performance evaluations or awards it is your responsibility to make it known--this is not considered bragging.

• Some interviewers are not skilled and they get nervous as well. If necessary, it never hurts to help carry the interview with an interviewer that is struggling.

• If you really don’t know the answer to a question just say something like: ‘That’s a great question, I really don’t know the answer but I’d be interested to find out more.”

• Try to avoid negative questions, such as ‘What do you not like about this organization?’ and research this topic by talking with those familiar with the organization, prior employees, etc.

• Be consistent and authentic. If you have multiple interviews, assume that everything you say to each interviewer will be discussed and compared by each of the interviewers when you’re gone, and scrutinized for inconsistencies.

• If an interviewer initiates a debate on a legal issue, don’t get too passionate and heated about defending your position. Remain calm, composed, and focus on good reasoning.
POST-INTERVIEW

• A thank-you note is always appreciated. Email is fine for thank-you notes. Just make sure there are no typos and you don’t write the same thing to each interviewer.

• In a thank-you note, demonstrate your interest and appreciation but don’t be too gushy—eg. saying you think you’re a ‘perfect fit’ after an initial interview can be viewed as presumptuous.

• It is OK to check in if you haven’t heard back by the time you could expect the hiring person to respond to you. Checking in “judiciously” can demonstrate the strength of your interest.

• However, don’t call the hiring contact repeatedly as you can make a nuisance of yourself, especially when they are not answering. Most organizations have caller ID and it can feel ‘stalker-ish’ to see a person call many times in a row.

• If you can follow up an interview with a personal recommendation call from someone known and respected by the organization, this can set you apart from the crowd.