

Interviewing in the Bio-Pharma Industry

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Part 1 – The Telephone Screen

Hiring Managers are evaluating you in 3 main areas during a phone interview:

1. Your technical fit for the position
2. Your personality and fit for the group
3. Your verbal communication skills

How is the hiring manager assessing your technical fit for the position?

Hiring managers need to know that each candidate possesses the relevant technical skills necessary for the position. The keys to the technical questions that will be asked are in the job description.

Prior to the phone interview familiarize yourself with the bullets from the required skills section of the job description. Highlight the points in the job description where you see the words required and preferred and begin thinking of examples where you have experience with those skills. Write your answers out and keep them near the phone for your call. You will be asked about the required skills set, so don't be caught off guard about these inevitable questions.

If there are required skills listed in the job description that you do not have experience with, don't worry. Simply state that you are familiar with that skill and a quick learner, and that you are genuinely interested in developing that experience. Many hiring managers will overlook a lacking skill set if they are convinced the candidate is a fast learner and has a genuine interest in acquiring the knowledge in question.

How is the hiring manager evaluating personality?

50% of any job interview process is focused on a candidate's personality fit into the group. Although this will be more of a focus in a face-to-face interview, the interviewer will certainly be trying to get a feeling about personality over the phone.

Coming across likable over the phone can be difficult. In order to do this you must:

1. Match the style of the interviewer
2. Exhibit enthusiasm for the position and the company

Matching Style

The cue to the hiring manager's style will be in the way the person starts the conversation. If the interviewer gets right to business very quickly on the phone, you are dealing with someone who is matter of fact and possibly very busy. Do not try and lighten the call, just simply respond with the same serious approach to your answers.

If on the other hand the interviewer sounds very upbeat and starts the call by discussing personal matters, return the favor and try and open up a bit. If you feel high energy in the voice of the interviewer, you will want to be upbeat as well.

Show Enthusiasm

First, make sure you tell the interviewer that you are interested and excited about the position. Many candidates forget to actually say this during a phone interview.

Additionally, prior to the phone interview, at a minimum, go to the company website and look at the product portfolio. Familiarize yourself with not only the job description, but also how that position might fit in to the company's overall drug development pipeline. After viewing the product pipeline, scan the company's recent news section as well and work that information into the call. This will show you have done your homework.

How is the hiring manager assessing your communication skills?

Verbal communication is a key component of the phone screen evaluation. The two questions a hiring manager is asking are: Can you answer questions clearly and concisely? Are you able to give more than just yes and no answers?

Be mindful of rambling, but make sure that every answer you give is elaborated on. I often hear from hiring managers that when a candidate answers in solely yes or no's, they automatically question their aptitude. Conversely, if you do all the talking and some of it seems aimless, hiring managers will also question your aptitude. The best way to avoid this is to have prepared examples of your skills written out and next to the phone. This should keep you on point and prevent you from being too verbose.

Final Points:

- As a rule, listen more than you talk.
- Try and find a private place where you are not worried about others listening to your conversation. If you are in a cube, this may mean that you would need to schedule calls before or after the work day. Interviewers would rather accommodate a time before or after work than deal with cryptic or half answers.
- Know that a call from HR will be very different than a call from a hiring manager. The HR call will be more about you personally, while the hiring manager will be more about your technical background.
- Try to take the call from a land line. Cell phone usage has become very popular, but cell coverage is still inconsistent and the clarity of a cell line is not yet as clear as a land line. There is nothing more annoying than to be speaking to someone and have it be broken up, or worse disconnected.

Part 2 — The Face-to-Face Interview

In addition to being a strong technical fit for the position you are interviewing for, hiring managers are evaluating you in 3 main areas during a face to face interview:

1. Your appearance
2. Your attitude
3. Your preparedness

Appearance

The golden rule regarding your appearance is: Wear a suit and dress as conservative as possible. If you are a struggling post doc with no extra money to spare, do not be afraid to check out the consignment stores. The suit does not need to be fancy or expensive, it simply needs to fit you well and be clean. This rule applies even if the company is casual or business casual. No one will ever fault you for wearing a suit.

Interviewees should never wear cologne or perfume as it can be very distracting and to some, even repulsing. If you are a smoker, do not smoke in the clothes you will be wearing or within several hours of the interview's start time. Certainly avoid smoking throughout the day as well. In today's day and age of the health conscious, most people frown upon smokers, so don't put yourself at a disadvantage unnecessarily.

In the end, remember that if you look sharp, you will feel sharp. A professional appearance will allow you to act more self confident.

Attitude

Your attitude throughout the interview process is incredibly important. Think of an interview like a 6 hour play where you have landed the lead role. This is the opening night, so although you have rehearsed for the show, you haven't had any live practice and like all opening nights, the critics are in the front row waiting to write about how you performed. You are on display all day, so you are going to need to keep your energy and your momentum up.

The first sign of a person's personality or attitude is their face, so make sure you are smiling. The more you smile the better. Remember, even a fake smile is better than no smile at all. Additionally, remember that people, including myself, do judge others on their handshake, so be sure to use a firm one.

At the end of each of your meetings, tell the interviewer how excited you are about the company and the position. I often ask candidates if they said this and many admit they forget. This is unfortunate. I have worked with hiring managers who have passed on candidates simply because they didn't think the candidate was interested, so if you always tell them that you are, they can not be mistaken.

Exude humility. Arrogance at any stage in your career is ignorance. Some of the most successful scientists I know are humble and gracious. Let your accomplishments speak for themselves. Conversely, don't be a shrinking violet either. No matter what the position is, either a management role or not, interviewers are looking for candidates who can lead. Throughout the day try and work in examples where you have led others.

Never ever speak negatively about your current or former colleagues or companies. Additionally, always try to turn your negative experiences into positive experiences. .

Preparedness

The final key to face to face interviewing is being well prepared by, "doing your homework." Most candidates don't bother to look into the backgrounds of the interviewers on the agenda and this is a real opportunity lost. In Bio-Pharma, almost everyone has published something, so candidates can always and easily find out information related to their interviewer's research interests. Get the agenda and search those names on PubMed (<http://www.pubmed.gov>) or a related database and see if you can scan through the papers they have published. Familiarize yourself with at least one thing about each person you will be meeting and be sure to mention that fact in your interview. If you do this, you will truly stand out.

Read through your CV and be sure you can give examples of all the work you have done that you list. Different people gravitate towards different skills, so you need to be prepared and speak about all of it. To that end, don't put experience on your CV unless

you can back it up in person. Never pad your resume, it will make for a very uncomfortable face to face interview.

Hiring managers are looking for leadership skills even at the more junior levels of the organization. Be sure to discuss and have prepared at least one project where you exhibited strong technical skills and also one project where you led or mentored others. Feel free to repeat those stories throughout the day if they are relevant.

Finally, understand that you will need to impress everyone you meet, regardless of who they are or at what level they are within the organization. Everyone on that interview team has a voice.

Part 3 — The Scientific Presentation

The presentation portion of your interview is make or break. If your scientific presentation is poor, it is highly likely that you will not get the job you are interviewing for. To avoid this misfortune, there are 3 things you can do to increase your chances of success.

- 1. Ask the hiring manager for guidance on choosing your topic*
- 2. Practic, Practice, Practice*
- 3. Anticipate questions and prepare answers*

Ask the hiring manager for guidance on choosing your topic

Don't be shy about calling or e-mailing the hiring manager for advice on topic selection. If the hiring manager is excited about your talk, it is very likely that the rest of the group will be too. This direction will also help you understand what subject matter is relevant to his or her groups focus. To some hiring managers it might not matter what you talk about. These hiring managers are using the presentation to evaluate your communication skills and assess how you field questions. However, as you interview for more senior level positions, what you actually choose to talk about will be evaluated and the best person to put you on the right track is the hiring manager. Your asking for help on topic selection shows you are interested in fully preparing for your interview.

Generally, hiring managers appreciate presentations in the following format:

- Statement of the problem or project.
- Identification of the expected outcome or theory.
- Description of the methods and tools used and results of those "tests."
- Discussion of the problems or obstacles encountered, either expected or unexpected.
- Outcome, and if different from expected outcome, why.

If at all possible, compose your scientific data in this way. It will allow the attendees to see how you think through a process and overcome obstacles, a skill everyone in the Bio-Pharma industry is interested in.

Practice, Practice, Practice

Be sure your presentation is peer reviewed and one that you have given several times before. If this is a new presentation for you, take the time to give the presentation as many times as possible to your colleagues or scientific friends and make sure to solicit feedback from them. You are better off knowing the truth about your presentation before you get into an interview setting.

It is also important to know your audience. Because there will likely be employees from all parts of the organization at your presentation, be sure to speak at a level that everyone can understand. Therefore, when practicing, invite people to your presentation that are both junior and senior to you.

Anticipate questions and prepare answers

Preparation for the question and answer session is key. During your practice rounds, encourage your peers to ask questions and write down those that were asked. Reflect on those questions and come up with clear and concise answers. This preparation will help you avoid giving only yes or no answers on the day of your interview.

Hopefully you will not be asked something that you don't know the answer to, but if you are, never make up an answer! State that you would like to think further about it and get back to them with the appropriate response. If this happens, do follow up with that person after the interview with a reply.

Part 4 — The Offer Stage

The offer stage actually begins long before you have convinced the company where you are interviewing that you are their ideal candidate. It begins when you have to start talking about salary and expectations.

Either before your interview or the day of your interview, you are going to be asked to fill out an employment application. Each company will ask you slightly different questions, but the point of the document is the usually the same. They want to get permission to run a background check and they will want you to provide your references and some brief employment and academic history. They will also want to know your current compensation and your salary expectations.

How do you answer questions about your professional, academic and salary history?

On all questions, be completely truthful. Never misrepresent your professional history, your academic credentials or your current salary information. If you do, the company will find out in a background check and you will certainly not be hired. Conversely, don't leave anything blank either. Information left blank draws a red flag and will appear that you are trying to hide something. This is especially true with the current salary question. I sometimes have candidates say to me, "I think I am underpaid, so if I tell them what I am earning, I might get a low ball offer." This is not true. Even if you are underpaid, a company is going to take into consideration three things when making you an offer.

1. *Your current base and bonus*
2. *Internal equity*
3. *How badly they want you*

If your base is low, you are not going to escape it, but the company will balance your base against the other factors and make you a fair offer.

As a note, if you receive stock awards or a yearly bonus, make sure you include that information with your current compensation. For instance, if you are earning 100K, with a 15% bonus plan and you receive 1000 stock options yearly, be sure to include all of that information. You want the company to understand your full compensation story, especially because the company where you are interviewing may not pay their employees exactly the same way your current employer pays. For example, the company you are interviewing with may not offer stock options at all, and they might want to make that up to you in an increased base or bonus, or a sign on bonus if necessary.

How do you answer a question about your salary expectations?

The answer is simple. On your application simply write negotiable. Nothing more, nothing less.

In your interview, you might also be asked verbally about your salary expectations. This is a key point to remember: When asked about your salary expectations, you simply say, "*I would consider any reasonable offer.*"™ If the person responds with, "No, really, what are you looking for?" Reply again with "No really, I am very excited about your company and the role I would play here, I would really consider any reasonable offer."™ No interviewer will ask you this question more than twice. It is important that you understand that this is a loaded question and you can not win if you answer it. If you state a number that is perceived as low, you will likely not get a dime more than the number you have given. If you state a number that is too high, even if the company loved you, they could pass on your candidacy because they don't think they can afford you. Always let a

company make the first move regarding offer. You can always negotiate from there, as most companies expect you will anyway.

Once an offer has been made, you want to spend some time really thinking about the offer before you do, or ask for anything. If they really knocked your socks off and the offer is truly more than you expected, don't bother negotiating. Although negotiating is sometimes necessary, it is not always perceived positively, especially if a company has gone above and beyond to make you happy. Therefore, if you are happy, don't risk the potential negativity of negotiating for what will amount to usually no more than a few thousand dollars.

However, if you are truly dissatisfied with the offer, but you want the job, then it is appropriate to negotiate. The operative phrase here is, *if you want the job*. Never waste a company's time negotiating an offer if you don't really want the position. You will not look good in the end.

Throughout the offer negotiation, try and put yourself in the shoes of the HR or the hiring manager that you are working with. It will help you keep perspective on a process that can not only be very overwhelming for you, but for them as well. Additionally, remember that your behavior while negotiating the offer and accepting is your first act as an employee of that company and will set the tone for the first few months of your new career.