

Throughout the process, it's critical to maintain the trust and confidence of your current employer, and this relationship will be damaged if your employer learns of your plans from secondary sources or through the media. At a minimum you must ensure that your employer is informed before any public release is made of your consideration by a new employer and, at the latest, when you're invited to be interviewed. Even though the interviews may be confidential, the risk that the information will become public increases significantly at that point. If you're in a manager position, you should first call the mayor or chair of the presiding body and personally inform him or her. You should also be willing to tell all the members of the governing body what you are doing and why. Thus, as you begin the process, you should be prepared with a succinct and straightforward answer to the question, "Why are you pursuing other positions?"

TIP

Be prepared to talk with the media once it becomes public knowledge that you have interviewed or are a candidate for a position. They will be asking many of the same questions that your current employer may be asking, and some may try to paint your current situation as controversial. Your message should be the same to the council, public, and media.

The interview process: before, during, and after

The interview is critical. While good credentials and a great résumé get you the interview, the interview gets you the job! If you're going to stand out from the crowd as the most qualified candidate, you'll need to prepare thoroughly. After all, you'll now be face-to-face in competition with other professionals whose experience and track records are at least as good as yours. Don't be overconfident. Strong credentials rarely overcome a poor interview.

In a standard interview, you'll be questioned on work experience, accomplishments, career objectives, alternative approaches to problems faced by local government, and related matters. The interview may be limited to an hour, in which case finalists may be called back for a second interview.

Types of interviews

For executive positions (manager or administrator), various processes may be used. You may start, for example, with a community panel including some council members and staffers, or you may interview directly with the governing body.

For staff positions (assistant, department head, analyst), your interview is likely to be with a group of managers and employees. Interview panels may include members of the executive management team as well as representatives of the business or residential community, a neighboring local government administrator, a local school district administrator, and others. Besides the full group, you may also spend some time individually with each member of the interview panel. In addition, you may be offered a tour with a staff member, and, if you're a candidate for a senior position, you may be invited to a staff or community reception.

Some employers may use tools other than a standard interview process, such as a written assignment, a verbal presentation, or an assessment center. An assessment center involves a variety of "exercises" in group or individual settings, including a verbal résumé, role play, and team problem solving. Assessors observe candidate behaviors and assess candidates' skills in oral communication, interpersonal interactions, problem solving/decision making, planning/organizing, and leadership.

Preparing for the interview

To prepare yourself for an interview, you should do the following:

- Review available information regarding the local government.
- Make personal contacts with individuals who may have valuable information about the position and community.
- Assess your personal abilities, skills, and professional accomplishments.
- Assess your image and appearance.
- Prepare answers to potential interview questions.
- Plan your schedule so that you will be rested and engaged at the interview.

Gathering information If you haven't already done so, get as much information as practical on the community or jurisdiction, the organization, and the current and future issues and challenges. Research key

individuals in the organization, their backgrounds, and their stance on issues. You may obtain this information from the government’s website and agendas/minutes, the Internet, the community access channel, and newspapers.

Personal contacts Consider contacting individuals who are current or former employees of the organization. This may include the incumbent and key staff members. You may also consider contacting local business leaders, the school superintendent, the chamber of commerce, and managers and ICMA members in neighboring jurisdictions. In addition, the state association and ICMA Range Riders and Senior Advisors can be excellent sources of information.

Assess your personal assets To prepare for the interview, thoroughly review your résumé and career goals. Assess your technical competencies and skills, what you do well (and poorly), and where you’ve succeeded and failed. Be prepared to draw parallels between your background and past experiences and that of the employer. Consider your weaknesses as well as your strengths.

TIP

Prepare answers to possible questions that have arisen through your research. If they are focused on infrastructure, economic development, human resources, etc., know how your experiences may help the interviewing community solve an issue that it may have.

Image and appearance It’s well known that clothes can affect how others perceive you. Studies have shown that people form an opinion of you in the first 40 seconds, long before you can tell your interviewer how you saved a city from certain bankruptcy. Your message will be muddled if you don’t look as solid,

TIP

It is better to be overdressed than underdressed. Taking off a jacket is easy, but sitting across from five well-dressed individuals while you are wearing jeans can’t be undone.

secure, and “in charge” as your background implies. You need to look authoritative, confident, and able to get the job done. It may be necessary to take a critical look at your appearance and invest whatever it takes to improve it.

Your appearance should reflect taste, sound judgment, and attention to details—attributes that any interviewer should find reassuring. Be careful not to underdress or overdress, which can be more challenging as society is becoming more casual in dress. Underdressing can signal to others that you lack sophistication, that you don’t care about your personal appearance, or that you don’t consider the interview very important. Overdressing by wearing the latest trends or flashy colors can suggest that you value “style over substance,” that you are not in touch with local traditions and preferences, or even that you live beyond your means. Deciding on the middle ground is a judgment call based on many factors, such as the interviewers, the region, and the size of the local government. If possible, watch the cable access channel to see how the governing body and executives are dressed, especially during more formal proceedings. The ideal image is one that leaves the interviewers favorably impressed with your overall appearance without remembering why. Here are some guidelines to follow:

- A conservative appearance is the safest approach in an interview setting. Shades of navy, gray, burgundy, and black are good choices. A suit, sport coat or jacket, and slacks, or a dress are appropriate attire. Ensure that your clothing fits well and is clean and free from excessive wear.
- Details and accessories are important, too. If you plan to carry a briefcase to an interview, consider investing in a good leather one in burgundy, tan, brown, or black. Assess your shoes for wear and scuffing. Pay extra attention to personal grooming. Consider a haircut or style update, makeup, or manicure (gender appropriate). Keep jewelry, perfume, or cologne to a minimum.
- Remember, it is better to be overdressed than underdressed. Wearing a suit or jacket that can be removed is much more appropriate than wearing jeans/khaki’s and a polo and sitting across from individuals wearing suits and dresses.
- Your preliminary research should have told you how the employer is likely to react to tattoos, piercings, and other styles that are not considered “mainstream” in much of the United States. You will need to use your judgment about how to present yourself if any of these are part of your

personal “style,” but be prepared for some interviewers to react with their own bias.

- In a world where discussions of health insurance have become more commonplace and employers are making requests for background checks and physicals, it is important for you to remember to take care of yourself during the job-hunting process. As with your dress, your haircut, and your accessories, your physical shape will be considered as part of the package.

Prepare your responses It’s more difficult than you might think to respond succinctly to such questions as “How would you summarize your professional and personal background?” and “What are your career goals?” Thinking through your responses to potential questions can help you answer them concisely and articulately during an interview. Traditional questions that you should be prepared to answer include the following:

- What have been your most important accomplishments?
- What has been your worst failure?
- How do you relate to and communicate with the public?
- What are your management strengths and weaknesses?
- Why do you want to change jobs?
- What value do you bring to this organization?

However, more and more interviews are including value-based and situational or experienced-based questions that require you to answer with specifics in your experience that relate to the question. For example, instead of the traditional question “What are your management strengths and weaknesses?” an interviewer might ask:

Give us an example in your current position that demonstrates your management style.

- Please describe a time when something within your organization failed as a result of your management, and tell us what you learned from that experience.

Most of the questions will cover your past experience and how you would deal with specific problems that the employer is facing. For senior positions, the interview may focus more on your management philosophy and style than on your technical skills, so be prepared to provide examples that illustrate your philosophy. A list of popular interview questions appears in Appendix D. Set aside focused time to review these

TIP

When faced with situational or experience-based questions, many candidates will attempt to answer in a theoretical way. For example, when asked for an example about management style, a candidate may say, “I am a participatory manager who serves the governing body well and pays real attention to details.” But the question was not “tell us about your management strengths”; it was “give us an example that demonstrates your style.” Make sure you are listening to the questions before answering. Some employers will simply move on and rate you on your reply, but others will redirect you and require you to provide an example.

questions and provide honest and succinct, yet thorough, responses. Providing a response that includes specific examples from your direct experience is an excellent way to exhibit your knowledge and abilities. Remember, this is your opportunity to “sell” yourself. If you personally led a project to completion, use the word “I.” If you were part of a team project, explain this and use the word “we.” Then explain your personal role in the project.

Most important, keep in mind that the interviewers will appreciate an upbeat and positive attitude. Speaking negatively about your current or former employer or colleagues is inappropriate. If you have had a bad experience, practice how you will address this in your interview.

TIP

With the growth of the Internet and social media, both employers and job hunters search for ways to improve the process. Employers search for the best, or the “magic,” questions, and job hunters search for interview techniques to answer those questions. Some of the questions used by the top tech firms to probe a candidate’s thinking skills are “Why are manhole covers round?” or “How many dogs/gas stations/windows are in America today?” A review of some of these more popular questions may help you prepare in case they arise during your interview.

The “magic” question

At the 2007 ICMA Annual Conference, [Daniel Pink](#), best-selling author and keynote speaker, mentioned such a question during the breakout session. He told a story of a Fortune 500 company that had developed what it considered to be the “magic” question for candidates. It was a simple question of just three words: *Are you lucky?*

At first glance, this seems like a silly or worthless question. Who cares if someone is lucky, right? But this company swore by the results, and this single question helped determine success or failure in the company. As Dan described it, there are really only two answers to the question:

1. No, I make my own luck. Everything I have is the result of my hard work, dedication, and effort.
2. Sure, I suppose luck plays into things. I grew up in a pretty good place, went to school, had some opportunities that found their way to me, it took a lot of hard work, but yes I would consider myself lucky.

Which person would you rather have in your organization? Which person would be a better team leader? The company determined that answer #2 resulted in a much better collaborative environment, whereas those who answered #1 were not bad people but were so reliant on their own efforts and accomplishments that they didn’t work well with others. Confidence is one thing, but be careful about coming across as egotistical, especially with “making your own luck.” At the 2012 conference, best-selling author and keynote speaker [Jim Collins](#) challenged the crowd during his break-out session to be prepared to answer, “*What is your return on luck?*”

Google yourself

Just as the world of technology has changed the way that you research, prepare for, and handle an interview, it has also given council, staff, and community members an opportunity to get to know you before you arrive for the interview. Social network sites are just part of the public persona that public managers will have living “online.” An old news story, a personnel story, a comment made by a current resident or reporter—all will be online, and while you may or may not have been correctly quoted, you most certainly will be asked about the situation. Knowing what people may ask about “you” is just another way to make sure that you are prepared for the interview.

Visit the community

If you have not been able to visit the community before your interview, plan to arrive a day in advance to tour the community, listen to the people you encounter, and consider how you will fit there. You can learn a great deal by driving through the residential and business districts, looking at the schools, and perusing a recent real estate listing magazine. Information on the value of homes, condition of public facilities, availability of shopping, and location of parks and

schools will help you determine if you want to live in the community. You may also consider unofficially visiting the employer’s facilities. If this is not practical, at least drive by the buildings. Most important, if you have a family, this is the appropriate time to involve your spouse/significant other in the process to ensure that this is an acceptable move for all of you.

Staff tour When you’re in town for an interview, a tour with staff may be scheduled either in a group or individually. You should regard the tour as a must-attend event and a critical part of the selection process. The tour provides an opportunity for you to gather information, but be aware that the individual(s) giving the tour most likely will be providing feedback on you as well.

TIP

Asking to see the worst part of community along with the best part will give you a chance to view and hear what people believe their problems are. Adding this to the information that you’ve researched can help you get an idea of the community’s struggles as well as of its successes.

Staff or community reception Especially in the case of senior positions, a reception may be scheduled with staff, the council or board, or the community. Your spouse/significant other may or may not be included. These receptions are critical parts of the selection process, not casual social events. You need to approach them the same way you do the formal interview. Find out who will be there, research the backgrounds of the attendees, and develop a mental picture of the “personal image” you wish to project. Key words are *approachable*, *interested*, and *professional*. These events provide you with an opportunity to show the attendees that they would enjoy working with you, that you can do the job, and that you are interested in the community.

TIP

The reception will provide your hosts with an open opportunity to see how you will deal with the staff/general public. They will be asking questions about your management style, what you see in the community, and your goals. Their agenda is to find out what you are like, professionally and socially.

Also be aware that in a general public session, some people may have alternative agendas. They may not tell you that they are running for council in the next election; they may not be completely honest about their backgrounds. You need to be honest with everybody, but steering the conversation to the positives of what you have seen or what you think is key; with luck, nobody is trying to find that quote or nefarious story about you to use later.

Lastly, some of the people who meet you will have done their research about you. Knowing what they have found is key and will keep you poised and professional. Know your background.

The interview

The big day: the actual interview. There’s been a lot of preparation to get you to this point, and you should be pleased that you’ve made it to this stage. However, there are still some key preparations to make to ensure that you do your best.

Your demeanor confident, professional, personable demeanor is essential to a successful

interview. You should consider the following points for the interview itself:

- Be on time!
- Appear confident and energetic (but controlled); you’re not going to get the job if you appear to be uncertain or passive—or desperate.
- Project an image of maturity and intelligence.
- Demonstrate good body control and posture, eye contact, and a firm handshake. Practice your handshake with others ahead of time and ask for an honest assessment.
- Respond to questions directly, concisely, and articulately; answer the questions you are asked, providing examples from past experience where appropriate.
- Emphasize your successes, as the single best indicator of future performance is past success. But don’t brag, and don’t appear overconfident.
- Avoid small talk and trivia.
- Don’t try to be too humorous, but don’t give the impression that you have no sense of humor, either.
- Avoid offensive language and off-color jokes; even if they win you a laugh, they’ll probably lose you the job.
- Be cautious about expressing personal opinions on issues that might be sensitive to others.
- Avoid criticizing your current employer or others; such behavior reflects a lack of loyalty and judgment on your part.
- Don’t be uncomfortable with pauses; let the interviewers take the lead.
- Be sure to give credit where credit is due. Few managers have been successful single-handedly.
- Avoid smoking even if your interviewers do, and avoid alcoholic beverages (keep this in mind during the community reception).
- Don’t bluff or cover up.

You’re being interviewed because your performance record indicates that you have the skills and talents the employer needs, and you should be projecting this during the interview. Remember that each situation is unique, and the importance of conveying who you are as a person as well as who you would be in the job cannot be overemphasized.

Your message During the interview, your goal is to convince the interviewers that you can do the job. Whether you’re a recent graduate or a more

experienced candidate, you want to convey a message that you

- know the responsibilities of the job, are technically competent, and can do the job
- are open, honest, and self-confident
- are a self-starter and a problem solver
- can work effectively with others
- will be loyal and responsive to your employer
- will be successful if hired
- will bring value to the organization
- are interested in the community and the profession.

For senior manager/administrator positions, you also want to show that you have the ability to

- provide administrative leadership
- work effectively with the council, board, and staff
- communicate and work effectively with citizens and advisory groups
- understand and solve problems.

Finally, be yourself. Trying to anticipate what the interviewer wants and portraying yourself as something or someone who you are not can only backfire. Even if no one on the interview team senses the inconsistency now (and someone usually will), you'll eventually revert to your true self. Both you and your employer will be unhappy when they discover that they didn't get what they expected.

What questions should I ask and when? Often the initial interview does not allow much time, if any, for questions that you may have, and you'll need to save your questions for possible follow-up sessions. Asking questions shows that you're interested; it gives you an opportunity to demonstrate what you know about the job and the community; and it puts the follow-up interview on a more equal footing. You should prepare a list of questions on the basis of your preinterview research. Concentrate on the major concerns that will affect your decision to either accept or reject the job; asking too many questions may have an adverse effect on the employer's impressions of you.

Do not use this opportunity to ask how you did in the interview! Finally, don't ask about compensation until a mutual interest has been established. Long before the interview you should have determined (either with the recruiter or through your own research) that you're at least in the right "ballpark" as far as salary is concerned.

How do I conclude an interview? At the conclusion of the interview, thank the interviewers for considering you and, if you want the job, let your interviewers know that you want the job and that you're prepared to do what it takes to be successful. You may also wish the employer the very best in the event that you're not selected. Follow-up notes to interviewers are acceptable and appreciated as long as they are sent immediately.

Withdrawing from a selection process

As you proceed through a selection process, you may decide to withdraw for many different reasons. If you decide to withdraw after you have submitted application material, but before you have been invited to an interview, you may do so with a formal written communication. If you have had personal contact with an executive recruiter or an official of the other government, it is also polite to call and let that person know you are withdrawing.

If you decide to withdraw from the selection process after your candidacy has become public, you need to do so in a way that extends professional courtesy to the potential employer and maintains the confidence of your current employer. You should personally contact the mayor or governing body chair and provide a direct explanation of why you have elected to withdraw. If you're working with an executive recruiter, it is appropriate to consult the recruiter about how to communicate the withdrawal. Simultaneously, you need to inform your current employer and staff in order to maintain these relationships. In all instances, you should be prepared with a direct answer to why you have withdrawn.