Speaking for Myself

Are you appearing for an interview for an academic position?

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This March (2015), I was privileged to be part of a selection committee at a national institute. We interviewed candidates for several posts of Assistant Professor, Associate Professor and Professor. Since the institute is highly reputed, there were several applicants for each post, from all parts of India.

Working from 8 a.m. to 7 p.m. on four weekends, we studied the competences and capabilities of hundreds of candidates. When a series of candidates disappointed the 12 or more members of the committee and the two independent observers appointed by the institute to ensure fairness and justice, there was general depression in the room. When—as was usual on most days—one or two or three outstanding candidates appeared, there was joy. These young scientists were so good that they would have been grabbed by any of the major scientific institutes anywhere in the world.

The cumulative experience of all the committee members and consequent discussions at lunch breaks resulted in some ideas that might help those aspiring to appointments in our major organizations.

GENERAL POINTS

1. Before you enter the hall, make yourself conversant with the work done in the institution you hope to join and papers published in your field by its staff members. One or more visits to the institute and the department and interactions with its staff members will help you to know of current activities, research projects being carried out by them and their plans for the future. Learn all you can of the experts you are to face, their work, publications and opinions on controversial topics.
2. Be punctual.
3. Dress comfortably. Simple formal attire is adequate.
4. Relax.
5. You are facing a group of experts in your field. They are hoping to gain information on your strengths and capabilities. This information will help them decide whether you are the right candidate for the post on offer.
6. Deliver your message as effectively as possible. Gentle humour, especially when directed at yourself, helps. Cautionary note: Forced humour can be counterproductive. Flippancy, arrogance and dogmatism can hurt your cause.
7. Listen carefully to the questions posed and answer them clearly, accurately and briefly.
8. If you are invited to expand on a statement, do so comprehensively.

SLIDES TO BE PROJECTED

1. The time available for making your presentation is limited. Please make optimal use of it. It is wise to limit the number of slides projected in a minute to three or less.
2. Do NOT exceed the time allotted to you. The interviewers have to examine a number of candidates after you. Going on and on frustrates and irritates them.
3. Since you are introduced to the interviewers as soon as you enter the hall, eliminate the slide with your name, photograph, post for which you are appearing.
4. Do not thank the committee or waste your limited time on such irrelevancies. Plunge straight into the substance of your presentation.
5. Brevity is not only the soul of wit but also saves you time and helps avoid inducing a sense of boredom in your interviewers.
6. Be careful how you use text. A candidate listed his ‘unique selling points’. This glib title is appropriate when making a commercial pitch. In an academic forum it may evoke sarcasm.
7. Do not crowd your slide with text, figures or tables. We must learn from artists and advertising experts the art of making our slides easy to read, the matter impossible to forget and the exercise of viewing the entire lot of slides a pleasurable experience.
8. Do not read aloud all the matter on the slide. Your interviewers are literate. Highlight key facts on the slide or supplement the data with a few additional oral observations.
9. Provide details of your education succinctly. Date, name of institution/university, qualification for each degree is adequate.
10. Provide one-line statements of your achievements after graduation from medical college. Do not list minor awards of local importance. Do provide details on your national and international awards in brief.
11. Describe only your major contributions in your chosen field. In each instance provide a key reference to your paper or chapter describing details of this work.
12. When detailing your research projects, be brief. State the goal and what was achieved. List the grants received for each project and the sources.
13. List your short- and long-term plans should you obtain the post you seek:
   a. to advance the state of knowledge in the field;
   b. to improve the care of patients;
   c. in teaching.
14. Do not list ALL your publications. It is difficult to decipher fine print from a distance and a crowded slide puts off your interviewers. Instead select the five publications you consider outstanding and provide the references to them in the literature. Be careful to list papers where your name is used as the first author. Include papers where you are a second/third/fourth author only if these are outstanding contributions.
15. Papers published in reputed, indexed journals will always score over those in unknown journals or in journals where the author has to pay to get his work in print.
16. Padding your achievements with relatively inconsequential information earns you negative points.

THE INTERVIEW
1. Be courteous at all times.
2. Be precise in your answers. Go straight to the crux of the question and answer it decisively. Try to anticipate secondary queries and pre-empt them by providing the relevant information.

3. Ignorance is no shame. If you do not know the answer, own up at once. The questioner will appreciate your honesty and move on to the next question.
4. When your opinion or stand on a debatable issue is requested, answer it decisively and immediately follow this with the reason/s on which you have based your reply. Quote a respected authority to back your stand when possible.
5. At all times, use Indian data and expert opinion to back your statements. Resort to foreign data only when no such data are available in India.

I wish you good luck.