

10 Dos and Don'ts for Security Job Interviews

The tight job market makes the interview more high stakes than ever when applying for security positions. We asked some seasoned security recruiters for tips on how to stand out from the pack

By Joan Goodchild, Senior Editor



Peter Metzger
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The pickings are slim in the job market and the time line of interviewing and then hiring new people is slow. But there are positions available in the security field, according to three veteran security recruiters that we spoke with recently. If you're looking for a change in your career, or are simply looking to get back to work, there is simply no room for anything less than the best impression these days.

Hiring managers have plenty of candidates to choose from in the current economic climate. If you get a call that you've got a shot at a job interview, every move counts. How can you have an edge over other candidates angling for the same position? Our experts weigh in on important steps to excel when you get your chance to wow a possible new employer (See also: How to Prepare if you Score an Interview).

Before the meeting

Do make sure your resume is perfect

"I see a lot of resumes from people who are really bright, but their resume is very vanilla," said Tracy Lenzner, CEO of the LenznerGroup, an executive recruitment company in New York. "Other resumes have too much content and are too long to read."

Lenzner recommends polishing your resume before you even begin your next job search. A recruiter can assist with finding the appropriate length, as well as which accomplishments and experience to highlight. In this competitive job market, it may even be necessary to tailor your resume for each job application.

"You can't underestimate the criticalness of a resume," she said. "Without a stand out resume or a good contact to get you an interview, you really never get to square one."

Do research the company

"The more prep work you can do, the better," said Peter Metzger,

a vice chairman of CTPartners, an executive search firm in New York. "It should include not only open sources research but third party referencing. Always assume you don't have enough information going in."

Metzger recommends doing a SWOT analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) for any potential new business you may hope to become involved in as an employee. Additionally, having a firm grasp of the company and its history will probably impress your interviewer.

Don't forget to prepare

As a job applicant, you have to engage in a bit of social engineering, said Lee J. Kushner, founder and CEO of L. J. Kushner and Associates in New Jersey. "Find out what the pain points have been in an organization so you can go into an interview and show that you understand their problems. That level of preparation will make a lasting impression on other side of the desk."

Kushner says another thing to understand before heading into an interview is what the company culture is like. Will you be a good match? How do they dress? Are they a casual workplace or a button-up, tie-wearing place?

Do practice answering tough questions in advance

There are inevitable questions in every interview that people dread, said Lenzner. In a recent workshop, she asked attendees which one they hated most. Their answer: Tell me a little bit about yourself.

"It usually gets asked in the beginning of a meeting," she said. "You want to sound effective right off the bat. The interviewer already knows a little about you, but they want to get a better idea of who you are."

Those first few lines are crucial. It is like the opening of a book, said Lenzner. You will decide right then: "Do I want to read this?"

Instead of fishing in your brain during the interview, take time to proactively write it out ahead of time so you have a few lines you can use to succinctly tell some one about yourself. You want them to know: Who are you? Think: What do I want someone to know about me?

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Others tough questions to consider practicing in advance include: 'Tell me about your current role' and 'What are your weaknesses?'

At the interview

Don't emphasize your 'cops and robbers' background. Talking too much about what he termed a 'cops and robbers' background can be off-putting to a potential employer, according to Metzger.

"Often times, people who have been in armed security work, such as with the FBI, or the Marine Corp., tend to overemphasize that," he said. "But that experience is assumed. The gaining employer will assume you have those kinds of credentials. They don't care how many shooting badges you've got, that's not of importance."

Don't talk about all the armed things you've done. You want to present yourself as an executive, not a knuckle-dragger who is trying to be an executive, said Metzger.

Do show them you are an executive who understands security. As a continuation of the previous point, Metzger advises applicants to present not only as an executive, but one who understands that security is cost center. It is not a revenue generator.

"You are constantly selling your service," said Metzger. "You are going from business unit to business unit and trying to sell them why certain things need to be done. Being able to articulate that you can do that is very important."

Another pointer for striking the right tone: Listen a lot more than you talk, said Metzger.

"And there is no prize for speedy answers," he said "It's not like a quiz in third grade. You can sit and think for a moment and formulate a response."

Don't get caught up in past accomplishments

Most people don't know how to position themselves when competing for a job, said Lenzner.

"In addition to being an expert in your field, you have to be an expert in the world of your career," she said. "People in the security industry tend to try and educate the gatekeeper, the recruiter, as to how wonderful they are and they shoot themselves in the foot. But sometimes less is more."

Kushner agreed.

"People get caught up in interviews with what they have done. They fail to apply it to what they will be expected to do in their new role."

Do provide examples of how you would solve problems

Job-seekers should relate their skills to the environment they are interviewing for, according to Kushner.

"It's not just enough to say I can help solve your problems, employers want someone who already has solved the problem in their head. You might never have been a CISO at a healthcare organization, but can you reflect that you have experience solving the kinds of problems that healthcare organization is dealing with? That is what you have to do in an interview. You want the person on the other side of the desk to know you can hit the ground running."

After the interview

Don't forget to follow up

Phone calls aren't great, according to Metzger. Emails are OK. But written letters are best, he said.

"A written letter demands some kind of response," said Metzger.

Take the time to craft a thoughtful 'Thank You' note to your interviewer.

Do strike the appropriate tone in your follow up

It goes without saying the job market is tight right now. Many companies are interviewing candidates and delaying the hire until they can better afford it, said Metzger.

That said, you want to follow up and let them know you remain interested, but don't be too aggressive in your approach.

"Most people who are in security are in security because they are aggressive," said Metzger. "But you don't want to be a pressure person. You want to be appropriate in your follow up. Tell them: "I understand your decision to delay. I remain interested and will for the next six months." Make yourself sympathetic to their situation. You don't want to be abrasive on these things."