

Acing the MBA application interview

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It's nerve-wracking and full of land mines. But an MBA admissions interview can be a key element of your business school application.

The admissions interview is your chance to get up close and personal with the business schools to which you are applying. It is an opportunity for you to reveal more of your personality in a way that's simply not possible in an admissions essay. Schools interview applicants to ask follow-up questions after reading their applications, find out how they express themselves in person, and determine how well they will eventually interview for recruiters. "Sometimes, we can sense the energy and vitality of the person we're interviewing," says Julie Barefoot, associate dean of MBA admissions at the Emory University Goizueta Business School (Goizueta Full-Time MBA Profile). "If we can sense it, then recruiters will sense it, too."

Although interviews are just one part of the application process, they can give you a boost with the admissions committee. You may create a lasting dialogue with the interviewer and, as a result, become a memorable applicant, says Michael Cohan, president of MBAPrepAdvantage, an admissions consultant. Memorable applicants—at least those who are memorable for positive reasons—have a better chance of succeeding with the admissions committee. If you want to have a successful admissions interview, here's what you have to do:

Prepare yourself

One of the most obvious ways to prepare for the admissions interview is often overlooked by candidates. Many never bother to find out how the interview will be structured.

Some admissions interviews are formal, highly structured affairs only for those who have already passed a particular screening process. Usually, these kinds of interviews are conducted by trained staff members, who are seeking answers to specific questions. Other schools allow anyone who visits campus to have an interview, which might be conducted by staff, alumni, or even current students. Some Internet research, discussions with students and alumni, and a review of the materials provided to you by the school are usually enough to determine the kind of admissions interview to expect.

If you can find out the name of the person with whom you'll be interviewing ahead of time, you can Google him or her, says Cohan. "Don't stalk him," he warns. "Be appropriate and explore if you have any commonalities that you might be able to discuss."

Get ready to share your story. Reread your application before the interview, suggest most admissions experts. You shouldn't regurgitate your application in the interview because the admissions committee is looking to learn more about you than it already knows. But remembering the goals you discussed, what you thought made the school stand out, and what you expected to contribute to the campus can help you when responding to questions face-to-face. Having this information in the back of your mind will also help you make the most of your time during the admissions interview, which usually takes between 30 and 40 minutes at most.

The interview is a chance for the school to ask you follow-up questions about your work experience or what you shared in your essays. In the past year, with the economic crisis, Barefoot says, many applicants had been laid off and were embarrassed to come out and say so. One applicant was unclear about his work status on the résumé that Goizueta asks candidates to bring to their interviews, says Barefoot, who adds that he would have been more successful if he had been honest. Candidates should explain their employment history and say,

"I was laid off, so I decided to prepare for the GMAT" or "I was laid off, so I spent time volunteering for X," says Barefoot.

Tardiness is another way to make a bad impression, because most interviewers are on tight schedules. Leave early and get directions ahead of time if you're unsure of the location. Another obvious tip worth mentioning is getting rest ahead of time, says Rod Garcia, director of MBA admissions at Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Sloan School of Management (MIT Sloan Full-Time MBA Profile). If you're well rested, you will look and feel better, which will make you better apt to carry on an interesting conversation.

Dressing the part doesn't hurt either. Most admissions experts agree that interviewers would rather see applicants overdressed than underdressed. Business attire is best, which means a suit and tie for men and either a pants suit or dress for women. Being dressed appropriately will help you feel comfortable and exude a certain level of confidence. "Confidence is key to success," says Cohan. "Preparation is key to performance."

Talk the talk

Answer the questions that are being asked of you. Don't get sidetracked. Even though you might have prepared points that you'd like to get across to the interviewer, you still have to give responses that relate to the questions being asked. For instance, MIT has a highly structured interview process, and it is designed to extract particular details from applicants, such as their ability to nurture talent. If the interviewer gets through the interview, says Garcia, and you have not revealed those facts, he will be unimpressed.

The admissions interview is one of the few times in life that talking about yourself is encouraged. Most business schools want you to discuss the role you played on a team, but they want to know about you and not your teammates. MIT tells applicants to use "I" and not "we" during the admissions interview, says Garcia. And that's a good rule for anyone interviewing for admissions to a school or job for that matter.

When you are responding to questions, be specific. "You don't want to be so broad that your response has no meaning," says Cohan. For example, instead of saying, "Kellogg (Kellogg Full-Time MBA Profile) is good at soft skills, which is why I like it," you could specify what impresses you about how Kellogg teaches soft skills and which skills in particular, adds Cohan. If the interviewer asks about your experiences or skills, then use examples to illustrate and confirm whatever you are saying.

In a face-to-face interview, the interviewer will be judging you as much on your ability to communicate verbally as he will on your body language. Make eye contact, smile, and sit at an appropriate distance from the interviewer (not too close so that you're invading personal space and not so far that you have to shout to be heard), says Cohan. Avoid any distractions. Try to refrain from nervous movements, such as flicking a pen, tapping your foot, or biting your nails. Leave water bottles at home or in your bag, and silence your cell phone and any other devices you might have with you, says Barefoot.

End the admissions interview on a high note. Have questions for the interviewer ready and be sure to ask them when prompted. Skip questions that you either should know already or can easily find on your own, such as those about the application deadlines or the majors that are offered. Instead, ask about the school's culture and the experiences of the interviewer. Even if an admissions committee member is asking the questions, says Cohan, he can tell you about working at the business school and its culture, all of which can give you a better sense of what it would be like to attend the program. Sign off with a firm handshake and an offer to share

your business card (be sure to have a few on hand). Of course, suggests Cohan, ask for a business card in return.

After the interview

Many business school applicants rush home and analyze every detail of their admissions interview to determine their chances of getting into programs X and Y. Instead of worrying about already spilled milk, you should write a thank you card to your interviewer, say admissions experts. An e-mail will suffice. But Cohan reminds his clients to reference the interview in some way, rather than send a generic thank you note, so you prompt the interviewer to remember you.

Remaining calm throughout the process is a must. Keeping the interview in perspective is helpful. "The bottom line is that it's always good to make a good impression," says Jackie Zavitz, senior associate director of MBA admissions at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School (Wharton Full-Time MBA Profile). "That said, this is just one piece of data in your larger application. The interview is not make or break."

DI MEGLIO, Francesca. Acing the MBA application interview. **BusinessWeek**, New York, Oct. 12th 2009. Disponível em: <www.businessweek.com>. Acesso em: 14 out. 2009.

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