



KANIA

THE ARTHUR J. KANIA SCHOOL OF MANAGEMENT

Rise Above the Crowd in Your Public Accounting Interviews

When interviewing for full-time and internship positions at public accounting firms of all sizes, earning an offer depends on more than high academic performance, extracurricular activities, and technical proficiency from past experience. These items have been highlighted on your résumé. The final step of the campus recruiting process – the interview – is the ultimate equalizer for students of varying résumé strength to explain why they rise above the rest. Here are a few tips for emerging CPAs.

Plan in Advance

Consider your target firm and consult with classmates who have interviewed there, alumni who are current employees, and campus recruiting representatives to find out about the interview structure. Interviewees must anticipate what they will encounter. Knowing these factors in advance will allow candidates to spend the majority of their preparation time on formulating quality responses to potential interview questions and less time on logistics.

Before You Go

The internship or full-time interview often is a student's first taste of a professional environment. With that comes a natural level of nerves and intimidation. Remind yourself that others contending for the same position are in a similar state of mind. Preparation is the key to gaining confidence, and that confidence will lead to a successful interview process.

Preparation is more than reviewing your résumé numerous times and memorizing the lists of technical and behavioral questions from countless interviewing books on the market. Take time before your interview to solidify your plans for all aspects of the interview day, including your wardrobe, résumé and other relevant documents, transportation to the office, point of contact at the office, and, most importantly, what time you are expected to arrive. Candidates may need to be present from several minutes to several hours prior to the interview itself.

First Impressions

The interview starts the moment you enter the office. Your interactions with the administrative staff, human resources, and others in the firm can, and frequently will, be considered during the decision process. Your mannerisms and general appearance speak volumes before you say a word.

When entering the interview room, set the tone with a confident handshake and introduction. Most interviews begin with the age-old “tell me about yourself” question. Your elevator pitch response will guide the direction of your conversation. This pitch establishes your personal brand and how it could add value to the bottom line and culture of your prospective employer, so take seriously what you want to share about your background.

Engage in a Dialogue

During the interview, jot down important points from the discussion and make a list of items you said you would share with your interviewer after the session. Taking notes without affecting the flow of your interview shows that you are engaged and can multitask – both characteristic skills of high performers in client-facing roles.

Technical knowledge is an important component of a firm’s hiring, but personality and work ethic must also fit the mold. Keep in mind that your interviewer may be a future manager who is trying to determine if she would value you as a team member or enjoy sitting next to you on a flight for an international engagement. If your discourse in one or multiple interviews can show that you are a strong candidate as a whole person, then you stand a very good chance of rising to the top.

Do You Have Any Questions?

Always have questions prepared prior to arrival. Also, reach back into some discussion points from your current conversation and ask for clarification or elaboration of details that interest you or that you may have missed. The likelihood of having time to ask more than one or two questions is small, but it is always better to be over-prepared for this component of your interview.

Final Impressions

Before your interviewer concludes the discussion, be sure you have left a memorable impression. You may be one of numerous interviewees that day, so you want to be remembered in a positive light. After you leave the office, send thank-you e-mails to those who played a major role in your interview day. Include a shared experience or discussion point in these brief messages to serve as a reminder of which candidate you were.

The anxiety which students feel before a big interview can be curbed with the right level of preparation. Reflect on your strengths and weaknesses – both on paper and in an interview setting – and adjust to make yourself the strongest candidate you can be. By adopting these steps as a general guide for a successful interview, you will be in a great position to earn the first role in your public accounting career.ⁱ

ⁱ Michael A. Zaydon '12, CPA, is an associate in the banking and capital markets group of PricewaterhouseCoopers LLP in New York and a member of the Pennsylvania CPA Journal Editorial Board. He can be reached at michael.zaydon@gmail.com.