



A Guide to **Executive Interviewing**

What you need to know before your next executive interview.

You landed the interview. Now what? It's time to prepare, prepare, prepare.

In this guide, we'll walk you through the ins and outs of the executive interview process so you can level up your career with confidence.

INTRODUCTION

Executive interviewing is a balancing act. It's a mix of pitching yourself and authentically presenting who you are. Essentially, you sell yourself as an executive by telling your career and leadership story. At the same time, you should also be asking questions and digging deep to see if this opportunity is the right fit for you and your career. Whether you're just launching your leadership journey or if you're a seasoned executive, keep in mind interviewing is a two-way street. Confidently present what you have to offer, and carefully consider the opportunity presented to you.

"In every interaction, just be yourself. If you've landed the interview, there's something in your background, experience, something on the resume, or maybe it was something in your LinkedIn profile that the recruiter or HR contact took notice of. They want to talk to you. Just be yourself. That's the best practice to leverage in all of these situations."



Kristen Chang
Managing Director of Human Capital at LLR Partners

At the end of the day, executive interviewing is all about strategy. Crafting an interview strategy tailored to you and your experiences will help you tell a compelling narrative about your unique leadership story. That's why we teamed up with Philadelphia-based private equity fund and AboveBoard client, LLR Partners, to outline executive interviewing expectations, common mistakes, best practices, and frequently asked questions.

Let's get started.

MEET THE KEY PLAYERS IN THE PROCESS

Executive interviewing is multilayered and the process varies from organization to organization. Smaller companies may have open, flexible processes whereas larger companies may have more structured procedures involving additional interviews with various stakeholders.

It's important to know more than just who you'll be speaking with at each interview phase, but also why you're speaking with them. Understanding each stakeholder's interview assessment agenda can help you make the best impression possible. Here's a general overview of the most common individuals you'll interview with and what you can expect from those conversations.



Recruiter

The first step in the executive hiring process generally entails a phone or video conference call with a recruiter. The goal of this initial conversation is to assess your interest in the opportunity. Recruiters are “looking for an alignment of the background and skills against the position requirements,” says LLR Partners’ Kristen Chang. “Sometimes, depending on the sophistication of the company, it could also be a light screen on culture, such as whether the interests of the candidate align with the overall culture of an organization.”

Expect this first conversation to take anywhere from 30 minutes to an hour. Bear in mind that the recruiter’s overall goal is to determine if you’re the right fit to move forward in the process, “mostly based on an alignment of experience to the position description,” according to Chang.



Hiring Manager

Once you pass the initial screening step, you’ll likely meet with a hiring manager. In this second conversation, you’ll move from outlining your experience to demonstrating it. This second interview builds “off of the notes from the first,” Chang says. “This is an assessment of what you’ve done in your career, and it’s also how you’ve done it.”

Be prepared to go beyond answering basic career questions and providing summary information, something Chang refers to as “behavior-based interview questions.” These questions are designed to show how you think and handle specific scenarios. Additionally, the hiring manager may use this second interview to see if you’re a cultural fit as well.

Expect questions along the lines of:

- 1 How do you prioritize projects under pressure?
- 2 How have you handled setbacks in the work environment?
- 3 What are your compensation expectations?



Peers

The final step in the executive interviewing process may include interviewing with peers or potential future colleagues. These peer conversations are often used to assess cultural fit, skills, and abilities, among other qualities. In general, these interviews can help employers and potential peers picture how you would fit into a specific team or area of the job. Basically, it gives them an idea of what you'd be like as a colleague.

COMMON EXECUTIVE INTERVIEW MISTAKES

Throughout their years of experience in executive recruiting, LLR Partners' Kristen Chang and Melanie Blaine have seen their share of interview mishaps. Here are some of the most common interview oversights:



Lack of prep

LLR Partners' Melanie Blaine, a recruiter within the firm's human capital and talent strategy network, says it's common for executive candidates to be ill prepared for the initial interview with a recruiter. It's the most rudimentary phase of the interview process, and sometimes there's a preconceived notion that prep isn't needed. So, how exactly do you prepare for this first interview? Blaine recommends doing your homework and researching the company and the role.



Talking money too early

Another common mistake is inquiring about compensation first thing during the interview or too early in the process. "It happens quite often and gives the impression that candidates are more focused on the potential financial gain and not so much on the role, the business, or advancing their careers," Blaine said.



Not asking questions

At the end of each interview phase, you'll likely have the chance to ask any questions you may have. Having no questions at the ready is not a great sign, according to Blaine. Recruiters and interviewers may see this as a lack of interest in the position or in moving forward in the process.

BEST PRACTICES FOR EXECUTIVE INTERVIEWING

You know what not to do when it comes to executive interviewing. Now, let's outline steps you can take to boost your presentation and tell your story well.



Research, research, research

You should have at least three to four thoughtful questions to ask at the end of each conversation. Inquiring about the role, company specifics, or industry in general can demonstrate that you take the opportunity seriously and are a curious, knowledgeable candidate.

Show that you've done your research by asking questions related to:

- 1 the industry, direct competitors, or market size.
- 2 business goals in the next quarter and/or year.
- 3 upcoming marketing objectives.
- 4 hiring plans for the team and the company overall.

As you craft your questions, remember that they're an opportunity to highlight your interest in the job and showcase your expertise.



Go beyond your resume/CV

Recruiters and interviewers are good at their jobs. You've been selected for a reason. AboveBoard's Head of Client Services Tangeel Cherry recommends providing information in your interviews that's not readily available from reading your resume, CV, or LinkedIn profile. You want your executive interviews to be meaningful conversations, not just a repeat of information found elsewhere.



Be honest

Be upfront about your background and experiences. Honesty and candor can go a long way when it comes to answering challenging questions about resume gaps or lack of experience, for example. Answering truthfully is a great way to demonstrate character, integrity, and humility. Plus, it's always preferable for interviewees and/or future employers to learn something directly from you rather than uncovering it later in the process.

LOCK IN INTERVIEW LOGISTICS

Now that you know what to do and what not to do, it's time to piece it all together with general interview best practices. These simple strategies can help strengthen your presentation while also setting you apart from other executives.



Establish executive presence. Interviewing virtually has its pros and cons, one of the cons being that it can be more difficult to establish executive presence. But that doesn't mean there aren't ways you can do so. Strong eye contact and good body posture go a long way, both in-person and virtually. Don't stare off into space or have your head down on an online call. Instead, be engaged with what's happening on your screen. Many of these best practices apply to in-person interviewing as well; be engaged with the person in front of you and make good eye contact.



Remember, it's a conversation. Regarding the flow of the interview itself, try to be more conversational and have a dialogue with the interviewer. The ease of having a dialogue "will definitely show some executive presence," Chang says. It may be helpful to conduct a mock interview with a business peer. This can boost your conversational skills, help you establish executive presence, and give you an opportunity to receive feedback.



Dress appropriately. Don't guess or assume the dress code if you're unsure about what to wear to your in-person interview or virtual conference call. It is OK to ask the recruiter or human resources contact about the appropriate attire. Whatever the dress code, the key is to be comfortable, presentable, and professional.



Be mindful and timely. LLR Partners' Blaine recommends "being cognizant of how much time you're talking." If an interview is scheduled for an hour, it's not practical to take 15 to 20 minutes to answer each question. At the same time, don't plan on short "yes" or "no" responses either. Instead, be conversational and offer open-ended responses that showcase your leadership as an aspiring or current executive.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS



When's the best time to follow up after an interview?

If it's been a while and you haven't heard back after your interview, don't panic. There are a number of reasons why companies may not be in contact (most of which have nothing to do with you). LLR Partners' Chang and AboveBoard's Cherry recommend giving your company contacts time before checking in, at least 10 days after the interview. And if you still don't hear back after following up, don't be afraid to check in again.

As a general guideline, it's a good idea to ask about the overall timeline to fill the position following your first interview. That way, if there's a lull in the process and you haven't heard back from the company in a while, you can point back to the initial date they offered as a frame of reference.



How do I assess company culture?

Nothing is as informative as an in-person interview or visit. Going to the office and seeing people actually in the work environment can go a long way, assuming you're able to do so, Blaine said. And if you're not, there are still steps you can take to get an idea of what a company's culture is like. For example, Chang recommends asking every interviewer how they would describe the company's culture.

"See if you get five different answers or five same answers," Chang said. "By asking the question to each person you're interacting with, you should start to form a pretty good picture of what it is."



What do I do if I have a call with a recruiter and have no details about the role?

Sometimes executive recruiters reach out, request an interview, and provide little to no detail about the role or company until the time of the actual phone call. So, how do you best prepare for these initial conversations? LLR Partners' Chang recommends treating these phone calls as exploratory conversations. Approach it as a 15 to 20 minute phone call, and consider it your opportunity to learn about the position and company. "You're learning about the opportunity and deciding if this is something you want to schedule additional time to discuss," according to Chang.



How do I address gaps in my employment?

If you have gaps on your resume or CV, you're not alone. Gaps in employment are more commonplace now, especially in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. The best way to approach career gaps is to be honest. Whether your resume gap is related to health, family, or an unexpected change in circumstances, be honest and confident in your explanation. Chang recommends using questions about employment gaps as an opportunity to tell about how you made the most of the time.

"Now more than ever, especially with the Great Resignation still going on, companies are more and more flexible with their employees," Chang said. "Having these gaps, or flexibility around family or other personal situations, is okay. I think you have to own it and know that's a part of your story and it's okay."

Whatever your story is, it's crucial to have it ready before the interview. If you need to, practice succinctly explaining your resume gap and what you accomplished during that time.



How do I navigate interviews as a founder or business owner?

For some self-employed individuals, business owners, or founders, the next step in their career may be jumping back into the corporate world. If that's you, be sure to treat your previous venture(s) as an employment experience. Hiring companies will be interested to understand your goals, motivations, and accomplishments. Be prepared to discuss your successes, lessons learned, and why you want to take on a corporate job at this time. Again, the importance of honesty and transparency cannot be overstated.



How do I make a good impression as an executive from a failed or declining company?

Companies decline, or even fail, for a multitude of reasons. If you're an executive seeking to take the next step in your career following a company breakdown, know that there is a path forward for you. Your accomplishments are not negated even if the overall company is negatively impacted.

At your next executive interview, it's crucial to lead with what you were hired to do at the company. Outline your goals, objectives, and how you met them. LLR Partners' Chang recommends saying something along the lines of: "This is what I was hired to do. This is what I was able to accomplish, even though the outcome of the situation wasn't what anybody wanted." This can help you highlight your accomplishments and contributions while maintaining a positive outlook.



We hope this guide provided some valuable guidance as you navigate executive interviewing.

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