

How Much Research Should You Complete on Target Employers?

RIGHT VIEWPOINT™

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Picture this: you have successfully networked into your number-one target organization: after many emails and a serious round of telephone tag you have finally received confirmation on a date and time for an informational meeting with the head of the group you'd like to join. The time has come, and you are settled into the visitor chair in the group executive's office. After the initial pleasantries, she squares her shoulders, looks you directly in the eyes and asks you, "What do you know about our company?"

What do you say? How do you begin? How much detail do you include? Do you mention the problem they had with their most recent new product introduction? Do you allude to the favorable analyst's report that was in the Wall Street Journal? Do you discuss what their competitors are doing? Do you refer to the speech the company CEO recently delivered at the latest industry conference in which he discussed an overview of the company's new strategic direction for emerging markets?

If you have not given a lot of thought to your response to this question, you may not have conducted sufficient research on the company. At the very least, you may become a bit flustered or anxious. At worst, you may appear not to have pertinent knowledge or a keen level of interest in the company to be considered a viable candidate.

There is a solution: do your homework. In other words, prepare, prepare, prepare. It is almost impossible to do too much company research. Here is a sampling of the multiple resources available to you:

- Current and former employees of the company
- Each company's individual website
- Recruiters
- Public filings
- Annual reports
- Executive profiles
- News releases and media coverage
- Industry analyst reports
- Annual reports
- Current and former employees of competitive firms
- Customers, vendors and suppliers
- Social networking sites such as LinkedIn

Candidates are reporting to us that virtually every interviewer is asking them some version of the question, "What do you know about our company?" It may be worded somewhat differently, but the intent is the same. Interviewers are trying to determine if candidates have a sincere interest in the company, if they are willing to put forth serious effort to complete their "due diligence", and if they have the business savvy to recognize priority issues that the company has publicly articulated.

Individuals who arm themselves with company knowledge, both figuratively and literally, are likely to make a better first impression and can provide more conversational "hooks" on which the interviewer can hang questions and comments, leading to a more engaging meeting for both parties. A recently landed marketing

candidate, who made a significant shift from one industry sector to another, compiled folders with pertinent information on each of her target companies. Each folder included a cover sheet with this basic information:

- Company mission/strategy statement
- Annual sales
- Number of employees
- Number of locations/countries
- Comprehensive list of products/services marketed
- Primary brands
- Major competitors
- Brief company history
- Acquisitions/divestitures
- Profiles of key executives
- Recent major news events

This candidate brought the appropriate completed folder with her to each interview and mentioned that she had done some research, highlighting a fact or two that was pertinent to the position under discussion. She found that interviewers were impressed with her knowledge: one even commented that she knew more about the company than some “insiders”. When she returned for her call-back interviews, one manager referred to the blue folder she had with her initially and said she had made quite an impression on his colleague with her grasp of the current state of the business. The story had a happy ending: she got the position she was hoping for and was well prepared for a successful on-boarding.

Now picture this: You are about 30 minutes into a scheduled one-hour interview for a senior IT project manager role at your number one target company, and you and the hiring manager are engaged in a lively discussion of how the industry has changed over the past ten years, in ways that are evolving almost day by day. You have your company research folder with you, including some press releases from competitive firms announcing their new technology approaches. You point to some information from a particular competitive company website that could be relevant to a situation faced by your target company. The manager asks how you might approach the challenge of enhancing their global technology resources, and you are able to answer with some history of what his company has done and some thoughts about lessons learned from the competitor’s approach. You suggest some modified approaches to align with the strategy discussed in the CIO’s recent article in an industry publication. The interview continues, more as a conversation than an interview, and you leave feeling that you and the manager truly connected and completed much more than a review of your resume.

So, how much research should you complete on your target employers? Easy: complete enough research to be prepared to answer topical questions, to be up to date on the important challenges a company is facing, to be conversant in the state of the industry, to be able to discuss the company strategy and sincerely demonstrate to the interviewer that you are already committed to helping the company succeed. If you can do all this, you are on the way to creating a win-win situation, and that is the best picture of all.