Cracking Job Interviews

Lessons learned from interviews with IBM, Google, Microsoft, Amazon, Airbus, Mercedes, and many more. Why people fail and how to succeed. Practical tips and a proven framework

ABM Junaed

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About ABM Junaed

Junaed is a passionate professional and the author of the "Cracking Job Interviews" book. He holds a Master's Degree in Informatics from TU Munich, one of the best universities for computer science. During and after his academic journey, he started working as a software engineer in several countries and companies, including Airbus, IBM, and others.

As an ever-evolving individual who likes to expand his knowledge and field of action, Junaed never ceases to pursue new learning opportunities. Driven by this mindset, he has acquired multiple certifications in Kubernetes, IBM cloud, AWS, and Spring framework - a popular Java framework.

During his career, he has learned valuable lessons that he wishes to share with others, whether they have just started their career or need to advance it. That is why he is always on the hunt for ways to spread his knowledge on career growth and mistakes, software engineering best practices, and more subjects.

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Chapter 1. Introduction

1.1. My Story

The year 2013. Microsoft invited me to a job interview for an intern software engineer. At that time, I was regularly participating in many programming contests, solved a lot of algorithm and data structure problems, so I was very confident to get that position.

I was expecting some coding challenges and crack the interview by solving those challenges. Surprisingly, there was no coding challenge in the beginning, rather various HR, behavioral and technical questions I faced. I felt impatient in my mind, but didn't expose that. Finally, there was a logical problem and I nailed that.

After the interview, I was certain that I will not get that position and got a rejection email as expected. The failure didn't stop there, it continued.

I failed job interviews many times, even if I had all the necessary skills! That made me frustrated, as I didn't know the reason of my failure! I emailed the interviewers to know the reason, but you know, every time you ask them and they give a templated reply with some bla bla...

I was not able to work on the projects, technologies I wanted to work on!

But I didn't stop there, I started analyzing my failures, I started playing the interviews in my head and remembered what I said. I put myself in the position of the interviewer.

I felt that there were better ways to answer during the interviews.

I talked with experienced friends, started reading articles, reading books on various soft skills, started thinking myself what answer I would have expected if I were the interviewer?

As a result, I created my own framework, my own tips, guidelines to do better at the job interviews. Then I never looked back, I cracked through almost all the job interviews afterwards including some big names, IBM, Mercedes Benz, AWS...

Moral of my story:

- You will only fail if you don't take any step
- "Failure is the pillar of success", this is not just a saying, it is true.
- Analyze your failure, talk with other people and improve yourself
- Your attitude matters a lot

Have fun and find the new you after reading this book!

1.2. Components of doing well in a Job Interview

Doing well in a job interview is not one thing.

It is a combination of various things. E.g., doing well in:

- HR screening interview
- Technical/core skill-related interviews
- Behavioral interviews
- Salary negotiation in the right way
- Proving soft skills
- Asking good questions
- Identifying what is important and demonstrating that you have those
- Presenting yourself in the right way

There are other factors as well, e.g., applying at the right time, luck,

and so on. But the above list is the most important in my view.

You don't have to have everything from the above list, but the more you have, the better.

Moreover, something is important for an established company but may not be important for a startup. Something is important for the 1st hire but not for the 10th hire; the priority of skills is different. E.g., if I have a startup, I will hire someone who can get the work done as soon as possible. If I have an established company with various employees, I will hire someone who can work with the existing team and follow the company's values, industry standards, etc.

Read the chapter What do interviewers look for while hiring? to know which skills you should demonstrate during the interview.

Chapter 2. What do interviewers look for while hiring?

Every candidate should know which qualities are essential for the job they are applying. This will help to take better preparation and do much better in the interview.

Misconception I had

I thought that the interviewer will ask me questions and I will get the job by answering correctly to those questions. I was wrong!

Correct approach

You should know which qualities and skill-set are essential for the job.

Then throughout the interview process, show that you have those qualities by telling your previous experiences.

As you progress through this book, you will learn various techniques from me.

Let's look at some qualities you should show during an interview. Some qualities are expected in general, some qualities are expected from mid or senior-level candidates, and some other qualities are expected from the freshers.

2.1. Everyone should have these qualities

There are some general qualities which both freshers and experienced candidates should have. Let's look at those qualities.

2.1.1. Technical or core skill set for this job

Suppose you are being interviewed for a marketing position. In that case, the interviewer will try to understand whether you have the skills needed for this marketing job and to what extent you have those skills. In the section Core skills of the chapter Preparation, I have shown how to find out the required core skills from a job description.

2.1.2. Soft skills

The interviewer also tries to understand your soft skills, for example, leadership, communication, and teamwork skills. These are the most important soft skills, but the position you are applying for might need other soft skills.

E.g., leadership is expected in more senior-level candidates. But skills like communication and teamwork are expected from both freshers and experienced candidates.

In the section Soft skills of the chapter Preparation, I have shown how to find out the required core skills from a job description.

2.1.3. Cultural fit

First, what is cultural fit? Let's see some examples.

Suppose the job you have applied for requires working with minimal supervision, and you have to make a lot of decisions by yourself. If your working style requires a lot of input from your manager, then you are not a good cultural fit for this job.

Another example is a customer-facing job, where you must be very friendly, show empathy, and care for customers. So, if you don't have these qualities, you are not a good cultural fit for this position.

2.1.4. Motivation

If you fail to show correct motivation, then there is a high chance that you won't get the job, doesn't matter how talented you are! In the chapter Show Correct Motivation, I have discussed why motivation is so important from the employer's perspective and how you can show the right motivation.

2.1.5. Confidence

Once, an interviewer asked me,

"Mr. Junaed, are you confident to do this job?"

I said, *"Yes."*

But **I was not looking into his eyes**, and my **voice didn't sound** `confident` enough. Guess what?

I didn't get the job!

So, please don't make the same mistake I did! **Show confidence in your voice, body language, and face.**

If you are not confident, you will take much time to do some tasks; you will always take a lot of time to make decisions, thus increasing the turnaround time. So, it is important to be confident. Confidence also helps to take calculated risks when necessary; as you know, failure is also a part of success.

2.1.6. Depth of knowledge

It means how much you know about a particular topic. If you're being interviewed for a sales position, then they would try to understand how much depth of knowledge you have about sales. If you're being interviewed for a software engineering position, then they would try to understand how much depth of knowledge you have about software engineering.

Okay, if you are a fresher, then this deep knowledge is not necessary.

But how can you show that you have deep knowledge of your core topic? For example, you can show any of the following points:

- You have done certification

- You have worked a lot in that area

- You solved some critical problems in your past/current job

- You have generated a lot of revenue with your work

2.1.7. Breadth of knowledge

You don't need to be an expert in everything, and no one can be an expert in everything.

But broaden your horizon; it is important to have a general understanding of various topics.

E.g., if you are a Java Developer, then also try to understand:

- How CI/CD works

- How your business unit works

- How your Scrum master or product owner thinks/works

- Which tools are used for running the server, and how the Operations team generally work

- Which software is used for vulnerability detection and finding security threats

- How features are prioritized for the customer

- How marketing and sales team work

Because these will help you:

- to work collaboratively with other members of the team/company

- to understand the pain point of other members of the company

- And you will also get more chances to lead the team.

2.1.8. Quick learner

Are you a quick learner? When you join a company, there are many things to learn.

Technology changes, working style changes, new tools come in, and you must adapt yourself. You have to learn new things, so the interviewer also tries to understand whether you are a quick learner or not.

2.1.9. Problem-solving ability

It has two aspects:

1. What is your thought process?

The interviewer tries to understand your thought process:

- How do you logically find the root cause of a problem?

- How do you logically solve a problem?

- Can you find different solutions and figure out the pros and cons?

- Can you choose the right solution based on the current situation?

> 💡 Think out loud During the interview to show your thought process

Thinking out loud

Many people think silently, which is wrong; because the interviewer can't see your thought process unless you talk out loud.

> When the interviewer gives me a problem, I think out loud. I tell the problem loudly; then I tell loudly what I am thinking to find a solution. This approach helps the interviewer to see my thought process.

Example 1. Example of thinking out loud

> Suppose the interviewer gave me a problem to solve. Then I say,
>
> "Let me tell the problem in my own words so we can see whether we are on the same page or not. The problem is [*I rephrase the problem in my own words*].
>
> Now let me think. To solve this problem, I can do [I tell what can be done to reach the solution]. This solution has the benefits [I tell some benefits of this solution], and cons [I tell some cons of this solution]. Or, I can do [I tell another solution approach if necessary].
>
> Based on our context, solution one will be a better choice."

Since I explain the logic step by step, the interviewer can easily understand my thought process.

2. Mentality, or attitude to solve any problem which comes to your path

You can face problems with customers, with colleagues, with the company, with the product, and in many different dimensions. Do you have the ability to solve those problems?

Are you calm and relaxed when faced with obstacles? Do you have the motivation to take on challenges?

> *I show my motivation by saying that,*
>
> "I like to take on challenges and solve problems

which come on my path."

When I answer a question, I keep these in mind:

- Instead of just answering, I show motivation and confidence in my face and voice

- Instead of saying simply yes/no, I talk more about the topic to show my depth and breadth of knowledge on that topic

2.2. Freshers and Junior candidates should show these qualities

Dear Freshers and Junior candidates, you should show the following qualities:

2.2.1. Having the basic knowledge

Since you are coming as a fresh graduate and have little or no working experience, you don't have a deep knowledge of what is being used in the industry, right?

But you should have basic knowledge of what you will be working on.

If you want to work in sales, you should know the basics of sales. Similarly, you should know the basics of Java programming language if you are being interviewed for a Java software engineering position.

2.2.2. Quick learner

Since you are new in the industry, now you must learn a lot of new stuff. The faster you can learn, the more productive you will be.

Example 2. I say something following to show that I am a quick learner and enjoy learning:

> "I know things change very fast, I am a quick learner, and I enjoy learning new stuff."

2.2.3. Good cultural fit

I have already discussed it here.

2.2.4. Trainable

Are you trainable? Since you haven't worked much before, you have to undergo a lot of training. They will teach you a lot of things. Remember, some people are not trainable, which means they don't want to learn new things or they learn very slowly. So, if you are the one who wants to learn and can learn quickly, you are already a good candidate.

2.2.5. Communicate properly

Can you communicate properly? Since you are a new hire, you have to learn many things. You have to ask a lot of questions. You have to communicate with a lot of people. So communication skill is very important.

2.2.6. Motivated

I have written a chapter Show Correct Motivation, regarding why correct motivation is important and how you can show your motivation during an interview.

2.2.7. Confident

I have already discussed it before.

2.2.8. Basic problem-solving skills

I have already discussed it before.

2.2.9. Good working styles: e.g., flexible, organized

Are you flexible? Are you organized? Since you are a new hire, it's better to show that you're flexible, your working time is flexible, the task they will give you, you are flexible to do those stuff. It is also important to organize your work and manage time.

2.3. What do interviewers look for in Mid/Senior candidates?

Senior candidate

A senior/experienced candidate is the 'Engine' of the team.

Without the engine, the car can't move forward; similarly, the team can't move forward without a senior or experienced person.

If you think of yourself as a senior candidate, then think about these questions:

- Do you have the qualities to be the 'Engine'?

  You have to show that you have the capabilities to move the team forward, to move the company forward, and to move the product forward.

- Can your employer depend on you?

  Your employer wants to give you the responsibility of the project and expects that you will deliver it on time.

Mid-level candidate

A mid-level candidate is the future 'Senior' candidate and more than a fresher.

If you think of yourself as a senior candidate, then think about these questions:

- Are you capable of being the 'future engine' of the team?

  You have to show that you have a handful of experience. You are no more a fresher, you know a lot of stuff, and you have the hunger to be the next senior employee of this company.

Both senior and mid-level candidates should show the following traits to be successful in the interview:

2.3.1. Leadership

Give examples from your experience when you led a team to solve a problem or succeed on a project.

You don't need to have the experience to lead the whole team.

For example, suppose you lead while implementing some features or took the initiative to solve a customer problem. In that case, that's also leadership, and you can tell that example in the interview.

2.3.2. Work independently

Can you work with minimal supervision?

When you are a senior or mid-level employee, you must figure out many things without your manager or employer's supervision. You have to figure out the correct solution on your own.

2.3.3. Understand the business

Do you understand how the business works, what the customer wants, and how the company generates money?

A big difference between a senior person and a not-so-senior person is that senior members understand the business needs. They know how the business generates money. As a result, they can choose the correct solution. Some solutions could be very fancy, which is very interesting for you. Still, those may not be very good for the company. For example, your company is using a software, and there is something new in the market. The junior employee tends to jump on the new thing; on the other hand, the senior employee takes a step back and asks, "How will the new software solve our customers' problems in a better way?".

Only then will you understand if you need to switch to the new technology and the benefits it will bring to the business.

If removing the old tech will take a lot of time, but the benefit will be minimal, "senior" people will stay with the "old" technology. They will also think about the long run. If the "old" tech makes them fall behind the business, they will propose a roadmap to slowly and gradually retire the old tech and replace it with the new tech.

But, the junior person often says that switching to the new tech will be very easy! But after a couple of days, they find out that a lot of knowledge is missing, new tech has its bugs, and that causes a lot of disruption to the business. And they have to deal with unhappy customers, angry bosses, etc.

Senior people can sense these things early on, so they don't 'jump in' to the new tech; they evaluate and make a roadmap.

Tips: During the interview, I tell the interviewer about different situations where I did choose 'tech A' instead of 'tech B' because it was better for the business in the long run.

2.3.4. Working style: Organized, proactive

Proactive: When you see any problem, you will immediately bring that up,

Example 3. Examples of being proactive

> "Hey, we are having this problem. We are falling behind the market and have to catch up."
>
> Or, "I made a mistake; let's inform the team so we can take quick action to minimize the damage."
>
> Or, "With our current architecture, our software will not work during the next marketing campaign; let's discuss with the team to solve this."

That means you proactively give suggestions, bring up new ideas, find the problems, try to solve those problems, and so on.

Organized: A senior person should know how to handle work pressure, prioritize tasks, organize, and avoid being in a messy state!

In the end, you don't have to have all the qualities from this list.

But the more you have, the better chance you have.

Tips:

When you go to the interview for a mid or senior-level position, try to show that you have these capabilities.

Prepare some examples from your past experiences. **Examples will help your interviewer to understand your ability.**

Keep the following points in mind:

- Have you shown some leadership qualities in your current or previous job?

- Have you demonstrated problem-solving ability in your current or last position?

- Or did you suggest removing some roadblocks to the business?

- Think about your skills and qualities and prepare examples so the interviewer can easily understand you.

- Show that you understand the business.

2.4. Situation based expectations

Startups vs. Large corporate

Startups usually want someone who can do various types of work. Sometimes you have to do something outside of your core responsibilities. They might also want you to stay late from time to time in the office.

On the other hand, large corporations usually have a set of responsibilities. So, if you are a person who wants very structured work responsibilities or are not willing to be flexible, then you might find it hard to get a job in a startup, but it might be a good fit for a large corporate.

1st hire vs. 1000th hire

For the 1st hire, the company needs someone who has done similar work before and can quickly finish the tasks, because the highest priority is to enter the market as fast as possible. But, when a company hires the 1000th employer, that means the company is already established. Now the company needs someone who can learn fast, can work together with others, and fit into the team.

Short-term project/freelancer vs. long-running project

In the long-term project, things change. So I will need someone who can adapt to changes. But I will need someone with all the skills to finish the project very fast for short-term projects.

Summary

- Know the important qualities based on your expertise and take preparation accordingly

Chapter 3. Hiring Process

A typical hiring process looks like this:

- The company needs a new employee. There could be several reasons for that:
    - Someone is leaving the team
    - The team is growing
    - There will be a new team
- The company announces the vacancy
- Candidates apply
- HR scans the CV using software
- HR takes screening interviews of the candidates
- HR creates a short list
- HR forwards the CVs of the short list to the hiring manager/team lead to verify if the profile really matches
- Interview is arranged with those short-listed candidates
- Hiring committee members discuss whom to hire
- An offer is made to the candidate
- After a successful negotiation, hiring is done

Sometimes, you will see that the hiring is stopped in the middle because the company has decided to stop hiring. I have seen a couple of times that the hiring is stopped after taking a couple of interviews. Once I saw that a new colleague was hired for our team, he came to the office and met the team. Unfortunately, then the company decided to stop hiring, and he was fired! Very unfortunate!

Sometimes, there is no specific decision on hiring. Still, the HR department post jobs and take screening interviews or collects CVs to have some candidates in the pipeline in case there is a hiring decision; only big companies do these things, as per my knowledge.

There are also external head hunters. They scan through the job boards and contact the company's HR department. They offer the company that they will find a suitable candidate for the position. They will take a percentage, e.g., 20% of the first year's salary of the candidate if a candidate is hired. The external head hunter signs a contract with the company, starts searching for good matches on LinkedIn and other platforms, and sends them cold messages. A lot of good candidates are not actively applying for jobs; these head hunters directly contact with talents and encourage them to apply for that job; indeed, if you apply and get the job, then he will get a commission. I get a lot of messages from headhunters on LinkedIn and Xing.

By the way, discussing the hiring process is not the purpose of this book, but if you know the process, it will help you see the bigger picture and prepare better.

Chapter 4. Junaed's Framework to Ace Almost Any Job Interview

Junaed's Framework is a step-by-step guide that will help you Ace any job interview. It's simple, it's proven, and it works!

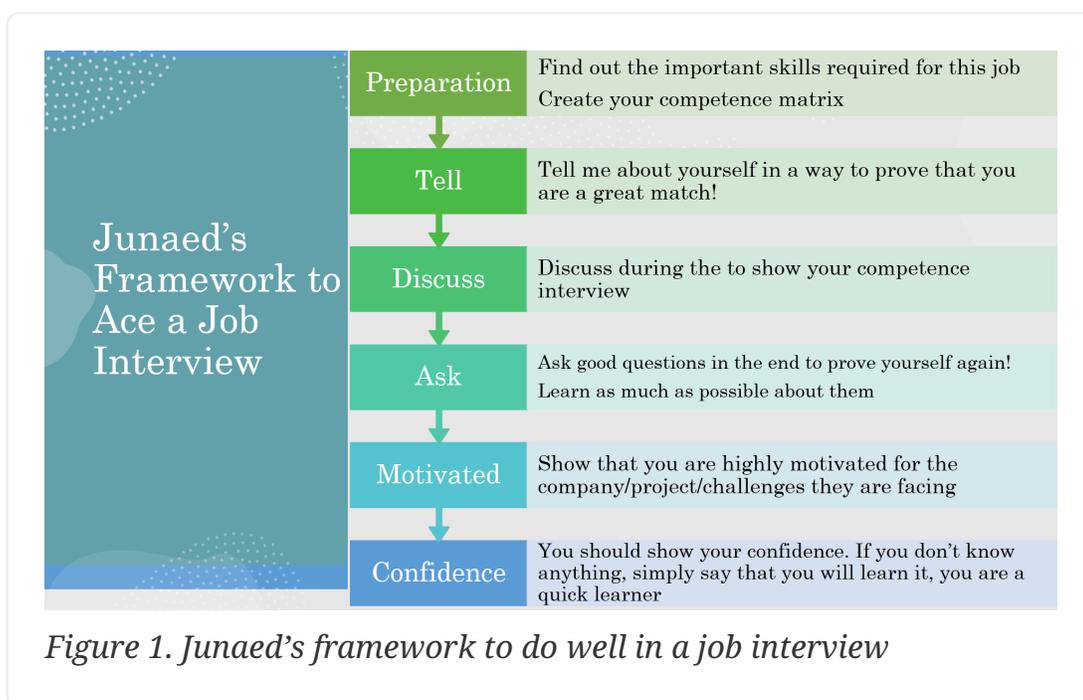Here's how it works:

My Framework has five ingredients.

Figure 1. Junaed's framework to do well in a job interview

In the following chapters, you will find the details of my framework, so keep reading!

Chapter 5. Preparation

A job description can list many skills, but not all are important for the position, so it is important to find out what skills are necessary for the job. Finding out which skills are most important will help you to prepare well.

5.1. Experience matrix

Create your experience matrix, it will help you to prepare for the job interview.

Exercise: Experience Matrix

| Project name	Your role	What you did/implem ented	What you improved	Technical/core skills you acquired	Mistakes you made, and your learnings	Soft skills you acquired	Domain name

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Figure 2. Experience matrix

5.2. Sort out important skills in 3 dimensions

First, sort out the required skills into three different dimensions from the job description, these are:

1. Core skills

2. Soft skills

3. Domain knowledge

Figure 3. Sort out skills in 3 dimensions
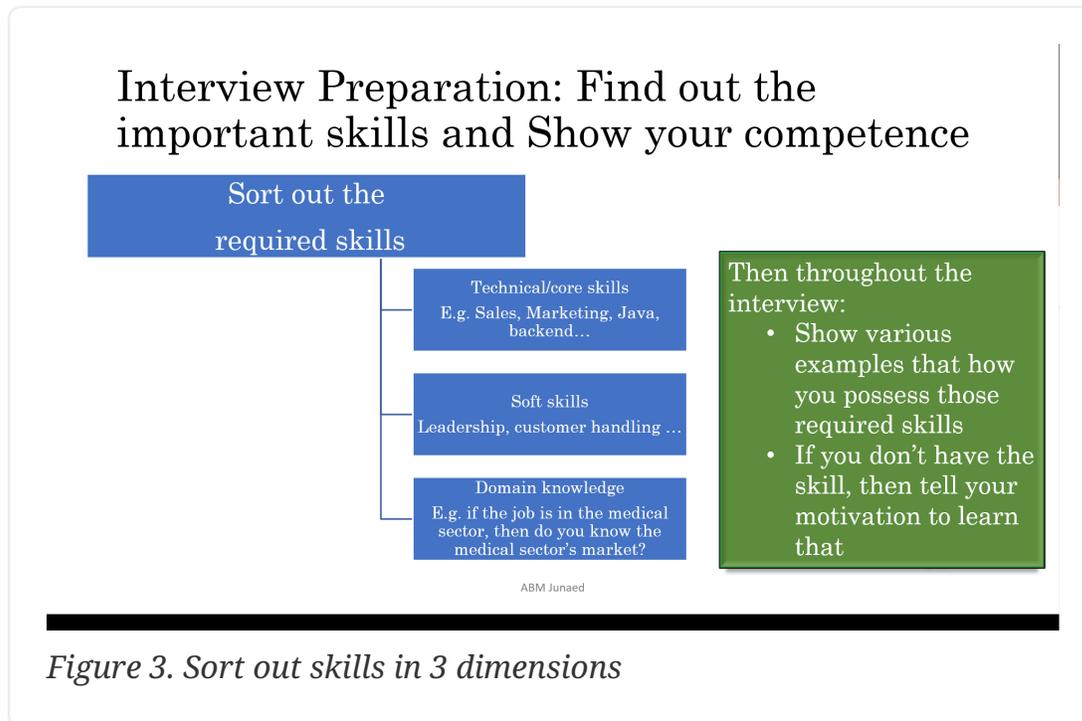
Let's see details with examples in the following sections.

5.2.1. Core skills

Core skills are the skills that are central to the position you are applying for. For example, if you apply for a software engineering position, then the core skills are coding, knowing a programming language, database skills, and so on.

Let's take an example. Below is a screenshot from a job description; it is mainly for a cloud software engineering position, but don't worry if you are not a software engineer. The main idea is to show how you can sort out the required skills.