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How to impress at your partnership interview

By **Jack Downton**

You've just been invited to present for partnership. A partner - it's what all your years of hard work have been gearing towards. There is one key obstacle that is exercising your attention ... the presentation. However, this is a great opportunity to present yourself at your best. To achieve this, it helps to think of your selection panel as a client and it is down to you to influence them. In terms of gauging your approach, treat presenting as a conversation with the board, even though the dialogue is of course one-way: talk to them and not at them.

Technical Skill

Your skill as an accountant is self-evident if you are in the frame for partnership; being a good accountant is not enough. You need to show the committee that you constantly make efforts to increase your knowledge and that you keep up-to-date with the latest developments. If you have developed or contributed to innovative products, then explore these. Consider the extent to which those in your firm, as well as your clients, look to you as a source of expertise. Have you had any articles or books published? If so, this sets you apart as a leading authority on your subject and is attractive in any partnership.

Leadership and Team Skills

In your presentation, you'll need to display your individual qualities. To become a partner in a firm, consider what you will be able to contribute *as a partner*. There are thousands of good accountants. What you need to do is set yourself apart. Highlight times when you exhibited superior leadership skills and be ready to give examples of projects you have led and how you motivated your team to overcome obstacles. Consider how you position yourself within your firm and remember it's important to demonstrate that you are able to interact not only with your peers, but also with more junior accountants, interns and secretaries, and that you can delegate tasks and responsibilities effectively. Demonstrate how you work within a team. Remember that they are looking for people that can not only lead but also be good team members.

Business Development Skill

You'll need to highlight how you've developed your business, not just your technical skills. How extensive are your networks and what opportunities do you take to maintain and expand them? What do you do to keep your clients? Also judge the sort of client

feedback you receive and the amount of contact you have with them. How successful are you at cross-selling to existing clients and do you seek and get referrals? If so, give examples of how they have led to new business. Also reflect on any marketing and sales initiatives within your firm, your role in these and your contribution to their success. In preparing for your presentation, you also need to think about your firm's strategy and resources in respect of profitability drivers, differentiation, and support on cross-selling. You should also emphasize the occasions when you delivered conference speeches and client seminars and the extent to which you engaged your audience and the feedback you received.

Professional Characteristics

As well as skills in accountancy and leadership, it is important to remember that your personal skills are an important factor in judging your suitability for partnership. In preparing how you will highlight such characteristics, examine how well known you are outside your immediate group, how committed you are to the firm and how this is shown in your working life. A member of the team for example that moved offices in the company shake-up shows flexibility. Be ready also to highlight any language skills, both in English and any other languages you may have. Think of times of crisis and give examples when you have had to respond to pressure, the extent to which you put the firm and your clients first and how commercially attuned you are to your solutions. Examine the firm's values, and assess what they mean to you and how you adhere to these values in your work.

Preparation

In preparing for your presentation, rehearse out loud what you will say and be ready to give clear and coherent answers to any question you anticipate might be asked. Keep your answers short especially if you are on uncertain ground and beware of any tendency to ramble. However, do not learn your speech or answers to questions by heart as it will sound much better if delivered in a spontaneous manner on the day.

Before resorting automatically to power point, ask yourself whether it is to help you or the board and how much it takes the attention off you. The key to this sort of presentation is portraying yourself in the best possible light and therefore it is advisable that you avoid the use of visual aids as they take the focus off you. You must be the focus of your presentation – not the screen. Instead, develop speaking notes to be used for rehearsal and possibly for your presentation. Also prepare intelligent questions to ask the panel. It shows that you have an understanding of your organisation, and a real interest and curiosity to build on that knowledge. And finally, practice in front of your friends and family to get your tone right – professional, yet engaging, showing poise, conviction and confidence.

With the right approach, plenty of practice and following these few tips, success will hopefully be on the horizon. So good luck!

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