

## How to Talk about Other Interviews in Your Interviews

By [Harrison Barnes](#)

One of the questions I receive quite often from people I work with is whether or not they should talk about other interviews while they are interviewing with a potential employer. Let me emphasize one thing: This is one of the more important questions you will ever be asked in an interview. Regardless of your qualifications, how you respond to this question will have a direct bearing on whether or not you receive an offer from the employer. Be very careful how you answer it.

At the outset, it's important to point out you don't have to answer this question. This question won't be asked very often. Indeed, it's my opinion that this question is inappropriate. In no instance should you even [volunteer](#) this information unless you are asked. The problem is that if you are asked this question, you will look bad if you refuse to answer it. Not answering the question gives the employer the impression you will similarly "hide the ball" when working for them. It also doesn't do much to assist you in establishing a bond of trust, empathy, and understanding with the potential new employer. Therefore, it's my opinion that his question must be answered if asked. There are two important rules you must keep in mind when answering this question.

First, you need to understand most employers are unlikely to give you offers unless they think you are their first choice employer. There are certainly exceptions when employers make offers to people who they don't think are their first choice employers. As a general rule, though, if an employer believes you are their first choice, you will be better off. Because I'm a [legal recruiter](#), I see instances all the time when attorneys go to work for [law firms](#) that initially weren't their first choice. Many firms are very good at recruiting and can convince most people to join their firm when they extend offers—even in the face of competing offers. Nevertheless, for the most part, an employer wants to believe you are their first choice and the majority of the time this will have a direct bearing on whether an offer is extended.

Second, how you justify why you are interviewing with the other employers will also have a direct bearing on whether or not the employer makes you an offer. In addition to knowing you're their first choice, employers also want to know you are likely to remain with them after joining. They also want to know why they are the best fit among potentially competing offers. Furthermore, the employer wants assurances that he is not making a mistake on you. How you justify where else you are interviewing will have a direct impact on your potential success in terms of getting an offer.

### **1. Before You Ever Tell An Employer Who Else You Are Interviewing With, The Employer Must Believe They Are Your First Choice**

I have a quick story from personal experience that's related to [law firm interviewing](#)—albeit, indirectly. I formerly worked for the admissions office of a major American university in Los Angeles. In this position, I was largely responsible for ensuring that applicants to the University were interviewed by different alumni. While I'm not the one making the ultimate decisions as to whom the school admits, I did put together reports on everyone I spoke with and expressed my enthusiasm (or lack thereof) for each applicant. I would have a hard time believing my reviews didn't carry at least some weight in the admissions process. A couple of years ago, I probably interviewed 50 students for the school that year. This school is generally ranked a "Top 10" American college. However, in some years it is slightly lower.

As is typical of most interviews, I spoke with high school students about their dreams and aspirations for college and asked them why they were interested in attending the University. Because I also attended the school, I have a decent understanding of the sorts of students that are likely to be happy and fit in well there. In my experience, the sorts of students I believe would be a good fit for the school are also the same sorts of students who are the most enthusiastic and have the most compelling reasons for wanting to attend.

One challenge of these interviews was trying to decide who amongst a great number of highly qualified individuals really wants to go to the school. If someone isn't qualified, my job was easy. Because the University is a highly ranked school, the majority of students I spoke with were inevitably applying to schools like Princeton, Yale and other similarly situated schools. Accordingly, one of the first questions on my mind was this: Why my school and not another highly ranked one?

This situation is compounded by an obvious fact: While I certainly believed the school I was interviewing for was the top university in the United States (and could argue convincingly about this all day), most years it's not the number one ranked university by *US News and World Report*, which is what most students use to make their distinctions between schools. Now, if I was interviewing for a university consistently ranked number 1 in the United States, I would think that the university was every student's top choice. Because the school I was interviewing for is not the number 1 ranked university, I knew that several people I spoke with might rather go to a more prestigious university.

Now if you think about it, this rationale is very similar to what goes on when people are interviewing with employers. In an extreme, if you're interviewing with Google and a small, 15-person computer firm in Palo Alto that pays less than half of what Google does, most rational observers would presume that you would rather go to Google than the small 15-person computer firm.

Imagine for a moment what the 15-person computer firm is thinking if you tell them that you are interviewing with Google. Do you think they think you'd prefer to work in the small 15-person firm? Imagine what Google is going to think if you tell them you're interviewing with the small 15-person computer firm. They're likely to think you're not that marketable. Or they might think that Google is a reach for you and want to help you advance. You need to put yourself in the shoes of the person making hiring decisions, because what they think will determine whether or not you're ultimately hired.

Why do I ask myself if the student really wants to attend the university for which I'm interviewing? Because I want to make sure if I put a strong recommendation behind the person, they are likely to attend the school. Don't get me wrong: if you are a stellar applicant you will still get a stellar recommendation. But someone who really wants what you are offering is always

going to be far more attractive than someone who doesn't.

What the University does with this information is their business. However, I do like to be able to say "the University is this person's first choice and I am confident they will come if admitted. I believe the school is their first choice because of X, Y and Z. Furthermore, they are the sort of person I imagine would do quite well there because they share so much in common with others students I knew while there."

When an employer is interviewing you, the same sort of logic applies. Employers constantly receive numerous applications from highly qualified individuals. If an employer thinks you will never take an offer, they're unlikely to be interested in speaking with you. In the event you do get an interview, if the employer thinks you just want to go to the most prestigious employer (and they are not that prestigious) they aren't likely to make you an offer.

As an aside, I should note I see this sort of phenomenon all the time in my job as a legal recruiter of attorneys. I deal with attorneys at some of the top law firms in the world on a daily basis. Many of these attorneys want to go to smaller firms that pay far less. While most of these attorneys are under the impression that the smaller firm would "die" to have them but the opposite is most often true. If the attorney is coming from a far superior law firm, the smaller law firm and its attorneys might be intimidated by hiring the attorney because they never worked in such a small law firm. People don't like to spend time with those they think (or others think) are superior to them.

You can draw on personal experience in this analogy. If you went to a public school and are now in a profession like architecture, medicine, sales, and so forth, your high school friends would be a good example. A lot of those people probably haven't not done much with their lives. You aren't the same person anymore and they're not as comfortable around you anymore. They are uncomfortable because they perceive inequality. Surely, this doesn't apply to all your past friends. However, I'm confident it applies to many of them. Regardless of how you may feel with this continued association, they're likely uncomfortable. This is also one reason people do not tend to marry outside their social class, for example. It creates too many difficulties due to a perceived superior and inferior role. No one likes to be around others that remind them of their inadequacies. Employers are exactly the same.

I'm an expert in getting [attorneys jobs](#) inside law firms. I know nothing about in-house placements, or other sorts of [legal-related placements](#). Law firms, by their nature, are strange and unique creatures. Law firms want to save face. Having someone take another offer over theirs makes the law firm look bad in their eyes. It makes them feel inferior. This sort of event makes it seem that the other law firm is a more attractive alternative. It's also a negative vote of confidence from you if you don't take an offer if one is extended.

So, how does the question of whom you are interviewing with fit into the equation? First, you need to answer this question. This question will rarely be asked at the beginning of the interview, though. **Before you ever answer this question, the employer you are interviewing with must—and I mean must—know that they are your first choice**. If the employer thinks this, then telling them that you are interviewing everywhere can help you.

Back to the situation with the 15-person computer firm. You could still very easily get an offer from this firm if you play your cards right. First, you need to walk into this interview and convince the firm that you really want to work there.

- Maybe you know someone at the firm that has said good things about it.
- Maybe they do a certain type of computer work you've been interested in since high school.
- Maybe their office is right across the street from your house.
- Maybe you want to work in a smaller firm so you can feel a more collegial atmosphere.

You need an arsenal at your disposal to give the employer compelling reasons for hiring you. If you give the firm enough reasons why you're a good fit, they will look at the fact that Google is interviewing you as something that verifies your worth in the market. The small firm needs to think you will be their first choice over Google. You taking an offer from them over Google will be a major vote of confidence in the small company, which is something they will use to impress upon its employees that they offer a great place to work.

When I was interviewing candidates for the University, I would answer the question of whether or not the candidate was really interested in my opportunity in several ways. For example, if the student had 1580 on their SATs (almost a perfect score), was captain of the football team, [student counsel](#) president, and first in their class, and my school was the only top school they were applying to, then my job was easy. The student was most likely interested in what my school offered.

Even if the student was applying to several more prestigious schools, I could still judge whether or not this same applicant really wanted to attend the University by several methods:

- If their parents went to the University and they have always wanted to go there,
- If they attended the University for summer school,
- If they worked for a professor of the University during high school, and
- If their life has been profoundly influenced by the work of some professor they want to study under.

You should get the idea. Even without this, a stellar applicant will still get serious consideration. The point is your interviewer wants to be able to say, "this school is their first choice and I believe it."

An employer wants the same assurances that they are your first choice. These assurances need to be given at the interview stage and they need to be given early. This is not an article about interviewing and I cannot tell you how to interview. I can tell you that when an employer believes they are your first choice, you will have a better chance of getting an offer with the employer.

If you apply to enough employers and package yourself correctly, you are likely to get more than one interview and may very well end up with several offers. Accordingly, you may often be asked in interviews who else you are speaking with and so forth. How you address this question will actually have a strong bearing on whether or not an employer hires you.

## **2.How You Justify Why You Are Interviewing With Other Employers Will Have A Direct Bearing On Whether Or Not The Employer Hires You**

There are several scenarios you should be aware of and each one merits a separate response. If you have prepared the interviewer properly, you will do very well when asked where else you are interviewing. Some potential scenarios are:

- (a) you are not interviewing with any other employers,

- (b) you are interviewing entirely with less prestigious employers,
- (c) you are interviewing with a mix of more prestigious and less prestigious employers, and

Given the importance of each of these hypotheticals, they will all be discussed below.

#### **a. You are not interviewing with any other employers**

If you are not interviewing with any other employers then you should tell the employer as much. If you're in school and this occurs, the employer should be under the impression that you're just starting the interview process if this is the only interview you have so far. Employers don't want to feel as if you are the black sheep and someone without a lot of options.

If you're interviewing laterally (i.e., you are already employed and interviewing somewhere), it's perfectly acceptable to tell the employer that you're not interviewing with any other employers. In this situation, the rationale for having only one interview should be that (1) you are not interested in a new job for the sake of a new job, and (2) the only reason you are speaking with this employer is because they are a perfect fit for your interests. The employer needs to think they are a perfect match for you. There are several additional reasons firms like to hear you are interviewing only with them:

- It makes you look loyal to your current employer -By stating you are interviewing with only one employer, it makes it seem as if you're not doing an "all out" search to find new positions. You are only interested in this one interview because the employer matches what you seek so closely.
- It puts the employer in a position where they know if they make you an offer, you are likely to take it -By having only one interview, the employer can give itself more assurances that if an offer is made, you will likely accept.
- It puts the employer in a position where they know if they make you an offer you will not choose one of their competitors over them -If you inform the employer that you have only one interview, the employer will have the assurance that they will not have to "lose face" if you take an offer from one of their competitors.

#### **b. You are interviewing entirely with less prestigious employers**

There are some potential positives to this admission. The positives are:

Since we are the more prestigious employer, if we make the candidate an offer they will most likely come here.

If the employer is more prestigious than the one you are currently at, the employer will think you are trying to "move up." *It's almost axiomatic in American culture that we respect individuals who are trying to move up and improve their lot in life. After all, most of our ancestors were immigrants at some point and moved up the ladder.*

If you tell your interviewer that your other interviews are with less prestigious employers, you may have a problem. Here, the employer will certainly think to itself, "Can't this individual get an interview with better employers? Is there something wrong with them that we are missing?"

In this situation, you need to be very careful. One way to approach this is to state you only are applying to places with openings and these are the only employers you are aware of with openings. In this way, the employer will believe you are applying to these other employers simply in response to what you know. While in all likelihood, you probably applied to more prestigious employers and have not heard back or were rejected, if the former is true, you need to make the employer aware of it.

The most important thing you can do in this situation is to make it clear to the employer that you are qualified to work for them. For example, if you are interviewing with less prestigious employers that pay far less, then tell the more prestigious firm that money is not a concern for you. Here, you can tell the firm you are most concerned with finding the "right fit" and that the less prestigious firms have a lot of attributes that might not be immediately transparent. In this instance, you put yourself in the position of someone who is more concerned with practicing law in the right environment than someone who is concerned with making as much money as possible. This sort of characterization can only help you.

There are many ways to get creative with this response. In sum, the most important thing you can do in a situation where all of your interviews are with less prestigious firms is to make the firm aware that (1) you are very interested in them, (2) seeking to move up, and (3) most concerned about finding a good fit.

#### **c. You are interviewing with a mix of more prestigious and less prestigious employers**

The issue in this situation is about the most normal occurrence for people. Most people that are interviewing are speaking with more prestigious and less prestigious employers. Here, your case doesn't need to be as compelling. Like all the situations discussed above, the employer must still be left with the impression they are your first choice. In addition, the employer must have a basis for understanding why you are interviewing with more than one employer.

Assuming you have done your job of giving the employer the impression they are your first choice., the employer should also understand why you are speaking with so many different sorts of employers. Here, the employer needs to be aware of why you're doing such a broad search. Accordingly, the employer needs to be aware of why something is seriously wrong with your current employment situation.

Again, this is a delicate topic. In all interviews, you never want to leave the employer with the impression that you harbor any sort of ill will towards your current employer. Employers typically do not like interviewees who say bad things about those they work for because they believe that they could one day be on the opposite side of this. This simply makes you look bad. What you need to do in the interview is convince the employer that your current employment situation is preventing you from reaching your full potential. You need to project that you are leaving your current employer, because you are trying to grow.

By upward momentum, I mean your desire is to be better at your job, get more business, get better work, and so forth. In sum, you should always try and portray yourself and your job search as follows:

*While your decision to join your current employer was a good one, you have continued a pattern of "growth" that has characterized you from the very beginning and is evident in everything you have ever done. While it's unfortunate, your current employer is limiting your growth potential. The environment of the employer you are interviewing with offers this growth potential and that's why you're speaking with them. In fact, the growth potential of the employer you're interviewing with offers is "hands down" the best of the bunch in terms of the other employers you've spoken with because of X and Y and Z ...*

If you were someone in charge of determining who you were going to hire, which candidate would you want to hire (1) someone without compelling reasons for being interested in your company, (2) or someone who needs the environment your

firm offers to grow? I am sure you can see the logic of this.

It's a fundamental human characteristic to want to feel good about ourselves. Finding someone who needs an organization like ours to thrive and letting them work with such an organization is something that makes hiring authorities feel good about themselves. You need to give employers compelling reasons for hiring you.

Moreover, giving yourself "upward mobility" makes you sound like a winner and not a loser. People want to associate with winners and not losers. Employers want to hire winners and not losers. Give yourself upward mobility.

### **THE LESSON**

Employers sometimes ask in the course of an interview about other interviews you may have had. How you handle this question can determine your success. You must convince your current interviewing employer that their position is your first choice before divulging any information about other interviews, and be careful how you justify your other interview to your prospective employer. You must convince your current interviewing employer that you consider their position to be your best fit and would most help you meet your career goals of upward mobility.

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