Strike gold
when interviewing for your first nursing job

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SOME NURSING STUDENTS call it the light at the end of the tunnel; others consider it the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. Whatever the name, every nursing student is after it: A graduate's first nursing job! This much sought-after prize is talked about from the first day of nursing school. The burning question is how to acquire it.

Students may believe they know how to land their first job, but how they prepare before, respond during, and act after a job interview may be the difference between success and failure. Practicing for the interview and following the pointers presented in this article will help.

Versatility and teamwork
Employers are looking for people who have a well-rounded knowledge base, are team players, and embrace the values of the organization. Human resource personnel encourage students to research the healthcare organization before the interview. This preparation helps the student understand the organization, including how it's structured.

Nursing has many roles, and at times, employees may be called on to wear several hats, such as clinical caregiver, patient educator, and advocate. Applicants who stand out in this area are more likely to be hired and put themselves on the promotion
track at a quicker pace. (For more ways to stand out, see Extra touches that polish the interview.)

**Practice makes perfect**

Rehearsing for a job interview can give students one up on the competition. Although students may think they know the answers to questions the job interviewer will ask, practicing the answers and being prepared for a wide array of questions may be the difference between a good interview and a bad one.\(^2\,^3\)

Students should gather their thoughts and be prepared to express clearly why they chose the nursing profession, what their educational and professional goals are, and how they might handle change in the work environment, such as different working hours, a new organizational structure for leadership, or increased patient-care demands. Being prepared for these key points may help the student stand out from other job applicants.\(^4\) Students should be prepared to cite examples of how they’ve faced problems, handled conflict, or remained calm in a crisis in the past, for example.\(^5\)

Ideally, the interview should be a two-way street. Candidates should prepare a few questions for their interviewers as a way to gather information and let them know their interests. Depending on candidates’ leanings, they may want to ask about the orientation process, the facility’s expectations, unit culture and values, educational opportunities, or key attributes considered important for nurses who work on the unit. The interview should be a mutual exchange of information.

Practicing for an interview can help prepare a candidate for the real thing. The candidate can do a mock interview with a trusted friend, family member, or faculty member and can even be filmed doing the interview. The candidate can then get feedback about his or her appearance, as well as verbal and nonverbal communication skills.

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**Extra touches that polish the interview**

- **Portfolios.** A student portfolio is a wonderful way for students to highlight their scholastic achievements, volunteer work in the community, and service to the college through clubs or honor society organizations. Some nursing programs require students to create such a portfolio beginning in the first semester of the program. This portfolio, which can be used as an added feature in the job search, can give students an edge on the competition.

- **Publications.** A less-traveled road that can help students make a positive impression during the job interview is to have written an article for professional publication. Students may feel this is a daunting task, but the experience they have writing papers during their nursing program can set the stage for success. Many nursing journals welcome nursing student authors. Students can approach faculty members from the nursing and English departments for mentorship while they’re writing the article to help ensure clinical accuracy and good grammar.

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**Get ready**

If the organization is located in an unfamiliar area, the applicant should make a trial run. Nothing is worse than being late after getting lost. It’s a good idea to arrive at least 15 minutes before the scheduled interview time. Arriving early gives the applicant time to get organized and be calm and collected.

When making the appointment, the applicant should ask for building and office locations and the name of the person who will be conducting the interview. Seeking out these details can help make a good impression.

If possible, the applicant should fill out an online application beforehand so the organization can assess his or her education and other qualifications ahead of time. This helps the employer decide which department is the best match for the applicant’s skills, interests, and experience.\(^6\) The student should ask at least two people for their permission to use them as references and come to the interview prepared to provide their names and contact information.

Some healthcare organizations have a tiered system for interviews, so the applicant may speak with several people during the interview time. The applicant should have multiple copies of his or her résumé on hand in case more than one person is participating in the interview process.

The résumé should be printed on crisp white paper for a professional presentation.

The applicant should also brush up on computer skills and medication calculations because these skills may be tested during the interview. Sometimes a demonstration is required.

The applicant may be offered a job shadowing experience to get a feel for the position and the nursing skills required for success. Gaining a better understanding of a position before formally accepting it is a golden opportunity that shouldn’t be missed.

The shadow experience, which is like an extended interview, is a wonderful way for candidates to see if they’re a good fit for the position and vice versa. Beforehand, they should ask how long the shadowing experience will last and whether they should be prepared to change into scrubs. They can ask the nurses they shadow thoughtful questions about their unit’s work to demonstrate knowledge, interest, and enthusiasm. This is also candidates’ chance to show they’re team players who get along with others.

**Dress for the part**

Being appropriately dressed for a job interview is just as important as the right location is to a real estate deal. Human resource personnel and nursing managers assess applicants from the time they arrive for the
Interview. It’s important for them to dress appropriately in business attire to make the right impression. Applicants shouldn’t wear jeans, shorts, flip-flops, or tank tops to the interview.

Something else that catches the eye of employers is body art. Tattoos should be covered during the interview either by clothes or makeup. Many employers insist on tattoos being covered in the workplace. Visible piercings should be removed before the interview.

**Details matter**

Applicants should greet the interviewer with a firm handshake while looking him or her in the eye, and continue to make eye contact with the interviewer during the interview. This helps them come across as a confident and mature person. If the job interview is conducted by a panel of interviewers, applicants should make eye contact with each member of the panel as questions are asked and answered.

At the end of the interview, applicants should thank the person or persons and be sure to have their names and contact information. Sending a follow-up thank-you note will reinforce their interest in the position and help them stand out from the crowd. Asking about salary would be a misstep at this point. Applicants shouldn’t discuss salary until a formal job offer has been made.

**Make it happen**

Getting that first job is on every graduate’s list. Applicants have to make themselves stand out to the interviewer. Being prepared and using all the available tools will make that happen.

**REFERENCES**


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