

NINE TIPS FOR BEING INTERVIEWED AS PART OF A FORMAL AUDIT

We have been asked on several occasions in the context of employees being interviewed as part of an audit/review being conducted by the Office of Internal Audit (including interviews conducted by the internal audit services contractor, SC&H Group, which provides support for such audits) what are best practices for responding to questions from the auditor. We want to share some of the most common "tips" for a person being interviewed to promote both more effective interviews and to alleviate some of the concerns that sometimes come from being interviewed as part of a formal audit. Following these "tips" should make the interviews more productive, and result in less wasted time for both the auditor and the person being interviewed.

TIP #1: MAKE SURE YOU UNDERSTAND THE PURPOSE OF THE INTERVIEW

Make sure you understand the goal of the interview and what the auditor is trying to accomplish. This will assist you in providing accurate and complete responses to their questions. If the purpose/goal of the interview is not clear, ask the auditor who will be interviewing you to clarify this before the interview begins.

TIPS #2: LISTEN TO THE QUESTION BEING ASKED

While this may seem rather obvious, many people can be nervous and inclined to simply "hear," instead of "listen," to each question. A helpful approach to ensure you are listening to each question is to repeat the question in your mind. If you cannot repeat the question in your head, then you either did not hear the question or you have forgotten it. In this case, your best response is to request that the interviewer repeat the question. If the question is unclear, or ambiguous, you can request that the interviewer ask the question another way. Simply say "I don't understand your question, could you ask it a different way?"

If the question concerns a particular document (policy, procedure, contract, transaction, etc.), or section/segment of the document, ensure you are clear what document (or segment) is being referenced in the question. Understand that if you have not seen the particular document, you should say so very clearly.

TIP #3: MAKE SURE YOU UNDERSTAND THE QUESTION ASKED

Normally we like to be seen as fully knowledgeable. Consequently, when someone is interviewed, they often attempt to answer a question without having a full and complete understanding of the question. It is important to ensure you fully understand a question before you attempt to answer. As with TIP #1, if you do not understand the question, do not hesitate to ask the interviewer to repeat or rephrase the question. Never answer a question that you do not understand. Do not be embarrassed or afraid to ask that a question be repeated or rephrased.

TIP #4: ANSWER THE QUESTION ASKED

Once you have listened to and understand the question, answer the question asked. Do not be evasive with your answers. Don't feel like you need to add something more or explain something not asked. Therefore, you should fully and completely answer only the questions that are asked, and not embellish unnecessarily.

TIP #5: AVOID INAPPROPRIATE GENERALIZATIONS

Be clear with responses; if something *generally* follows one process but can *sometimes* follow a different process, this should be communicated. Using words like “always,” “never,” “sometimes,” can assist an auditor in understanding whether the topic area/process is black and white (e.g., “always,” “never”), or grey (e.g., “sometimes,” “usually”).

TIP #6: TAKE YOUR TIME

Don’t feel rushed in answering a question. Understand that you can take your time when answering, to really think about your answer and get it right. Do not be afraid to admit that you do not have an answer.

TIP #7: ALWAYS TELL THE TRUTH AND DO NOT GUESS

Honesty, sincerity, and straightforwardness should be the touchstones of your responses. An auditor is looking for the truth. A guess, even if it is an educated guess, is not the truth. Therefore, do not guess your answer, unless you are asked to give an opinion; and then make clear that your answer is an opinion, not a statement of fact. It is perfectly acceptable to answer: “I don’t know,” or “I don’t recall;” or to say, “As best I can recall,” if you are not 100 percent sure of your recollection on the matter. If you initially provided an answer, but on reflection after the interview believe it was inaccurate or not complete, you should feel free to follow-up with a clarification or correction.

TIP #8: BE AN ACTIVE LISTENER

When you are speaking with someone, you can usually tell (by their facial expression, their comments, their follow-up questions) when the person does not understand what you have communicated. This is all part of active listening, and should be carried over into when you are being interviewed by an auditor. If the auditor appears not to understand the answer you have provided, feel free to ask. “Was that clear?” If you are having trouble explaining yourself or the auditor is having trouble understanding you, walk through an actual example.

TIP #9: MANAGING AUDITOR DEADLINES

Auditors will normally request documents and data to be provided within a timeframe that allows them to stay on their audit schedule. This is certainly reasonable; but such timeframes may not recognize the realities of how long it will take you to pull together the requested documents/data, or other priorities that you do not control. Auditors will generally be receptive to accepting proposed alternative timeframes to respond to such requests, so long as the alternative timeframe is reasonable (i.e., days, not weeks, later) and there is a valid reason for the delay that can be explained to the auditor. So, be willing to ask for additional time, if it is truly necessary, when the auditor makes the request and proposes a timeframe for responding; and be prepared to explain the reasons.