

TOP STORIES

Should You Take Notes in an Interview?

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By **Jon Jacobs**

If a job interview is an exchange of information, is it proper for you to take notes during the conversation? It depends who you ask. We checked with a variety of career authorities and received a diversity of answers.

Proponents of note-taking say it demonstrates a candidate is diligent and treating the interview like any other business meeting. "I've never had a client tell me that the candidate took notes and they didn't like it. Never," declares Alan Geller, managing director of AG Barrington, a financial services technology sector search firm.

But opponents say it's impolite and can get in the way of establishing rapport with an interviewer. At the same time, they'd approve in certain situations, such as when the interviewer is also taking notes. So a candidate should pay close attention to signals and context before pulling out a pen and pad.

Whether it's suitable to take notes "is going to be very very dependent on the environment in the room," says Neil Diller, a New York City based career counselor and a former director of human resources for Wall Street firms. "You need to read your audience. As in everything else, you have to vary your approach based on who you're talking to."

Diller says note-taking could make sense even at a dinner meeting if the candidate is interviewing for the role of chief executive. "If the information being imparted is important to remember - say, a lengthy description about the organization or the position - then it seems to me reasonably appropriate to acknowledge its importance by taking notes," he says.

The Message You Send

Below the C-suite level, however, a candidate's self-presentation in an interview will likely carry more weight than their grasp of the employer's structure and strategy. That makes it risky to take notes right off the bat.

"If I start off with pad and paper, it says something different than if I start writing things down in a situation where it seems important to do so," Diller explains.

Also, taking notes can set an adversarial tone and make an interviewer hold back sensitive information they might otherwise have shared, says Vicky Oliver, the author of *301 Smart Answers to Tough Interview Questions*. It also prevents eye contact and active listening. "I think it's a really big mistake," she says. "What you're gaining by accuracy I think is really hurting the chemistry of the situation."

Oliver says candidates should keep their eyes on the interviewer, engage them in conversation and ask interesting questions. "When you leave the interview and you're by yourself, that's a superb time to jot down notes about anything interesting you learned."

The Case For Note-Taking

Rather than being impolite, taking notes actually can help candidates show they're focused on the prospective employer's needs, contends recruiter Alan Geller. Geller's "meeting flight plan," a three-page interview primer, advises candidates to rely on their own interview notes to restate management's "hot topics," both at the end of the meeting and in follow-up communications. Your elucidation of why you're the ideal candidate will be more credible if preceded by comments that show you heard and understood what was said about the company's expectations for the person that's ultimately hired.

"People who meet with me and expect to get some value from the meeting always take notes," Geller adds. "Jamie Dimon (chief executive of JPMorgan Chase) always brings a pen and notepad to meetings."

Hedge fund recruiter Sandy Gross also is firmly in the pro-notetaking camp. "I think the candidate should take notes," says Gross, managing partner and founder of Pinetum Partners in Greenwich, Conn., a retained search firm specializing in hedge funds and other financial institutions. "It shows that they're interested. It's a way for them to reference what was said, go back and ask questions at the end."

Gross' only caveat is to avoid letting pen and paper dominate your interview persona. To maintain a professional appearance while taking notes, she advises using a small, neat pad rather than a large conspicuous one - or worse, scrap paper or the back of a napkin or business card. Don't keep your head down or scribble furiously in the manner of a student in a college class. Just capture the most critical points, jotting down a few words here and there, she says.