Early Career Members

Communicating Your Talents to Prospective Employers: Effective Presentation Techniques

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Congratulations! You have made the short list for your dream job. In the near future, you will be afforded a few short hours to convince a potential employer that you are the top candidate. Each employer has individual methods for assessing candidates, but in general, interviews for scientific positions include one-on-one meetings with potential co-workers and/or collaborators, an intense question-and-answer session with the selection committee, and a presentation to a general audience of interested individuals. Though each of these segments of the interview is important, the most daunting for many job seekers can be the presentation. After all, it is widely acknowledged that for most of the population, the fear of public speaking ranks equally with the fear of death or an IRS audit.

Yes, the prospect of speaking publicly can be intimidating, but a carefully produced presentation will aid greatly in audience communication. Several years ago, I attended a workshop presented by Dr. Mary Anne Courtney of the University of Rochester entitled "Effective Presentation Techniques for Scientific Job Seekers." This intensive eight-hour workshop provided me with invaluable guidelines for presentation preparation, knowledge that I have utilized during several subsequent (and successful!) interviews. Below, I share some of the guidelines that may be useful as you pursue your dream job.

Part 1: Do Some Homework

Prior to the scheduled date, the prospective employer should provide an interview schedule that identifies the time allotted for your presentation. At this point, it is acceptable to contact the employer to ask about logistics (e.g., AV equipment availability) and the size and or/makeup of the expected audience. Will the audience consist solely of departmental scientists and staff or will it be more general, potentially including people with limited scientific knowledge? Such information will aid in tailoring your talk to meet the expectations of the audience. An employer will not supply names of potential audience members, but some internet sleuthing may identify prospective attendees. Such information can be useful since describing potential collaborative projects with future coworkers, during your presentation and/or during the one-on-one interviews, clearly demonstrates your interest in the position and creates departmental goodwill.

Part 2: Presentation Development

The principal goal of your presentation will be to convey facts in a simple, concise, and interesting manner. Prior to beginning the development of your presentation, review the job announcement one more time and make note of special skills and/or attributes required for the position. As you develop the presentation, be cognizant of communicating how you meet these requirements.

The presentation will commence with a brief description of your background/training. This will be followed by a section relating your scientific accomplishments, which will be similar to a professional meeting presentation:

- Provide objectives of the work you did
- Give the framework/background for the endeavor
- State hypotheses
- Briefly describe experimental design
- Present evidence
- Assert conclusions

Your final slides should summarize why you are a strong candidate for the position in question. Be assertive in describing the talents that you bring to the employer, but do not embellish or overstate your accomplishments.

The following guidelines may be helpful in developing a visually stimulating, effective presentation:

- Slide background design is extremely important. Avoid background templates that use graphics or color progressions. Most often a monochromatic, dark background will suffice. Complex backgrounds will detract from the message that you are trying to convey.
- Use a single blocky, simple font (e.g., Arial) throughout the talk in a color that contrasts strongly with your background (e.g., white or yellow font on dark blue background). Highlight words of importance using underlining or a different font color. Use 20-point font or larger, and use upper and lower case (all capitals is harder to read).
- Keep text to a minimum on each slide. You want the audience listening to you, not reading the slides. Provide only necessary words, not complete sentences, and avoid any abbreviations or jargon.

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date will be expected to pursue extramural funding to support scholarly activities related to their area of expertise. Other duties related to the position include student recruitment, mentoring and retention and advisement of student groups. The successful candidate will have extension responsibilities to include serving as Co-Coordinator of the Oklahoma Sustainable Agriculture Research and Extension (SARE) program. As SARE Co-Coordinator, the successful candidate will provide leadership and administrative guidance for the organization and facilitate sustainable agriculture extension activities and events statewide. Minimum qualifications include a Ph.D. in Soil Science, Agronomy, Plant and Soil Sciences, Environmental Science, or closely related area. Post-secondary instructional experience and advisory experience with student groups is preferred. Candidates should have broad knowledge regarding all soil science disciplines and how they are connected to agronomic, crop science, environmental or natural resource issues. Experience in classroom or laboratory environments with an understanding of pedagogical theories is expected. A demonstrated commitment to effective teaching and learning, ability to mentor students and advise student organizations are essential. This position is available July 1, 2012. Screening will begin January 15 and continue until a suitable applicant is found. Applicants may obtain a copy of the official vacancy announcement at the OSU website: http://pss.okstate.edu/professional-opportunities . Applicants will be considered without discrimination for any non-merit reason such as race, color, religion, gender, national origin, age, disability, sexual orientation, or veteran status. Oklahoma State University is an affirmative action/equal opportunity employer committed to diversity. The OSU-Stillwater campus is tobacco-free.

Utah—Product Development Scientist. Apogee Instruments Inc, an energetic manufacturer of innovative environmental instrumentation, invites applications. Requirements: An understanding of the physical processes in the soil-plant-atmosphere continuum and a strong background in the instrumentation and measurement techniques used to quantify these processes. An M.S., Ph.D., or equivalent experience in disciplines such as Environmental Biophysics, Biometeorology, or Plant Ecophysiology is desired. The candidate must have excellent written and verbal communication skills, good computer skills, and experience in data analysis and graphical data summarization. The ability to solve technical challenges while working with other scientists, engineers, and technicians is required. A working knowledge of basic electronics is also desirable. Responsibilities: Manage projects to develop new instrumentation, attend scientific conferences to represent the company, interact with customers, research new applications for existing products, identify opportunities for new product development, and present research data. Educate customers on the use of Apogee products and provide customer support by phone and email. Oversee sensor calibration and work with technicians to maintain and improve calibration and production procedures. Develop application-specific datalogger programs using Campbell Scientific dataloggers for system control and data collection. Write marketing literature, application notes, user manuals, and journal articles. Continually reinforce the company's commitment to providing quality instrumentation to the scientific community at a reasonable cost. This is a full-time, salaried position, with benefits. Salary is commensurate with experience. If you are interested and meet the above qualifications, please send a cover letter, resume, and list of references to: Bruce Bugbee Apogee Instruments, Inc. 721 West 1800 North Logan, UT 84321.

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  - A general rule of thumb: no more than six lines of text per slide.
- Avoid animations at all costs. Animations can easily be incompatible between operating systems, and a non-working animation can be highly distracting and annoying to the audience. The last thing that you want is to have to apologize to the audience for a non-working animation.
- Plan on explaining highly technical terms. This will be appreciated by the audience and will leave them with a positive attitude toward you and your message.
- Use summary slides throughout to keep the audience oriented properly within the framework of your talk.
- Data illustrations:
  - Keep them simple and straightforward. Incomprehensibly complex diagrams are annoying, and if the audience is spending time trying to comprehend the slide, they are not listening to you!
  - Each table/figure should include a title that clearly identifies the contents (e.g, rather than "Hog Weight Responses to Feeding Levels," use "Hog Weight Increases in Response to Supplemental Feeding").
  - For graphs, label axes clearly and limit the number of lines. Use contrasting colors to identify lines rather than different shapes of data points.
- The final summary slide should be brief and simple, reinforcing the central theme and purpose of your presentation and reiterating how you fit within the requirements of the position.

Part 3: A Few Final Thoughts

This goes without saying, but be sure to practice, practice, and practice some more! Ensure that the presentation fits within allotted time while allowing time for questions. Practice while standing with your back to the screen. During your presentation, you do not want to be talking to the screen. You will instead be looking out to the audience and meeting their eyes, presenting a confident, well-assured job candidate.

Of course, the presentation is just one element of the interview process. During each Annual Meeting, the ASA, SSSA, and CSSA Early Career Members Committee offers numerous workshops, ranging from "Resume Writing Tips" to "Interviewing and Negotiation Skills," to aid job-seekers in navigating their way through the complex interview process. Be sure to check us out in Cincinnati in 2012!