



THE INTERVIEW PROCESS – BOTH SIDES OF THE TABLE



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There is something special about the Internship Program at Cowan Guteski & Co. P.A. For the past two years, it has been run by the Young Professional Group, a committee of ambitious team members who are below the level of manager and under the age of thirty-five. Prior to that, the in-charge was a partner.

Empowering the Young Professionals with the Internship Program changed the foundation of the program. Since we are so much closer to the age of the interns, we can relate on a level of “buddy” more than “mentor.” It is important to an intern who is nervous about entering their first “real world” experience, to make that transition with people to whom they can best relate. Because partners and managers are at a different stage of their lives and careers, they may not be as approachable or available when a question needs to be answered or advice is sought.

I personally feel that this one progressive move is changing the future of the Firm, since a great deal of hiring is done through the Internship Program. From the perspective of a college student, it is much easier to approach a “twenty-something” team member than a partner who may be the same age as your Dad. Cowan Guteski & Company has allowed us to bridge the generation gap between management of the Firm and its future leaders.

As a staff accountant who has been with the Firm for less than two years, I can not believe I am in the position that I hold today. Cowan Guteski & Company has entrusted me with interviewing and hiring the summer interns for the Firm. When I sat across the conference room table from Bill McNamara, the Partner-in-Charge of the Internship Program in 2003, for my own interview, I never expected to be in his seat just three years later.

This responsibility has given me the opportunity to learn a great deal about the interview process. If I knew back in 2003 what I know now, the interview process would not have been so daunting. Although Career Services and professors coach the eager college graduate on how to dress, act, speak, and behave on interviews, they can not ease the pressure of actually going on an interview. I invite all those anxiously seeking employment to breathe a sigh of relief - the people on the other side of the table are not the enemy.

In the past year I have interviewed more than twenty-five potential intern candidates. During each interview I would try to put myself in the candidate’s shoes. Having been there myself only three years ago, I remember those nervous feelings as I went over each checklist item, just as I was taught in college: dark suit – black or navy (as a female I always struggled with a skirt or pants but have found that either are appropriate as long as you feel confident), bring a portfolio with an updated resume and review the company’s website to have intelligent questions to ask interviewer. On the way to the interview, I felt it was important to practice answering the basic questions: What are your strengths and weaknesses? What are your goals? What have you accomplished that shows leadership? With sweaty palms, stressing out about arriving on time and not saying “Uh” or “Um” too much - it could have been construed as torture.

I see students like that, when I walk into the waiting room to greet the candidate with a friendly smile. I notice as they rise to their feet, fumbling with their portfolio as they extend a hand to shake mine. Although I understand the old adage, “You only have one time to make a first impression,” I promise you that the interviewers are rarely the hungry barracudas that you are anticipating.

In fact, I interview the intern candidates with a co-worker. We ask specific questions that were developed and designed to determine if your personality is a fit for the culture of our Firm. At the intern level, there is a minimum level of prerequisites that are presumably met at college.

When I was being interviewed I feared the potential of a case study with required sample problems. In reality, as many of my mentors have taught me, at the intern level or even the entry level, the main focus on the candidate is *personality*.

I was completely off base when I was being interviewed by being more concerned with how intellectual my answers were and how professional I presented myself. At that time, I did not realize that the main goal of the interviewer is to find an individual with common sense and a good personality - accounting knowledge comes with experience and practice.

As an interviewer it is more important for me to be able to have a positive and intelligent conversation with the candidate; to relate to them on a personal level. Being out of college for less than two years I feel like I am close enough to the position that the candidates are in that I can share in their collegiate issues, job searching ventures, and overall fears of starting a career.

At Cowan Guteski & Company we are a family, with emphasis on the work life balance, including after hours events such as golf leagues, baseball games, picnics, etc. Being able to relate to our team members is an important trait. Our Firm also places significant emphasis on marketing and to have a personality that is comfortable and confident enough to develop opportunities, even at an entry level is an extra special trait.

Interview candidates should not be worried about being scrutinized from their tie to their socks. We want to hire quality people who are personable, friendly, and intelligent. It is about fitting in with the Firm’s culture. I do not interview and hire accountants; I interview and hire my future associates and team mates.

[About the Author](#)

Sarah Krom, Staff Accountant, was an intern with Cowan Guteski & Co., P.A. for the two years prior to graduating *summa cum laude* from the Richard Stockton College of New Jersey in 2004. She provides audit and tax services to clients ranging from small closely-held businesses to publicly traded companies in the manufacturing and distribution, professional services, construction and not-for-profit industries. In addition, she works closely with clients to establish realistic financial goals and the reporting systems to insure that they are on track to achieve those goals.

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