

9 surprisingly effective job interview exercises from improv coaches

The tools of the comedy trade can help you rise to the top of the talent pool.

Dominique Rodgers, Monster contributor



A successful [job interview](#) requires confidence, [thinking on your feet](#) and quickly finding the right words to impress your audience—the same qualities that improv comedy performers need to demonstrate on stage.

And the very exercises they use to prepare can also help you make a great impression. Improv exercises can “allow the interviewee to really make a connection with the interviewer and make the interviewer feel like the interviewee really grasps onto any information that is shared,” says Rebecca Stuard, creative director of Improvolution in the New York City area.

Try these 9 exercises from improv coaches to limber up physically and mentally for your next job interview.

Flex your imagination

“Take any object—a belt, a pen, a piece of paper—and use it in any way, other than the way it was originally intended. For example, instead of only holding up pants, a belt can be a dog leash, a snake on the ground or a jump rope; a pen can be a dart, a syringe or

a lightsaber; and a piece of paper can be an airplane, a telescope or a ball. This exercise gives you practice using your imagination, and is one that is often used in actual interviews to test creativity and flexibility.” —Bob Kulhan, founder and CEO of Business Improv in the New York City area

Put your ears to work

“With a partner, pretend you’re in a scenario, such as two business partners on a plane. Each person must start their sentence with the last big idea of their partner’s sentence. For example, Partner 1 says, ‘I am so excited to go to Florida for vacation. I haven’t been since I started my own cupcake company.’ Partner 2 replies, ‘Yeah, starting your own company is a time-consuming thing...’ This enforces listening and promotes *not* having an agenda when you speak. You must listen to the end, and although you may have ideas or ‘comebacks,’ you listen to everything before you speak.” —Rebecca Stuard, creative director of Improvolution in the New York City area

Be honest with yourself

“A concept we think about in improv is turning a negative into a positive. Instead of only focusing on the best parts of your job and your personality, take an honest inventory of what isn’t great about you, and figure out what you need to do to not fall into old, less-than-productive patterns. Be constructive and learn from previous jobs, rather than just talking smack about your old boss. Being able to own your own deal and be honest, funny and self-effacing can be refreshing.” —Jeremy Brothers, artistic director of Improv Asylum in the Boston area

Loosen up

“A warm-up exercise can help you relax, get out of your head and into the mental state where you are fully present and in the moment. A great warm-up you can do alone to get in the right mental state shortly before your interview is called ‘Shake ’em 8s.’ Hold your right arm out and shake your right hand, counting up to 8, then repeat the shake and count for your left hand, right foot and left foot. Then repeat the whole process counting up to 7, 6, 5, 4, 3 and 2, until you finally shake each limb 1 time.” —Bob Kulhan, founder & CEO of Business Improv in the New York City area

Harness the power of pretend

“Practice the art of ‘if you don't know it, pretend you do,’ either with friends or by recording yourself. Launch yourself into a seminar about a topic that you know nothing about. The point is not to be correct; it's to practice speaking authoritatively. That way, when you speak about something you *do* know about, you'll realize you know more than you give yourself credit for and be comfortable with your authoritative tone.” —Holly Mandel, founder of iMergence in Los Angeles

Keep talking

“The main tenet of improv is ‘Yes, and...,’ which emphasizes taking what's introduced by others, accepting it and building upon it. Practicing this type of response can help someone who might feel self-conscious or doesn't know what to say next. Start with the question, ‘Why do you want this job?’ and just start talking; do not stop, and don't judge in your head or think, ‘I need to start over.’ Practice going and going and thinking of more reasons, even if they sound crazy.” —Holly Mandel, founder of iMergence in Los Angeles

Play both sides

“With a partner, create a situation with a potential conflict, such as parents at a police station after their kids are picked up for underage drinking. One participant plays an uptight do-gooder; the other is laid-back and thinks laws are meant to be broken. Have a conversation where everyone takes turns expressing how they feel and responding. Once it feels complete, stop the scene and switch sides; then go through it again with the roles reversed. As improvisers, we want to be free from having to be ‘correct’—instead, we want to be freed up and just do what our character would do. This breeds acceptance and teamwork in any situation because it forces you to ‘defend’ the other side.” —Rebecca Stuard, creative director of Improvolution in the New York City area

Turn a word into a story

“Practice making up stories based on a random word or sentence you find in an arbitrary news article that you have not read. This practice will not only help with reacting and adapting to unexpected questions, it will help you develop the skills

needed to tell coherent stories in real time.” —Bob Kulhan, founder & CEO of Business Improv in the New York City area

Get a status update

“One of the ways we teach people how to play characters in improv is to think about status—the comfort level someone has in any given situation or environment. Someone with high status can own a situation outright; someone with low status might struggle. For a job interview, try looking at everyone as if they’re trying to sell you on working at their company. At some point, if you’re buying what they’re selling, start to consider everyone [as having] equal status—imagine them as your peers in a company. Are these people you want to see every day? If so, great—hopefully they’ll feel the same way about you. If not, it’s not the right scene for you.” —Jeremy Brothers, artistic director of Improv Asylum in the Boston area

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