

# 1 job, 11 interviewers

## It's not easy if you're a candidate being grilled by a big panel, but you can make it work for you. Plus, using LinkedIn to boost your job search.

By [Anne Fisher](#), senior writer

(Fortune) -- **Dear Annie:** I've been working with a recruiter on finding my next job, and he just told me that one possibility (an opening for a manufacturing manager with a midsized company) will require that I undergo a panel interview, meaning an interview conducted by a group of prospective colleagues and bosses, all in the room at the same time. I've never been interviewed by a group before. Is this unusual? Do you have any advice on how to succeed at it? -*Stage Fright in St. Louis*

**Dear SFSL:** Panel interviews, an import to the business world from academia, are getting more common all the time. The reason is twofold, according to executive coach Susan Whitcomb ([www.careercoachacademy.com](http://www.careercoachacademy.com)), author of *Interview Magic* (Jist Works, \$18.95). First, meeting everyone you'd be working with at once is a big time-saver for everybody. But more important, meeting your whole team gives everyone a better idea of how well (or not) you'd fit into the group.

"When there are half a dozen or more people observing you at the same time, it's a lot easier to compare notes and reach a consensus" about you than in several different interviews, Whitcomb notes.

Whole Foods Market, [No. 16](#) on Fortune's 2008 list of the Best Companies to Work For, has been subjecting all applicants to panel interviews for several years now.

"It was the most difficult job interview I've ever been through," says Ben Friedlander, 34, who was hired last spring as marketing coordinator for the retailer's Rocky Mountain region, based in Boulder. "But it was also the most interesting."

His panel was made up of 11 people, including the regional president, some store employees, the vice president of purchasing, and "basically everyone who would have significant contact with me," he recalls.

The panel chose Friedland out of more than 150 applicants for the job. Friedland admits he was nervous about facing so many interlocutors in one fell swoop but, he says, "You can choose how you're going to approach it - either be intimidated, or embrace it."

To help you with the latter, here are a few tips:

**Know your interviewers.** Don't be shy about asking the person setting up the interview, "Who will be on the panel, and what are their job titles?" Friedland got this information from the headhunter who was helping Whole Foods ([WFMI](#), [Fortune 500](#)) fill the job -- as well as each panelist's e-mail address -- so he could send prompt thank-you's afterward. Also, gather as much background on each panelist as you can, starting with a Google search, Whitcomb suggests.

**Be ready to take notes.** "Jotting notes, as you would in any business meeting, will help you remember important points," Whitcomb says. Writing things down may also buy you an extra moment or two to come up with an answer to a tough question.

**Take it one question at a time, one person at a time.** "Address each of your responses primarily to the person asking, while also making eye contact with the rest of the panel," Whitcomb advises. A focus on one questioner at a time may help calm any stage fright.

**Look for the key decision-maker on the panel.** "He or she is often the last person to arrive, or the person to whom all heads turn when an issue arises," Whitcomb says. Make eye contact with this person somewhat more often than with the other panel members, but without overlooking anyone else. If you do end up getting an offer and you want to negotiate the terms, Whitcomb notes, "it helps to know who has the authority to approve changes."

**Ask questions.** At Whole Foods and elsewhere, candidates are judged as much by the depth and intelligence of the questions they ask as by the answers they give to panelists' queries. Your questions, then, should show you have studied the company and its customers carefully.

Ask at least one question of each panel member, Whitcomb advises. "You're really trying to find out what they're seeking in the ideal candidate for this job," she says. "You can put it in results-oriented terms and ask, 'Six months from now, how will you know you've hired the right person?' Then, if someone says, 'Our XYZ business will have grown by 20%' or 'Costs will have dropped by 10%,' you can focus on describing experiences in your past that can help you achieve that goal."

Before Friedland's panel interview, he spoke with many Whole Foods employees, and did a survey of 400 customers, so he'd be prepared. "Don't come up with ideas in a bubble," he says. "Listen to as many people as you can."

Since joining Whole Foods, Friedland has sat on dozens of panels himself, so he now sees the process from both sides.

"When you have 10 or 11 people questioning you, you can't sneak anything by them, the way maybe you could with a single interviewer. It's really obvious who's done their homework and who hasn't," he says. "So make sure you understand the company -- its industry, its culture, what people there are most proud of, and where they want to be headed."

A crucial last step: After the meeting, send an individual "thank you" to each panel member, and vary the wording a bit with each one. "It's amazing how few people do this, but it can give you a tremendous advantage, by distinguishing you from your competition," says Whitcomb.

Friedland couldn't agree more. He e-mailed each of his 11 interviewers immediately after meeting with them -- and included a link to a URL he had created, with a short video summing up his marketing vision for the company. (Want to see it? Go to <http://www.makeitwhole.com>.) "I wanted to make one last positive impression," he says. Good thinking.

Note to job seekers: You may be one of LinkedIn's 14 million members, but do you know how to make it work for you in a job hunt? Career coach Rita Ashley has written a useful e-book - illustrated with step-by-step screen shots - on how to make the most of LinkedIn to help you find your next job. Download it for free [here](#).

Readers, what do you say? Ever been interviewed by a panel -- or been a panel member? What do you see as the pros and cons? Got any tips for candidates or panelists? [Post your thoughts](#) on the Ask Annie blog. ■

First Published: November 21, 2008: 6:19 AM ET  
[100 Best Companies to Work For](#)