Imagine checking your inbox several days after applying for the sought-after railroad job you’ve been dreaming about. You can barely believe your eyes; an invitation to the railroad interview! You’ve got just a couple weeks to prepare for this rare opportunity. You have to get it right; you may never get a second chance.

I’ve interviewed successfully three times at two different Class 1 freight railroads. Three times I interviewed, and all three times I nailed it. The first interview was for a position as a diesel electrician on the Union Pacific Railroad. I was offered the job, but turned it down less than a week later in order to interview for a conductor position with the same railroad. The conductor position had not been listed at the time, or I would have pursued it first. I navigated the conductor interview process like a pro, and a job offer was extended to me the very same day. The third interview was with the BNSF and I was also hired. At the end of this article I will explain why I interviewed with BNSF after being employed by the UP, but for now I want to focus on giving you the tools necessary to achieve the same results, which is getting a job offer.

All three interviews were conducted at large hotels; each was in an entirely different city, at different times and with different staff. For the sake of this discussion I’ll stick mostly to the conductor interviews, as they are most likely what you’re interested in; that said, these principals broadly apply to any interview process on the railroad.

The conductor interviews were large events. I counted about 300 candidates at each one. I also knew, each time, that they were looking to hire about 30 people. This meant I had a 1 in 10 chance of getting the job; I know, daunting to say the least! I calculated these numbers as I sat among all my competitors and looked around the room to see if I could identify more than 30 individuals that looked as though they could outshine me. I remember thinking in both cases that I had my work cut out for me. This is how you must also think if you’re going to nail it down. There is no place for luck here, you need to go out and get it.

I had studied everything I could get my hands on for a couple weeks prior to even applying, so in a way I was well prepared, but I was also nervous, and facing stiff competition. The things I learned prior to the diesel electrician
interview worked, and those strategies were reinforced with the success of getting an offer. Attending the UP conductor interview taught me even more, and of course so did the BNSF. I know what I’m talking about so please listen up.

**Location rehearsal**

If the railroad interview is out of town by more than a two hour drive consider getting a hotel in the same location, and spend the evening brushing up on your interviewing technique, relaxing, and shifting your focus from all your everyday concerns and pressures to what you must accomplish in the morning. Check out the route beforehand, the path you will take to get where you’re going in the morning. Rehearse your physical steps ahead of time, as this will remove any anxiety that you might otherwise face before you arrive. Can you imagine if you’re running late, you’re not sure where it is, and you make a wrong turn; you’re stress level is going to sky rocket! You don’t need this, and it can be easily avoided, just take the time and learn in advance where you will park the car or pick up the cab, what door to go into, and where the room is located. In addition, get up extra early so that you’re not rushed, eat a modest breakfast. You’re in for a long day so you must eat something.

**Dress up.**

There are going to be people who disagree with me on this, but then they haven’t been hired three times either. Wear a shirt and tie! I did not say suit – that would be overkill. But definitely a pair of pressed slacks, a pressed dress shirt, nice leather shoes in good condition, a belt, and a tie. If you do this, you will be the only one out of 300 people that cared enough to go to the trouble. Listen, if the issue of your dress is brought up, as it was in my diesel interview, you simply reassure them that you do understand the nature of the job you are interviewing for, that the remainder of you wardrobe consists entirely of bibs and coveralls, but that you also respect the hiring process and wanted to look your best. That’s all – case closed. Any negative effect you feel your dressing up might bring, or that others have told you it would bring, will be instantly erased. The positive points you will gain are almost immeasurable. I’m not open to criticism on this point, because I succeeded three times with this. For the diesel job, this concern was brought up, and I deflected it nimbly with the answer I gave above. The only thing left was three smiling interviewers on the other end of the table. The third time, one of the interviewers mentioned me having been the only person with a tie, and that she appreciated me making the extra effort. The second interview it was not mentioned, but I’m sure it still played its part. A shirt and tie will speak volumes about you – just do it! Also
don’t forget to get a hair cut at least 3 days before and shave or trim your beard so that you look well groomed. Remember guys: 1 out of 10.

The orientation.

At the beginning of the process they will sit everyone in a large conference room and give an introduction about the job and answer any questions. Before and after this time when you are milling about, don’t keep to yourself. It is important to socialize a bit with others. The railroad interview starts the minute you walk in the door. You’ll also want to have a professional looking folder or notebook with you, where you can take some notes when they are giving the presentation. Again, you’ll probably be the only one doing this, there might be a few others, but you’ll stand out as someone taking it serious, and as someone who cares about what they are getting themselves into. When they present a time for asking questions, try your hardest to be one of the small minority that raises their hand. However, be certain you have an intelligent question. You should think of 5 or 6 possible questions the night before. It is all about standing out in a positive way. You’re in direct competition with all these other people. After the interview is over they will sit down and try to determine who they should call; don’t be forgettable; you want to be the one who stands out in their mind in a positive way.

Smile.

Do not forget to appear friendly and happy. Fake it if you must, but don’t neglect this important point. If an ounce of sour-puss is detected, well, you’ve just wasted an entire day of your time, not to mention you’re not getting the job. When I say fake it, I mean fake it, but don’t appear fake. You can muster up a friendlier, yet natural version of yourself, it’s in there, and you know it is. Bring that guy to the railroad interview. In for a penny, in for a pound; once you walk in to sit down with the panel just jump in with both feet and smile. Dig down deep and inwardly pretend you’ve known them all your life. On the outside remain professional and respectful. After they introduce themselves, ask politely if you may refer to them by their first names. Don’t sit until you’re invited to, and if water is offered, take some. This is kind of like meeting your girlfriend’s parents for the first time, you’ve got to be cordial, respectful, yet you also have to appear real, and approachable.

Listen when they speak

Nothing is worse than getting to the point where you’re supposed to answer and you can’t really remember the question. You can’t go back in time – you are
done! Listen carefully, and don’t feel pressure to reply instantly. Take a few seconds, maybe even five to seven if necessary. I know it will seem like an eternity; but I’d say it is better to formulate a genuine answer after ten seconds of silence than to spew garbage after two. If you have the answer by all means let go with it, but if you need to think, well they understand that.

**Sell yourself.**

Many people are not comfortable speaking highly of themselves. Our mommies all taught us, rightfully so, that we should be modest and humble. In most situations this is definitely called for, but not at the railroad interview. Unfortunately they don’t have time to get to know you over a long period of time where all your strengths would eventually speak for themselves. You’ve got to share it with them now! I remember being asked at the second interview: Why should we pick you over all these other qualified people? I spoke right up and said “Because my skill set is superior to theirs, and I have a highly developed capacity for critical thinking. My time in the Navy has taught me how to be goal oriented, and safety conscious. I’m a true professional; I leave my problems at home. I will be a strong asset to the Union Pacific and will seek to advance and grow with the company and work hard to keep it profitable.” In other words I rambled a bit about how great I am. I had to. The interviewer was taking notes as rapidly as I could say this stuff, he wasn’t even looking at me, he was just writing, but he was shaking his head in affirmation as I spoke. He was eating it up.

**Whatever you do, please don’t talk about your love of trains.**

This is the quickest and most certain way to get an invitation to hit the skids. You can probably imagine how many times these guys hear “Well, I have always loved trains ever since I was a little kid… I remember my first model railroad…” **FOR THE LOVE OF UNCLE PETE, DO NOT GO THERE!** If you are a rail fan or model railroader now is not the time to share your enthusiasm. As a matter of fact, if they ask about your hobbies, honestly you might want to just skip over this one. I hate to say this; I don’t mean to offend. I understand how hard this is going to be for many of you, because you are passionate about trains – hey maybe that’s why you’re applying to work for a railroad in the first place – makes perfect sense to me. Personally I cherish all kinds of people and think variety is the spice of life. In fact, I’d be delighted to invite you to my home and look at every picture of every train you ever took someday, but the railroad HR department just doesn’t care, and worse they will almost certainly hold it against you. If you stop and think about it for a minute, you’ll probably see it from their perspective: When you’re dealing with a
fortune 500 company, it’s not hard to understand why they don’t feel your model railroad is relevant to moving the nation’s goods safely across hundreds of miles of prairie and mountains in the middle of the night. Because it just isn’t. I can’t say it any gentler. How do I know this is a non-starter, other than the fact that it’s kind of obvious? An instructor, who lent a hand with interviews on the UP, once told me how tired they get of hearing about people’s love affair with trains since childhood. I think the reason otherwise great candidates bring this up, to their demise, is because they simply haven’t prepared for the interview. They aren’t ready to say the things they really need to say, like telling the railroad why they’re the man that can go out in the middle of the night and get the job done effectively and efficiently without getting hurt, or endangering others.

Safety.

Find a way to work safety themes into some of your answers without appearing overly obvious that you’re just trying to hit them up with catch phrases about safety. If you’ve ever had safety related responsibilities at other jobs now is the time to mention them. Hazmat training is always good. Also experience with personal protective equipment, how you take it seriously and encourage its use among your fellow workers. If the question as to who is responsible for your safety is asked… The only right answer is “I am.”

Sense of humor.

Sometimes during any human to human exchange little funny things will happen. Don’t be afraid to laugh, or chuckle if it is truly funny. Again this goes hand in hand with being comfortable in your own skin, and acting naturally. You must of course keep the protocol of respect in place, but you want to appear approachable, warm and real at the same time. Don’t offer any jokes, but if a play on words occurs by happenstance, or a good natured pun is stumbled upon go ahead and laugh a little. Just be an adult for crying out loud, look these people in the eye, and proceed with a measure of confidence. Dig deep for it, and like I said, if you must, fake it without seeming fake.

Ask two or three intelligent questions.

At the end of the railroad interview they will ask you if you have any questions. You will not shake your head in the negative and whisper the word no! You will have questions because you will have thought up a half a dozen good ones the night and days before. Many of these will get answered in the process of the interview, which is why you have many to choose from going in, so certainly at
least two will be left unanswered. “Yes I do”, look down at your notes in the nice folder that you brought. “I was curious about training to become a remote control locomotive operator, is that something that would be available to me after conductor training, or would I need to be an engineer first?” Holy cow, this guy wants to work here, he’s already planning his career. You see what I’m getting at. You have to ask a couple intelligent questions.

**When the railroad interview is over.**

You will not shuffle out the door with your head hung low! You will stand up tall at the end of the interview. You will look your panel in the eye, each one at a time. You will smile and shake their hands in an appropriately firm manner. Not too firm and not too dead fish. You will thank them sincerely and warmly for the opportunity. You will express how much you enjoyed yourself today, and let them know directly, with words, how excited you are about your prospects and how you can’t wait to receiving a phone call from them later. You will say goodbye in a sure voice and a warm smile and close the door softly behind you as you leave.

Participating in a Class 1 railroad interview is an exciting thing to do in it’s own right, just imagine what it will feel like when you get the phone call with a job offer. You’ve done it, you got the job! You’re life will never be the same – in a good way! Follow my advice in this article and you’ll stand out in the crowd. I’d say good luck, but you won’t need it. You’re going to make your own luck this time, and you’ll be working on the railroad in no time, making good money, and having the prestige that comes with a time honored profession.

*The reason I left the UP was to pursue a career as an airline pilot during a short furlough from the railroad. In the middle of my flight training the railroad recalled me. I had to make a very hard decision. I elected to resign and continue with flying. I interviewed for my airline job, was hired, but put into a waiting pool as the industry was recovering from 9/11. During this period of unemployment I got on with the BNSF in Fort Worth Texas where I could be near my future wife. The airline eventually called me to work and I left the BNSF. I am a Captain at a regional airline now, but often miss the railroad, as it was every bit as wonderful and exciting as being a pilot, it truly was.*

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