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The Job Interview



a concise guide
to a successful interview

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The Employment Interview

The ideal interview is one in which a conversation takes place and there is a mutual exchange of information. The primary purpose from the employer's point of view is to determine if your background meets the organization's needs. As the applicant, you will want to emphasize your ability to perform the job functions while trying to determine whether the employer will be able to meet your employment needs.

Regardless of what approach you choose to locate a job, your goal will be to get interviews. The job-hunting strategy, the resume, the phone contacts, the mailings, and more are all undertaken for the express purpose of getting an interview. Interviews get jobs; everything else is done to get interviews.

The interview is the most crucial step in your job search. By being prepared you will be able to articulate how well your background relates to the position for which you are interviewing.

Your job in the interview is to relate your skills to the needs of the employer. Your ability to succeed will depend on how well you convey your achievements; offer proof that you have the requisite skills that are clearly connected to the requirements of the job for which you are interviewing.

By knowing something about the company to which you are applying, you will be better able to frame questions and answers. You will have more confidence and boost your overall performance.

Preparing to Interview Successfully

Understanding Yourself

When preparing for an interview you must learn as much as you can about the topics to be covered. Since the main topic of the discussion will be you, you need to know yourself. Evaluate your strengths and weaknesses, what you want in a job and what you don't want in a job, what you have accomplished, and what you hope to accomplish.

Interviews go more smoothly for people who have fairly clear career goals. Before the interview review your background, interests, and goals as they relate to the employer's needs. You should understand the type of position you are interviewing for and be able to visualize yourself in that job so that you can tailor your presentation. Provide supporting examples to show how your background prepares you for the job. Don't expect the employer to spend the interview counseling you about your career goals. You'll get much more out of the interview if you are

certain of your career interests ahead of time. Never say “I’ll do anything.” Stick to the specialty that brought you to the interview.

Do you want to be a manager, a laboratory technician, a sales representative, a computer programmer, or ...? If you know the answer, great! If not, get some ideas by doing some career research. Talk with someone in the field you’re considering to find out more about the work.

Ask yourself questions like these:

- What have my education and experience prepared me to do?
- What do I like to do?
- What do I dislike doing?
- What are my weaknesses?
- What do I value in life and in my career? Variety? Security? Mobility? Money? Social-justice? Leisure time? Flexibility? Creativity?



Understanding Employer Needs

Being prepared also requires that you demonstrate knowledge of the company. Read recruiting literature, employer web pages, annual reports, or trade publications. Find out where the organization has been, where it is going and how it plans to get there. **The success of the interview depends upon your ability to focus on the needs of the company and to show how prepared you are to help meet those needs.**

Learn as much as you can about the organization **before your interview** - size, products, services, employees, location of branches. If a brochure on the employer is not available consult a reference librarian for guides such as Dun & Bradstreet, Moody’s Manual, Standard and Poor’s and Thomas Register of Manufacturers. As you research organizations, consider where and how you could contribute, whether you might enjoy working there, and if the work is in line with your career plan.

Behavioral Interviewing

Behavioral interviewing is a current style of interviewing frequently used by recruiters. Since past performance is the best indicator of future performance, the employer may ask open-ended questions about how you have reacted in particular situations. Your response needs to be based on the **STAR** formula:

Situation:

Identify the problem.

Task:

Define your objective.

Action:

Describe the steps you took to achieve your objective.

Results:

Measure your effectiveness.

Structure of the Interview



The typical interview can be broken down into three sections:

1) The introductory stage, 2) an evaluation of your background, a discussion of the employer's opportunities and how you fit in, and 3) the conclusion in which points are clarified and the interviewer explains how and when the next contact will be made, if there is to be one.

Introduction

On the surface, the introductory stage may seem little more than a simple exchange between two people who have just met. The first few minutes help to establish rapport. Some interviewers are extremely adept at establishing rapport and creating a relaxed though business-like atmosphere. Others find this stage more difficult. In any event, this is **where the interviewer gets the first impression.**

To ensure good rapport applicants must speak clearly, listen closely, and show by gestures and facial expressions that they are receptive to the interviewer's thoughts and questions. Remember, the overall evaluation of you as a candidate begins the very moment the interviewer greets you. The way you shake hands, the way you're dressed, the way you sit, your eye contact, and the way you speak all play a part in the impression you make.

Next, Your Background

After the introduction, the interviewer generally begins to ask about your education, experience, career plans, and self-assessment. The employer will use open-ended questions which will let you describe your background. **These will be "why," "where" and "when" type questions.**

Essentially, these questions are designed to measure your self-confidence and your ability to relate to others; to communicate in a clear and logical manner. **Provide positive, useful information in your answers. Demonstrate clear connections between your expertise and the employer's needs.**

Your resume will give the interviewer a great deal of information about your educational qualifications, experience, and interests. With this basic information as background, the interviewer will try to learn something about your skills and aptitudes and delve into other areas such as non-work activities. Most employers are looking for well-adjusted men and women who aren't afraid to work ... people who are self-starters ... self-motivators. These characteristics are generally not reflected in a resume, but may be identified through your choice of outside interests.

Stay “on the interview track” by watching for non-verbal clues that will tell you how the interviewer is responding. Is the interviewer relaxed, alert, interested, following you, encouraging you with nods, smiles, and comments? Avoid wandering away from the subject, telling unrelated anecdotes or skipping from point to point without continuity.

The Matching Begins

During the second stage, the interviewer identifies your interests and talents to see how they might fit into the organization. Assuming that you have the necessary credentials, as well as a positive attitude and person-ality, **the interviewer will begin the process of matching your career interests and goals with existing job openings.** Consequently, it's important that you know what your immediate and long-range goals are and that you express these objectives in a clear, organized, logical fashion.

The interviewer might delve into job responsibilities, other areas of activity, and a discussion of various operations, policies and practices. You may want to ask questions in order to gather information for the decision-making process. You can inquire about the type of work you would be doing, details on the training program, or some other aspects of the company operation. Most professionals discourage bringing up the subjects of salary and fringe benefits during the initial interview.

Well-thought-out questions will impress the employer; asking “canned” questions that seek information already in company literature will not impress anyone. When trying to develop questions to ask, consider what you need to know to evaluate your desire to work for that organization.

The Interview Closing

If interested in you as a candidate, the interviewer will most likely try to “sell” you on the company, talking about training, advancement, and benefits. You will be given ample opportunity to ask final questions. The interview will be brought to a close by arranging for your next meeting or by indicating that you will receive some specific communication within the next few days or weeks. **End the interview on a positive note.** Be sure to express appreciation for the interview and “ask” for the job by indicating your interest in the position and making a final statement about your qualifications.

It is important to remember that the initial interview is just the first step in securing a position with an organization. In the interviews and contacts that follow, you will need to continue to sell yourself.

How to Make the Most of an Interview Opportunity

- **Express yourself clearly.** You can’t sell yourself well with mumbles, monotones, “uhs”, “yeahs”, and “ers”. The ability to talk effectively to people at all levels in a company is a key to success, now more than ever.
- **Know yourself and review your accomplishments,** so that when the occasion presents itself you are ready to discuss your areas of strength and to give specific examples. Be prepared to give further description or additional examples beyond those provided in your resume.
- **If your experience is limited, stress key personality traits,** relevant interests, and your desire to learn.
- **Dress appropriately, neatly, and conservatively.** Your primary goal in dressing for an interview is to feel great about the way you look while projecting an image that matches the requirements of the position and the company. Clothes should fit well, be pressed, and clean.
- **Be polite and personable to everyone you encounter.** A smile and a friendly disposition really help to establish a cordial relationship between you and the interviewer and others in the office. People hire people they like. Don’t demonstrate any irritation or displeasure over delays or interruptions that may occur.
- **When you are introduced to the person you came to see, offer a firm handshake.** Let the interviewer indicate where you should sit and avoid leaning on or placing anything on the interviewer’s desk. Don’t smoke or chew gum during the interview.
- **Identify and discuss the employer’s needs and problems.** Prior to the interview, research the company and find out as much as you can. Interviewers react favorably to

applicants who are knowledgeable about the company and its operations. Don't be a yes-person; elaborate on your answers.

- **Watch non-verbal communication.** Pay attention to the interviewer's physical posture, as well as your own. Don't appear too relaxed or too rigid. Maintain eye contact, but don't stare. When seated, place your arms and hands on the armrests of the chair or in your lap if there are no armrests. If the interviewer appears bored, modify your response or ask a question.
- **Demonstrate enthusiasm, interest, and confidence.** Enthusiasm adds to any personality and plays a vital role in the interview experience.
- **Be honest about your ability and don't exaggerate.** Do your very best to answer the questions, letting your record speak for your abilities. If you don't know something, admit it rather than give the wrong answer.
- **Answer the question asked.** Stick to the subject. Don't give lengthy answers. Interviewers ask for further clarification when it is needed.
- **Present a positive attitude.** Don't make excuses. Don't apologize for negative aspects of your education or prior employment.
- **Do not discuss any personal problems** during an interview.
- **Avoid writing notes during the interview.** Instead, immediately after the interview jot down key points that you want to be certain to remember.
- **Be an interested listener and observer** and be sure to take the necessary time to think before you answer any questions. Look directly at the interviewer to show that you are alert and listening attentively. If you need clarification, ask that the question be rephrased.
- **Do not show discouragement** if the interview appears to be going poorly. You have nothing to gain by showing displeasure. It could also just be an interview tactic to test your self-confidence.



- **Avoid premature salary discussions.** Don't talk about money or benefits until your value has been established or you are offered a job.
- **Send a thank you letter** after the interview and indicate that you are still very interested in the position.

Sample Interview Questions and Responses

Interview questions come in all types. Some are straightforward and require brief, concise answers. Some are open-ended, requiring detailed answers.

You may be able to improve your “performance” by practicing the answers to some typical interview questions. Here are some sample questions and effective responses. Be ready with good answers; preparation is the key to a good interview. Develop and practice answers that promote your background and skills.

1. **Can you tell me something about yourself?**

This question is totally open-ended. Be prepared to describe briefly your current interests and why you are seeking this job. Your response should focus on the position for which you are applying. Relate your strengths to the job.

2. **Why did you leave your last job? Your previous position? How did you like your last employer?**

Be concise and be honest. Avoid negative explanations. By stating that your current goals surpassed the opportunities offered by your last employer you could focus on why you now want to work for a new company with greater growth potential. Put another way, you could say your prior experiences have prepared you for new opportunities that do not presently exist in your current environment. Never criticize a former employer or your professors.

3. **Why do you want to join our company? What made you apply for this job? How can you contribute to the company? Why should I hire you?**

Explain that through your research you identified this particular employer as one that interests you, then tell why. Provide several reasons why you believe that your current skills qualify you for the available position.

4. **Where do you plan to be three years from now in your career? Five years from now? What is your long-range career goal?**

Don't say you don't know where you'll be! Tell the interviewer that you seek an opportunity to show how well you can perform and hope to go as far as hard work and dedication to the job will take you. Then ask the interviewer where he or she would hope that you would be in 5 years, if all goes well. Discuss educational goals if they seem appropriate.

5. **What is your greatest asset? Describe your major weakness.**

The ability to identify and discuss your strengths is an indication of self-confidence. Highlight an asset that relates directly to the available position. By describing and proving your skills you will be able to link your past experiences to the needs of the employer. If you

must describe a weakness, point to a relatively unimportant, non-job-related area that needs some improvement. Better still, discuss strategies you employed in the past to eliminate a weakness.

6. What are your salary expectations?

The best advice here is to remember that there is no salary at all unless you get the job. Research salary data for similar positions before the interview. Delay discussing the salary until you completely understand the level of responsibility associated with the duties of the job. If you are forced into a salary discussion, ask about the range for the position and indicate your expectation based on your level of experience. Once a job offer is made, negotiate an acceptable salary that is commensurate with the job's responsibilities.

7. What kind of experience do you have for this job? What have you learned from past jobs? Describe the kind of work that you have done. What are your skills?

Highlight skills that are relevant to the job and give examples of professional accomplishments and significant achievements. Remember always to link past experiences to current needs of the employer.

8. Why did you select this type of work?

Stress how this job relates to the interests, skills, and values you deem most important in a satisfying and productive work environment. Appear sure of your career choice. Emphasize courses you've taken that relate to the position you are seeking. If you did well in a related class mention how high marks and your interests go hand in hand and that the job you seek is attractive to you because it requires similar interests.

9. What have been your greatest accomplishments? What has been your most significant accomplishment? Why?

Keep your answers job related. If you've done a thorough skills assessment, a number of achievements should come to mind. You will want to demonstrate pride, reliability, and completion of goals.

10. What is important to you in a job? What type of job are you looking for?

Draw attention to things that satisfy you personally and point out that these are the same things that contribute to the employer's programs and objectives. Do not mention salary in response to this question but rather that you are seeking a job where you will have the opportunity to be productive.

Additional Frequently Asked Interview Questions

Think about how you would answer questions like these and try to respond quickly, concisely, and in a positive manner.

1. How do you relate to other people at work? To people you dislike?
2. What methods do you use to be more effective in dealing with people? What methods are ineffective?
3. Do you feel you've made a success of your life to date? How?
4. Can you work under pressure and meet deadlines? Give an example.
5. Describe a difficult problem you've had to deal with.
6. Which of your jobs did you like most? Least?
7. How long do you think it would take you to be productive in this job?
8. Why has it taken you so long to find a job?
9. Might you be over qualified for this job?
10. What types of decisions did you have to make on your last job?
11. How would you describe your own personality? How would others describe you?
12. What do you most admire in others?
13. What was your most unpleasant work experience? Your most pleasant one?
14. What criteria are you using to evaluate potential employers?
15. If you could describe an ideal working environment, what would it be?
16. What things are most important to you in a job? Why?
17. What do you know about our company? What position would you like to have? Why?
18. What personal characteristics do you think are necessary for success in your chosen field? Do you have them?
19. Have you held any leadership positions? If so, what were they and what did you learn from them? If you have never had any leadership responsibilities, why not?
20. In looking at your academic program, which classes did you enjoy most? Least? Why?

21. Do you feel you have done your best academically? Why or why not?
22. What do you think determines an individual's success in the workplace?
23. Describe the most significant written document, report, or presentation that you have completed.

Questions to Ask to Gather Information During the Interview

Job interviews allow the employer and the candidate to evaluate each other. By raising questions, each makes a better employment decision. As the interview draws to a close, the interviewer may ask if you have any questions. Ask for details about the position so you can relate your skills to the job duties and to look for a match with your interests and abilities.

Following is a list of questions to consider. **Remember, by asking good questions you will earn the interviewer's respect.** Do not ask for information you could get through pre-interview research. Inappropriate, too, are questions about salary; there will be ample time to discuss that and fringe benefits in follow-up discussions.

1. What are the main responsibilities and duties of this position?
2. Who would be the key people I would work with? Is there a lot of team/project work?
3. How much authority would I have to carry out my responsibilities?
4. What objectives would you like the person hired to accomplish during the first year on the job?
5. How would you describe the corporate culture of this company? What makes your organization different from your competitors?
6. How would my performance be evaluated?
7. What opportunities exist for growth or advancement?
8. Is your policy to promote from within or are higher level jobs filled by experienced people from the outside?
9. Where does this position fit into the organizational structure?
10. Was the incumbent promoted? How long did the previous person hold the job? Why is this position currently open?

11. Could you tell me about the people who would be reporting to me?
12. What is the largest single problem facing your staff now?
13. What is the nature of the training program and supervision given in the early phases of employment?
14. What kinds of assignments might I expect during the first six months on the job?

Preparing For Second Interviews

If all goes well at your initial interview, you may be invited for a second interview. The format for this situation will be similar to your first interview, but may involve more people and more time and be more in depth.

The person who originally interviewed you will probably serve as your guide. You may then interview with the hiring manager and perhaps his or her supervisor. You may also meet and interview with those who work in related functions as well as people you would work with directly.



Illegal Questions

Federal and state legislation protect the rights of applicants from discrimination based on sex, age, race, color, religion, national origin, physical handicap, medical condition, marital status and sexual orientation. Most employers are trained and familiar with these rules but too often, candidates are not.

Although popularly referred to as “illegal” questions, the questions may not so much be illegal as they are inappropriate. Your response to such a question could possibly be used to discriminate against you in the hiring decision, however the burden of proof would be on you.

During an interview, the employer is permitted to ask only those questions that are job-related. For example, while it would be unacceptable for an interviewer to ask a general question like “Do you have any physical disabilities or handicaps?”, the interviewer may ask “Do you have any physical condition or handicap which may limit your ability to perform the job applied for? If yes, what can be done to accommodate your limitation?”

If faced with an inappropriate question during an interview, you may ask the interviewer to restate the question as it relates to the job description or answer in such a way as to provide information that relates only to the work situation. For example, if an employer were to ask

about provisions for child care, an appropriate response could be, “I realize this job requires me to travel, and I can assure you that I will be able to carry out my responsibilities as needed.”

A list of unacceptable and acceptable pre-employment inquiries, prepared by the U.S. Department of Fair Employment and Housing, is available in the Office of Career Services and Cooperative Education.

Telephone Interviews

Upon reviewing your resume, a hiring supervisor or manager may telephone you to discuss your qualifications. In this way, the employer can screen candidates before extending invitations to come for on-site interviews.

Preparing for a Telephone Interview

You will want to be prepared for such a call by keeping a copy of your resume by the phone during the job search. You will have no advanced warning of an employer’s call but should expect it at any time. Keep a pencil and pad handy to record the caller’s name and to take notes during the conversation.

Tips for a Successful Telephone Interview

- If you are caught in the midst of distractions, ask if you can call right back then take whatever action is necessary to improve the circumstances.
- Listen carefully, compose your thoughts, and respond positively. Your frame of mind must be just as appropriate as if you were face to face with the interviewer.
- At the conclusion of the conversation, ask what will happen next and be sure to thank the interviewer for the call.

Using Your Voice Mail Wisely

An important but often overlooked step in the job search process is recording a suitable message on your voice mail. This preliminary contact by employers will give them their first impressions of you. A message that is unclear, has loud music, or is gimmicky, for example, may produce a negative reaction from a prospective employer. A short, simple message is the most professional and desirable. Refer to your voicemail instructions for suggestions.



Also, set up your voice mail for the phone number you are giving to employers, and be sure that the employer will not receive a message that the mailbox is full.

NOTES
