

Interviewing

There is no one trick or foolproof strategy to a successful interview. Like any human interaction, interviews depend on chemistry, so there are no guarantees of success. There are, however, skills to learn and refine that will improve your chances by helping you present your qualifications most effectively. Remember, also, that the interview is one of the best opportunities for you to critique the employer. Pay attention to your own gut feelings about what a job at that organization might be like.

Interview Types

Screening Interviews. The screening interview does just that—screens out candidates whose qualifications don't meet the job specifications. This is the time to articulate your skills and what you accomplished at each previous job experience. The first interview is typically conducted by a human resources professional and will probably focus more on your resume and qualifications than anything else.

Second Interviews. Second round interviews are often more difficult to prepare for because their purpose is more subtle—to determine which candidates will best "fit" with the company. This is also a good chance for you to ask questions about the work environment. This stage may also include reference checks and additional testing.

Case Study Interviews. Consulting firms and certain financial institutions may include a case study or word problem based on a real-life (or simulated) consulting situation as part of their interview process. In this instance, the interviewer will present you with a case study and ask how you would approach and solve the dilemma at hand. You can usually ask relevant questions in your efforts. The interviewer is trying to determine your analytical abilities through this interview method, so try not to get flustered! There are a number of case study books available in the Career Resource Room to help you prepare for these types of interviews.

Behavioral Interviews. In these interviews, the interviewer will ask you to talk about a real situation you've encountered and your response to that situation. A sample question could include, "Tell me of a incident when you failed." The interviewer is attempting to assess how you would behave in certain situations. Stay calm and answer the question as completely as you can.

Stress Interviews. In a stress interview, the interviewer purposely tries to make you uncomfortable to see how you react in stressful situations. The interviewer may seem antagonistic or may, for example, repeatedly and quickly ask you to solve a series of math problems. The trick here is to stay calm and not get defensive. Again, answer the question as best you can.

Telephone Interviews. Usually part of the initial screening process, some employers will conduct phone interviews with out-of-town applicants. Some people find these interviews difficult because you can't see the interviewer's facial expressions and other nonverbal cues. Make sure to have a copy of your resume on hand as well as a pad and pen to jot down questions or ideas that come up throughout the interview. A glass of water may be helpful in case your mouth gets a little dry from all that talking. Remember, make sure to have a professional message on your answering machine in these situations and throughout your job search.

Interview Format

Introduction. This is the time for "small talk" and a chance to establish a bit of common personal ground with the interviewer. Be relaxed but not too chatty. This will show the interviewer that you are professional and comfortable with yourself in a variety of situations.

Qualifications Assessment. This is the traditional pattern of questions by the interviewer and answers by the candidate, and the key time to sell your abilities to the employer. The interviewer wants to answer three questions: Can you do the job? (your skills and experience); Will you do the job? (your interest and aspirations); and, Are you a good fit? (your interpersonal skills and personality). Aim for a casual give-and-take rapport, and be prepared for the unique burden of managing the interview pace. It's up to you to judge how long your answers should be. Think

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carefully about how much time to give each question – some deserve detailed explanations and examples while others just a simple “yes” or “no”.

Opportunity for Questions. Many job seekers make the mistake of overpreparing for the qualifications segment of the interview while nearly ignoring this portion, in which you ask the interviewer about the company. (“I know I want this job; why should I ask questions?”) Thoughtful, knowledgeable questions will not only help you make your final decision about the job, but will also indicate sincere interest and preparation to the interviewer.

Closure. Allow the interviewer to give you the cue for ending the interview, and try to end on a cordial, relaxed note. Take a moment to check that you and the interviewer have all the appropriate materials, and to gather your things before leaving. For instance, it is a good idea to obtain the interviewer’s business card to use as a reference when writing your thank you note. Also, be absolutely clear about the next step – who will be calling whom and when.

Preparation

Know Thyself. You will be under close scrutiny during the interview, so be ready to discuss your skills, abilities, interests and work values. Each of these will be covered explicitly or implicitly during the interview. Review your past career decisions, beginning with your choice of undergraduate school and major. Employers want to hire a decision-maker whose career has taken logical and challenging steps in the past. Focus your career objective. While you may have many interests, keep one objective in mind throughout the interview to assure the employer that you are serious about the field.

Know the Employer. Just as the employer reviews your resume, you should review the organization’s “resume,” in the form of an annual report or mission statement. Many organizations have websites that provide just such information in an easily accessible form. Doing your homework before the interview may distinguish you from other candidates with similar academic and professional qualifications.

Use your contacts. Before your interview, call on your network of contacts for more information. A well-prepared candidate will know the following:

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|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Characteristics of the industry | Recent press coverage of company |
| Names of key people in management | Company reputation |
| Location of the headquarters | Existence of a training program |
| Company’s services or products | Skills expected in this position |
| Organization’s hiring history | Responsibilities of this position |
| Major competitors | Function within company of position |
| Organization’s financial status | Alumni at the organization |
| Latest new reports | |

TEN TIPS FOR THE BIG DAY

1. Rehearse and use positive imaging of successful interview.
2. Arrive on time or 10-15 minutes early.
3. Read company literature while you wait.
4. Introduce yourself first to the interviewer.
5. Have a firm handshake.
6. Lean forward and smile to convey interest.
7. Listen intently.
8. Ask about the next step in the process.
9. Thank the interviewer before you leave.
10. Write a thank you note to everyone you spoke with.

Interviewing (continued)

What to Expect

Interviewers will take note of everything, including but not limited to how you are dressed, when you arrive, your composure and preparation, your manners and your ability to listen. In addition to preparing yourself with information, think about presentation and sketch some sample answers to the questions below.

Typical Interview Questions

Tell me about yourself.
What is your greatest strength and greatest weakness?
What are your long-term career goals?
Why are you applying for this job?
What do you know about this job or organization?
What accomplishment gave you the greatest satisfaction?
Why did you leave your last job?
Tell me about a time when you had to make a decision, but didn't have all the information you needed.
What is the biggest contribution you made to firm X?
What is the biggest mistake you've made?
What aspects of a job do you consider most crucial?
What did you like/dislike about your last job?
How do you organize and plan for major projects?
What can you do for us that someone else can't do?
What was the last book you read? How did it affect you?
If your references were here, what would they say?
What did you learn in school that could be used here?
Was there anything you were afraid I would ask?
Why?

Guidelines for Answering Difficult Questions

Be sincere and honest.
Support your points with specific examples as evidence.
Don't place blame for bad experiences. Stress what you learned from them.
Use good grammar and diction; say "yes," not "yeah."
Emphasize how your skills will make a contribution.
Ask for clarification if you don't understand a question.
Listen carefully to each question before answering.
Stay focused on your original career objective statement.
Offer evidence of your knowledge of the organization.
Don't apologize for any facet of your work/academic history. Emphasize your skills and assets.
Pause briefly rather than using fillers like "um/uh/ah."
Don't punctuate sentences with "like," "you know," etc.
Use strong, decisive language; not "I think/feel/guess" and "pretty good" or "fairly well."
Assert yourself with confidence, not arrogance.

N EXERCISE ELEVEN

Which of these questions fill you with dread? Which ones have you faced before? On a separate piece of paper, write out answers to the first 5-10 questions.

Still concerned? See Guidelines above.

Evaluating the Interview

Employer's Evaluation of You. People get hired usually for one of two reasons: because they will add value in the short or long term, or because the interviewer likes them. Both of these criteria, particularly personal chemistry, can be difficult to judge, but it may help to keep in mind how you are being evaluated. Employers ask themselves the following questions:

How will this person fit my organization's team/style?
Does this candidate show enthusiasm for the job?
Would he/she be a good candidate for advancement?
Does he/she show an appreciation for my organization?
Does the candidate have the profile I'm looking for?
Does this candidate have individual goals that might add energy to our work?

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Your Evaluation of the Employer. While you may be most concerned with your own performance, take some time to consider how the company fared. Think about the following questions while impressions of the company are still fresh:

What is the organization's general character?
Is its reputation well deserved?
Will you enjoy working with the people there?
Do you respect their abilities?
What is the organization's future?

Will your work be challenging and interesting?
How is performance judged and by whom?
What are the criteria for advancement?
Does the organization's work interest you?
What are the organization's budget constraints?

Follow Up

Follow up to an interview is crucial to furthering your chances of getting the job and to improving your interview skills for the future. Immediately after the interview, write down all the questions you were asked – you will probably hear them again. Try to recall which ones you answered well and which answers needed improvement. Within 48 hours of the interview, write thank you notes to everyone who interviewed you. This shows that you recognize the protocol of professionalism and gives you the opportunity to reiterate your qualifications and desire for the position.

Once you have found out the result of the interview, it may be helpful to request some feedback. If possible, ask the interviewer what you did well in the interview and where you can improve. For on-campus interviews, meet with the OCS Manager of Recruitment to hear any feedback recruiters have given.