

INTERVIEWING

What is an interview? An interview is a structured conversation between you and an employer where you ask each other questions to determine if you would be a good fit for the job.

What do they want to know about me?

- There are two main pieces of information an employer wants to get during an interview:
 1. *Why you want the job*
 2. *Why they should hire you*
 - All the questions the employer asks during the interview are designed to get more detailed information about these two things.
 - So, to have a successful interview, you must convince the employer of these two things.
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SUCCESSFUL INTERVIEWING: THE BASICS

What's the interview all about? At this point, they've probably reviewed your resume and cover letter, and if they've called you for an interview, it's because they've determined you're at least minimally qualified for the job. So now, in addition to your qualifications, the interview is about determining if you will "fit" into the organization.

So how do you make a good impression? There are 5 main ways:

1. Be Professional.

- **Dress the part.** A suit (for both men and women) is usually preferable. Make sure hair, makeup, jewelry, and accessories are conservative and professional.
- **Be on-time.** Allow extra time for travel, and check in with the receptionist 5-10 minutes before the interview.
- **Be courteous and respectful** to everyone, including the receptionist, custodian, landscaper, etc. You never know who will be giving an opinion on whether or not you should be hired.
- **Bad smells can ruin an otherwise good interview.** Brush your teeth and use mouthwash before an interview, NEVER smoke before an interview, and use very little or no perfume or cologne.
- **Turn off your cell phone!** Having to interrupt the interview to silence your phone is NOT a good thing!
- **Use a firm handshake** to greet people, and always stand to greet someone.

2. Be Prepared.

- **Know the interview location.** Find it ahead of time, even if you think you'll be able to find it easily.
- **Know the job description.** Know what the job will entail, and what qualifications they're looking for.
- **Know the company.** Do as much research as you can before the interview. More on this later!
- **Know what questions to expect** (at least the standard ones), and what the employer is looking for.
- **Know what information you want to share** about yourself.
- **Know what questions you want to ask the employer.** More on this later!
- **Bring your materials.** This usually means a copy of your resume for everyone you'll meet (plus some extras), a pen and paper to write if you need to, a folder or binder to keep everything in, and anything else they ask you to bring.

3. Be Friendly.

- **Don't be so serious** that you forget to be yourself. They want to hire a *person*, not just a set of qualifications.
- **Smile! (And smile often!)** This will make you seem more friendly and likeable.
- **Be comfortable and confident.** This will make the employer more comfortable, and increase your likeability.

4. Be Engaged.

- Being engaged helps convince the employer of your interest in the job.
- **Make frequent eye contact** with everyone in the room.
- **Pay careful attention** to everything that is being said.
- **Ask questions!** If you don't, it will seem like you're not really interested.
- **Sit up straight** and lean slightly forward towards the interviewer.

5. Be Gracious.

- **Thank the interviewers** (several times) for their time and for this opportunity. Be sincere!
- **Send a thank you note afterward** (or thank you email) to leave a good impression. Send it as soon after the interview as possible, and no later than the next morning.

TYPES OF INTERVIEWS

There are several types of interviews you could encounter, depending on the particular employer's hiring procedures.

One-on-One Interview: This is the traditional, one-on-one, face-to-face interview. You may have only one of these, or you may have several one-on-one interviews with different people on the same day.

Panel/Committee Interview: This is very similar to the one-on-one interview, except that you will be interviewed by several people at the same time. When answering questions, make sure to make eye contact with everyone equally!

Group Interview: This consists of you and other applicants all being interviewed at the same time. There are several things that could happen in a group interview:

- The "interview" may really be a presentation by the employer, followed by a question and answer session. There will likely be other interviewers in the room who are watching the behaviors of the applicants. In this setting, the best thing you can do to make sure you are noticed is to show you are paying close attention to the presentation, and ask intelligent questions about the company and the position.
- You may take turns answering standard interview questions. Sometimes you may all answer the same questions, or sometimes you may answer different questions.
- You may have to do an activity or perform a task, often with the whole group or with a smaller group. Generally, the employer is looking to see how you work with a team and what role you take on, such as whether you emerge as the group leader, or whether you barely contribute.

Telephone Interview: This is an interview done over the phone, with one or more interviewers, and usually, standard interview questions. This is sometimes done as a first interview, to narrow down the applicants before the in-person interviews. It also may be used for out-of-state applicants. (But, we do recommend that you go in person, whenever it is even remotely possible to do so. In-person interviews leave a much stronger impression, and if you go, it will show your commitment to the job.) A phone interview will probably never be your final interview. Here are some tips:

- Smile, even though they can't see you- they will hear it in your voice.
- Find a quiet, isolated place to do the interview where you will have NO INTERRUPTIONS.
- Be prepared and waiting for the call- if you miss the call, you may not get another chance.

Lunch/Dinner Interview: This is when the employer takes you out to a meal as part of your interview. Sometimes, this is the "informal" interview, where the employer is trying to see more of your personality, and will have more casual conversation with you. Sometimes, this is the main event, and you will be asked the standard interview questions. Here are some tips:

- Don't get TOO relaxed- remember, it is still an interview.
- Use your best table manners, and in the case of a fancy meal, make sure you know your formal dining etiquette.
- Don't order anything messy or that you have to eat with your hands.
- Don't order the most expensive thing on the menu. To get an idea of your price range, see what other people are ordering first.
- Drinking alcohol is usually not recommended, even if the interviewer is. You want to be at the top of your game.

Performance Interview: This is where you're asked to actually DO something besides just answer questions, such as give a presentation, read an article and then take a test, etc. They do this to assess your ability to do a certain part of the job, or your ability to learn the job. Hopefully, you will be told ahead of time about any of these things, and can prepare accordingly, but sometimes they will be a surprise. In that case, retain your composure and do the best that you can.

Often, for a professional job, your interview will be a half day or full day, and may include a variety of the interview types listed above. You will probably interview with many different people, and may also be given a tour.

HOW TO PREPARE FOR THE INTERVIEW

1. **Assess yourself.** Spend time thinking about who you are, why you want this job, and why they should hire you. Figure out what your strengths and weaknesses are. Figure out why you decided to pursue this career field in the first place, why this particular job is right for you, and why this company is right for you. Clarify what your goals are. Figure out what makes you special and unique- what you bring to the table that other candidates may not. Figure out why you are the BEST person for this job. (You'll have to answer questions about all of these things during the interview.)
2. **Research the company.** At the very least, you should be familiar with the information on the job description, and the information on the company's website. Also, talk to current employees if you can, search for articles written about

the company, etc. Once you've done your research, prepare the questions you want to ask the employer.

- *Some examples of things to know:* What all they do, who their customers are, their size, what the company culture is like, what kind of training they provide, how many locations they have and where they are, how well the company has been performing, what the organizational structure is, who their competitors are, the typical career path for someone in your field

3. **Know the standard questions** and be prepared to answer them. You may still get an off-the-wall question that you weren't prepared for, but if you seem surprised by a standard question, you'll give away the fact that you didn't prepare well. Some of the most common questions and how to answer them are discussed in the next section.
4. **Practice, practice, practice!** A staff member at the Career Center will do a practice interview with you. This interview can also be videotaped so that you can see how you presented yourself, and hear how you answered the questions. You'll be given helpful suggestions for how to improve your answers and your overall performance. Also, print out lists of sample questions and have your friends and family ask them to you. The more practice you get, the better you'll do at the actual interview.

THE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Basic advice for answering ANY interview question:

- Know what the question is REALLY asking
- Keep your answers relevant – to the question and the job
- Elaborate (but remember to keep it relevant)
- Give examples to support the things you're saying
- Keep your answers positive
- Don't talk about personal information
- Focus on what YOU can do for THEM

TYPES OF QUESTIONS

Most interview questions fall into one of these categories:

- Basic questions about you and your qualifications
 - Behavioral questions
 - Scenario questions
 - Stress questions

BASIC QUESTIONS ABOUT YOU AND YOUR QUALIFICATIONS

How to answer these questions: The basic formula

1. Present your main idea **FIRST**
2. Elaborate on your main idea
3. Support your main idea with an example

“Tell me about yourself.”

- What they're really saying: *“I reviewed a lot of resumes... so remind me who you are and why you're here, and tell me why I should pay attention to the rest of your interview!”*
- **Answer:** If you think about the interview like an essay, this is your introductory paragraph, so introduce your two main topic areas- why they should hire you and why you want the job. Give an overview of your qualifications (resume) and interest in the position. Remember, even though they've probably already looked at your resume, that doesn't mean they remember what's on it. Don't be afraid to remind them what your qualifications are. You can talk about your education, related experience, skills, characteristics, and accomplishments. Tell them a little about why you've chosen this career, and why you want this job. You can choose to tell the “story” of how your experiences and goals have led you to apply for this job, but do NOT tell your life story, and leave out unrelated personal information. They don't need to know where you were born or what your marital status is!

“Why are you interested in this position?”

- What they're really saying: *“Convince me that you really want this job so I know you will be motivated to work hard and stay with us awhile.”*
- **Answer:** There are actually 3 separate questions you need to answer:
 - Why **this field**?
 - Why **this position** over another in the same field?
 - Why **this company** over another company?

You must convince them of your genuine interest in all 3! They want to see commitment to your field, understand how this position fits in with your goals, and know that you've researched the company and have specific reasons why you want to work for them instead of another company where you could do similar work.

“Why should we hire you?”

- What they're really saying: *“What are you going to do for us that's better than what the other candidates are going to do for us? Tell us why we should choose YOU over the other qualified people we're interviewing for this job.”*
- Answer: This is really THE most important question; it is what you're here to tell them. They don't just want to know what your basic qualifications are, they want to know what unique qualifications you have- what you're going to bring to the table that the other candidates won't. This is usually the last question asked. So, briefly summarize your main qualifications, then really hone in on what makes you the BEST person for the job. This is often the hardest question for people to answer, because they come into the interview not really knowing why they're the best person for the job. If you haven't convinced yourself, you're not going to be able to convince the employer.

“What is your greatest strength and greatest weakness?”

- What they're really saying: *“We want to see that you're very self-aware of your abilities and the areas in which you can really contribute, as well as the areas in which you might need some additional support or development.”*
- Answer:
 - **Strength**: Pick something that will really help you excel at THAT job. Follow it with a supporting example.
 - **Weakness**: There are 3 main strategies for picking a weakness. You can pick a weakness that comes from a strength, like if you're so detail-oriented that it sometimes takes you longer to get things done, but these answers can sometimes come out sounding fake. You can also pick a weakness that would have little or no impact on your ability to do the job at hand. Alternatively, you can give an honest assessment of what you anticipate to be the most challenging thing for you in your field, which is the answer the employer is really looking for. In any of these, you need to finish your answer by telling them either what steps you are taking to improve upon your weakness, or what strategies you use to work around it effectively.

“Tell me about your experience with...”

- What they're really saying: *“We want more information about how much and what kind of experience you have doing these things that you'll need to be able to do as part of this job.”*
- Answer: Talk about what you've done, making sure you address each of the things they asked about. Elaborate and give supportive examples of related results/accomplishments. If you have NO experience with something, be honest about it, but also point out similar things you've done, and/or education or training you've received in those areas, and explain how these have prepared you to quickly learn the thing they asked about.

“How do you feel about...?” or “How well do you work in...?”

- What they're really saying: *“This is the how it's going to be if you work here. We want to know how you're going to handle that.”*
- Common examples: “How well do you work in a fast-paced environment?” “How do you feel about being supervised?” “How do you work under pressure?” “How do you feel about having to start at the bottom and work your way up?” “How do you work with a team?”
- Answer: Since they're telling you this is what you can expect, you always want to respond positively. Of course, anyone can give a positive response and not mean it, so it is really important to give an example here of a time you've done something similar to what they're asking you about. This will help *prove* that you can handle it.

Examples of other common questions:

- What are your long term goals?
- What concerns you the most about your ability to be successful in this job?
- How would your previous supervisor describe you?
- If we hire you, what additional training will we need to provide you with?
- Do you plan on continuing your education in the future?
- Why did you leave your past jobs?
- How well did you do in school? Why?
- What course in school did you like the least or do the worst in? Why?
- How well do you feel like your education has prepared you for your career?

BEHAVIORAL QUESTIONS

A **behavioral question** is a question that asks you to tell a story or give a specific example of something. They ask you to do this because of the idea that **your past performance will predict your future behavior**. So, the way you did something in the past is the same way you will do it at this job.

With these questions, it's really important to know they're really asking. So, for example, if they ask:

“Tell me about a time you encountered a problem in a previous job, and how you handled it.”

- What they're really saying: *“Show us how you will solve problems that come up at this job by giving us an example of how you solved a problem in the past.”*

These questions sound like they're just asking you to tell them a story about something. But since they're looking to see HOW you do something, the part of the story they really want the most details about is what you did- the action you took.

How to answer: the formula

- **STAR Method:**
 - **S**ituation – Give a *brief* background story so that they understand the context of your example.
 - **T**ask or Problem – Briefly describe what it was you were dealing with in the example.
 - **A**ction – Give them *lots of details* about what you did you to handle the task or problem.
 - **R**esults – Tell them what the outcome was. Examples with positive outcomes are usually better!

Tip: Prepare for *categories of questions*, rather than specific questions. For example, a common category is problem-solving. You may get asked a behavioral question looking at how you solve problems that is asked in a number of ways, such as “Tell me about a difficult situation you’ve encountered,” “Describe a problem you had at work,” or “What is the most stressful thing you’ve had to deal with?” Think of a couple examples you could use for each category.

Common Categories of Behavioral Questions:

- Problem-solving
- Setting and achieving goals
- Conflict resolution
- Time management/Prioritizing
- Taking initiative
- Adaptability
- Innovation
- Decision-making
- Integrity
- Leadership
- Persuading people
- Teamwork

Behavioral questions are the big trend in interviewing. Some employers do Behavioral Interviews, which consist entirely of behavioral questions. Even in regular interviews, you will almost definitely see at a least a couple of these.

SCENARIO QUESTIONS

A **scenario question** is when you are given a hypothetical situation and asked what you would do in that situation. The scenario will most likely be something that could (or will) occur in that job you're applying for, and is usually asked to see if you have the skills needed for the job or not.

How to prepare: Anticipate different situations that could potentially occur at this type of job, and think about how you would handle them. Do your research on how professionals in that job are typically supposed to handle those kinds of situations.

STRESS QUESTIONS

A **stress question** is a question designed to test how well you perform under pressure. The interviewer will ask you something unexpected, see how well you react, how well you think on your feet, and what thought processes you use. Examples: “Sell me this pen,” or “How many gas stations are there in Idaho?”

How to answer: For questions like the gas station example, they want to see the thought processes you use in solving problems. So, to answer these types of questions, think about what factors you would consider if you HAD to make an *educated* guess about how many gas stations there are. Think out loud. Remember, they're not looking for the actual answer to the question; they just want to see how you go about figuring it out. The worst things you can do are to give up, say you don't know, or just take a wild guess. Always retain your composure and put in your best effort.

“DO YOU HAVE ANY QUESTIONS FOR US?”

Hint: The correct answer to this question is *always* YES!

Asking questions is important for a few reasons:

- It shows you're really interested in the job
- It allows you to interact more with the interviewer
- It restores the balance of conversation (otherwise, it's not a conversation, it's you talking the whole time)
- It makes you more memorable (because they had more interaction with you)
- It helps you determine if this job is really a good fit for you

What should you ask? The best questions demonstrate your research and interest, by referencing something you've learned about the company or position, and asking for more *in-depth* information about that subject. Examples of topics: The mission or goals of the company, what characteristics they look for in an ideal employee, what a typical day on the job is like, details about the tasks listed on the job description, opportunities for professional development

What SHOULDN'T you ask about?

- Things that you should already know from the job description or the website
 - Money or benefits (Makes it look like that's all you care about. Save this until after you've gotten the offer.)
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WHAT WENT WRONG?

Why didn't I get the job? Here are reasons, some funny, but all true, that employers say interviews frequently go wrong:

Problems with your answers:

- **Answers were too short.** "I didn't learn a lot about you or why I should hire you. It seemed like you weren't very interested in getting this job since there wasn't much of anything you wanted to tell me."
- **Rambled and didn't give me focused answers.** "I'm your potential employer, not your therapist. I don't need to know your life story. Only tell me the things that have to do with why I should hire you."
- **Didn't seem prepared.** "Why were you caught off-guard when I asked questions like why we should hire you? Isn't that why you're here, to convince me why I should hire you? If you were serious, you would have prepared."
- **Didn't answer some questions.** "Yeah, some questions are hard. But you should have just done your best anyway. If I hired you and gave you difficult tasks to do, would you just give up on those too?"
- **Doesn't really seem to have goals or a sense of direction.** "Why haven't you thought about what you want to achieve professionally? If you're not working towards a goal, why do you want this job? Just because you need money to pay the rent?"
- **Talked negatively about previous employers.** "Geez. Is this the way you're going to talk about ME in the future?"
- **Gave reasons to doubt your ability to do the job.** "So you're applying for a customer service job, and your greatest weakness is not having a lot of patience?"

Problems with your level of preparedness:

- **Arrived late** (and perhaps gave some excuse about how you got lost). "You obviously don't respect me or my time. And if you didn't know where our office was, why would you wing it on the day of the interview?"
- **Didn't know enough about the company.** "If you don't know anything about our company, how do you know you want to work here?"
- **Seemed caught off-guard when I asked if you had questions for me.** Didn't have questions prepared, or didn't ask any at all. "So you're telling me you want this job, but there's nothing you want to know?"

Problems with your overall presentation:

- **Not dressed appropriately-** either not dressed up enough, or not dressed conservatively, or had tattoos or body piercings, wore glitter eye shadow, etc. "If you're not serious about impressing me, what *will* you take seriously?"
- **Didn't have a firm, confident handshake.** "Your handshake represents your overall confidence level. I don't want to hire someone who's not confident in himself."
- **Didn't display good oral communication skills.** Had trouble expressing ideas clearly, or had poor grammar, diction, etc.

Problems with your attitude:

- **"What's in it for me?" attitude.** Asked questions about salary and benefits, not about the job or the company. "Do you really want to contribute to the company, or are you just interested in the paycheck? How into this job can you really be if the first thing you want to know is when you can start taking vacations?"
- **Didn't seem interested.** I'm not convinced he really wants the job. "Why should I hire somebody who doesn't really want to be here? You might quit right away. Even if you don't, you're probably not going to be very fun to work with!"
- **Lacked confidence and poise.** "If you don't act like you can do this job, how am I supposed to believe you can do it? I get that you're nervous, but I still need to be impressed by you!"
- **Didn't seem appreciative.** "There are plenty of other people who want this job, and would appreciate me taking the time to interview them! Why are you wasting my time?"
- **Seems to have a sense of entitlement;** not willing to start at the bottom and work up. "You seem to think that since you just graduated from college, someone should hand you a management position. Your degree will help you get your foot in the door, but you still have to prove yourself to us, which will probably mean starting out doing the jobs that no one else wants to do, and doing it with a smile!"

Just because you didn't get the job doesn't necessarily mean you did anything wrong- there may just have been a lot of other very qualified applicants. Don't give up! Perfect your skills, and keep trying!

The Career Center can help! We can answer questions you have about interviewing, and do practice interviews with you to help you prepare for the real thing. To make an appointment, call 426-1747.