

Interviewing Skills



Career Services
Department



Twin Cities
Campus

Introduction

For many people, one of the most stressful parts of the job search process is interviewing. In these situations, candidates often feel a mixture of excitement, fear and nervousness. The good news is that almost anyone can learn how to interview well by following the techniques and suggestions in this packet. Read on and learn how to master the art of interviewing.

Why Organizations Interview

By the time you reach the interview stage, the employer has usually narrowed the selection to just a few candidates. Generally, the only people who get interviews are those who the employer feels are qualified for the position. The interview is used to confirm that you have the skills necessary to do the job, and to narrow the selection to a final candidate. Employers use the interview to gauge your enthusiasm for the job and their organization. Furthermore, an interview enables an employer to evaluate a candidate's personality, appearance, and communication skills. In essence, it is a time for both you and the employer to exchange information and determine if you are a "good fit" for the position.

Preparing for an Interview

Preparation is the single most important thing you can do to ensure a successful interview. People who spend time preparing have a much easier time talking about their skills and how they can benefit the organization. Additionally, their answers generally have more depth and show greater thoughtfulness. In short, being prepared really pays off!

Research the Organization

Researching an organization allows you to understand what the organization is all about and how your talents will benefit the employer. Here are some basic questions you should try to answer through your research:

- What services and products does the organization offer?
- What is the organization's mission?
- What does the organization value in its employees?
- What is the organization's financial status?
- Who are the organization's main competitors?
- What trends are taking place in the field you are exploring?
- What skills does the position require?
- What goals does the employer have for the person in the position?

To get answers to these and other questions:

- Look at the organization's web page.
- Search the internet for related information.
- Look in professional journals.
- Read newspapers and magazine articles.
- Utilize professional organizations and their publications.
- Ask Career Services for help.

HOT Tip – When using the web, use several different search engines to find related information. Also, when looking at an organization’s web page, make sure to read their mission statement.

Self Knowledge

Self knowledge is crucial to interviewing well. You must be able to articulate your goals, talents, skills, experiences and accomplishments. Developing an effective resume and cover letter will go a long way in helping you define what you can bring to the table. You should be able to answer the following questions:

- What are my long term and short term career goals?
- What do I want out of this position?
- What attracts me to the job and organization?
- How do my talents and skills fit with this position?
- What are my strengths and weaknesses?
- What are my accomplishments?

Anticipate Questions and Think Through Your Answers

Anticipating questions allows you to ponder your responses in advance and provide well thought out answers. Most interviews will cover some standard questions. For example, you can bet that sometime in the interview you will be asked: “Why do you want this job?” It’s a lot easier to answer that question if you have given it some thought beforehand. See a list of common interview questions on page 10 of this packet.

It’s easy to anticipate standard questions, but what can really set you apart is anticipating questions that aren’t general to all jobs. The key here is to ask yourself, “What is the employer looking for, and what questions will they ask in order to determine if I meet their requirements?”

Be Prepared with Specific Examples

Today, many interviewers are trained to conduct Behavior Based Interviews. In this style of interviewing, employers are seeking explicit examples of past performance. The premise is that the best predictor of future behavior is past behavior. In other words, employers don’t want to hear you say you have certain skills, they want you to provide specific examples that **SHOW** you have those skills. Here are some examples of Behavior Based Interview questions:

- Please give me an example of a time when you had to complete multiple tasks in a short time period. How did you handle the situation and how did you prioritize your assignments?
- Please give me an example of a project or improvement that you initiated and executed.
- Tell me about a time when you worked on a team with people who had significantly different personalities or styles. What was your role on the team and how did you go about accomplishing your goals?

A good answer should have three parts. Think of it as a “STAR” response.

1. **ST: Situation or Task.** Describe the context in which the behavior or action took place.
2. **A: Action.** Logically take the interviewer through the steps you took to handle the situation or resolve the problem. Keep your answer clear and concise.
3. **R: Results.** Explain your results Even if you weren't as successful as you'd hoped, it's important to make it clear that you understand the implications of the outcome and why it happened.

Make A List Of Things You Want The Interviewer To Know About You

Bring to the interview a list of things you want the interviewer to know about you. Each of us has special talents that we feel we can bring to an organization. The interviewer’s questions may not prompt you to relate some of your most valuable skills. Your list can help you remember to include them in your answers when appropriate.

Develop Your Own Questions

Part of an interview’s purpose is to allow candidates the chance to gain enough information about the job and organization to determine if the position will be a good fit for them. Since you could be spending a significant amount of time engaged in the job, you should want to know as much as possible about the position. Therefore, it makes sense that you would have questions for the employer.

Many employers assume that if you don’t have any questions about the job, you either don’t know enough about the position to ask questions or you just don’t care about the job at all. In many cases, neither of these two assumptions is true. Most often, the candidate is anxious and can’t recall his or her questions at the time of the interview. To prevent this situation, it’s best to write down your questions in advance. Some questions you can ask include:

- What is a typical day like?
- How will you determine whether or not the person in this position is successful?
- What long range plans do you have for the position and department?
- How would you describe your organization’s culture?
- What is the next step in the hiring process?

For more examples of questions to ask in interviews, see page 10 of this packet.

Practice, Practice, Practice

Ask friends or family members to help you with mock interviews. Mock interviews give you the opportunity to practice articulating your talents. They help you recognize bad habits and distracting mannerisms such as “run on answers” and staring at the floor. Finally, practice allows you to get used to interviewing and gives you more confidence when talking to a potential employer.

Dressing for an Interview

Before you introduce yourself, before you shake someone's hand, and before you answer any questions, your appearance is going to give the interviewer an impression of you. It is up to you whether or not that impression is going to a positive or negative one. Do not make the mistake of under dressing. It's much better to be over dressed and show that you are taking the job seriously rather than be under dressed and display a sense of indifference.

Hear are some tips on dress etiquette for interviews:

Men and Women

- Conservative two-piece business suit (solid dark blue or gray is best)
- Conservative shirt/blouse
- Clean, polished conservative shoes
- Well-groomed hairstyle
- Clean, trimmed fingernails
- Minimal cologne or perfume
- Empty pockets--no tinkling coins
- No gum, candy or cigarettes
- Light briefcase or portfolio case
- No visible body piercing (nose rings, eyebrow rings, etc.)

Women

DO'S

- Minimal use of makeup (it should not be too noticeable)
- Conservative hosiery that matches your skirt or is at or near skin color (and no runs!)
- No purses, small or large; carry a briefcase instead
- If you wear nail polish (not required), use clear or a conservative color

DON'TS

- Excessive jewelry
- Black/White stockings
- Boots, gym shoes, shoes with 3-inch+ heels

Men

DO'S

- Necktie should be silk with a conservative pattern
- Dark shoes (black lace-ups are best)
- Dark socks (black is best)
- Get a haircut; short hair always fares best in interviews
- No rings other than wedding ring or college ring

DON'TS

- No faddish ties
- Earrings, face piercings, or gold chains
- Shirts without collars
- Boots or gym shoes

Stages of the Interview

Most interviews follow a format like the one listed below. Recognizing the various stages will help you navigate an interview and provide appropriate answers.

1. *Breaking the Ice*

- Getting acquainted.
- Small talk to make each other feel comfortable.

2. *General Information Gathering*

- Interviewer asks questions to expand on information given in resume.
- Interviewer surveys the applicant's background, goals, and areas of interest.

3. *Focusing*

- Applicant directs interviewer to her/his strengths and how they relate to the needs and goals of the site.
- Applicant asks specific questions about the responsibilities of the position and articulates how his/her abilities and background match.

4. *Closure*

- Interviewer summarizes the organization's needs and goals, confirms applicant's interest in the site and discusses next phase of the search process.
- Applicant summarizes strengths that fit the organization's needs, confirms any follow-up meetings, and asks for the interviewer's information/business card.

5. *Follow-Up*

- Applicant sends a thank you letter (*no later than 24 hours after the interview*) to the interviewer indicating continued interest and highlighting strengths.
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The Day of the Interview

Get a Good Night's Rest and Eat Well

This may seem like common sense but it's important. No one can put their best foot forward if they are exhausted and have an upset stomach. Interviewing takes concentration and thought.

Arrive Early

Give yourself extra time to reach your appointment and arrive early. Don't put yourself in a situation where you are late because you haven't anticipated the traffic or you get lost. Being late to an interview is discourteous and shows a lack of professionalism. However, don't report to the office too early either. Arriving a half hour before an interview can make the interviewer uneasy and feel compelled to adjust his or her schedule. Arriving ten to fifteen minutes early is perfect. Once you arrive, take a moment to take a deep breath and mentally prepare for the meeting. This will allow to you calm down and focus.

During the Interview

Pay Attention to Nonverbals

Because many candidates experience communication difficulties in the course of an interview, it is important to understand that communication is more than just what is said. Often it is the nonverbal communication that we are least aware of that speaks the loudest. Following are the top five non-verbal communication skills, ranked in order of importance:

- ***Eye Contact*** - Unrivaled in importance! If you look away while listening, it shows lack of interest and a short attention span. If you fail to maintain eye contact while speaking, at a minimum it shows lack of confidence in what you are saying and at worst may send the subtle message that you are lying. Do not assume that you have good eye contact. Ask, watch, and then practice. Ask others if you ever do not have proper eye contact. Some people maintain excellent eye contact while listening, but lose eye contact when speaking or vice versa. Just sit down with a friend and practice until you are comfortable maintaining genuine, continuous eye contact.
- ***Facial Expressions*** - It is amazing that many interviewees are totally unaware of the gloomy, bewildered, or even mildly hysterical expressions plastered on their faces during the entire course of interviews! Try to be cognizant of different facial expressions, especially negative expressions, that you regularly make. Again, ask for feedback about this from a trusted friend or family member. Don't forget to smile! You do not need to smile continuously during the interview, but remember to keep coming back to it.
- ***Posture*** - Posture signals your confidence and power potential. Stand tall, walk tall, and most of all, sit tall. When standing, stand up straight. When you are seated, make sure you sit at the front edge of the chair, leaning slightly forward. This will speak volumes about your interest and motivation.
- ***Gestures*** - Contrary to popular belief, gestures should be used sparingly during the interview. There is no need to use artificial gestures to try to heighten the importance of the issue at hand. It will merely come off as theatrical. When you do use gestures, make sure that they are natural and meaningful.
- ***Space*** - Recognize the boundaries of your personal space and that of others. If you are typical of most Americans, it ranges between 30 and 36 inches. Be prepared, however, not to back up or move away from someone who has a personal space that is smaller than your own. Hang in there, take a deep breath, and relax.

Stay on Track

Keep your answers short and to the point unless you are asked to elaborate. It's good to give detailed answers, but if you ramble on for long periods of time, you risk losing the attention of your audience, or coming off as unfocused.

Answer the Questions

One of the biggest complaints of interviewers is that candidates don't answer their questions. Rather they talk around them or give unrelated examples. Make sure you listen to questions carefully and answer the questions asked. If you are unsure what the interviewer is asking, it's ok to ask them to clarify.

Be Energetic

Remember, the employer is looking to see if you are excited about the position. Being energetic shows that you want the job!

Give Examples and Outline Accomplishments

Providing examples and explaining accomplishments provides evidence of your skills and can set you apart from other candidates. They make you more memorable and demonstrate past behavior.

When giving examples use the "STAR" response outlined earlier.

ST: Situation or Task - Describe the situation or task required

A: Action - Explain what action you took

R: Results - Outline the result

When outlining accomplishments

- Describe exactly what you were able to do
- Explain how well you were able to do it
- Describe the impact your activities had on the organization

Be Professional

Being professional means being polite, courteous, and tactful. More than that, it means being prepared and presenting yourself in a way that conveys competence and interest in the position.

Ask Questions

Make sure you ask questions. After all, you want to know as much as possible about the position, and asking questions shows you have an interest in the job. For examples of questions, please see page 10 of this packet.

After the Interview - Thank You Letters

All interviews should be followed up with thank you letters. Thank you letters are probably the most underestimated and neglected part of the job search process. They show that you are courteous and professional. Just as important, they allow you one more opportunity to remind the interviewer why you would be the best person for the position.

If you are interviewed by a group of people, you should send a thank you note to each person who took part in the interview.

HOT Tip - Ask for your interviewers' business cards or write down the interviewers' titles and the proper spelling of their names before leaving the interview.

Timing

Try to send the letters **within 24 hours** of the interviews, a maximum of two days later.

Length of your letter

Keep it to a brief page. Do not stress over it too much – it is more important just to send something quickly than to delay doing it for days.

Personalize each letter

- When interviewing with several people at one organization, take a few seconds between interviews to jot down some notes about each conversation. Use these notes when writing individualized thank you letters to each interviewer.
- When sending letters to several people at an organization, each letter does not need to be completely different from the rest, but you should not send identical letters to several people. Your letters will generally all end up in your file in the Human Resources department.

Content of your letter

- Thank the interviewer for his or her time, and reiterate your interest in the position, and your enthusiasm for the organization.
- **Whenever possible, say something that will help your interviewer remember you as an individual from amongst all the candidates:**
 1. addressing a topic of particular interest (to your interviewer or to you) that arose during the conversation, especially where that topic reflects favorably on your job-related skills (for example, you talked for 15 minutes about your research on the health care industry); **OR:**
 2. addressing an interviewer's specific concern in greater detail than was possible during the actual interview (for example, the interviewer seemed concerned that you did not have the technical skills necessary for the job); **OR:**
 3. re-emphasizing a skill or strength important to that interviewer (for example, the interviewer showed a particular interest in your experience with a certain type of patient).

Carefully proofread

Proofread each letter. As back up, have another person look it over as well.

Some Common Interview Questions

- Why do you want this job?
- What skills can you bring to the position?
- Tell me about yourself?
- How would you describe yourself?
- What motivates you?
- How has your education prepared you for this position?
- What courses did you like best and why?
- In what ways do you think you can contribute to the organization?
- Tell me/us about a time when you faced a significant challenge? How did you address the situation and what happened.
- What are your strengths?
- What are your weaknesses?
- What type of environments are you most comfortable in?
- Under what conditions do you work best?
- Give me /us an example of an accomplishment you are especially proud of?
- What role do you usually play on a team?
- What are your professional goals?
- Describe a time when you showed initiative?
- Tell me/us about a conflict you experienced with a coworker or supervisor and how you handled the situation?
- What are your salary requirements?

Questions you might consider asking during the interview

- What is a typical day like?
- How will you determine whether or not the person in this position is successful?
- What long range plans do you have for the position and department?
- What are the best and most challenging aspects of this position?
- How would you describe your organization's culture?
- What is the next step in the hiring process?
- Who would be my direct supervisor?
- What kind of training or orientation would be provided?
- What are some of the objectives you would like accomplished in this job? For this organization?
- How would you describe the relationship between staff members?
- How does your organization encourage diversity?
- What are some of the challenges that your organization faces?
- What significant changes do you see in the near future?
- What is the next step in the hiring process?