

ACING THE INTERVIEW

An interview is a conversation between a job seeker and an employer. For the employer, it is an opportunity to see if you, the job seeker, would be a good candidate for the job. For you, it is an opportunity to judge if the employer and the position would fit your career objective.



The interview is your chance to market your skills, knowledge and abilities to the employer. While the resume gets you the interview, it is the interview that will get you the job!

TYPES OF INTERVIEWS

Depending on the size of the organization and the kind of the position you are seeking, the interview process may have multiple steps.

The Screening Interview:

For most jobs today your first interview will be a “screening.” Employers today are overwhelmed with job candidates. Screening interviews are used to select a pool of candidates to go on to the next stage of the interview process.

Screening interviews may be conducted over the phone or in-person. Sometimes organizations have candidates respond to a series of questions via computer as a means of screening likely candidates.

Today, an increasing number of organizations are using telephone interviews as a method of screening. Most often you will be telephoned ahead of time to schedule the telephone interview. However, some phone interviews may come without warning, so you’ll want to be sure that your job search records are organized and you can get to them when a call comes in.

The telephone interview may be short and may seem more like a business conversation. However, don’t forget that the employer is using this information to decide whether or not to grant a personal interview. To increase your chances for success take care to prepare for the telephone interview as thoroughly as you would an in-person interview. (See other sections of this tip sheet)

Make sure that during the telephone interview, you are not engaging in other activities that could distract you from the interview. Take the call in a quiet room free from household noises.

- Be sure to smile when you are speaking – the interviewer will “hear” your confidence and enthusiasm.
- Sit up straight in a chair or stand during the telephone interview so that your voice projects.
- Remember, the interviewer is either taking notes by hand or keying information into a computer, so don’t be concerned about periods of silence.
- DO have your resume in front of you for reference, but don’t read off of it word for word. You should sound natural and confident. Also, be careful not to rustle paper.

The Second Interview:

The second interview can come in all sorts of shapes and sizes. It may consist of an interview with one person, such as the Human Resources or hiring manager, be part of a series of interviews, or take the form of a panel or team interview. Regardless of the specific type of interview, the following stages of preparation apply:

BEFORE THE INTERVIEW

Do a self-assessment.

Determine your short- and long-range career goals. Identify your skills, abilities, personal qualities, strengths, weaknesses, values and interests. Determine how they fit in with the position for which you are applying. Be able to cite concrete examples of how you have demonstrated all those qualities. Use your experiences in classes, internships, extracurricular activities, volunteer experiences and work experiences to build those examples. Focus on your accomplishments whenever possible. Be prepared to explain the rewards and satisfactions of your career field that caused you to choose it. Recruiters tend to shy away from candidates who have merely stumbled into their profession without much thought. Know your resume *cold* and be prepared to answer questions about any item on it.

Obtain pertinent information

Clarify location, place to park, length of interview(s), etc. If not provided, obtain the name and title(s) of the interviewer(s). It's also a good idea to get contact information in case an emergency arises on the day of the interview.

Research

Just like class, you need to do your homework before an interview. Employers expect you to demonstrate knowledge of the organization. It is a critical factor in their overall evaluation of applicants.

You should research the organization's history, mission, products and services, target markets, competitors, business strategies, culture, current events, press releases and industry trends. You can obtain this information through the Internet, libraries, Chambers of Commerce, directories, each individual organization's literature, and friends and family in business or the community (your "network").

Another tip – visit the website just before you go on the interview and before subsequent interviews. Be sure to check the "news" section for the latest information. You do not want to be caught off guard in an interview being unaware of breaking news.

In addition to preparing you for the interview, research provides an excellent opportunity to start a dialog with the employer to learn more about the company culture, etc. (See Questions to Ask During the Interview)

Common Interview Questions

You can reduce pre-interview jitters by identifying potential questions and how you might respond. Although it is almost impossible to anticipate every question that you will be asked in an interview, you should be prepared to respond to the typical questions that arise during most interviews. Consider how you would respond to frequently asked questions by writing down answers to each one. Even if these particular questions do not come up, planning will help you speak fluently about yourself and your achievements.

See list of common interview questions in appendix section of this document

Behavioral Interview Questions

Many organizations now include questions about your behavior and experience when they conduct interviews. They ask these types of questions because it is believed that past behavior predicts future success.

How can you tell if the interview is behavioral? Listen for key phrases such as "Give me an example of a time when..." or "Tell me about a situation in which you..." To respond successfully you will need to give specific examples of when you have demonstrated the desired behaviors. In designing behavior interview questions, the company typically determines the skills required for the position, such as: problem solving, flexibility, teamwork, leadership, interpersonal skills, etc.

The organization determines the skills by doing a detailed analysis of the position they are seeking to fill. As a candidate you need to go through this same process. What are the necessary knowledge, skills, abilities and competencies to do this job? You can find this information in the job ad or position description. You can also find information from the corporate website, annual report, or through networking.

See list of behavior based interview questions in appendix section of this document

Practice! Practice! Practice!

All job-seekers can benefit from practicing interview skills. A Mock Interview is one of the very best ways to prepare for an actual employment interview. The Mock Interview will help you to learn what is expected in a real interview, and how you can improve the way you present yourself. In addition to rehearsing your responses to real interview questions, practice your facial expression, eye contact, handshake and body language.

Schedule a video recorded mock interview with Employment and Career Services or ask friends or family members to role play potential interview questions. As you practice, pay close attention to your facial expression, eye contact, handshake and

body language. Allow ample time for your research and rehearsal before the interview. You want to avoid cramming the night before. Take time to wind down and get a good night's sleep.

THE DAY OF THE INTERVIEW

Dress for Success



Take time to look your best. That first impression is so critical. Your grooming and clothing are important to putting your best foot forward during the interview.

In today's business casual environment, choosing the appropriate interview attire can be stressful. Before you decide what to wear for your job interview, consider the following: the dress code of the company, the job duties required of the job you are applying for, the way the rest of the employees dress during a normal work day, and the current season and temperature outside.

To get a better sense of what is appropriate, drive by the organization at the start or end of the business day, or during lunch time. If you are a student or recent graduate you can also ask the interviewer for suggestions. **A word of caution - even in casual environments, most interviewers consider it a sign of respect if the interviewee dresses up.** Always remember that the clothing you wear should identify you as someone the employer would want as a representative of their company or organization.

A few other helpful hints:

- Be sure that clothing is cleaned and pressed and shoes are polished.
- Nails should be clean, short and well-groomed.
- Don't be a trend-driven fashion victim
- Keep hair out of your eyes
- Women should avoid wearing excessive jewelry, make-up, or loud nail polish.
- Men should remove all visible piercings. Women should remove all visible piercings except for one set of earrings. Tattoos should be covered. *Remember, less is more.*
- Women should avoid clothing that too short, low cut, or see through.

Other Tips

It is the little things that make a difference. Take extra care to cover all of the details to ensure a successful interview.

- Be sure you have the exact location of your interview. Consider doing a practice drive. Allow for extra time for traffic, construction delays, and finding a parking space.
- Drive in a safe and courteous manner as you approach the location of the interview. You do not want to cut off the interviewer as you pull into the parking lot!
- Arrive 10 to 15 minutes before the interview.
- Go alone. Do not bring friends or family with you to an interview.
- Do not smoke or drink an alcoholic beverage before the interview. Do not chew gum.
- Bring along breath mints and tissues.
- Remember, the interview starts once you step foot on the property. Be pleasant and professional with everyone you meet.
- Bring a list of references.
- Turn off your cell phone. Do not make calls from the reception area or lobby!
- Bring copies of your resume; have your own copy available with your notes.
- Bring a pen and notepad – it is perfectly acceptable to jot down notes during your interview. It will help for questions you might have and for sending a thank you letter. It also tells the interviewer that you are serious about the position.

DURING THE INTERVIEW

- **Be aware of your non-verbal communication.** Always start with a smile and a firm handshake. Stand and greet the interviewer by name, using Mr. or Ms. until invited to use a first name. Those simple gestures convey your level of self-confidence and are indicators of how strong your interpersonal skills may be. Relax, maintain good eye contact, and keep your posture controlled. Deliver your answers with a sense of energy and enthusiasm.

- **Speak in a clear, articulate, specific manner.** Take your time and think about your answers before communicating them. Be able to briefly describe how you fit in with the position and the organization’s climate. Give specific examples that demonstrate how your strengths fit the characteristics that are required of the position.
- **Remain positive.** Show motivation and enthusiasm by explaining why you want the position. Avoid speaking negatively about a past work experience.

QUESTIONS FOR THE INTERVIEWER

Near the end of the interview expect to be asked if you have any questions. As a candidate it is important that you are always prepared with questions to ask. It’s best to have about 10 questions prepared since some of your questions may be answered during the course of the interview. Do not ask questions that are clearly answered on the employer's web site and/or in any literature provided by the employer to you in advance. This could be interpreted that you did not prepare for the interview.

Never ask about salary and benefits issues until those subjects are raised by the employer. The employer will divulge these eventually, although maybe not until after an offer is made. Asking about salary conveys that you are more interested in the money than you are in the opportunity.

See Questions to Ask the Interviewer in appendix section of this document

Convey Your Interest

At the end of the interview, restate your interest in the organization and the position. If the interviewer has not already shared the process, ask about the next steps in the selection process. Ask for a business card so you can send the interviewer(s) a thank you letter.

“THANK YOU” IS IMPORTANT



Effective job hunting demands that you send you a thank you letter 24 to 48 hours following your interview. Sending a “thank you” to the interviewer is viewed as evidence to your attention to detail and that you are interested in the job.

Each thank you letter should be unique to the interview. Before you write the letter take a few minutes to replay the interview for yourself, mentally. Mention the skills and qualities that you bring to the organization that make you the ideal candidate for the position. This is also an opportunity to clarify anything you feel might have been misunderstood or to add something you may have forgotten. End your letter by restating your interest in the position.

See appendix section of this document for a sample “Thank You” letter

Because of the amount of content, you can see a handwritten note is not an option. Also, if there is any length to your message it may be difficult to read your handwriting.

There is debate on whether to mail a business letter or to send email correspondence. Email gets there instantaneously of course and will be in the hands of the interviewer even if he or she is jetting off to a conference or meeting.

Note: Many organizations now prefer e-mail correspondence. You might get a sense about this during the interview. Another option is to follow up your email with a hard copy of the same via standard U.S. Mail. In this case, make sure that your thank you letter uses the same heading as your resume and initial cover letter, as this maintains consistency. Also, remember to take the time to ensure that your thank you letter is absolutely error free and grammatically correct.

INTERVIEW POST ANALYSIS

Following your interview it is important to take a step back to reflect on your need for further practice or training. In your post-analysis ask yourself: What went well? What would you do differently in a future interview?

Appendix

Common Interview Questions

Fear of tough questions creates most of the anxiety experienced during an interview. Here are some frequently asked questions and suggested strategies for responding:

1. Tell me about yourself

This is your personal infomercial. Give a brief outline of your professional and/or educational background, highlighting those elements that shows how closely you “fit” to the organization and position. Conclude with a strong closing statement of how all this led you specifically to this interview.

2. What are your strengths?

Provide three to four job-related abilities. Be ready to provide specific examples to support.

3. What are your weaknesses?

Never say you have no weaknesses. Limit to one or two at the most. Turn weaknesses into positive statements about your potential job performance, such as “I tend to be a perfectionist,” or “I have a tendency to work long hours” if a project excites you. You can also reference a legitimate weakness that you have worked to overcome through improved self-management or training, ie. time management or computer literacy. Just be sure that it doesn't have a major impact on your ability to do the job.

4. What are your career goals? Where do you see yourself five or ten years from now?

Discuss your desire to advance but also let the interviewer know that you are interested in making a meaningful contribution to the area that you are hiring in at. If you are being interviewed by the hiring manager you don't want to give the impression that you want to get your foot in the door and then move, leaving them with a hole in their department!

5. What accomplishment are you most proud of?

The secret to this question is being specific and selecting an accomplishment that relates to the position. Think of the qualities the company is looking for and develop an example that demonstrates how you can meet the company's needs.

6. Why did you leave your last job?

If you are unemployed due to company closure or lack of work, simply explain the circumstances. If you are reentering or just entering the work force, briefly explain why...e.g., in school, raising children, self-employed. Even if your last job ended badly, be careful about being negative in answering this question. Be as diplomatic as possible. If you do point out negative aspects of your last job, find some positives to mention as well. Complaining endlessly about your last company will not say much for your attitude. If you were terminated, be honest. Talk briefly about the circumstances, and emphasize that you have learned from it.

7. Why do you want to change jobs?

You don't want to turn this question into a negative bashing of your last job or boss. Avoid negative comments about your current employer or boss. Express that you benefited from your time with your former employer, but you are ready to look toward the challenges of a new career. You can also use your research to put forth several points about the organization you are interviewing with that you feel will be a great match for your particular skills and experiences. Emphasize the fact that this opportunity to work for them is 'just what you have been looking for' and why, and then go into several ways you can add value to the organization.

8. What do you do with your spare time?

Tell them. Hobbies and sports tell interviewers a lot about the sort of person you are. Prepare now before any interview in what way your pastimes will help you in this position. For example, if you are active in sports, your peak fitness could be useful. If you play football for example, emphasize that you understand the needs of being a team player. They probably want to see that you do more with your life than just watch TV every night. Sometimes they are also looking for anything that might clash with work. Perhaps a night school course that will keep you from working late, or interfere with required business travel. Remember also that people like people that are like them, that they have something in common with and you might just strike lucky.

9. How do you handle pressure?

Consider this response: “I enjoy working in a challenging environment. I have found that I have been able to effectively manage pressure on the job by prioritizing my responsibilities so I have a clear idea of what needs to be done when.” Also, be prepared with some specific examples of how you have handled stress on the job.

10. Describe your last boss

Discuss the strengths your past supervisors had and how they helped you succeed in your positions. Avoid negative comments. If you are asked specifically what you did not like about your previous boss or what you would change, try to turn it into a positive, e.g., “because of our reduced staff, Chris could not give me a lot of coaching, however, as a result I become more self reliant and proficient in XYZ”

11. Why do you want to work for us?

Stress the positives you have heard about the organization. Show that you have done your homework by giving information you obtained from your research.

12. How would you describe your personality?

Keep your answer short and relevant to the job and organization’s culture. Remember the interviewer is trying to determine if you would “fit” with the culture/ personality of their organization.

13. You seem over-qualified for this position

An employer will get “a quicker pay-back from hiring you” because you have more experience than required. Emphasize your unique attitudes, abilities, and interests that led you to apply for the job. Stress your skills, your enthusiasm for the organization, your eagerness for the opportunity to learn, and that you feel that there is always something new to learn wherever you work. Also, play up your experience and say you could help train other people. You might also say that you have targeted this position because you have a special interest in “this kind of work,” or in this “particular organization.”

14. You seem under-qualified for this position

The employer is worried that your training time will be extended. State that you are eager to learn and learn quickly (be prepared with an example). Emphasize that because you do not have a lot of experience they do not have to retrain you.

15. Why have you been unemployed for so long?

Never say that you've been living on your unemployment/severance pay and taking a break! Emphasize that you are you looking for the right fit and not just any job. Discuss how you have continued to stay current in your field - “Finding the right job takes time. I’m not looking for just any job.” Some answers may be the same as #3 if you've been out of the labor force. Otherwise, explain that you have been diligently looking for work but that jobs using your skills are not readily available in the area. You have made a career change and entry jobs are more difficult to find.

16. Can you explain these gaps in your employment?

You may have gaps in your employment for many reasons. Speak confidently and positively about your experiences during the gap that would make you a good employee. For example, the skills involved in budgeting, organizing, and planning while raising a family might transfer to on-the-job skills. Volunteering might have equipped you to work with diverse groups and adjust to flexible schedules. Definitely mention if you have used the opportunity to return to school or even take a PC class.

17. Your last job was with a large company. We’re a small entrepreneurial firm and we’re used to rapid change. Can you adapt?

State: "My last company underwent many changes while I was employed there. I enjoyed trying new things and ideas." (Show examples whenever possible.)

18. What salary are you seeking?

This is one of the most important interview questions. When an interviewer asks your salary requirement, try first to gently deflect the question by indicating that your requirements are negotiable and that you are seeking compensation that is fair based upon the role and responsibilities. You can also turn the question around by asking how much the organization has budgeted for the position. If you are pressed for a number, give a range. To decide on a range, think about the salary you want, your salary at your most recent position and the industry-standard salary for the job. (Do some research if you are not sure about the industry-standard range in this region.)

19. How would your boss respond to a question about your strengths and weaknesses?

Interviewers believe that the candidate will give a more realistic answer if they believe that the interviewer may discuss this during a reference check or other contact with the prior boss. Say that you believe he or she would confirm whatever you have claimed as your strengths and areas that need improvement. If your boss had complimented you for a particular quality or accomplishment, this gives you an opportunity to mention it.

20. What is most important to you in your job?

Think about what truly motivates you. Is it helping others, solving problems, having challenges, being recognized for your efforts, etc? Relate your answer to what you know about the organization and the position that you are being considered for. For example, what qualities or values would a person need to do that job well.

21. Why should we hire you for this position?

Your response should sum up the main selling points of what you have to offer. It is not a time to be shy. What do you have to offer this organization - past experience? specialized knowledge? skills? attributes? Again, just be sure that the selling points you emphasize relate directly to the qualities the employer would want in that position.

Note: Potential employers often ask a number of questions about your past employment. To be prepared, carefully review your resume and develop brief 20-second vignettes or “stories” that more fully explain every responsibility and activity required for both your current and past jobs. Also, have examples of successes / challenges that you overcame that will demonstrate your accomplishments - especially those that show skills that would apply to the new job.

Sample Behavioral Questions by Competency

Behavioral Interview Questions

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DIMENSION: Adaptability

1. Give me an example of a time when your situation changed unexpectedly. What exactly did you do? What ultimately happened?
2. Tell me the process that you use to integrate a new team member into your area and with the rest of the team.

DIMENSION: Building Trust/Ethics

1. Tell me about a time when your boss asked you to do something that you didn't think was appropriate. How did you respond?
2. Tell me about a time at work when you objectively considered others' ideas, even when they conflicted with your own.

DIMENSION: Coaching/Mentoring

1. Tell me the process that you use to integrate a new team member into your area and with the rest of the team.
2. Tell me about a time when you took someone under your wing, what you tried to teach him/her, and the results.

DIMENSION: Commitment to Safety

1. Tell me about a time when you were really busy or under a lot of pressure to finish an assignment. Describe the actions that you took to ensure that safety was not compromised.
2. Describe a time when you had to confront someone who was in violation of a safety policy.

DIMENSION: Customer Service

1. Describe a situation where you had to go the extra mile to support a customer.
2. Describe a situation in which you were unable to satisfy a customer.

DIMENSION: Decision-Making

1. Tell me about a time when you made the wrong decision. What went wrong?
2. Give me an example of a problem, issue or concern that you handled in a unique creative way.

DIMENSION: Delegation Skills

1. Tell me about the last major project, task, or assignment you delegated. How did you decide to whom you would delegate?
2. Tell me about a time when you delegated a project and the person did not want the assignment. How did you handle the situation?

DIMENSION: Interpersonal Skills

1. Tell me about a time where you had to discipline someone and how you handled it with the person.
2. Describe a situation in which you were able to use persuasion to successfully convince someone to see things your way.

DIMENSION: Leadership

1. Describe a time when someone reporting to you wasn't cutting it and what you did to rectify the situation.
2. Tell me about a time when you were forced to make an unpopular decision.

DIMENSION: Managing Change

1. Tell me about the part you played in implementing a new system and/or technology in your department.
2. How do you win people over to the adoption of new techniques or technologies?

DIMENSION: Planning and Organization Skills

1. Tell me about a time when an unexpected project fell into your lap and the process you used to schedule it.
2. How do you determine your priorities? Give me an example.

DIMENSION: Quality Focus

1. Tell me about a time when you noticed that a process or task wasn't being done correctly. What did you do?
2. When working on a repetitive task, it's easy to lose your concentration and miss important details that can result in a problem later. Tell me about a time when this happened to you.

DIMENSION: Results Orientation

1. Tell me about the goals you set with your associates and how you helped them achieve their goals.
2. Give me an example of a project you managed and how you kept everyone on track to successful completion of the project.

DIMENSION: Risk Taking

1. Describe a time when you seemed to be on the wrong sign of an issue and what you did or did not do.
2. Describe a situation where you heard of some new technology and implemented it.

DIMENSION: Stress/Conflict Management

1. We've all felt stress in our work lives. Tell me about *work-related situations* that cause stress for you. How do you typically handle such stress?
2. Tell me about a *work emergency or crisis* of some kind in which you were involved. What was your role? What did you do?

DIMENSION: Teamwork

1. Describe a project you did as part of a *team or a work group*. What was your role and what were your specific contributions to the project's success?
2. Describe a team experience that you found disappointing. What would you have done to prevent this?

DIMENSION: Time Management

1. Describe a time when a project under your direction was late and how you dealt with the issue.
2. Describe your current projects and how you keep them scheduled for on-time delivery.

QUESTIONS TO ASK DURING THE INTERVIEW

Prior to the interview you should develop a list of questions that will help you have a better understanding of the organization and the position you are seeking. Here are some commonly suggested questions to ask, however, you should develop a list that is most appropriate for you:

- Why is this position currently open?
- (If this is not a new position) What did the previous employee go on to do? How often has this position been filled in the past five years? What were the main reasons?
- What types of assignments may I expect the first 6 months on the job?
- What is most pressing? What would you like to have done in the next 3 months?
- What would you like done differently by the next person who does this job?
- What type of training is available?
- Why do you enjoy working for this company?
- What has been your career path within this company?
- How will the person who accepts this position be evaluated? By whom?
- What significant changes do you foresee in the near future?
- How would you describe the work environment?
- How is one evaluated in this position?
- What accounts for success within the organization?
- Can you describe a typical day for someone in this position?
- Can you describe your management style?
- Does the organization support ongoing training and education for employees to stay current in their fields?
- I'm very interested in this position. What are the next steps in the selection process?
- What's a common career path for someone in this role?
- What's the most enjoyable part of your job? What's the most challenging part?

Others:

- _____
- _____
- _____

SAMPLE "THANK YOU" LETTER

DANA DYNAMIC
555 My Street
Acmeville, OH 44xxx
440 555-1212 home
440 555-3030 cell
ddynamic@myemail.com

February 15, 2xxx

Jane Doe, Administrator
Acme Care Center
222 Main Street
Acmeville, OH 44xxx

Dear Jane:

I very much enjoyed having the opportunity to meet you and to learn more about the Volunteer Coordinator position. Thank you for taking the time to give me a tour and to share your vision for the organization with me. I was very impressed by the environment as a warm, caring place for families to bring their loved ones and a pleasant working environment for employees.

After our interview I am even more enthused about the opportunity to join your team. As we discussed, I have more than 12 years of experience recruiting volunteers and have spent the past year working in long-term care.

Thank you again for the opportunity to be considered. I am eager to move forward to the next step in the selection process.

Sincerely,

Dana Dynamic