Interviews

Although interviews are an essential part of the job search process, many people struggle with them. By taking a positive and planned approach, you can reduce your interview anxiety, increase your confidence and improve your chances for a successful outcome. Your job is a big part of your life - it influences where you live, how you live and what you do for 40 (or more!) hours a week. Take time to plan ahead for a successful interview.

**Preparation for the Interview**

Your appearance and attitude are critical components to a good interview. In general, the impression you make will hinge on five factors, and you must prepare yourself in all five areas:

- **Your past experiences**
- **Your skills and abilities**
- **Your personality and appearance**
- **Your knowledge of the employer and job field**
- **Your future plans**

**Your Past Experiences**

These can include the following: part-time, full-time, summer employment; internship and volunteer experiences; coursework training, community activities, extracurricular activities, professional association activities, interests and hobbies. In any of these activities, you have accomplishments that can be considered good indicators of your potential for future success.

Your experiences can translate into the abilities, skills and interests that employers are seeking. Talk about them in a straightforward way without being too humble or boastful.

**Your Skills and Abilities**

To become aware of your skills and abilities, it is helpful to examine your past experiences and identify those skills and abilities you have used:

- **Accomplishments**—Started a volunteer program, earned an A in a class.
- **Jobs**—Especially those that were most meaningful to you.
- **Roles**—Such as volunteer, intern, assistant, aide and group projects.
Choose 7-10 experiences that seem most important to you, describe the details of each and ask yourself these questions:

- What abilities do these special accomplishments demonstrate?
- What specific skills have I used?
- How can these skills be used in the job for which I will be interviewed?

**Here is an example:**

**Achievement:** One summer you volunteered building houses for the house-less.

**Skills:** Manual dexterity, solving mechanical problems, assembling, repairing, showing attention to detail and care for others.

**The Interview:** You are interviewing for a high school band instructor job.

**The Transfer:** The skills noted above would be valuable to the music department and the school district in repairing band instruments.

**Your Personality**

While having excellent skills and qualifications for the job is very helpful, it is equally important to be able to establish rapport with your interviewer and express your strengths. This is where your personality and appearance become important factors. There are several criteria the interviewer will be considering:

**Your communication skills**

Being able to converse easily, to express your ideas and to listen perceptively are marketable skills an employer finds important. Avoid using slang or poor grammar. Listen closely. If you do not understand a question, ask for clarification.

**Avoid answering questions with a simple “yes” or “no”**.

Elaborate on your answer by giving examples to strengthen your points. Look for clues (non-verbal as well as verbal) that give you an idea as to how the interviewer is responding to you. If you sense a loss of interest (averted eyes, fidgeting, paper shuffling), you may be on the wrong track or talking too long. If this happens, quickly adjust or wrap up your response.

**Self-confidence tops the list of the traits that most employers seek**

While you may not always feel confident in your abilities, it is important in an interview to highlight your positive traits. Short-comings need not be volunteered, but if you are asked about them, explain the circumstances rather than give excuses or blame others and what you learned from them.

Outline your best qualities in relation to something specific. For example, saying “I paid for 75 percent of my own college expenses,” is clearer than “I am a hard worker and want to get ahead.” The first makes the point more convincingly. The best way to build your self-confidence for the job interview is to practice! Go to a career advisor, mentor or friend to go through a mock interview with you. You can use sample questions in this guide to practice interview skills.
Your Appearance

Good grooming is very important. Allow yourself plenty of time to dress and get to the interview so that you arrive relaxed and ready to do your best.

Dress appropriately

Dress professionally for the job interview but choose attire that fits the company culture or style for the job to which you are applying. If you are unsure, err on the side of dressing more formally rather than too casually.

Business casual attire is often accepted for employer information sessions and campus career fairs. Business casual ranges from slacks or skirts to khakis. It includes a collared shirt and trousers, a shirt or sweater with a skirt or dress slacks, or coordinated separates. Low heeled shoes and loafers are acceptable but tennis shoes are too casual.

More formal interview attire includes a suit or a dress, skirt or nice slacks with a coordinating jacket. Ask your Career Advisor or search the Academic and Career Advising Center website for more ideas. Dressing too casually can prevent you from getting an offer!

Non-verbal communication skills are important too

The way you sit, stand or walk tells a lot about you. Be aware of the kind of self-image you are projecting, and practice positive body language. For example, a limp handshake makes a poor impression; be sure your grip is firm, but not crushing! During the interview, maintain an alert (but not rigid) posture. Eye contact is important; look your interviewer directly in the eyes. Smile when appropriate!

Do not let your hands reveal you are nervous. If you do not know where to put them, leave them in your lap. Try not to tap your feet or wring your hands.

Your Knowledge of the Employer and Job Field

It is important to be knowledgeable about the field and become familiar with any terminology that might be used. Research the organization prior to the interview to help you understand the organization and the position for which you are applying. You can ask intelligent questions and to emphasize your assets during the actual interview.

Helpful Resources:

- Employer websites.
- Salary surveys that list typical salaries for the field of jobs for which you are applying.
- Visit the organization. Talk to employees, human resources and/or the supervisor of the area in which you desire employment.
- If there is a job description or announcement, be sure to read it carefully and be sure you fully understand all parts of it.
Another way to demonstrate your knowledge is by asking a few informed questions. Most interviewers will ask you if you have any questions. **Be sure you have questions prepared! It will show you are serious about the job.**

**The Interview**

An interview can be considered a conversation directed toward a definite purpose. In a job interview, a good interviewer will have four basic tasks:

- To establish a good rapport and friendly atmosphere
- To obtain relevant information
- To evaluate this information in relation to the objectives
- To provide information.

**Sample Questions Used by Interviewers**

Open-ended questions such as “How would you describe yourself?” and “Why should I hire you?” are opportunities to give the employer information about your skills and accomplishments.

1. How would you describe yourself?
2. What are your career plans? Where do you see yourself 5 or 10 years from now?
3. Why do you want to work for our organization?
4. What do you know about our company?
5. What type of position interests you most?
6. What two or three things are most important to you in your job?
7. What qualifications do you possess that will make you successful in your career?
8. Why did you choose your particular major and/or minor?
9. Do you have plans for continued study?
10. What have you enjoyed most about your past jobs? Least?
11. What have you learned from your mistakes?
12. What are 3 words that describe you?
13. Are you willing to relocate? Travel?
14. What kind of work environment do you prefer?
15. What two or three accomplishments have given you the most satisfaction? Why?
16. What do you consider to be your strengths? Weaknesses?
17. What extracurricular activities have you pursued while in college? What did you learn from these activities?
18. How would you deal with a conflict between yourself and someone in another office with whom you had to work closely?
19. Why should I hire you?
20. How do you spend your leisure time - your hobbies and outside interests?
21. How do you deal with stress?
22. Describe your experience working with ...
23. What would you do if ... (a hypothetical situation that might occur on the job)?
Your Future Plans

Interviewers may ask one or two questions designed to ascertain your plans for the future. They are not invading your privacy, they just want to find out how the position they have fits with your goals. Sometimes they want to understand the length of time you would be willing to commit to their organization. Discussion of your goals provides you the opportunity to demonstrate you have a plan for meeting your career aspirations.

Illegal Inquiries

By law, interview questions must be restricted to information which is related to the individual’s ability to perform the specific job for which they are being considered. Employers do not have the right to ask for information which is not job-related, nor to discriminate against you because of such factors. Illegal pre-employment inquiries include: age, sex, race, national origin, color, birthplace, religion, ancestry, citizenship, type of military discharge, arrest record (including convictions), marital status, number of dependents, clubs and organizations to which you belong, physical disabilities, or any inquiry which is not job-related or necessary for determining an applicant’s eligibility for employment.

Questions regarding illegal pre-employment inquiries should be addressed to the California State Department of Industrial Relations, Labor Standards Enforcement or to the State Department of Fair Employment and Housing. (The Academic and Career Advising Center can help you contact these agencies.)

You have the right not to answer a question which you feel is discriminatory. If you choose to answer, do so in such a way that is neutral, not defensive and keep your response short. You can deflect it by diverting to a similar job related topic or inquire how that may relate to the job.

Assertively Answering Questions

Positively state your qualifications without denying any of your possible shortcomings.

Examples of Assertive Answers

**Question:** In this job there are a lot of deadlines. What makes you think you can write under pressure?

**Assertive Response:** As a recent graduate, I am used to writing under a deadline. I am confident I can handle any pressure that may come with this position.

**Question:** Tell me about a time when you were discouraged. How did you handle it?

**Assertive Response:** My past company offered little in the way of advancement which was discouraging. I learned a great deal about myself from this experience. I feel that this job is one which I could do well and would also offer me an opportunity to grow.
Behavioral Interviewing

During your interview you may be asked to provide an example of how you handled a given situation. The assumption behind this approach is that past behavior is the best predictor of future performance. Instead of asking if you have leadership skills the interviewer may ask you to give an example of an experience working in a group. A “behavioral” question gives you a chance to showcase your skills and gives all candidates an equal opportunity to present their accomplishments.

Behavioral questions determine the critical capabilities for the position. Get a copy of the job description or talk to a current job holder.

Be ready to talk about significant accomplishments. Think about school projects, jobs, volunteer activities and situations in which you overcame some barrier. Prepare 60-90 second stories using the following format.

**Situation:** What was the situation? Provide context. Why was it important?

**Task:** What was the task? Your plan to settle the situation.

**Action:** What action did you take and why? Use dynamic action verbs.

**Results:** What happened because of your actions? Did your actions improve the situation? What did you learn?

Basically, you must recall many experiences quickly, select the most appropriate one and describe it effectively. Practice with a friend.

**Example**

**Question:** Tell me a time you dealt with a difficult situation and how you dealt with it.

**Situation:** In college I lived in an apartment complex with a predominantly student population. The place generated an enormous quantity of recyclable material but there was no systematic effort to collect it.

**Task:** We had to figure out the best way to collect it and get it to the recycling center.

**Action:** Several of us interested in environmental issues formed a committee to promote recycling. I was elected chairperson with the primary responsibility of organizing our efforts. We convinced a local recycler to donate containers and held a kick-off party in the parking lot. Residents had to bring recyclables to get in. I persuaded people with trucks to rotate hauling the papers, cans and bottles to the recycler.

**Result:** The project was a giant success. Recycling was increased by at least 90%. The money we earned funds an annual party for everyone in the complex.
Sample Behavioral Questions

1. Give me an example of a time you demonstrated initiative.
2. Thinking back over your college experience, describe a situation in which you were challenged in using your communication skills. What did you do to overcome the challenges?
3. Tell me about your experience in dealing with routine work. What problems did you overcome in order to focus on the details the job required?
4. Describe a time when you had to make an unpopular decision. Tell me about the process of making that decision and the results.
5. What was one of the most difficult technical problems you have solved? Tell me about it.

Sample Questions to Ask an Employer

Always prepare for your interview by planning to ask some questions. Your questions should show your interest in the job and the employer.

(PLEASE don’t use these exactly! Make up your own!)

1. What is your evaluation style?
2. What sort of person are you looking for to fill this job?
3. What are the general goals for your employee development program?
4. How do you view your competition?
5. Would you describe your training program for me?
6. What are your plans for expansion?
7. What do you like most about your job/organization? Least?
8. What sets your organization apart from others?
9. What role does the principal play in the discipline of students in your district?
10. What are have other employees done after this position?
11. What are your promotional policies?
12. What are your policies regarding continuing education for your employees?
13. How would you compare Wildlife Biologist positions with your agency to similar positions in other agencies?
14. What will I do during the first year?
15. What texts, equipment and methods are currently being used in the area?
16. I’ve had experience (organizing programs, writing brochures, etc.). Would I be likely to use those skills in your company?
17. How would you describe your company’s culture?
18. Why did the previous employee leave this position?
19. What are the next steps in filling this position?
End of the Interview

Be sensitive to signs from the interviewer that the session is almost over. If you are still interested in the position, sum up your interest and thank the interviewer for his/her time and consideration. Be sure that you know what the next step in the process will be. Many a job has been lost because the subsequent steps were left uncertain. If you are asked to submit transcripts, references, credentials, and so forth, be sure to do so immediately.

Thank You Note

A thank you note or follow up e-mail is often expected after the interview. This reaffirms your interest in the position, adds any additional information which did not come out in the interview, and can be attached to your resume if the employer has not previously received one. Thank you notes set you apart from other applicants.

Ethics of the Interview

Making an appointment for a job interview is a commitment on your part. If you change your mind, are no longer interested in the job, or are unable to keep the appointment, cancel as early as possible. Allow the employer plenty of time to schedule an applicant to take your place.

Interview Checklist

☐ I know the exact time and location of the interview and have allowed for plenty of time to get there 5 minutes early.

☐ I have planned what I will wear to the interview.

☐ I have researched the organization.

☐ I have practiced commonly asked questions.

☐ I have formulated the questions I plan to ask during the interview.

☐ I will bring extra resumes, my portfolio, writing samples (whatever is appropriate) to the interview.
How to DRESS for SUCCESS

Smile and be personable
Take time to do your hair
A simple tie can really bring an ensemble together
Wear appropriate jewelry. Less is more
A suit jacket, while not required, can outdress the competition
Wear matching dark colored socks
Keep dress shoes clean and neat

What NOT to wear

Your beat-up backpack
Nail color should be professional not bold
Jeans and leggings are NOT professional attire
Tennis shoes
Cologne and perfume should be worn minimally
Explore, Experience, Achieve

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