

COMPETITIVE INTERVIEWING TECHNIQUES

Career Services
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What is an interview? It is a two-part process that:

Allows an employer to find out more about you.

- How your background matches requirements for the job.
- How your **personality** fits with the "personality" or "culture" of the organization. Many times an employer is looking for qualities such as enthusiasm, poise, bearing, and warmth.

Provides you an opportunity to find out more about a potential employer.

- Gives you a chance to find out if the organization fits both your personal work preferences and needs. Remember, your values and needs are important, and if you think deeply about them extend beyond salary alone!!! Take time to think about and explore your needs and find out if the organization can meet them. Construct questions to ask the interviewer to uncover the following:
 - advancement opportunities
 - stability of the organization and position
 - relocation
 - decision making authority
 - family support/day care
 - value of your input on work decisions
 - creativity
 - respect

Behavioral scientists have researched the interviewing process over and over again. Collectively, this research has resulted in five major findings:

- You need to genuinely want the job you seek. If you haven't truly decided upon a career goal, you won't be able to fool the employer. If you need career planning help, get that before you begin your job search.
- Although the interviewer's influence on the hiring decision will vary from employer to employer, whatever influence the interviewer has is based on his or her perception of you in the interview. The interviewer makes his or her decision about your suitability in the interview, and this decision is practically irreversible.
- The first part of the interview is extremely important. All research indicates that the first impression—positive or negative—is the one that lasts. Some researchers contend that the first impression is largely visual and occurs in the first *seconds*, as you enter the room. Others extend the time line and believe that the first few *minutes* are the most significant. Regardless, none refute the main finding: The beginning is what counts most.
- For better or worse, the employer's impression rests on a subjective assessment of your personality.
- The key to that assessment is to give the employer the impression that you are confident and assertive.

The research findings boiled down: Your interview must begin well, making the impression that you are clear, confident, and assertive. You don't have to be brash or outgoing to pull this off. You can even be shy or reserved. How you handle the early moments of the interview go a long way in making a favorable first impression.

How to prepare for an interview:

1. **Research the organization.** Obtain information from:

- company brochures
- journals
- annual reports
- library reference section
- magazines
- local chamber of commerce
- people who work for the organization
- home page on the internet

Find out:

- the name and title of the person or persons conducting the interview
- how large and old the business is
- what its products and services are
- how well it has done financially over the past couple of years
- any civic achievements it has been honored for
- its plans for future expansion in size or into different product or service areas

You don't have to become the world's leading expert on the employer, but you do need to understand what the organization does and what you can do for it. If answers to these questions can't be found through printed or electronic material, ask the employer directly for information in advance, explaining that you want to do your homework and be thoroughly prepared for your interview. Your eagerness will impress the employer.

It is very impressive to be able to tell the interviewer information you know about the organization. Many times an interviewee is caught flat-footed when asked: "Tell me what you know about our organization."

2. **Research yourself**

- Know your background and how it relates to the organization's needs.
- Practice responses to questions you anticipate the interviewer will ask.
- Be able to answer questions on gaps in your employment history, if any.
- Know your long-term goals. You might be asked "What do you expect to be doing 5 years from now?"
- Ensure your references are aware of which positions you are interviewing for.
- Conduct research to identify the salary range for the position, in the geographic area where the job is, and what your salary requirements are. Web sites such as www.acinet.org and www.salary.com can help.

It's extremely important to your interview, and especially its beginning, that you identify your main strengths—the traits or qualifications that you think separate you from the competition. Concentrate on a short list of three to five strengths. For each strength, offer specific evidence that you have that strength. The more specific your evidence, the better. And, identify the one that is your strongest. Really work hard on this: It will pay off at the beginning of the interview.

3. Dress properly.

REMEMBER: "YOU NEVER GET A SECOND CHANCE TO CREATE A FIRST IMPRESSION"

- Dress conservatively:
 - suit and tie for men, clean and pressed
 - business suit or dress for women, clean and pressed
 - work uniform OK depending on type of job
- Other points:
 - fingernails (clean and manicured)
 - no chewing gum, food, smoking or drinking

4. Be on time, or 5-10 minutes early! Being too early might be a sign of nervousness.

- get directions in advance
- make a practice run to the interview site
- anticipate traffic and parking considerations
- fill tank with gas the night before!
- don't bring anyone with you
- be nice to the secretary and act conservatively in the lobby

Following these tips will allow you to relax and compose yourself, and focus on doing well in the interview. You can try to have your interview scheduled between 9-11AM. This is the most successful and productive time of day for interviewing.

What to bring to the interview:

- directions to the interview site
- company information
- name of person or persons conducting the interview
- extra copies of your resume
- portfolio or small, professional-looking notebook and pen
- list of references or reference letters
- copies of any impressive evaluations or citations received for outstanding work related to your qualifications for the position.
- list of job related questions
- important information used in filling out any job application forms

Stages of the interview:

1. Introduction

- proper handshake
- Let them offer you a seat. Try to sit across from the interviewer.
- Stay formal, unless interviewer specifically asks you to use his/her first-name.
- during this stage, the interviewer will probably explain the interview agenda

2. Employer questions and answers

Nearly always, these questions are about you, your experience, your education, your goals, etc. You know more about this subject than the interviewer, so try to relax. Nearly always, the interviewer will give you an opportunity to begin well by asking an open-ended question early

such as “Tell me a little about yourself” or “Why do you want to work here?” Instead of giving a standard response, draw upon your preparation for the interview by focusing upon your main strength and supportive evidence. For example, in response to “Tell me a little bit about yourself,” you could say something like: “I think the most important thing that I can tell you is that I have a very strong ability to **(fill in the blank)**. For example, while working as a **(fill in the blank)**, I frequently led the staff in **(fill in the blank)**, prompting my supervisor to award me a bonus. I’m confident that this skill would help me make a strong contribution to the company.” The particulars, of course, can differ widely, but the point is to talk early and specifically about your main strength. If you’re shy, don’t let that stop you. You don’t need to modify your behavior or voice, you just need to quietly answer the question.

Refer to enclosed list of typical interview questions. Many questions are “open-ended” and general in nature. Don’t just answer “yes” or “no” to these questions. Use them as an opportunity to highlight your skills and abilities, and how they make you the person for the job. Many times the interviewer uses these questions to evaluate your poise and oral communications skills.

After making sure you understand the question and have collected your thoughts, answer it. Then stop. Too often, candidates continue to talk after answering the question, often lapsing into confusing or off-the-point excursions that distract from their earlier answer. If you are unsure that you have made your point, just ask the employer, “Have I answered your question?” Candidates who have heavy accents and know that they are frequently misunderstood need to work especially hard on this issue. Use your very best English. Speak at a moderate pace and maintain sufficient volume.

Some employers ask questions relevant to the job that are technical in nature; generally, these are problems that you are asked to solve. Typically, the employer is assessing how you try to solve the problem and is less concerned about the correctness of your solution. Aim to be thoughtful and thorough in your approach; don’t worry if you know the correct answer. To some degree, think aloud as you answer such questions as a way to best demonstrate your thought process.

Occasionally an employer may ask a question that seems unfair, having to do with your gender, race, disability, age, or a similar matter. For example, an employer might say that the job involves a lot of travel with members of the opposite sex and ask if that will be a problem. It is not appropriate to ask a question that is focused on your gender, but it *is* appropriate to ask if you are willing to travel, since that is a condition of the job. Your best bet: Translate the inappropriate question into one that is legitimate and answer that. For example, “I understand that this job involves travel and I have no problems with that.”

Sometimes an employer will ask your salary expectations. There is a perfect answer to this question. Based upon the reasonable range that you identified in your preparation, say: “I know that the standard range for this type of position is **\$(fill in the blank)** to **\$(fill in the blank)** and naturally I’d prefer to be at the high end.” You will have made it clear that you have done your homework and, while stating your preference for a high salary, you have not drawn any lines in the sand

Different employers have different styles and paces. Candidates need to adjust to that and not let these variations deter or distract them. Adopt to the employer’s style and don’t feel the need to talk during prolonged silences.

Other tips:

Keep your answers brief and to the point. You should never be talking more than a couple minutes at a time.

Some nervousness is understandable and will not weigh heavily against you, but you do want to strive to maintain your composure and avoid appearing confused or overwrought with tension.

Clarity is very important. First, make sure you understand the question, even if you need to ask that it be re-phrased. Second, collect your thoughts before you begin. Third, don't meander—stay focused on the question.

Far too many candidates over-generalize and fail to back up their claims with specifics. Use examples whenever possible, tell stories drawn from your experience.

Look the employer in the eye as you speak. Fixed stares aren't required, but good, general eye contact is. You don't need rigid, military posture, but don't slouch. Look energized and attentive. If hand gestures are natural to you, use them since they are a form of punctuation.

No negative information about previous jobs or employers.

Be careful of using slang or informal language (um, uh-huh, yea)

Show **enthusiasm** for the position! Convey your interest and excitement through your tone of voice and inflection!

REMEMBER: Employers value good oral communications skills as much as specific work related skills and abilities. They use them as a key evaluation factor in the interview. Use good listening skills. Pay attention to what the employer says, and answer the questions asked. Pay close attention to non-verbal communication, such as proper posture and body position, and what to do with your hands. Try to avoid distracting mannerisms and nervous habits (pulling/twisting hair, drumming fingers, picking nails, clearing throat repeatedly, fidgeting, sniffing, etc.) as these make you appear overly nervous. If you have difficulty breaking such a habit, adopt a clasped hands approach.

When you use these techniques you are convincing. When you don't, you are not.

3. Applicant questions

At the end of the interview, the employer typically asks if you have any questions. It's best to have a couple—it makes you look more interested. This is an appropriate time to ask about reporting structures, advancement opportunities, benefits, etc. Don't ask about salary unless the employer brings it up. A good technique is to draw questions from your earlier research about the company. For example, "I noticed on your web site that **(fill in the blank)**. Could you elaborate on how that works?" Such questions underscore your preparation.

Consider your values, goals, and preferences for questions here. Focus on questions about the position, not on salary and benefits. Refer to the sample question sheet in this packet.

4. Closing

- Express thanks for their time and consideration.
- If the interviewer does not state when he/she will let you know when a decision has been reached, ask when you can expect to hear from them.

5. Review

- evaluate your performance as soon after interview as possible while things are still fresh in your mind. Note positive/negative factors. Use the post-interview checklist to help

6. Follow-up

- Send thank you letter same or next day. In the letter, stress those points brought out in the interview that qualify you for the position.
- If after your self-evaluation of the interview you discover any strengths missed or left out, indicate these in the thank you letter.
- If you don't hear from them by the decision date, contact the interviewer.
- If you are not offered the position, you should consider contacting the interviewer for a professional discussion on your strengths and weaknesses and how you can improve your interviewing skills and qualifications for future, similar positions.

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