

Guide to Interviewing

Preparation

Preparation is the key to successful interviewing. There are three important elements:

1. Assess yourself

- What skills do you have and like to use?
- What interests you and keeps you motivated? How would you describe your ideal job?
- What are your goals? What gives you personal satisfaction in a job?

You may not be asked specifically about these components, but having them available will allow you to integrate them into your interview answers. For example you might say, "My attention to detail and familiarity with ABC Company's spreadsheet software saved us over \$2500 last year, for which I was named employee of the month."

2. Assess the employer

Collect as much information as possible about the employer. You can get information from:

- People in the field (friends, neighbors, associations, professors)
- Literature from the organization found on their website
- Information produced by outside resources such as glassdoor.com, and salary.com

Consider the following:

| | | |
|----------------------------|------------------------|---------------------------|
| Positions and career paths | Issues and trends | Organizational structure |
| Organization history | Work environment | Management style |
| Salary ranges | Philosophy and culture | Organization future plans |

3. Assess how your skills and interests fit with the employer

Once you have collected information about the employer, this knowledge of the position/organization will help you see if there is a "fit" with your skills, interests and goals. Making a good career choice, about something you genuinely want to do, makes you more marketable. At your interview, employers are trying to see both what's in it for them as well as what's in it for you. It is important to make a good match, so identify the following (with a little bit of reflection and research): Why do you want to work in this industry? What draws you to this particular position? What is it about this organization that appeals to you? Being able to answer these questions with clarity, enthusiasm, and excitement will demonstrate your motivation and prove that the position isn't just a good fit - it's an excellent fit.

Exercise A: Go into the interview knowing several good reasons why you are the best candidate for the position.

Remember, no one has the same "mix" as you. Seldom are you "just" your major or GPA. With this in mind, make a brief list that focuses on what makes you uniquely qualified for the position and integrate these into your interview.

- Who you are: personality, traits, strengths, and characteristics
- What you know: educational background, certifications, and research conducted
- What you know how to do: experience from class projects, work, volunteer, or leisure activities

Exercise B: Get it down on paper to really see how you fit and get concrete ideas of what to mention so the employer sees the fit (you may have already done this to tailor your resume and cover letter to the specific position!).

| Position requirements | Examples of my qualifications |
|--------------------------|--|
| Team player | Part of the front end team at local retail store, helping directly with customer service and sales |
| Ability to problem solve | To cut costs of placing bulky purchased items in expensive plastic bags and still maintain merchandise security, I proposed we adopt a sticker program to indicate larger purchases and it became an effective regional policy |

Practice

Practice is the key to fine-tuning your interview and anticipating its process. There are two important elements:

1. Anticipate and practice answers to the employer's questions (see sample questions and STAR handouts!)

Tell me about yourself.

This is a favorite question to start with in many fields. It is very beneficial for you to have an answer prepared, as it helps you begin the interview feeling relaxed and prepared, instead of caught off guard, trying to quickly come up with an appropriate answer to an abstract question! Talk about what brought you to this point. Include relevant details such as: college/educational experiences, research you have done on the field/career/position, work/intern/volunteer experiences that have guided you here, and other information that is **relevant**. You do not need to talk about pre-college experiences or events, unless they have had a specific impact on where you are now (which is actually quite often! – things like parental influence, early career goals). The answer should be concise (2 minutes at most), which is why it is so helpful to plan the answer in advance.

What do you consider to be your greatest strengths and weaknesses?

It is helpful to decide which strengths and weaknesses you are going to use for each interview. **Prepare 2-3 of each.** You may be asked what friends or former supervisors would say your strengths and weaknesses are, but the answers will not likely change much!

Strengths: Aim for confidence without arrogance. Choose some things that are relevant to the position and also try to find some things that may set you apart from the competition. If every candidate is going to say they are organized, try something more creative – or at least give some concrete examples of what “organized” means for you.

Weaknesses:

- Prepare in advance so you don't get caught feeling unprepared. On a related note, keep the answer pretty concise – you don't want to dwell too long on the negative
- Choose a weakness that is not completely central to the position. We don't want the employer to be concerned (i.e. I am not good with people, and you are applying for customer service), but not one that is completely irrelevant (i.e. I am not a very good cook)
- Do not mention something that can be seen as a personality/character flaw (such as being a procrastinator)
- Instead focus on behavior, a program or task you are unfamiliar with and are willing to learn more about (especially if you have a plan to learn about it or have already started). Choose weaknesses that are pretty easily overcome and talk about how you are working on them
- You may choose to mention a weakness that the employer has already noticed. If you got to the interview, it is probably not too big of a deal and this can be a good chance to address it and prove that it is not going to be a problem (i.e. lack of previous experience dealing with a certain aspect of the position description)
- Do choose a real weakness. The employer wants a weakness or they wouldn't have asked
- Really, they want to see **self-awareness**. A self-aware employee is easy to supervise and will likely do well!

What are your short-term and long-term goals?

- Employers like students who know what they want
- Walk the line between being too vague and making the employer feel like you want to take their job! Do talk about more than “getting *this* job with *this* company”. Watch out for giving the impression that you are going to take their time and training and head off for the next best thing (or grad school) in 6 months
- Having aspirations is good. Show you have put some thought into it. You may not have the rest of your life all figured out (and that is **really, really** okay) – just tell them the parts you do have figured out!

Can you tell me of a time you dealt with a challenging person and how you handled that situation? In general how do you handle conflict?

- With any behavioral question (ones where you are asked to tell about a specific time you...), employers are looking for how well you incorporate real life examples into your answer. This is a technique that is very useful (and highly recommended) whether they phrase it as a behavioral question or not!
- It can be a struggle to come up with a specific example on the spot, which is why it is so important to prepare for behavioral interview questions in advance. Even if you are good at thinking on your feet, it is still beneficial to come up with some scenarios in advance, so you can be more assured of mentioning the best possible example
- It can be very helpful to think up several scenarios that were positive and several that were negative – rich scenarios that you can tailor to the question at the interview
- Especially with the negative questions, it is very important to not get too negative. In your answer, give challenging people the benefit of the doubt. Show that you are professional, not bitter or nasty, and how you rose above it all to handle the situation!
- For each scenario think about the actions you took and the final results. Even if the results weren't fabulous, you can talk about what you learned.

2. Know your rights. There are things employers in the United States cannot ask you about. In brief they are:

| | |
|--|--|
| National Origin/Citizenship | Age |
| Marital/Family Status | Sexual Orientation |
| Clubs or social organizations not relevant to the job | Personal information such as height and weight |
| Disabilities (unless related to the ability to perform the job; see Americans with Disabilities Act) | Arrest record (unless related to the job) |

NOTE: In some other countries, these questions might commonly be asked. You will need to do your research if interviewing outside of the United States. Career Services has some resources to help you.

3. Be prepared for tough questions

“If you’re interested in finance, why didn’t you major in business?”

Stress the value of a liberal arts education. Illustrate the areas in your coursework in which finance and business were a part of the curriculum even if they didn’t contribute to completing a major or certificate. Besides the general graduation requirements many classes have interdisciplinary elements to their subject matter that employers might not understand simply from a course heading. Focus on what you did study or experience that have helped you feel ready for this position.

“What sort of salary are you looking for?”

It is important to bring up that salary isn’t the only criterion by which you would judge a job offer. However, if they press you for actual numbers and having done your research prior to the interview, you should be able to provide them with a salary range -- do not provide them with a fixed amount! Be sure to give yourself room to negotiate your pay. For more information on exploring salary ranges check out salary.com and glassdoor.com.

Exercise C: This exercise involves areas you should be prepared to field questions about, but don’t want to bring up on your own unless asked. Know that once you get a job interview your prospective employer is already confident you can handle the job, so now they’ll want to see in what areas you may need improvement. Be able to identify areas in which you’re not as proficient and how you plan to or are currently working to improve. It is to your benefit to reassure the interviewer that you’re committed to developing these skills quickly.

| Areas needing improvement | Plan for improvement / How I am improving |
|---|---|
| My first year GPA is lower because I was not as focused academically as I should have been. | Since that time I improved my grades by setting aside specific times to study and utilizing my professor’s office hours to ask questions. As you can see, my major GPA has improved significantly. |
| I’m glad you brought up the fact that I have no direct experience within an advertising agency. | However, I have done event planning while volunteering for the Wisconsin Union Directorate. I’m also knowledgeable about publication design and press releases as part of the group projects I’ve worked on in my journalism courses. |

4. Make sure you have a list of questions prepared to ask the employer

| | |
|--|---|
| What are opportunities for professional growth? | How is an employee evaluated and promoted? |
| Can you describe the typical first year assignments? | What are the organization’s plans for future growth? |
| What makes your organization different from competitors? | What are the organization’s strengths and weaknesses? |
| How would you describe the organizational culture? | What opportunities exist for cross training? |
| Why do you enjoy working for this organization? | What qualities are you looking for in your new hires? |

5. And stay away from questions such as:

- “Can you tell me about your training program?” (Too general, shows you didn’t do your homework)
- “At what salary level would I be if I progress to Step 3 in my second year with the company?” (Shows your concern is money as opposed to responsibility or other factors)
- “I noticed on the second half of last year, your dividends dropped 2 points. Was that due to your plants closing in Virginia or just the general economy?” (Sounds like you are showing off and the question is a bit technical for most interviewers. A better related question would be: “Could you discuss a few of the problems or related issues regarding the plant that closed in Los Alamitos?”)
- “Could you explain your fringe benefits package?” (Standard, boring question - be more specific)

The interview

Interview logistics: Learn as much as possible about your interview logistics. Areas to consider are as follows:

- Location (make sure you know exactly where to go. If you need to, make a trial run in advance)
- Make sure you know about the length and number of interview(s)
- Type of interview (one-on-one, interview panels, etc.)
- Know names of contacts, the organization, and the job title for which you are applying
- Arrive 10 to 15 minutes early for your interview
- Bring to interview: copies of tailored resume, references, transcripts (if requested), portfolio (if you have one)

Dress appropriately. It's best to dress conservatively and to be overdressed rather than underdressed. Wear clothing that is appropriate for the organization with which you are interviewing. A conservative look is best for most interviews -- a suit and tie for men and a suit (pants or skirt and a jacket) for women. Convey an image of professionalism and confidence. And know that you may end up being the best dressed person in the room...and that's okay.

Watch your body language and eye contact. Always offer a firm handshake and confident eye contact, making sure to maintain appropriate eye contact throughout the entire interview. Know that your body language can speak volumes. Make sure you are sitting up straight and are slightly leaning forward. You don't have to be stiff, but watch that your hand gestures are not too wild! Careful with fidgeting! The body language of the interviewers shows their engagement as well.

Be a good listener. Answer the questions they're asking. If you're unsure of what was asked, it's alright to ask that they clarify the question or rephrase it again in other words. If you are caught off guard for an answer, pause and think -- you don't have to respond immediately. Think of the interview as a conversation. The more dialogue, the better.

Be yourself. Answer questions truthfully. Be authentic, real, and genuine. (And don't forget to breathe and smile!)

Remember, watch out for these employer pet peeves:

| | |
|---|---|
| Arrogance | Unprepared for interview and making excuses |
| Poor oral communication and presentation styles | Egotism / Over-confidence |
| Lack of interest | Tardiness / Not showing up for interview |
| Lack of employer knowledge | Poor eye contact |
| Early questions about salary and benefits | Abrasive, rude and demanding |

After the interview

- After the interview write down your impressions, observations, any important time lines, and note the names of people you met (obtain business cards when possible). Reflect on the good. Take a few moments to note what went well and what didn't go so well so you can be better prepared for the next interview.
- **Write a thank-you letter.** Follow-up with thank-you notes to all the people who interviewed you. It's best if they're written the day of or the day after the interview and sending them via regular mail or email are equally acceptable. Be sure the names are properly spelled. In your note, it's not a bad idea to repeat your strengths and interest in the position. Reaffirm your interest, qualifications and any important points which were discussed. This piece is very important! A little sincere gratitude goes a long way.
- If you discover that you are no longer interested in the position, it is a professional courtesy to inform the employer of your decision to withdraw from the selection process. You may thank him/her for the opportunity to learn more about the organization, but that the position does not meet your goals and/or interests at this time.
- If you do not get the job, remember that you will find a position in which the needs of both you and the employer will be met. Look upon your interviews as a learning experience -- an opportunity to learn more about yourself and about the people and organizations in your field!