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Job Search Resources

## **Interview Guide**

# Your Interview

Although interviews are an essential part of the job search process, many people are bewildered by them and don't know how to prepare in advance. 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

How you feel and appear in a job interview is too important to be left to chance. With careful preparation, you can enhance the possibilities that the interview will have a positive outcome. 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

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

You need to be mindful of your experiences and how they translate into the abilities, skills and interests that employers are seeking. And you need to be able to 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, abilities and qualifications you used:

**Accomplishments**—built a kite, received an “A”, swam a mile.

**Jobs**—especially those that were most meaningful to you.

**Roles**—such as volunteer, mother, brother, student, friend.

Choose 7-10 experiences that seem most important to you, describe the details of each and ask yourself these questions:

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

### Here's an example

**Achievement:** One summer you worked installing car CD players.

**Skills:** Manual dexterity, solving mechanical problems, assembling, repairing, showing attention to detail, customer service ...

**The Interview:** You're 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 to do a good job of expressing your strengths. This is where your personality and appearance become important factors. There are several criteria the interviewer will be considering:

### Improve your communication skills

Being able to converse easily, making yourself understood, and listening perceptively are marketable skills which your interviewer is seeking. Avoid using slang or incorrect grammar. Listen closely! If you don't understand a question, ask for clarification.

### ***Avoid answering questions with a simple "yes" or "no".***

Elaborate by giving examples, illustrations, or explaining circumstances. 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.

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

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

If you can, mention your best qualities in relation to something concrete. For example, saying "I paid for 75 percent of my own college expenses," is better than saying "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! Get a friend to go through a mock interview with you. See sample questions in this guide.

## Your Appearance

Good grooming is very important. Allow yourself plenty of time to dress and get to the interview so that you will arrive relaxed and calm.

### Dress appropriately

You should 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're 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 may be 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 help. Remember, 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 may be projecting, and practice positive body language. For example, a "limp fish" 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, and keep doing it from time to time during your conversation. Smile—when appropriate!

Don't let your hands reveal your nervousness. If you don't 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

You should certainly have some degree of knowledge about the field and be familiar with any terminology that might be used. Researching an organization prior to the interview also is a must. Such research should help you understand the organization and the position for which you are applying, to enable you to ask intelligent questions and to emphasize your assets during the actual interview.

### Resources which might be helpful include:

- Employer websites.
- Salary surveys that indicate salaries typical for the type of jobs for which you are applying.
- Visit the organization. Talk to current or former employees 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 understand all parts of it.

Another way you can demonstrate your knowledge is by asking a few informed questions. Most interviewers will allow some time for you to do this by asking, “Do you have any questions?” **Be sure that you do!**

## Your Future Plans

Interviewers may ask one or two questions designed to ascertain your plans for the future. They’re not invading your privacy—they just want to find out how the job they have available might fit with your goals. Sometimes they may also be concerned about the length of time you would be willing to commit to their organization. Well-thought-out plans also indicate a well-organized person for whom work is important.

## The Interview

An interview might be defined as a conversation directed toward a definite purpose. In the instance of a job interview, a good interviewer will have four basic tasks:

- to establish a friendly atmosphere and rapport,
- to obtain relevant information,
- to evaluate this information, and
- to give information.

## Sample Questions Used by Interviewers

The following questions are frequently used by interviewers to obtain the information they need. Use these to practice for your interview. 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 or outside 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 (agency, division) 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. How good are your writing skills?
23. Describe your experience working with ...
24. What would you do if ... (a hypothetical situation that might occur on the job)?

## Illegal Pre-employment 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 he or she is being considered. You should be aware that 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, 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. (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; however, refusal to answer could cost you the job. If you choose to answer, you should word your response in such a way to present yourself in the best light.

## Answering Questions Assertively

Listen to what the interviewer is asking, not what you think he or she means by the question. Without denying any of your possible shortcomings, state your qualifications in positive terms.

### 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:** I like to write and I cope well with pressure. In my last job there were times when I had to handle the department alone during the absence of three people, and I managed very well.

**Question:** I understand that you were fired from your last job.

**Assertive Response:** Yes, I was. The company offered little in the way of advancement, and after a while I became discouraged and it affected my performance. I feel that I learned a great deal about myself from this experience, and I feel that this job is one which I could do well and which 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.

To prepare for behavioral questions you must show the critical capabilities for the position. Get a copy of the job description or talk to a current job holder.

You must also be ready to talk about significant accomplishments. Look at 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? What was the task? Provide context. Why was it important?

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

**Results:** What happened because of your actions? What was improved? What were the benefits? What changed? Use numbers if possible.

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

### Example

**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 and get it to the recycling center.

**Action:** Several of us who were interested in environmental issues formed a committee to promote recycling. I was elected chairperson and had the primary responsibility of organizing our efforts and assigning duties. We convinced a local recycler to donate containers. We held a kick-off party in the parking lot. Residents had to bring recyclables to get in. I persuaded people with pick-ups 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. Tell me about it in detail.
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. What is the most difficult decision you have had to make that involved other people who did not agree with your 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 all about it in detail.

## 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 methods do you use to evaluate your employees?
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 rate your competition?
5. Would you describe your training program for me?
6. What are your plans for expansion?
7. What is the ethnic/social make-up of your student enrollment?  
(school district)
8. What do you like most about your job/organization? Least?
9. How would you describe the differences between your organization (agency) and others?
10. What role does the principal play in the discipline of students in your district?
11. What are your trainee turnover statistics?
12. What are your promotional policies?
13. What are your policies regarding continuing education for your employees?
14. How would you compare Wildlife Biologist positions with your agency to similar positions in other agencies?
15. What classes are included in your art (social studies, science) curriculum?
16. What will I do during the first year?
17. What text (equipment, methods, etc.) are currently being used in the area?

18. I've had experience (organizing programs, writing brochures, etc.).  
Would I be likely to use those skills in your company?
19. Why did the previous employee leave this position?

## End of the Interview

Be sensitive to signs from the interviewer that the session is almost ended. Assuming 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 letter is often appropriate and appreciated after the interview. Such a letter 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.

## 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, you should cancel as early as possible. Allow the employer plenty of time to schedule an applicant to take your place.

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## Interview Checklist

- I know the exact time and location of the interview and have allowed for plenty of time to get there a few minutes early.
- I have planned what I will wear to the interview.
- I have researched the organization.
- I have thought out the answers to important and commonly asked questions.
- I have formulated the questions I wish 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



Don't bring your beat-up backpack

Nail color should be professional, not bold

Jeans are NOT professional attire

Tennis shoes?  
Are you running for the position?





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