



PREPARING FOR AN INTERVIEW

An interview is a meeting between an employer and an applicant to discuss a job. While job interviewing for most people may not seem to "come naturally", there is much that can be done in advance to increase your effectiveness as a candidate. Some individuals believe that just being themselves is sufficient for successful job interviewing. However, you are participating in a highly competitive selection process. You need to know how to effectively sell yourself, communicate your skills and experience, and to portray your personality as one that will fit in with the culture of the organization. Being properly prepared and informed about the interviewing process can help you positively focus your energies on what needs to be done and help you find the right job.

GOALS OF THE INTERVIEW

Goals of the Candidate (you):

- To obtain information about the job and the organization.
- To determine whether the job is suitable for you and whether you want it.
- To communicate important information about yourself.
- To favorably impress the employer.

Goals of the Interviewer:

- To promote the organization and attract the best possible candidate.
- To gather information about the candidate.
- To assess how well the candidate's qualifications/ experiences to match the job requirements.
- To determine whether the candidate will fit in with the organization and the staff.

PREPARATION FOR THE INTERVIEW

1. RESEARCH THE ORGANIZATION

Find out some basic information about the organization before you go for the interview. You will be in a better position to ask intelligent questions and you will impress the interviewer with your initiative and your knowledge of the organization.

2. RESEARCH THE JOB

Employers often list more qualifications in the job posting than can realistically be met by most potential candidates. Frequently, this is done as a pre-screening device in order to reduce the number of applicants for the position by setting up artificial barriers. You should not allow this to discourage you or prevent you from pursuing the position .

Just as you are looking for the ideal job, employers are looking for the ideal employee. Analyze the job description and match your experiences, skills, interests, and abilities to the job. You may find that some of the qualifications are less essential than others. Emphasize your strong points to minimize the effect of possible limited experience.

Talk with people who have worked in similar positions in that organization or in other companies. Read about the specific job category in the career literature. As a result of your

research, you will have gained information about the nature of the job, the level of education and/or training necessary, future potential, and other pertinent details.

3. PREPARE AND ANTICIPATE QUESTIONS

Anticipate questions that may be asked of you in an interview. This does not mean memorizing responses or writing a script. It does mean planning the points you want to make. Also, prepare questions you would like to ask the employer

4. PRACTICE GOOD COMMUNICATION SKILLS

It is important that you use good communication skills during the interview. Practice with a friend, with a career counselor, or by videotaping a mock interview. Work on the following communication skills:

- presenting yourself in a positive and confident manner
- offering a firm handshake
- speaking clearly and effectively
- listening attentively and maintaining eye contact
- avoiding the use of unnecessary verbal and non-verbal distractions

5. DRESS APPROPRIATELY

Dress professionally for the interview. Remember that you don't get a second chance to make a first impression. Your appearance should be neat and clean, pressed and polished. Conservative business attire is appropriate for most settings.

6. BE PUNCTUAL

Be on time for the interview. Plan to arrive about fifteen minutes early. Check in with the interviewer or the secretary about five to ten minutes prior to your scheduled appointment. Use your waiting time to check your appearance, review the questions and answers you prepared, and read any company literature that may be on display. Take advantage of this time to get a feel for the work environment by observing the surroundings and interactions among staff.

THE STAGES OF THE INTERVIEW

Regardless of the style of the interviewer, the interview will progress through four basic stages: the introduction, sharing general information, narrowing the focus, and the closing.

Introduction -- begins with small talk initiated by the interviewer. The interviewer may ask a few casual questions or make some general remarks. The purpose is to put you at ease, establish rapport, and find a comfortable level of communication.

Sharing general information -- starts when the interviewer shifts from small talk to general information about you, the organization, and the position. You may be asked to review your background, interests, and goals. The interviewer will discuss the organization and its goals. This will test your listening and speaking skills as well as give you additional information on which to base intelligent questions.

Narrowing the focus -- occurs when the interviewer begins concentrating on the job and how you might fit in. You have the opportunity to expand upon your skills and to demonstrate how they apply to the job requirements. Your efforts in researching the job and the organization will pay off at this point.

Closing -- happens when the interviewer begins summarizing what has been said and clarifying certain aspects of the interview. It is crucial that you express your interest in the position at this time. It is also important that you review the points you've made especially about how you are uniquely qualified for the position. If you have relevant skills or experience that you have not yet shared, do it now. The employer will probably explain how and when the next contact will be made and may end with, "Do you have any other questions?". Try to save

at least one of your questions for the end so that you wrap-up the interview on a positive note, leaving an enthusiastic impression.

TYPES OF INTERVIEWS

BASED ON PURPOSE

SCREENING INTERVIEW -- used to quickly and efficiently eliminate unqualified or overpriced candidates. Conducted by professional interviewers, recruiters, or personnel representatives seeking information regarding educational and experiential background using a highly structured question and answer format.

SELECTION INTERVIEW -- used after some type of screening process. Usually conducted by a professional practitioner who will be the candidate's supervisor. It is generally less formal and less structured than the screening interview. Questions tend to be open-ended with subsequent questions based upon candidate's responses to previous questions.

BASED ON FORMAT

ONE ON ONE -- usual interview procedure. Screening and selection interviews usually include one interviewer and one candidate. At times, a second company representative may join in or candidate may have a series of interviews that involve several meetings with different people within the organization, one at a time.

SEARCH COMMITTEE OR BOARD INTERVIEW -- group consists of many interviewers and one candidate. Used by business and industry for selection of high level corporate officers. Typical of a selection committee search in higher education.

GROUP INTERVIEW -- group consists of many candidates and one or more interviewers. Frequently used as a screening procedure by smaller companies and by graduate and professional schools. Used to assess leadership skills and ability to work in groups.

BASED ON STYLE

QUESTION AND ANSWER OR DIRECTED INTERVIEW -- highly structured; interviewer comes prepared with list of questions. Used by recruiters and professional interviewers to seek facts. Generally is format for screening interviews.

OPEN-ENDED OR NON DIRECTIVE INTERVIEW -- generally informal and less structured. Used by professional practitioners to assess candidate's skills, experience, and personality attributes. This is the usual format for selection interviews.

STRESS INTERVIEW -- staged to determine how candidate will perform under stress. It may be typified by long periods of silence, challenges to candidate's opinions, or a series of interruptions.

HANDLING DIFFICULT QUESTIONS

What questions do you dread being asked in an interview? Some of the more commonly asked dreaded questions include: "What are your strengths and weaknesses?", "Where do you see yourself in five years?", "Why should I hire you?", and "Why do you want to work here?". When you think about it, they are all legitimate questions. You may not have done sufficient soul searching or strategizing to handle them well, but each presents you with an opportunity to sell yourself.

It is helpful to look first at why they ask the questions and then to strategize a response. **"What are your strengths and weaknesses?"** The employer may be assessing how well you know yourself and how honest and open you are. You have an opportunity to showcase your strengths and also to reveal a not too serious weakness. It is best if you demonstrate

how you are working to improve your stated weakness. For example, you might say, "My computer experience is somewhat limited. However, I recently took a week long training program on using the MAC and I'm looking forward to building on the skills I learned."

"Where do you see yourself in five years?" They want to know if you are ambitious. If you find it hard to look five years out, try this: "Five years seems like a long time. I can see myself as a programmer analyst in two years. Five years from now, I might be a software developer or a systems analyst. I won't know which direction I want to take until I've been in the field for awhile."

"Why should I hire you?" Here's where they find out how well you understand their needs and how confident you are of your qualifications for the position. How about a response like this one? "I think you should hire me because I have the skills you need in this marketing support position. My technical skills exactly match the requirements as I've been using your software in my Co-op job. And my interpersonal skills are strong as a result of my student government experience."

"Why do you want to work here?" This is where the employer finds out how much you know about their organization. You want to convey your interest in contributing to their mission or in being part of an important project they've been awarded. For example: "I've read about your contract to develop tax accounting software for the federal government and I want to be part of the action..."

Then there are those questions that you hope no one asks but they inevitably do -- important questions that demand a well-prepared response from you. For example, if **your resume doesn't show continuous employment**, you should expect to be asked for an explanation. What positive results came out of your decision not to work? An upbeat way to explain might be, "That's correct, I did not work in 2002. I was nearing the end of my degree program at Massey. I realized that if I attended school full time I could complete my bachelor's degree in one year, rather than working and taking three years to finish. I feel I made the right decision: when I went back to work, I was offered a salary considerably higher than my previous earnings."

Perhaps you were laid off last year, so you dread being asked why you left your last job. You want to frame your explanation in a way that dispels any shame or guilt you may be harboring. "I was one of 180 people laid off last September when XYZ company went through a major downsizing."

What if you were fired for some reason? This can be very worrisome to the job seeker. "To be honest with you, I just didn't fit into the organization. Finally, my supervisor and I decided it was best for me to leave. While this was a devastating experience, I feel I'm ready to begin again."

These examples show honest, straight forward responses that will be acceptable to an employer. The important thing is for you to come to terms with the issue, see the positive side, and demonstrate that you are eager to move on in your career.

ETHICAL ISSUES

It is illegal for employers to ask questions of a personal nature prior to employment. Whether you are married or single, have children, or belong to a certain religious group should have no bearing on your ability to do the job. However, this does not mean that you won't be asked illegal questions. Many interviewers have had little training and don't realize that they are asking improper questions; other interviewers know and ask anyway to see how you handle uncomfortable situations.

SALARY NEGOTIATIONS AND RESPONDING TO THE JOB OFFER

Salary negotiations often make candidates uncomfortable, and rightfully so, as this is one of the trickiest parts of interviewing. A few suggestions on how to manage this topic may eliminate some of the discomfort.

First of all, if the topic comes up too early in the interviewing process, it is advisable to postpone the discussion. For example, you could say, "I would be happy to discuss my salary requirements, but I feel I need to know more about the position first. Could you tell me about..." The idea here is to buy some time. The more you know about the job, the better you will be able to pinpoint what it is worth in today's market.

Secondly, if you are in the final round of interviewing and you are asked about your salary expectations, it is appropriate to clarify, "Are you prepared to make me an offer?" Try to get the interviewer to commit to you as the preferred candidate. Your negotiating position will be greatly enhanced if you establish that you are their first choice.

Finally, there comes a time when the negotiation can't be delayed any longer. Ideally, you know a lot about the position and how it compares in the market because you've done your homework, and you are the front running candidate. You are still likely to do better in the process if you aren't the first one to name a figure. You may be able to ask what they have in mind or what they have budgeted. If they tell you, for example, that the position is rated at \$32,000 to \$36,000, you can then say why you think you deserve to receive the higher end of the scale, based on your knowledge and experience.

CLOSING THE INTERVIEW

If you've made a good impression up to this point, you want to make sure you end on a positive note. If you decide you want the job, be prepared to say so in a clear, convincing manner.

Say thank you. Regardless of whether you feel things went well or poorly, remain friendly and courteous to the interviewer and thank him or her for taking time to meet you.

Ask when a decision will be made. Without giving an ultimatum about other job offers or deadlines you may have, politely ask when the hiring manager will be making the final decision about the position for which you are applying.

Write a follow-up letter. Send a thank-you note as soon as possible after your meeting. Your letter should express gratitude for the meeting, reinforce your interest in the job, and recap the strongest points recommending you for the position.

Like most skills, becoming an expert at interviewing takes practice. But the more you prepare for the part, the better impression you'll make on the people you meet -- and the more you'll increase your chances of securing the job offer.

