

Interview Skills

There are some easy steps that you can take that will increase your chances of success at interviews.

First, remember that **job interviews should be a process of two-way communication.** Not only are they a tool for employers to use to evaluate you, but they are also an opportunity for you to assess the job, the organization, and to see if there is a "fit."



The keys to a successful interview are preparation and practice. The following suggestions will help you prepare for an interview:

Self-evaluation It is important for you to think about yourself and your past experiences in order to be ready to articulate what you have to offer an employer. Consider the following topics:

- How your present and past experience relate to the position
- Your current and future career goals
- What skills and expertise you have to offer
- The skills that you would like to develop or improve
- Location, salary, and lifestyle priorities
- Kinds of people and environments you prefer
- Past experiences you want to highlight such as volunteer work, hobbies, travel



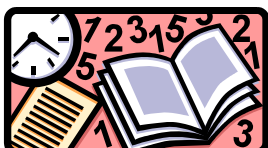
Before the Interview



Research the Company - A company's website is an excellent place to begin. It usually gives you information on whether it is international or domestic, what its revenues are, how many locations it has, and the nature of its major products. Most companies are very proud of their websites. Don't be surprised if one of the first questions interviewers ask when you arrive is, "Have you have had a chance to look at our website?"

Practice interviews - Write down a list of possible questions that you think may be asked, then have a friend act as an interviewer and direct them to you in a practice interview situation. Don't stop until you feel comfortable answering each question. Practicing beforehand will make you feel more comfortable and relaxed during the interview.

Dress Professionally - In today's environment, wearing a suit isn't always necessary. Contact the HR Manager of the company or your recruiter, and find out what the dress code is for the company at which you are going to interview. Then dress one level above. For instance, if it is business casual, men can wear dress pants, dress shirt, and sport coat. Women can wear a pantsuit, dress, or a skirt and blouse. Visual impressions are very important. Therefore, if in doubt, always dress on the conservative side.

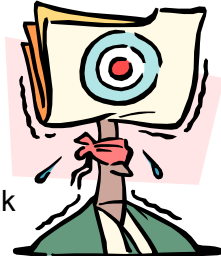


Arrival - Try to arrive at the interview location a little early. This gives you time to determine where you need to go, and will give

you a few minutes to collect your thoughts. DO NOT arrive late. Nothing destroys your chance at impressing an employer more than arriving late and offering no explanation. If you learn at the last minute that you are going to be arriving late at the interview, call and let the interviewer know. Interviewers understand that things can come up suddenly. You are never considered late if you call and make them aware of the fact.

During the Interview

First impressions - First impressions take only thirty seconds. Establishing rapport, direct and sustained eye contact, a firm handshake, a warm smile, good posture, and introducing yourself in a confident manner are important ingredients. A well-groomed, professional appearance is critical. Greet the interviewer with a firm handshake, whether it is a woman or a man. (No one likes a weak handshake.) Always maintain eye contact while shaking hands.



Smile - A smile denotes confidence in a candidate. Try to smile often. Also, don't be afraid to use some hand animation while answering questions. This suggests enthusiasm in a candidate.

Body Language - Use good posture, and look the interviewer right in the eye. Sit up straight. Never slouch.

Speak Clearly - Don't mumble. It portrays a lack of confidence. Speak with assurance. This indicates confidence.

Listen Before Answering - Allow the employer to begin the interview, but be prepared with some opening statements or questions such as, "I understand that this position involves...", or "What are you looking for in a job candidate?" Make sure you understand the question. If not, ask the interviewer to clarify it. Don't be afraid to take some time to think before answering. Interviewers are impressed with someone who thinks out an answer before speaking.



Give Brief Answers - Make your answer concise and to the point. Rambling tends to suggest that you really don't have the answer to the question(s) asked.

Previous Employers - Never, ever say anything negative about your present or previous employers. No matter how much you may have disliked someone, find a way to give your experiences a positive spin.

Be Truthful - Don't lie when asked about something you haven't done. The next question will be "tell us about it."

Know Your Resume - Be prepared to talk about every fact that is on your resume. Many people embellish their accomplishments on their resumes. Avoid this, since the only point of reference an interviewer has about you is the resume you provide to him/her beforehand.

Keep things at a professional level - Sometimes near the end of an interview, the two parties start feeling comfortable with each other. Don't let this comfortable feeling lead

you to telling them something about yourself that they really shouldn't know. Always keep things at a professional level.

Look for Something in Common - This is something that has given an edge in the past. Try to find a common bond between yourself and your interviewer. If you are being interviewed in an office, look at how the office is decorated. Look for something you can identify with. Is his/her college diploma hanging on the wall? Did you attend a nearby school, or perhaps one in the same Division? If so, make a quick comment about it: "Did you attend Penn State? I attended the University of Michigan. What a great football conference." Interviewers sometimes feel more comfortable with people with whom they have something in common. This approach has helped several candidates obtain a position over other qualified candidates. Above all, be sincere.



After the Interview

Back in Touch - Ask the interviewer when s/he expects to get back to you on her/his decision.

Get Everyone's Business Card - Before you leave, be sure to get the business cards of all of the people with whom you visited. If you cannot do that, ask a secretary for their names and e-mail addresses.

Thank the Interviewer - Verbally thank the interviewer for taking the time to interview you, before leaving. Within a day, send thank-you letters to all of the interviewers with whom you spoke. This does not need to consist of a written letter sent via snail mail; an e-mailed thank-you works just as well.



Do not give up - Sometimes, within ten minutes of the start of an interview, you will know that the job is not one you want to pursue. If you begin to feel this way, don't give up on the interview. Continue to interview as if the job was the most important thing in the world. This provides you with practice for your next interview, which may be for your dream job! Not all interviews will lead to offers of employment, but, if you approach every interview as if it's the most important interview you ever had, you will come out a winner!

Additional tips

- Focus on presenting a positive, enthusiastic tone.
- If you are asked to describe a weakness, mention lessons learned, and steer away from negative descriptions.
- Think about three or four key points that you want to make about your personal characteristics, skills you have learned, and relevant experiences that demonstrate that you could perform the job well.
- Find specific, rather than general, examples from your experience that illustrate important points about yourself.
- When answering questions, focus on experiences that demonstrate flexibility, adaptability, responsibility, progress, achievement, creativity, initiative, and leadership.



- If the employer signals the end of the interview and asks you for questions, and you haven't discussed some key points, say: "There are a couple of points I would like to mention."

After the interview, write a brief thank you letter. Express your appreciation for the opportunity to interview and learn about the organization, re-confirm your interest, and re-emphasize how your background and skills might be of interest to the organization.

Some Interview Questions

You can expect to be asked some of the following types of questions in an interview.

Case Questions are often used by consulting companies to assess analytical and problem solving skills. The interviewer presents a situation and asks you to discuss possible solutions. A sample case question is, "Describe a managed care company that you think is successful and explain why. What do they do that works? What are their potential problems? What is your outlook for their future? What suggestions do you have for their future?"

Behavioral or situational questions are used to assess how you would behave in different circumstances and to predict your behaviour in future, similar situations. An interviewer may ask, "Tell me about a time when a team you were working on was unable to proceed due to some interpersonal conflict. How did you respond, and what role did you play on the team?"

Role-play questions entail the interviewer asking you to put yourself in another role and decide how you would handle a specific problem.

Industry-specific questions are questions regarding the latest trends or issues in the industry. An interviewer may ask, "If you were a CEO of Microsoft's main competitor, what actions would you take in the on-line services market?"

Brainteasers are quick questions where the obvious answer is not necessarily the right answer such as, "Which would you rather receive: fifty thousand pennies or a 10x10x10 room filled with pennies?"

General questions

- Tell me about yourself.
- What are your key experiences and accomplishments?
- How would you rank your achievements?
- What are your strengths and weaknesses?
- How would your friends describe you?
- Explain your reason for leaving your current job.
- What are the most important things to you in a job?
- What do you value in a supervisor?
- How would you describe your management style?
- What appeals to you about this job and organization?
- Describe the ideal position in our company.
- What qualities do you think make someone successful in our industry?
- What would you like me to know most that is not on your resume?



- Explain your understanding of the issues and trends in your specialty and in the overall industry.
- Why are you qualified for this position?
- Give an example of a situation where you demonstrated leadership.
- Give an example of how you worked on a team.
- What questions do you have about the organization? Questions for the interviewer are queries that usually focus on the culture or mission of the organization, and job responsibilities. This is not the time to bring up questions about salary, benefits, and vacation about which you can inquire after you have been offered the job.

The Phone Interview

Due to a company's geographic location, travel costs, and divergent schedules, a phone interview may often be your initial contact with a prospective employer. Therefore, we're offering some phone interview tips.



Objective - The idea behind a phone interview is to gain an invitation for a personal interview, and to gather more information for future steps in the process.

Preparation - Have a pad, pen, and a copy of your resume near the phone. Use a phone in a quiet area. Avoid any background noise. Also avoid using a cordless phone, because they tend to transmit poorly.

Speaking

- a. Smile and be enthusiastic. Your enthusiasm will carry through to the interviewer.
- b. Speak in a conversational manner, and be sure to speak loudly enough to be heard. Speak with some inflection and tone.
- c. Let the interviewer do most of the talking. When s/he asks you a question, expound upon the answer. Use the opportunity to sell your skills and experience.
- d. When the interview is over, let her/him know that you are very interested in scheduling a personal interview at her/his place of business.



References

Altavista Careers (2001), JobsontheWeb(2001), Virtualville (2001) and MIT Online Resources (2001)