



Interview Skills



Careers and
Employment

When you get to the interview stage in a selection process it means that the company/organisation is interested in you as a possible employee. The interviewer wants to hire someone and will be doing their best to give you an opportunity to present yourself as a strong candidate.

Employers value candidates who are prepared and focussed. By being prepared, you will be able to anticipate possible questions, demonstrate that you want the job and present yourself as being confident.

And for more information you may visit the C&E website (www.qut.edu.au/careers) or the Career Planning website.

Notes

Find out as much as you can about the organisation, the person(s) interviewing and the situation of the interview. Anticipate questions they may ask and prepare answers for these.

Arrive on time

Dress appropriately. There is no rule that fits all positions. If in doubt, dress up. In most situations a 'collar and tie' is appropriate for males, while in some situations a suit is expected. For females, a skirt, blouse and jacket are usually required, with a minimum of jewellery.

First impressions are important. First impressions are formed in the first two minutes. Once formed, impressions are hard to change. Be confident and not too aggressive or passive. Rehearse possible entry routines.

Shake hands firmly **while making direct eye contact.**
Avoid limp or bone-crushing handshakes.

Take along a **portfolio with original documents to offer** to the interviewer(s) after you meet them.

Sit comfortably and don't fidget. Hold on to something if you are nervous, eg. The chair or your other hand.

Maintain eye contact and keep all interviewers involved in the process with your confidence and enthusiasm.

Use the opportunity to **illustrate the skills you possess** and how you can assist the organisation.

Prepare questions to ask if the interviewer(s) give you the opportunity. They could include information about the job (eg. training, expectations) and/or timelines about when you can expect an answer regarding employment.

Leave the interview in a positive **frame of mind.** Express your interest once again in the position.

Send a **thank you note** to the interviewer(s), even if it is a short one.

Types of Interviews

Screening interviews - Many employers have screening interviews on campus. Often short, the purpose is to determine who will be invited for a second interview. Apart from checking your technical competence, they often consist of open questions to ascertain those personalities, which would fit into their corporate culture.

Telephone screening interview - Often used where the organisation is some distance from the university, or used by local companies wanting to screen people quickly.

Unstructured interviews - These rely on open questions such as "tell me about yourself?" or "what are your career goals?" Even though the interviewer seems unfocused, you should be very focused. Although you can't control the direction of the interview, you control the content.

Panel interviews - A panel of interviewers will generally take it in turns to ask questions. Focus on the person who asks each particular question.

Behaviour-based interviews - These interviews assume that by describing your behaviour on a past situation, they can predict how you will behave in the future. Questions will be like "tell me about a time when you..." Each question requires a detailed, highly specific answer from your past. They may focus on issues such as leadership, problem solving, initiative, teamwork etc. Your responses need to include the situation, what was required of you, your actions, and what you learnt from them. You need to prepare a range of stories, which exemplify your actions in a range of areas.

Stress interviews - These consist of questions and situations designed to place you under stress to see how you react. Recognise the behaviour for what it is, and thwart their attempts by staying 'cool'. Deep breathing and checking the question again before answering are useful techniques.

Sequential interviews - These are conducted consecutively by different individuals in the organisation.

Interviewers compare impressions and notes after the interview.

Desktop videoconferencing - Often interstate or overseas companies will use this method for initial interviewing. You have to learn to do the difficult task of interacting with a camera and not a screen.

Individual - Sometimes the interview is conducted by just one person. Spend time to ensure you build up a rapport with this person before you launch into answers.

Situational - This is the term used when interviews are held on site in the actual building or environment where you will eventually be employed. It sometimes helps the interviewer to assess your fitness to the work environment as well as the usual other reasons for interviewing.

Assessment Centre - Many organisations are now using assessment centres where a group of maybe 8 students at a time operate in a space for a number of hours. During this time they could be asked to form teams and compete, move into pairs and do role plays, give spontaneous or planned presentations, do tests, have interviews, have discussions, problem solve in groups, etc. There could be up to four observers together with the facilitators.

Key Interview Skills

Active Listening

Active listening can be defined as high level listening in which your entire attention is focused on the person speaking – your body, your face, your eyes, all confirm you are listening. Active listening is important for two reasons. First, employers are attracted to active listeners. Active listeners are better liked and perceived to be better employees. Second, through active listening you'll pick up clues that the interviewer is consciously and unconsciously giving you. You can then process the clues to determine what the employer is really looking for. Use your body language to show that you are truly listening. Be relaxed, but don't slouch.

Control the content, not the interview

Let the interviewer control the question while you control the content. Controlling the content means that you will be deciding what to say and which examples to give. Develop a game plan and know the points you want to cover and the experiences you want to describe. Look for the earliest opportunity to present the information in the interview.

Let others speak for you.

When you're answering questions in an interview, let others build you up by saying something like, "My boss felt

some of my most valuable attributes were that I could always be counted on to get a project done on schedule and that the details had all been taken care of."

Research the organisation

Researching an organisation can yield big dividends during an interview. Read annual reports, recruiting brochures and information held at C&E. Research can reveal problems or challenges the organisation is facing and can enable you to select, in advance, appropriate experiences you should describe in the interview. Learn what you can from your research then weave the information you've gathered into the interview.

Overcoming objections

An objection is not a rejection, it is a request for more information. If the employer states "you don't have enough experience", they are not rejecting you. In fact, they could totally sold on you but for this one concern. Your task is to sell yourself and overcome that objection. Do not take the objection personally, and do not become defensive.

The first step in overcoming objections is predicting what they will be and developing appropriate, effective response to them. The objection may be that you don't have the right coursework background. A way to deal with this is to convince the interviewer(s) that you learn quickly.

Master the art of story telling

Using stories to sell your skills is a highly effective interview technique. In less than three minutes, you can tell a story that will make interviewers remember you favourably. Employers believe that the best predictor of future success is past success, so tell stories that vividly describe your successes. Don't be concerned if your stories are not highly impressive, as long as the experience demonstrates your effective use of a particular skill.

Practice telling stories. Begin by recalling 5 – 10 experiences that you are proud of or feel good about. These experiences can come from school or college, hobbies, volunteer work, and jobs. In your mind recall the experiences, write 100 – 300 words about each one, practice giving a 1 and 2 minute version of each. With the longer version you can add details that provide a greater richness and make each story more memorable. The shorter the versions that the most effort because you must decide which information is more crucial. Then, tell your story into a tap recorder. When you play it back, ask yourself, is it a well-told story? Is it interesting? Does it create word pictures?

In stories that demonstrate how you solved a problem or overcome an obstacle, create before and after pictures that highlight your impact on the situation. Not all stories have to be success ones. It is often more effective to include unsuccessful ones so long as you learnt from the situation.

Questions Commonly Asked

"Tell me about yourself"

Most people hate this question. By preparing for it and knowing what a wonderful opportunity it offers to sell yourself, you should look forward to it. It is the most frequently asked question during interviewing. It usually serves as a bridge to go from small talk to the real interview. To answer it, briefly describe your education and your work history. Briefly describe interesting aspects of your education or a job and look for opportunities to share accomplishments. Add in your personal interests.

"What is your greatest strength?"

The question asks for your number-one strength, skill, or asset and requires you to analyse yourself. You should have several strengths in mind and share the one you feel is the most appropriate for the position you are applying for. Begin with a brief statement, and provide a clear example.

"What are your career goals?"

This question tests whether you've determined your career goals and whether your goals match the organisation. Sound definite and express your goals based on what you know about the organisation.

"Why would you like to work for us?"

If the question is asked at or near the beginning of the first interview, you have an opportunity to describe what you know about the organisation. If the question is asked after the interviewer has described the job and the company in detail, you could mention positive points that you had discovered on your own, as well as some mentioned by the interviewer. This might include the reputation of the company or department, its rapid growth, or your personal affinity with some of the concepts presented by the interviewer.

"Do you prefer to work individually or as part of a team?"

The best responses depend on what you know about the job and how you see yourself in the position. If the organisation is looking for a decisive person, you would emphasise your individualism and independence. If most work is done by committees and task forces, emphasise your ability to work as part of a team. If you are not sure, describe how you enjoy both aspects.

"Why did you choose your major?"

To answer it, recall your reasons for choosing your major and then give only the most positive ones. Demonstrate forethought and planning ability. Indicate that the decision was made after considerable thought. If you are not using your major – a psychology major now looking to get into

banking – indicate the strengths you were able to develop as a result of your major.

"Do you feel you did the best work at university that you were capable of doing?"

If you worked hard at your studies, a person might say, "I worked very hard and really took my studies seriously. I graduated with a 5.2 GPA (or with honours). Even the classes I didn't do so well in grade-wise, really taught me something" or "I worked hard and got good grades, but I also wanted to balance my education. I was active in [eg debating, sports, volunteer work]." If you were a poor student, you could admit to a lack of focus at the time, adding that you are very focused now. If you got your best results in your major, or individual subjects, mention those rather than your overall GPA.

"Why should I employ you?"

This question is often asked at the end of an interview and allows you to summarize your strengths. Since this is a summary, you can discuss points that you've already covered and add new ones. Sell yourself. Be prepared to take up to 4 minutes. Try to focus on everything you have learnt about the job, your future boss, and the needs of the company. With such limited time, you must cover only those points that will have the greatest impact. You can create that impact by describing a combination of personality skills, transferable skills, and technical skills.

"What are your weaknesses?"

This is an opportunity for the interviewer to find out how aware you are of yourself as a person. Use no more than two words to describe your weakness (*shy, quiet*). Provide the answer in three parts. For example: 1) Sometimes/some people say that I am (*quiet*) 2) the good aspect of that is that I (*listen well or when I do say something it usually makes a significant contribution to the conversation*) 3) but I know I need to work on (*being a bit more outgoing*).

Asking Questions

Employers like being asked questions. In fact, most are disappointed if you don't ask thoughtful questions; they may even interpret a lack of questions as a lack of interest. Giving the interviewer a chance to answer your questions makes the interview interesting and makes you seem more interesting as well. Asking questions also gives you the opportunity to gather useful information and clear up any confusing issues.

Each of the following questions could be appropriate at any time:

- ★ Could you describe your management training program?
- ★ What types of people seem to do well in this department/company?
- ★ If I'm as effective as I think I would be, where could I be in 5 years?
- ★ Is there anything else I should know that would help me understand the position?
- ★ What are the main opportunities you see for this department/company in the next three years?
- ★ What are the challenges that have to be faced?
- ★ What are the timelines for the selection process?
- ★ When would I reasonably expect to be contacted?
- ★ Is the company able to deal with technological changes in the next five years?
- ★ What type of growth do you foresee in the next few years? Why?
- ★ Does the company promote personal and professional growth? How?

Projecting Your Personality

On a conscious and subconscious level, employers will be evaluating your personality and asking "Do I like this person? Will we work well together?" When considering two people with equal qualifications, the one with the more pleasing personality will always be hired. In order to adequately sell yourself, you need to know your personality skills. These include being cooperative, effective under stress, and energetic.

During an interview you should not merely rattle off claims to each of these characteristics – you should demonstrate each one. In just twenty minutes, a perceptive interviewer can accurately assess you in each area – both by what you say and what you are. The famous saying, "your actions speak so loudly, I can't hear what you're saying", is especially applicable to the ways in which employers assess a job applicant's personality during the interview.

Identify 3 to 6 attributes which are unique to you and which you can refer to and demonstrate. Select them from this list or add in your own and think how you can model these characteristics during the interview:

**Assertive
Cheerful
Conscientious
Cooperative
Decisive
Diplomatic
Discreet
Energetic
Enthusiastic
Flexible
Friendly
Goal-oriented
Hard-working
Honest
Humorous
Inquisitive
Insightful
Loyal
Open-minded
Optimistic
Patient
Persistent
Practical
Productive
Real
Reliable
Resourceful
Responsible
Thorough
Trustworthy
Self-confident
Sincere**

Record Your Progress

Keep track of your interviews by logging down the key details of each interview and some private comments about how you went, and where you might improve.