

Interview Tips

Do your homework

Before the interview, you should do basic research into the company: key people, their products or services, locations, competitors, and the latest news on the industry. Start with the company's website, research databases such as Hoovers, local newspapers and business publications, and professional associations servicing the industry.

Practice

If you have never interviewed, or haven't done so in awhile, get ready by practicing with a friend, parent, or mentor. Be able to easily answer the typical questions that may be posed to you ("Tell me about yourself." "What are your strengths and weaknesses?" "Where do you hope to be in five years?" "Why should we hire you?").

Dress for success

It is imperative that you dress appropriately for the job and 99 percent of the time that means wearing a business suit. Even if you know the company has a casual environment, dressing up for your interview sends the message you are serious about your career and the job. Being neat, clean, and professional goes a long way toward making the first impression a good one.

Arrive early

There is nothing worse than being late for your first interview. Even though it's not your fault -- a truck turned over on the highway or you got stuck behind a school bus -- arriving late sends the wrong message to your prospective employer, and it puts extra stress and time constraints on everyone involved. If you are going to be late, call as soon as you know. Likewise, don't arrive too early either. Enter the lobby about 15 minutes before your meeting so you can relax and study the atmosphere.

Be observant

As you progress in your career, you will become more aware of the importance of corporate culture and clues on how to judge an organization's climate. For a first-time job seeker this may be more difficult, but not impossible. Chat with the receptionist and see why he or she likes working at the company. When walking to and from your interview, look at how employees are dressed, their age range, how they are behaving (seeing laughter and smiling is always good!) and if it appears to be a conservative or creative environment. In other words, can you envision yourself working there?

Know yourself

Know what you are good at -- your accomplishments, skills, traits -- and what sets you apart from other job seekers. Right before the interview, review your resume and make sure you know the content and dates so you can effectively answer questions without referring to your copy. If you are in a creative field, don't forget to bring your portfolio, and know how best to show off examples of your work in a timely fashion.

Put your best foot -- and hand -- forward

Always present a firm handshake to both men and women, smile, make eye contact, and greet the interviewer by name. Be positive and enthusiastic and prepared to make small talk -- especially during walks to and from interviews. During the meeting, stress accomplishments, but don't talk about yourself for long periods of time and try to relax. Be engaging and confident but humble in all your interactions. And, if at all possible, refrain from taking notes until after the interview is complete and you are in private.

Listen first, answer second

Listen carefully and attentively and ask for clarification if you don't understand a question being asked. Don't be vague or try to bluff your way out of a question. If you need more time to respond or to provide additional information, don't hesitate to state that. Ask the interviewer insightful questions, but don't pose off-the-wall, lengthy, or hypothetical questions. Prepare at least three follow-up questions to ask of your prospective employer that will provide more information about the job or working at the company. Not only will that help you evaluate the opportunity, but it will also show you are engaged and interested.

Concluding the interview

At the end of the interview, be cordial and thank the interviewer for his or her time. Be direct in asking what the next step is in the hiring process. If appropriate, ask if you can check back with him or her. Make sure you express your interest in the company and the position. The only time you shouldn't do this is if you are 100 percent sure you don't want to work there. If that's the case, it is better to say nothing. Also, never ask about benefits or vacation time (save that for later in the negotiation process). Most companies have competitive offerings and by asking too early, you show you are more interested in the benefits than the work.

After the interview

Shortly after you return home from an interview, e-mail or mail a note of thanks to everyone you interviewed with. The note should express your gratitude for taking the time to meet with you and also reaffirm your interest in the position. If you haven't heard from the interviewer in the time frame in which they told you they were making a decision, it is perfectly acceptable to follow-up with a quick e-mail or phone call to again express your interest and gauge theirs.