

EMPLOYMENT INTERVIEW

Course instructor: Mariam Aftab

An employment interview is an exchange between a candidate and a prospective employer (or their representative). It is a formal process with several consistent elements that you can use to guide your preparation.

Employment interviews come in all shapes and sizes, and may not be limited to only one exchange but one interaction. A potential employee may very well be screened by a computer (as the résumé is scanned) and interviewed online or via the telephone before the applicant ever meets a representative or panel of representatives. The screening process may include formal tests that include personality tests, background investigations, and consultations with previous employers. Depending on the type of job you are seeking, you can anticipate answering questions, often more than once, to a series of people as you progress through a formal interview process. Just as you have the advantage of preparing for a speech with anticipation, you can apply the same research and public speaking skills to the employment interview

- **Informational or networking interviews.** Informational interviewing is particularly useful in helping you explore career options. This is an interview that you have requested to learn about a particular job, company, or industry and how best to present yourself to potential hiring managers. An informational interview also gives you an opportunity to create a positive impression. Be sure to get referrals, leads, and recommendations for other networking contacts.

- **Screening interviews.** Generally conducted by a representative of the company's human resources department or a recruiter, a screening interview is used to determine whether you are qualified or overqualified to do the job. This initial interview is often conducted via telephone. As the name implies, the objective of this interview is to find reasons to remove, not include, people in a candidate pool. Do not consider it lightly just because someone other than the hiring manager is conducting it.

- **One-on-one interviews.** In a one-on-one interview, the interviewer asks a set of questions to learn if you have the knowledge and skills to handle the job for which you have applied. The hiring manager conducting the one-on-one interview also wants to get a sense of what it would be like working with you and how you would fit in the organization. It is also used to learn how you behaved in past situations as a predictor of how you are likely to behave in the future. Expect to be asked "Tell me about a time when..." or "Give me an example..." questions. This interview is the one a hiring decision is based on.

Behavioral interviews ask the applicant to describe actual behaviors, rather than plans or general principles. To answer a behavioral question, describe the situation, tell what you did, and tell what happened. Think about the implications of what you did and be ready to talk about what you'd do the next time or if the situation were slightly different.

- **Situational interviews** put you in a situation that allows the interviewer to see whether you have the qualities the company is seeking.

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■ **Stress interviews** deliberately create physical or psychological stress. Change the conditions that create physical stress. Meet psychological stress by rephrasing questions in less inflammatory terms and treating them as requests for information.

COMMON QUESTIONS

Here are eleven common questions you are likely to be asked in an employment interview: McLean, S. (2005). The basics of interpersonal communication. Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

1. Tell me about yourself.
2. Have you ever done this type of work before?
3. Why should we hire you?
4. What are your greatest strengths? Weaknesses?
5. Give me an example of a time when you worked under pressure.
6. Tell me about a time you encountered (X) type of problem at work. How did you solve the problem?
7. Why did you leave your last job?
8. How has your education and/or experience prepared you for this job?
9. Why do you want to work here?
10. What are your long-range goals? Where do you see yourself three years from now?
11. Do you have any questions?

Traditional Interview Questions:

Interviewers ask traditional questions to learn about your education, experience, career goals, and personal history and characteristics. Answers to these questions help the interviewer decide whether you have the education and/or experience, interests, and characteristics that fit the position.

Consider possible questions and plan brief but meaningful positive responses that illustrate your past successes and accomplishments. **Don't memorize responses or rehearse so extensively that your answers sound "canned."** The following list shows examples of traditional interview questions.

Traditional Interview Questions

Personal History and Characteristics

1. Tell me about yourself.
2. What is your greatest strength? your greatest weakness?
3. How is your personality reflected in the kinds of activities you enjoy?
4. Who are your role models? Why?
5. Tell me what you learned from a book you read recently.
6. How do you manage stress?

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7. What three words best describe you?
8. What motivates you?
9. Why are you interested in working for us?
10. What skills, ideas, or personal attributes do you bring to the job that other candidates aren't likely to offer?
17. Tell me about your involvement with your professional organization.
18. Do your grades accurately reflect your ability? Why or why not?
19. Were you financially responsible for any portion of your college education?
20. Do you have plans to get additional education?

Experience

21. Did your customers or clients enjoy working with you?
22. What job-related skills have you developed that are crucial to this job?
23. For what kind of supervisor do you like to work?
24. What type of work environment, structured or unstructured, is your most productive or ideal work setting?
25. How would your last employer describe your work habits and your work ethic?
26. What does teamwork mean to you?
27. What did you do on your job at ____? What were the most rewarding aspects of that job?
28. Have you ever quit a job? Why?
29. What did you like least in your job at ____?
30. Have you done any volunteer work? What kind? Career Goals
31. Describe your ideal career (or dream job).
32. Do you like to work alone or with other people? Why?
33. Are you willing to travel?
34. You are younger than most of the people you will supervise. What problems might this pose? How will you resolve them?
35. Where do you want to be in five years? ten years?
36. Because this is your first job, how do you know you'll like the career path?
37. What career paths with this company interest you?
38. What are your aspirations beyond this job?
39. Why did you choose this field of work?
40. What salary do you expect to receive in this job?

Below are some interview questions used at Zappos, where the emphasis is on hiring people compatible with their strong service mission:

- Give me an example from your previous job(s) where you had to think and act outside the box.
- What was the best mistake you made on the job? Why was it the best?
- Tell me about a time you recognized a problem/ area to improve that was outside of your job duties and solved [it] without being asked to. What was it, how did you do it?
- Would you say you are more or less creative than the average person? Can you give me an example?

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■ If it was your first day on the job at Zappos and your task was to make the interview/ recruiting process more fun, what would you do for those eight hours?

■ What's an example of a risk you took in a previous job?

What was the outcome? Quoted from Tony Hsieh, *Delivering Happiness: A Path to Profit, Passion, and Purpose* (New York: Business Plus, 2010), 172. With permission from Central Grand Publishing. If you were fired, say so.

There are various acceptable ways to explain why you were fired:

- a. It wasn't a good match. Add what you now know you need in a job, and ask what the employer can offer in this area.
- b. You and your supervisor had a personality conflict. Make sure you show that this was an isolated incident, and that you normally get along well with people.
- c. You made mistakes, but you've learned from them and are now ready to work well. Be ready to offer a specific anecdote proving that you have indeed changed

HOW TO ANSWER

1. **Tell me about yourself.** Focus on several strengths that show you are a good candidate. Give examples with enough specifics to prove each strength. Don't launch into an autobiography, which will have too many details the interviewer will not care about. Provide professional, not personal, information.

2. **Walk me through your résumé. Highlight your best features and offer reasons for major decisions. Why did you choose this college? Why did you take that job?** Have professional reasons: You went to State U because it has a top-ranked accounting department, not because it is close to home; you took that summer job because it allowed some interaction with the company's accounting department, not because it was the only one you could find. Don't try to cover too much; your résumé walk should be no longer than three minutes. But do try to add some interesting detail that is not on your résumé. Above all, do maintain eye contact; do not read your résumé.

3. **What makes you think you're qualified to work for this company? Or, I'm interviewing 120 people for two jobs. Why should I hire you?** This question may feel like an attack. Use it as an opportunity to state your strong points: your qualifications for the job, the things that separate you from other applicants.

4. **What two or three accomplishments have given you the greatest satisfaction?** Pick accomplishments that you're proud of, that create the image you want to project, and that enable you to share one of the things you want the interviewer to know about you. Focus not just on the end result, but on the problem-solving, thinking, and innovation skills that made the achievement possible.

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5. **Why do you want to work for us? What is your ideal job?** Even if you're interviewing just for practice, make sure you have a good answer— preferably two or three reasons you'd like to work for that company. If you don't seem to be taking the interview seriously, the interviewer won't take you seriously, and you won't even get good practice. If your ideal job is very different from the ones the company has available, the interviewer may simply say there isn't a good match and end the interview. If you're interested in this company, do some research so that what you ask for is in the general ballpark of the kind of work the company offers.

6. **What college/university subjects did you like best and least? Why?** This question may be an icebreaker; it may be designed to discover the kind of applicant they're looking for. If your favorite class was something outside your major, prepare an answer that shows that you have qualities that can help you in the job you're applying for: "My favorite class was a seminar in the American novel. We got a chance to think on our own, rather than just regurgitate facts; we made presentations to the class every week. I found I really like sharing my ideas with other people and presenting reasons for my conclusions about something."

7. **What is your class rank? Your grade point? Why are your grades so low?** If your grades aren't great, be ready with a nondefense explanation. If possible, show that the cause of low grades now has been solved or isn't relevant to the job you're applying for: "My father almost died last year, and my schoolwork really suffered." "When I started, I didn't have any firm goals. Once I discovered the field that was right for me, my grades have all been B's or better." "I'm not good at multiple-choice tests. But I am good at working with people."

8. **What have you read recently? What movies have you seen recently?** These questions may be icebreakers; they may be designed to probe your intellectual depth. The term you're interviewing, read at least one book with people." "I really can sell things." "I'm good at solving problems." "I learn quickly." "I'm reliable. When I say I'll do something, I do it." Be ready to illustrate each with a specific example of something you've done. It is important to relate your strengths to a magazine (multiple issues) and see at least one serious movie that you could discuss at an interview. Make thoughtful selections.

9. **Show me some samples of your writing. Many jobs require the ability to write well.** Employers no longer take mastery of basic English for granted, even if the applicant has a degree from a prestigious university. The year you're interviewing, go through your old papers and select a few of the best ones, editing them if necessary, so that you'll have samples to present at the interview if you're asked for them.

10. **Describe a major problem you have encountered in your work and how you dealt with it.** Choose a problem that was not your fault: a customer's last-minute change to a large order, a flu outbreak during Christmas rush. In your solution, stress skills you know the company will be seeking.

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11. **What are your interests outside work? What campus or community activities have you been involved in?** While it's desirable to be well rounded, naming 10 interests is a mistake: the interviewer may wonder when you'll have time to work. Select activities that show skills and knowledge you can use on the job: "I have polished my persuasion skills by being a cabin counselor at a camp for troubled preteens"

12. **What have you done to learn about this company?** An employer may ask this to see what you already know about the company (if you've read the recruiting literature and the website, the interviewer doesn't need to repeat them). This question may also be used to see how active a role you're taking in the job search process and how interested you are in this job.

13. **What adjectives would you use to describe yourself?** Use only positive ones. Be ready to illustrate each with a specific example of something you've done.

14. **What are your greatest strengths?** Employers ask this question to give you a chance to sell yourself and to learn something about your values. the specific position.

15. **What is your greatest weakness?** Use a work-related negative, even if something in your personal life really is your greatest weakness. Interviewers won't let you get away with a "weakness" like being a workaholic or just not having any experience yet. Instead, use one of these strategies:

a. Discuss a weakness that is not related to the job you're being considered for and will not be needed even when you're promoted. (Even if you won't work with people or give speeches in your first job, you'll need those skills later in your career, so don't use them for this question.) End your answer with a positive that is related to the job: b. Discuss a weakness that you are working to improve: c. Describe advice you received, and how that advice helped your career.

16. **What are your career goals? Where do you want to be in five years? Ten years?** This question is frequently a test to see if you fit with this company. Are your goals ones that can be met at this company? Or will the company have the expense of training you only to see you move on promptly to another company?

17. **Why are you looking for another job? Do not answer this with a negative**—"My boss didn't like me," "I didn't like the work"—even if the negative is true. Stress the new opportunities you're looking for in a new job, not why you want to get away from your old one: "I want more opportunity to work with clients." Also be careful of hidden negatives: "I couldn't use all my abilities in my last job" sounds like you are complaining. It also suggests that you don't take the initiative to find new challenges. If you are looking for a job with a bigger salary, it is better to use other points when answering this question.

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[For a creative job in advertising:] I don't like e.g. accounting. I know it's important, but I don't like it. I even hire someone to do my taxes. I'm much more interested in being creative and working with people, which is why I find this position interesting.

[For a job in administration:] I don't like selling products. I hated selling cookies when I was a Girl Scout. I'd much rather work with ideas—and I really like selling the ideas that I believe in. In the past, I wasn't a good writer. But last term I took a course in business writing that taught me how to organize my ideas and how to revise. I may never win a Pulitzer Prize, but now I can write effective reports and memos. The professor for whom I was an undergraduate assistant pointed out to me that people respond well to liberal praise, and that I was not liberal with mine. As I have worked on providing more positive feedback, I have become a better manager.

18. Why do you have a gap in your employment history? Answer briefly and positively; do not apologize for family decisions.

If you were laid off, be prepared to explain why you were one of the people let go. It helps if you can truthfully say that all new employees with less than three years' experience at the firm were laid off, or that legal services were outsourced, or that the entire training department was disbanded. Be careful you do not display bitter, angry feelings; they will not help you get a new job. It may help you to realize that in tight economies, being laid off is not an issue for many interviewers.

I cared for an ill family member. Because of the time it took, it wasn't fair to an employer to start a new job.

I stayed home with my children while they were young. Now that they are both in school, I can devote myself to top performance in your company.

19. What questions do you have? This question gives you a chance to cover things the interviewer hasn't brought up; it also gives the interviewer a sense of your priorities and values. Almost all interviewers will ask you for questions, and it is crucial that you have some. A lack of questions will probably be interpreted as a lack of interest in the company and a lack of preparation for the interview. These are some questions you might want to ask:

- What would I be doing on a day-to-day basis?
- What's the top challenge I would face in this job?
- What kind of training program do you have?
- How do you evaluate employees? How often do you review them?
- What will a good employee have done by the time of his or her first evaluation?
- Where would you expect a new trainee (banker, staff accountant) to be three years from now? Five years? Ten years?
- What happened to the last person who had this job?
- How would you describe the company's culture?
- This sounds like a great job. What are the drawbacks?

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- How are interest rates (new products from competitors, imports, demographic trends, government regulations, etc.) affecting your company? Questions like these show that you care enough to do your homework and that you are aware of current events.
- What do you like best about working for this company? Ending with a question like this closes your interview on an upbeat note