

# Interview Preparation

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## General Interview Information

### **Making a Match:**

The key to a successful interview is **preparation and “making a match” between you and the job; you and the organization with which you are interviewing.** If you are thoroughly prepared, you will present a relaxed and polished image and are less likely to get flustered by unexpected questions. Based on your resume, the employer has already decided that you meet certain qualifications. The interview provides additional detail about your experience and personality and shows the employer what you can contribute to the organization. **Keep in mind that an interview is an exchange of information. You are looking for the “right fit” just as much as the employer.**

### **Strengths, Skills and Accomplishments:**

Prepare to discuss not only why **you** are the best person for the job but also how your **knowledge, strengths, skills and abilities** relate to the position. Provide **examples of your accomplishments** from previous employment or activities to exemplify your skills. If you are unsure of what your skills are or how to describe them well, set up a meeting with one of the Career Center staff.

### **Values:**

In addition to discussing your strengths, learn to discuss your **values** in relation to work and lifestyle. Answers to questions such as: *In what kind of work environment do you feel the most comfortable? Why have you chosen the career for which you’re preparing? Does the idea of relocation concern you?* reflect your values. Thoughtfully answering these or similar questions demonstrates maturity and a strong sense of direction. If your answers are compatible with the values and structure (or *culture*) of the company, you are seen as a potential employee who will be content with the job and committed to the organization.

### **Weakness or Lack of Experience:**

Also be prepared to discuss your **weaknesses** or lack of work experience. Choose one or two points of weakness that you can turn into strengths. Present weaknesses in a positive light and indicate how you are improving. If the question is about an area of inexperience, discuss similar experiences you have had, particularly experiences that required the same skills. Preparing in advance will enable you to present yourself favorably even though you are discussing weaknesses.

### **Research Prior to Interviewing:**

- 1. Research the position and the organization before going to the interview.** Try to obtain a detailed job description. **The job description is the key to “making the match” between you and the job.**
- 2. Discuss the position and the organization** with anyone you know who might have insights. Also, pick up any printed material they distribute. This information will enable you to tailor your comments specifically to the job and the organization. Find out about:

- Relative size of the firm within its industry
  - Growth potential for the firm and the industry
  - Various product lines or services offered by the firm
  - Potential new markets, products or services
  - Who are the firms' competitors
  - Organizational structure
  - Geographic locations for firm headquarters and branch offices
  - Type of training program for new employees in this position
  - Recent items from the news; check Wall Street Journal, local online newspapers and industry journals.
- 3. Formulate good questions.** The information learned during the research process will enable you to formulate high quality questions to ask the interviewer. Good questions display your enthusiasm and your understanding of the position, helping the interviewer to “make the match” with YOU in the position.

## *Interview Etiquette*

**Dress:** Assess the organization's style and dress a bit more conservatively than you would if you were actually performing the job. Show you care about the job by looking your best, but also make sure you are comfortable in what you are wearing. Look and act professional at all times. You want everyone you meet to understand that you are applying for a professional position. Bring a pen and paper to jot down notes, bring copies of your resume and your reference sheet.

**Punctuality: NEVER be late.** (But on the off chance something goes wrong, call the company and ask if you can change the time or reschedule the meeting.) Arrive **10 to 15 minutes** early to give yourself time to compose yourself and run through your resume and notes. Check in with the receptionist a few minutes before the interview is scheduled to begin. Be polite to everyone. Feel confident and visualize yourself having an outstanding interview!

**Listen:** You can determine the assets and qualifications an employer values by listening well. By doing this, you can evaluate whether the organization is a good fit for you. Knowing what the employer is looking for also enables you to focus your answers.

**Talk:** Most interviewers will try to engage you in conversation before jumping into the “meat” of the interview. Demonstrate your confidence and social skills by responding naturally, and take the opportunity to initiate small talk yourself. Provide complete answers and details.

**Body Language:** Be aware of the impression your body language conveys. Avoid distracting mannerisms or nervous behavior (e.g., crossing your arms or clenching your fists). Maintain good eye contact. This will increase focus for both you and the interviewer. Smile. Attitudes are generally mirrored. Maintain professional posture.

**Interest Level:** Always demonstrate interest in the position through your manner and tone of voice. Follow the interviewer's lead in establishing the tone of the interview. Leaning forward in your chair conveys enthusiasm. Asking good questions shows interest in the position.

**Answering Questions:** Respond to all questions directly. Do not avoid questions or talk around them. If the question is not clear, ask for clarification. If you do not know the answer, do not make one up. Take the time to collect your thoughts and respond in a manner that conveys your ability to absorb information quickly and perform well in new situations. Use examples of past accomplishments to illustrate your skills. Speak and think in positive terms. Never speak negatively about your current or past employers, or your professors, coaches or University. Express enthusiasm and interest in the company and the position.

**Evaluation:** As soon as possible after an interview, evaluate both how you think you came across to the employer and how interested you are in them. Such information is useful in preparing for future interviews and in making a decision if you receive a job offer from them.

**Follow-up:** Always write a thank-you note to the employer immediately following the interview. This final touch enhances the impression you made in person. Type thank-you letters using business format. It is appropriate to e-mail a thank message if the employer plans to make a hiring decision in the next day or two.

## Types of Interviews

There are many types of interviews. Certain industries are known to prefer one interview style over another but, in the end, if you have done your homework relating to the organization and the position, you should be able to be successful in the interview. Some of the most popular interview styles include:

**Screening interviews** are short, first interviews, conducted in person or via telephone, used to determine which candidates should be considered more closely. First impressions are crucial because the employer is trying to determine if you will fit in with the organization. The main objective of a screening interview is to make the recruiter feel that you are worth another, more thorough, personal interview. Impress them with your enthusiasm and potential.

**On-site interviews** usually occur after a screening interview. During an on-site interview, you usually talk to several people, including future co-workers, supervisors, and high-level managers. It is appropriate to ask for the agenda in advance so you can prepare for the questions you will be asked and so you will be familiar with the names of the people you will meet. Sometimes you will be invited on-site without a screening interview.

**Behavior Based interviews** are quickly becoming the standard in many corporations. This type of interview is popular because people often feel that past performance is a good indication of future performance. A behavior based interview requires you to provide evidence that you possess certain skills or knowledge. You will not be able to get away with generalities. You should have six or more stories ready that clearly demonstrate your skills and how you handled difficult situations.

**Stress interviews** are designed to be stressful, with the theory being that the situation will show how you may respond to stress when it occurs on the job. The interviewer may use rapid-fire questioning, silence or body language to make you feel your answer is unacceptable. The

primary antidote to this type of interview is simply to recognize it when you see it, and do not become flustered and defensive.

**Board interviews** occur when several people interview you simultaneously. Be sure to make eye contact with all board members throughout the interview to keep them interested and to make them feel valued.

**The purpose of all interviews is to exchange information, project enthusiasm about yourself and your ability to perform the job, and to overcome any objections that may crop up.** Research, study and rehearse for your interview. The interview gets you the job offer!

## What to Expect During an Interview

**I. INTRODUCTION** - The interview will start with an introduction and greetings. This is usually followed by some small talk; weather, traffic conditions, recent news and events.

**The Employer is looking for a firm handshake (demonstrates confidence), eye contact, appropriate attire and poise.** First impressions are made in the first 20 seconds of the interview. The questions asked confirm first impressions.

**II. QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS** – This often starts with the standard, “So, tell me about yourself.” In response, there are some main areas you should focus on. (This does not mean you should cover every aspect of all four areas in your response to the first question. Answer the first question with a sentence or two, including your top two or three points, then stop. The employer will then ask more questions and the interview is on its way.)

### 1. Work Experience

- Nature of previous jobs held and duties performed
- Level of responsibility
- Supervisory experience
- Interpersonal skills
- Percent of college expenses earned

**The Employer is looking for energy, trainability, willingness to follow directions, ability to get along with others, and how responsible you are.**

### 2. Activities and Interests

- Volunteer Experience
- Extracurricular Activities
- Personal Interests

**The Employer is looking for your ability to work as part of a team, ability to motivate others, leadership skills and diversity of interests.**

### 3. Career Goals

- Type of work desired
- Short and long term objectives
- Plans for further education
- Relocation or geographical preferences
- Why this particular company

**The Employer is looking for preparation for employment, knowledge about and genuine interest in the company, future plans and how they relate to the Employer.**

**III. YOUR TURN TO ASK QUESTIONS** – Now is the time to get the answers you need to make an informed decision about the employer. There are two main areas you should focus on.

#### 1. The Company

- Opportunities within the company
- Where you might fit in
- The training program
- Current and future projects

**The Employer is looking for informed and relevant questions, to know you conducted company research, and the ability to “sell” yourself and your skills.**

#### 2. Tie Up Loose Ends

- Ask what the next step is
- How will the company follow up
- When will you be notified

**The Employer is looking for attention to detail and readiness to follow through.**

### **IV. CORDIAL FAREWELL**

**The Employer is looking for you to express a sincere interest in the position.**

## The "TODAY" Method

It may be helpful to use the TODAY method, developed by Melanie Szlucha, president of Red, Inc., during your interviews. This method gives students a way to think of examples to discuss in an interview. It helps keep you focused on selling your specific skills, abilities and personality.

**T – Teamwork:** Examples of when you were on a team or functioned in a team environment, such as, a sports team, a Corps of Cadets Company team, a team project in class.

**O – Overcoming Obstacles:** Examples of when you faced a challenge, such as financing college or finding a part-time job.

**D – Duties:** Accurately describe the duties of any jobs or internships and relate those skills to the job opening. For example, as a class project leader, motivating members of your class to work late in order to complete the project is very similar to motivating employees to finish a project for a client.

**A – Achievements:** Any of your accomplishments, such as, awards, scholarships, placing in sporting events.

**Y – Your Strengths and Weaknesses:** Strengths should be unique (not simply, "I get along with a lot of people"), and you should have specific examples. For a weakness, think of something you are currently working on and what you are doing to improve, for example, a fear of public speaking has caused you to take a public speaking class.

## Practice Interview Questions

Think about your answers to these questions ahead of time to ensure that you will present a confident, prepared image. Choose three-five questions in each category and practice your responses out loud. Take it one step further and practice out loud with a career professional. Answer the questions using "I," "my," and "me" so the interviewer can envision YOU in this position.

### Personal Assessment and Career Direction

- 1) Tell me about yourself. (They are interested in your goals, education and experience.)
- 2) Why did you choose the career for which you are preparing?
- 3) What are your greatest strengths and weaknesses?
- 4) How would you describe yourself? (Use adjectives and specific examples to convey your character, personality and strengths.)
- 5) Why should I hire you? (Show your understanding of the company and the position and how YOU will be able to help them achieve their goals and fit into their culture.)
- 6) What are your long range and short range career goals and objectives? How are you preparing to achieve them? (Do you have plans for an advanced degree? Are you open to travel and relocation?)

- 7) What specific goals, other than those related to your occupation, have you established for yourself for the next 10 years?
- 8) What are the most important rewards you expect in your career?
- 9) What motivates you to put forth your greatest effort?
- 10) How would a friend or professor who knows you well describe you?
- 11) What qualifications do you have that make you think you will be successful in this career field/position/organization?
- 12) In what kind of work environment are you most comfortable?
- 13) How do you work under pressure? (Give examples of a time when you successfully worked through a lot of pressure.)
- 14) How creative are you as an employee? What are some examples of your creativity?

### **Work Attitudes**

- 15) What qualities should a successful manager possess?
- 16) Describe the relationship that should exist between a supervisor and supervisees?
- 17) What criteria are you using to evaluate the company for which you hope to work? (Cite specific reasons why you chose to interview with this company.)
- 18) How do you define success? According to this definition, how successful are you?
- 19) Are you willing to spend at least six months as a trainee?

### **Academic Assessment**

- 20) How has your college experience prepared you for a career?
- 21) Describe your most rewarding college experience.
- 22) What led you to choose your field of major study?
- 23) Why did you select your college or university?
- 24) Did you work while you were going to school?
- 25) What college subjects did you like best/least? Why?
- 26) How would you plan your academic study differently if you could? Why?
- 27) What changes would you make in your University? Why? (Do not say anything negative or disrespectful. This is a time for positive, constructive language.)
- 28) Do you have plans for continued study? An advanced degree?
- 29) Do you think your grades are a good indication of your academic achievement?

### **Knowledge of the Employer**

- 30) What do you know about this organization? Tell me your thoughts about our website.
- 31) What contributions do you think you could make to this organization?
- 32) If you were hiring a graduate for this position, what qualities would you look for?
- 33) Why did you decide to seek a position with this organization?
- 34) Why do you think you might like to live in this community/region?

### **Sensitive Issues**

- 35) How did you get along with your last boss? (Remember, nothing negative about any individual.)
- 36) How much do you think this position is worth? (Check salary data for this position and its geographic location before the interview. It is best to let the employer talk about salary,

but if they push you for an answer, it is best to give a range, such as, \$40,000-45,000. The Career Development Center can direct you to resources for realistic salary data.)

- 37) You seem overqualified for this position.
- 38) What is the hardest job you have ever performed?
- 39) Are you opposed to drug testing?

### **Other Interests and Experiences**

- 40) What two or three accomplishments have given you the most satisfaction? Why?
- 41) What major problem have you encountered and how did you deal with it?
- 42) What have you learned from your mistakes?

### **Behavioral Based Interview Questions/Situational Questions (Have examples ready that clearly demonstrate how you have handled similar situations in the past.)**

- 43) Describe the system you use for keeping track of multiple projects. How do you track your progress so you can meet deadlines?
- 44) Describe a time when you motivated classmates or co-workers to work together. How did you accomplish this and what was the outcome?
- 45) What, in your opinion, are the key ingredients in building and maintaining successful business relationships? Give examples of how you have made them work for you.
- 46) Describe the most difficult interpersonal situation you've had with a professor, supervisor, supervisee or colleague. How did you handle it?
- 47) If your supervisor is assigning you too much work and setting urgent deadlines, what would you do?
- 48) How would you handle a situation where your direct supervisor asked you to do something that was not consistent with your professional judgment?
- 49) Give me a specific example when a classmate or co-worker criticized your work in front of others. How did you respond? How did that experience shape the way you communicate today?

### *Questions for You to Ask the Employer*

- **Job Responsibility**

What are the responsibilities of this position?

What qualifications do you expect the successful candidate to have?

What are the main problems that need immediate attention?

What would a typical day look like?

What could I do between now and the start date to "hit the ground running" once I begin?

- **Resources**

What resources are available in this department for accomplishing these responsibilities?

What types of equipment, hardware and software, as well as budget, are available to accomplish the responsibilities of this position?

Do you support professional development? How?

- **Supervisory**  
Will the person in this position be responsible for supervising other individuals, and if so, how many and what are their positions?  
What are the established guidelines and procedures for making decisions in this position?  
What are the reporting relationships of this position?
- **Performance Evaluation**  
How often is performance reviewed in this position?  
If I do a great job, will there be opportunities to assume additional responsibilities?
- **Corporate Culture**  
How would you describe the corporate culture of this organization?  
Is your environment formal or informal, structured or flexible?  
Describe the interdepartmental relationships.  
What has the turnover rate of the department been?
- **Next Steps**  
What is the next step, as you see it? **(The answer to this determines your next steps.)**  
What is your timeline for making a hiring decision?  
Do you plan to contact all interviewees?  
(If they ask you for additional information, send it immediately. If they ask to arrange another appointment, do so with the receptionist before you leave. Pay particular attention to the timeline they have in mind for making an offer. If they have another week or so for interviews, send a thank you note via regular mail. If an offer is in the more immediate future, you should send a thank you note by e-mail.)

### *Post-Interview*

1. Send Thank You Letters using a typed, business format. See next page for more information on “Thank You” letters.
2. Evaluate the Interview
  - Note the name of the interviewer and the place and date of the interview.
  - What questions were you asked that you want to remember?
  - With what questions did you have trouble?
  - In which areas do you need more information?
  - What should you emphasize in a second interview for the same position?
  - What is your overall evaluation of the interview?
  - Note any interview feedback.
  - How should I follow-up? When? With whom?
  - Would I accept this position if offered to me? Why? Why not?
3. Follow-up phone calls as needed.

## Thank You Letters

The idea of sending a thank you letter following an employment interview seems old-fashioned. It seems like it's something you should do "if you can find the time." But the reality is, sending a thank you letter is something you **MUST** find the time to do.

Point Of View magazine, an annual college career guide, reported on the importance of follow-up thank you notes to prospective employers. In the article "To the Letter," author Lynette Harrison wrote, "It is absolutely critical that a formal thank you note be put in the mail within 24 hours of the interview. Remember: interviewers are looking for ways to *eliminate* candidates to make a final decision come easier and quicker."

In addition to keeping yourself in the running for a particular job, there are many other reasons to send a thank you note after **EVERY** meeting or interview:

- It's the right thing to do – say thank you when someone helps you, spends his valuable time talking with you, provides you information, buys you lunch, and so on.
- It gives you the opportunity to restate your interest in a particular position, such as, "Thank you for taking the time to interview me on Tuesday, July 11. I continue to maintain a high level interest in working for XYZ Company. I was particularly impressed by..."
- It provides the opportunity to once again get your name in front of the interviewer. A thank you note sitting on the interviewer's desk three days later may be just the reminder she needs to get her thinking about your interview and filling that position.
- Even if you don't get the job, or decide to decline an offer, a thank you note is still appropriate. The interviewer needs to be thanked for the time and information shared with you. Further, you may very well meet this person again, especially if you stay in the same geographic region or industry as the interviewer. People move around within industries. You may meet this same interviewer after he leaves GHI Company and starts working for JKL Company. It will benefit you to be remembered as a professional candidate who completed all steps of the interview process.
- Receiving a thank you note is uplifting for the interviewer. It will help her view and remember you in a more positive light.

It is best to use regular mail for thank you letters if you have time. If, however, you know the employer is making a decision in the next day or two, it is perfectly acceptable to e-mail your thank you note to the interviewer(s).

### Some Final Advice

No matter where you may be speaking with an employer; at a job interview, a career fair, a party or a conference, you are on an interview. First impressions are lasting impressions. **Always be professional.**