

## Assistance with the Job Interview

For many people, the interview is the most nerve-wracking part of the job search process, but it's also the part of the process where you get to cement your position with a potential employer as the top candidate for a certain job. The key to a good interview is doing enough preparation work so that, when you walk in the door, you're comfortable and ready to impress.

### Overview of the Interview Process

Don't try to "wing it" by going into an interview situation with no prior preparation. It is always a good idea to practice with a mock interview beforehand. Find a partner who will play the interviewer and ask you a series of tough questions. Why should you rehearse? For one thing, practice makes perfect in terms of your skill level. Also, you will be more comfortable in an actual interview if you are going over familiar territory.

Remember that marketing yourself is selling a product and you are that product. The best way to make a successful sale is to match features and benefits to the needs of the client. This requires that you do your homework and find out what your potential employer is looking for and match that to your personal inventory.

For instance, do they want someone with solid work experience, personal confidence, supervisory ability and a high energy level? Review your personal inventory including your strongest skills, greatest areas of knowledge, key accomplishments, personal strengths, qualifications, etc. to find as many matches as you can and be sure to talk about them during the interview.

### Interview Rules

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- Be on time
  - Be honest
  - Be enthusiastic
  - Make lots of eye contact
  - Remain positive
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### Researching the Organization

Research is an important part of your preparation. Why do research at all? When you research an industry, occupation, or employer, you gain the information you need to make a good decision about the direction of your job search. You get to decide whether to apply for a job at a specific employer based on facts, not feelings. You're in control. The information you gain while conducting this research will also impress the prospective employer during the interview. It says you are serious about your job search. Research can be done on occupations, industries, specific organizations, availability of jobs in your area and on other topics.

Research doesn't have to be time-consuming. Newspaper ads, the Internet, and employer brochures can be good resources for discovering what experience, training and knowledge are required by a variety of employers. You can measure your qualifications against those required by the employer.

## Sources of Published Information:

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- Library
  - Internet
  - Telephone Yellow Pages
  - Professional/trade associations and unions
  - Business and Manufacturer Guide
  - Dunn & Bradstreet Directory
  - Standard and Poor's
  - Corporate Report Fact Book
  - Corporate Yellow Book
  - Business Directory
  - Employer database such as InfoTrac at local libraries
  - News articles about employers
  - Business Periodicals Index
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## Benefits of Research:

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- Increased job search confidence
  - Increased control over the job search
  - Increased decision-making ability
  - Increased potential for job search success
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## Researching an Employer

Before you apply for a job at a particular employer, you should learn as much about that employer as you can. Researching the employer will give you the information you need to decide if this is an employer for which you'd like to work. Would employment with them meet your career values?

## Sample Research Topics:

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- What products/services does the employer provide?
  - How many employees does the employer have?
  - How long have they been in business?
  - Where is the employer located? Does it have more than one location?
  - What is the employer's mission statement or philosophy?
  - What is the company's financial situation? Is it making money?
  - Has the employer undergone any downsizing in the last five years?
  - Is the employer involved in community services? If so, what?
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## Key Interview Questions

The following are sample interview questions that will help you prepare for an interview:

### **Tell me about yourself.**

This is an open-ended question often asked to help break the ice in the interview. The important thing to remember is to keep the answer job-related.

### **Why are you interested in working for this company?**

This will show the employer that you've done your homework. State the positive things you've learned

about the company and how they fit with your career goals. This shows the employer that you cared enough about the interview to prepare for it.

**Tell me about your education.**

Even though your resume includes this information, some employers like you to expand on the subject. Mention your grade point average and good attendance record; include all classes, seminars, workshops and on-the-job training you've attended that support your job goals.

**Describe your best/worst boss.**

Don't present a negative picture of any past employers. If given a choice, always talk about your best boss. If pressed to describe your worst boss, pick a work-related characteristic that can be stated in a positive way. For example, "I had a supervisor who was vague when issuing assignments. I learned to ask questions so that I knew what was expected."

**What is your major weakness?**

Always turn this into a positive! State a weakness and turn it into a positive by showing how you overcame the weakness. "In the past, it's been difficult for me to accept criticism from my peers. However, I've learned to value and solicit this input and it's improved my job performance."

**Give an example of how you solved a problem in the past.**

It's important to be able to show the process you go through when presented with a problem. State the problem and the steps you followed to reach the solution.

**What are your strengths?**

This is the time to describe the skills you've identified that will most effectively "market" you as an employee.

**What was your most noteworthy accomplishment in your last job?**

Give examples of ways in which you saved the employer time, money, or developed an office procedure that improved efficiency.

**Where do you see yourself in three years?**

Telling the interviewer, "In your job!" isn't a good idea. Do indicate that you hope to acquire sufficient skills and knowledge within that time to make a positive contribution to the organization.

**Give an example where you showed leadership and initiative.**

Even if you haven't had the title of lead worker, supervisor or manager, give examples of when you recognized a job needed to be done and you did it.

**What have you done to develop or change in the last few years?**

This shows a willingness to be challenged and to improve. Employers are looking for people who are willing to continue learning. Talk about formal and informal educational opportunities you've pursued. Mention books and periodicals you've read related to your field of interest.

**All interview questions are really the same question –Why are you the best person for the job? Keep your answers brief and job-related. Focus on your skills.**

## Tough Interview Questions

### **Tell me about a failure or criticism you've had in the past.**

Talk about one failure only. If possible, pick something that happened early in your career and is unrelated to the job that you are applying for. Be sure to explain what you learned from the failure and how the experience in general was helpful to your future growth.

If you are asked to disclose a personal fault for which you've been criticized in the past, make sure it is a "good" one such as, "I've been told in the past that I'm too much of a perfectionist and use unnecessary time checking and double checking everything. I've since learned that not everything has to be perfect and that sometimes 'good enough' is really good enough."

### **Describe yourself using five adjectives.**

Hopefully you have done your personal inventory and are ready with five adjectives that describe your strongest traits. You should also be prepared with illustrations of how you displayed those traits in the past. For instance, if you use the adjective, "reliable" you should be able to back it up if challenged by saying something like "I had the best attendance record of anyone in the department and the boss always told me that she never had to check on my work assignments as they were always completed on time, if not early."

### **"Are you married" or "How many children do you have" or "How old are you"?**

These questions as well as any inquiries into religion, child care, national origin or ethnicity are illegal questions. The first thing to do is to remember not to open the door; that is, do not volunteer information on these subjects. If you are asked an illegal question, you can choose a number of ways to respond. You can state that you don't find that question relevant and just ignore it. Or you can take a more subtle approach and try to smoothly deflect it by saying something like, "I've never been asked that question before by an interviewer. May I ask you why you are inquiring?" Hopefully, that will alert the interviewer that they are treading into dangerous territory with that question and they will go on to another. You are not required to respond to illegal inquiries but you probably want to be as tactful about it as possible.

## Interviewing Tips

- During the interview process, also ask questions about the company's current activities and future plans:
  - Ask if they have an annual report that they can share with you
  - Ask for company publications as well, such as books or newsletters
  - Inquire about the company's competitive position and its vulnerabilities
- Take advantage of electronic research tools. See if you can find a third-party perspective on the company
- Try to meet with future peers and associates informally to get a feel for the culture and how they perceive management. This could also include former employees you encounter through networking
- Consider an interview an exchange of information between you and the employer during which you have an opportunity to learn about each other. To gain an edge, be prepared with focused questions and expectations

**The key is FIT!**

Think about what is important to you in a job: advancement, challenge, fun, life balance? Remember: you are interviewing them as much as they are interviewing you.

## **Behavioral Interviewing – Past Behavior, Future Success**

Skilled interviewers use behavioral interviewing techniques to screen out candidates. But what does that mean?

In order to find experienced people, employers are asking interview questions based on past behavior as an indicator of future success. In other words, if you can demonstrate through examples, especially recent examples, that you've had success in certain areas at a previous time, you will be looked upon as a possible candidate for success in a future position.

The questions asked in behavioral interviewing are different from traditional interview questions. A traditional question might begin with a statement like, "What would you do if..." You can use your imagination with that type of question and spin a tale.

Not so with behavior-based interviewing. An example of a behavioral question would be, "Tell me about a time when..." or "Can you give me an example..." The interviewer is looking for specific examples of how you handled situations. It is now time for you to tell your success story. Your stories should include the situation, what you did/the action you took, and the result or outcome. Your examples will demonstrate your experience with people, your flexibility, and your willingness to grow with the job.

If the interviewer does not use this interviewing technique, you can still tell your stories, when appropriate. You could say, for example, "I'd like to tell you about my customer service experience, which I think would be important in this job."

By preparing for the interview with an exercise recalling your past stories, you will be able to think of examples ahead of time and not be caught off-guard. Your stories don't necessarily have to be about paid work. Examples of volunteering, community work, or your education can also be effective.

## **Questions to Ask a Potential Employer**

### **"Do You Have Any Questions?"**

Very often at the conclusion of the interview the interviewer will ask, "Do you have any questions?" The majority of candidates answer this question with a "No." Wrong answer! Don't you want to know something about this company, the interviewer, the opportunity?

The best questions come as a result of the questions they asked you. Listen carefully during the interview and pick up clues about the company and position from the interviewer.

As an example: If one of the questions was about working in a "fast-paced environment," you may want to ask, "What makes this environment hectic?" Find out what the issues might be.

### At the First Interview:

1. Please describe the duties of the job. May I have a copy of the job description?
2. Why is this position open – new or someone left? If they left, why?
3. What assignments might I expect during the first six months on the job?
4. What skills are important for someone in this position?
5. Is there a lot of team or project work?
6. Will I have an opportunity to work on special projects?
7. What type of training programs do you offer new employees?
8. How many positions do you expect to fill this year with recent college graduates?
9. How would you describe your management style? (If being interviewed by future supervisor.)
10. What would be a typical career path for a person in this position?

### At the Second or Third Interview:

1. How much responsibility will I have during my first assignment? Subsequent assignments?
2. Do you promote from within or hire from the outside?
3. What is the largest single challenge facing your staff/department/organization?

### At the Point of an Offer:

1. What is the salary range for this position?
2. Are salary adjustments geared to the cost of living or job performance?
3. Do you have a standard benefit package, or can I choose from a variety of options?
4. What is your vacation policy?
5. How often are performance reviews given?

## After the Interview - Follow-Up Letters

### How did you do?

As soon as possible after the interview, you should sit down and write down your thoughts. This is your assessment of the interview (for your eyes only!).

- What is your gut reaction to the process you just went through?
- How do you rate your performance?
- What do you think the interviewer thought of you?
- What reservations did you hear from the interviewer – spoken or not spoken?
- Do you want to work for this company? Why?
- What reservations do you have about working there?
- Did you address these reservations to your satisfaction?
- What looks exciting?
- What could you have done differently to be more effective?
- What do you still have to find out about the company/job/compensation/benefits?

**Important:** After you complete this exercise, it is time to write your follow-up letter keeping mind what you felt you did well, or additional thoughts you may have on questions asked.

## Follow-Up Letters

The “Thank you for the interview” letter is a good way to put yourself in front of the interviewer one more time. Sometimes the follow-up letter can be the tie-breaker between you and another candidate. The follow-up can create goodwill that sets the tone for your future interactions with your potential employer.

You should send the letter within 24 hours of the interview while the experience is still fresh in your mind as well as in the interviewer’s.

The letter should be a professional letter that reminds them of the qualities you can bring to the company – your added value. A handwritten letter or note is also acceptable.

If you met with several people, it is appropriate to send each of them a separate thank you letter. E-mail may also be appropriate in less formal situations or if the addressee expresses a preference for that type of communication.

### It is important to:

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- Keep it short
  - Correctly spell all names
  - Proofread it carefully
  - Be honest. Most people can detect insincerity
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Sending a thank you letter makes you stand out positively from other candidates who may not have done so.

### Follow-up Format Example

*Dear Interviewer,*

*Your reaction to the interview. (“I left the interview with many ideas going through my head regarding your company and the challenges of the job.” Or, “I came away from the interview feeling confident that I would be an excellent candidate for the position.”)*

*Why you want this job. (“After talking to you, I was impressed with the company’s view of future technology.” Or “My goal is to work for a company that has the type of culture and mission such as yours – in particular, your attitude toward the employees working as a team.”)*

*What you would bring to the company. (Restate your qualifications – “The added value I would bring to this position would be my ability to solve problems using my past experience and analytical skills, particularly working with tight deadlines.”)*

*Ask for the job. (Do you want the job? Let the interviewer know. (“I am really excited about the prospect of joining your team and want to be considered as an interested candidate. I know that I would be an excellent fit for the job based on my past experience and what I can bring to the job, and my future goals.”)*

*Sign-off. (“I look forward to talking with you further regarding this opportunity.” Or “Thank you again for the interview; I felt very comfortable talking with you.”)*

## Thank You Letter - Model

*Your mailing address*

*Your email address*

*Date*

*Contact's name*

*Contact's title*

*Company*

*Company's mailing address*

*Dear Mr./Ms. \_\_\_\_\_:*

*Remind the interviewer that you interviewed for \_\_\_\_\_ position on \_\_\_\_\_ date.*

*Thank him or her for the opportunity to interview and mention some specific aspect of the interview (i.e., "I really enjoyed our discussion about the history, mission and values of X organization").*

*Confirm your interest in the organization.*

*Cite specific ways that you feel you can contribute to the organization and how your skills meet and exceed all the qualifications for the position.*

*If you wish you had said something during the interview but didn't; this is a good place to do it.*

*Keep the letter brief, no more than a half-page long.*

*You might want to close with a suggestion for further action.*

*If multiple interviews were indicated before the position is filled, state your desire to have an additional interview.*

*Mention your phone number and the hours when you can be reached.*

*Once again, thank the person for meeting with you and state that you would be happy to provide any additional information about your qualifications.*

*Sincerely,*

*(Your signature) Your full name (typed)*