

# **INTERVIEW PREPARATION**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The interview is one of the most important phases of the job search process. Your resume and cover letter are simply tools to get you to the interviewing stage of the process. Keep in mind that employers don't tend to interview candidates they don't feel are qualified for the job. Therefore, once you have made it past the initial screening it's your opportunity to convince an employer, using your powers of persuasion and communication skills, that you are the right person for the job.

## **BEFORE THE INTERVIEW**

### **Research Is Critical!**

The applicant who has worked hard to prepare is much more likely to get a call back for a second interview or an offer of employment. Prior to an interview, clarify the skills and abilities you have to offer an employer, thinking of an example for each one. Research the career field/position you are pursuing to convince yourself this is an occupation you would enjoy (it's much easier to convince a potential employer once you've convinced yourself). Conduct thorough research on the organization, developing a checklist of information based on your research to share with the interviewer during the interview.

### **Researching Yourself**

1. Think back on your previous experiences (work, academic and extracurricular) to determine the skills and abilities used in each.
2. Develop a list of your 5-7 strongest skills for a particular position. Also, review any work-related values inventory you've done, selecting the 9 top values as factors to help you find the right organizational fit.

### **Researching the Position/Field**

1. Review library and on-line resources describing various career fields.
2. Talk with personal contacts and alumni about the nature of their work and the organization they represent.
3. When a job description is available, list the key skills being sought so that you can match your skills/strengths with their needs. It is helpful to develop an example from your experiences to demonstrate each skill.

### **Researching the Organization**

1. View library publications and resources listing information on specific employers.
2. Conduct a search of the Internet to see if an organization has a Web site.
3. Prepare questions to ask about the organization during the interview (see **Questions to Ask Employers** section).

**Practice Makes Perfect!** Review the commonly asked interviewing questions and prepare answers in advance. You don't want to appear rehearsed, but you do want to sound prepared. The more practice you have answering typical questions, the better able you are to convey your ideas in a clear, concise manner. Have a friend play the part of the interviewer to enable you to practice your responses; ask for constructive criticism.

## Preparing for Questions

1. Whenever possible, answer questions using specific examples to support your response. Think of the acronym **STAR** (situation or task, action, and result), a simple three step process that will enable you to focus on specific experiences to support your responses:
  - **Situation or Task** - describe a task or project for which you had responsibility
  - **Action** - talk about the approach you took to deal with the situation
  - **Result** - discuss the outcome of your action, making sure to mention accomplishments or improvements made due to your action
2. Emphasize the most relevant and impressive aspects of your background and qualifications (including paid and volunteer work).
3. Stress that the skills you have developed in the past are transferable to the employer's organization.
4. Speak in positive terms about previous experiences and employers.
5. Don't be afraid to talk about accomplishments and skills (assume that what you don't tell an interviewer, she/he won't know). Also, don't assume they have read your resume in depth.
6. If possible, include an example (either extracurricular or in a work situation) of your ability to work as a part of a team.

## TYPICAL STAGES OF AN INTERVIEW

**The First Impression** (employer is looking for a firm handshake, eye contact, appearance and dress appropriate to the organization, ease in social situations, good manners and poise)

- a) introduction and greeting
- b) small talk (brief, informal conversation on a topic of mutual interest - keep comments short)

## Discussion of Background and Qualifications

- a) education
  - 1) relevance of coursework to career interests
  - 2) willingness to work hard
- b) work experience
  - 1) relevance of skills developed to position being sought
  - 2) motivation, enthusiasm
  - 3) initiative
  - 4) willingness to follow directions
  - 5) ability to get along with others, team player
- c) extracurriculars
  - 1) diversity of interests
  - 2) social conscience
  - 3) leadership or teamwork/organizing ability

## Determination of Your Career Goals

- a) preparation for employment
- b) knowledge of opportunities

## **Demonstration of Your Interest in the Organization**

- a) knowledge of and genuine interest in the organization
- b) an opportunity to ask informed and relevant questions, to learn more about the employer

## **Conclusion**

- a) next steps in the interviewing process are discussed
  - 1) ask for the organization's time-line in the decision-making process if one is not mentioned
- b) volunteer to provide additional information (i.e., references, transcript, etc.)
- c) thank the interviewer for his/her time
- d) ask for a business card - this will be helpful when sending your thank you letter

## **Review**

- a) go over the positive and negative points of each interview and modify your responses
- b) learn from your mistakes and build on your strengths

# **SAMPLE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

## **Introductory**

- What are some of the greatest personal challenges you have faced during your lifetime?
- What motivates you?

## **Skills and Personal Qualities**

- What skills or personal qualities do you possess that will help make you successful in today's job market?
- Tell me about yourself (ask what type of information the employer is looking for, skills? personal background?).
- What special skills do you possess that would make you stand out from other candidates?
- Describe a frustrating experience you've encountered and tell me how you dealt with it.
- Discuss some of your past leadership or teamwork roles and your accomplishments in them.
- Why should our organization hire you?
- Who was the most difficult person you have ever dealt with, and how did you handle the situation?
- Can you think of a specific situation that reflects your ability to show initiative? Describe it.
- What is your greatest weakness and what have you done to try to overcome it?
- Tell me about a challenge you faced and how you approached it.

## **Career Goals and Objectives**

- What are your long range career goals and how are you preparing to achieve them?
- Why are you interested in this industry/occupation?
- Why do you want to work for our organization?
- What do you see yourself doing in three to five years?

## **Work Experiences**

- What did you enjoy most about your most recent job experience?
- Please elaborate on your most relevant work experience.
- What do you see as your major strengths as they apply to this position?

## **Accomplishments/Achievements**

- What else would you like us to know about you in order to make an appropriate decision?
- Of what accomplishment are you most proud?

## Knowledge of Organization/Industry

- Why did you select our organization with which to interview?
- What attracts you to this industry?
- What do you know about our organization?
- Why do you think you'd like working for our organization?

## Salary and Benefits

- When comparing one company offer to another, what factors will be important to you besides starting salary?
- What salary range are you expecting? (If possible, you may want to state that you are more interested in the content of the position at this point and would be happy to discuss salary when an offer is presented).

## Unusual Questions

These questions seldom have right or wrong answers. Even though the questions may not seem to be job-related, employers may try to determine your confidence and creativity through your answers.

- Why are manhole covers round?
- If you could be any fruit which would you choose and why?
- Think about your favorite product. Now think up five better names for it.
- Tell me a story.
- How would the world be different if you had never been born?
- If you had to choose to be one of these three life forms; a lemming, a sloth, or an earthworm, which would you be and why?

## Illegal Questions

Employers may ask questions to learn about a candidate's motivation and personality. Such questions can relate to former job responsibilities and outside interests. Inquiries into an applicant's: RACE, COLOR, AGE, SEX, RELIGION, NATIONAL ORIGIN, MARITAL STATUS, PAST ARRESTS, ALCOHOL AND DRUG USE, CREDIT HISTORY, CHILDBEARING PLANS OR AGE are illegal.

- An interviewer may not ask about your religion, church, synagogue, parish, the religious holidays you observe, or your political beliefs or affiliations.
- An interviewer may not ask about your ancestry, national origin, or parentage; in addition, you cannot be asked about the naturalization status of your parents, spouse, or children. The interviewer cannot ask about your birthplace. However, the interviewer may ask whether or not you are a U.S. citizen or a resident alien with the right to work in the U.S.
- An interviewer may not ask about your native language, the language you speak at home, or how you acquired the ability to read, write, or speak a foreign language. But, he/she may ask about the languages in which you are fluent, if knowledge of those languages is pertinent to the job.
- An interviewer may not ask about your age, your date of birth, or the ages of your children. But, he/she may ask you whether or not you're over eighteen years old.
- An interviewer may not ask about maiden names or whether you have changed your name; your marital status, number of children or dependents, or your spouse's occupation.

*Illegal questions are often asked unintentionally.* If you feel you are being asked an illegal question during an interview you can legitimately, but politely, refuse to answer. You might say, "I'm not sure of the relevance of that question, can you tell me how it specifically relates to this job?"

## QUESTIONS TO ASK EMPLOYERS

It is important to have prepared questions to ask of each employer; these questions will indicate your interest in the position and organization. Additional questions may occur to you during the course of the interview.

### About the Organization

- What is it about this organization that attracted you in the first place and has kept you there?
- How would you describe your organization's style of management?
- How will industry trends affect this organization within the next 3-5 years?
- How does the organization define a successful individual?
- What is the method of feedback/evaluation used by this organization?
- What do you see as your organization's strengths and weaknesses?

### About the Position

- Can you describe recent projects on which a person in my position has worked?
- What is the common career path for people entering the organization in this position?
- How are people trained or brought up to speed with regard to their responsibilities?
- What type of person tends to be successful in this position? What type of person are you looking for?
- How and when is performance evaluated?

### Inappropriate Questions

Inappropriate questions include those that ask what the organization will be doing for you if you're hired; i.e., What salary can I expect? How much vacation time will I accrue? You can find the answers to these questions later, if employment is offered.

## SEND A THANK YOU LETTER

The most important aspect of a thank you is to send it *promptly* within 3-4 days of the interview (see **Sample Thank You**, p.9). If you do not have access to a word processor, then hand write your thank you on a note card. It is also possible to send it via email if the recipient has offered her or his email address. The more time that elapses, the less enthusiastic you will be about writing it, and the less impact your letter will have on its reader.

Send the thank you note to the person who interviewed you that day. When you have interviewed with a number of individuals in one day, as you might in a site interview, address the thank you to the person who seemed to coordinate the day. You can make mention of the others with whom you spoke and ask the coordinator to convey your thanks to them as well. The letter provides an opportunity to continue building the rapport that you began during your initial meeting.

### The Letter Is a Vehicle for:

- acknowledging the individual's participation in your interview visit
- thanking them for insights shared
- highlighting a specific aspect of the organization which you admire

### You Can Use Your Thank You Letter to Make Any of the Following Points:

- Restate or expand one of your skills or achievements about which the interviewer was obviously interested in learning more.
- Link the values of the organization with your own values.
- Draw a parallel between characteristics of previous organizations in your work history and those of the prospective employer: clients, services, products, urban/rural/national/international affiliations.

- Reiterate your interest in responding to a problem which the organization faces, and which you and the interviewer discussed. If possible, try to recall your interviewer's use of examples and language, e.g., an employer describes the worksite as a "seething cauldron of activity," a memorable image to be sure, and one which the interviewee uses to her/his advantage by including the seething cauldron image in the thank you letter.
- Address a perceived roadblock to your candidacy; e.g., the employer is very interested in candidates who have teaching experience with children but your professional experience is exclusively with adults, albeit in the same country and culture. So, you emphasize your role as a Big Sister/Big Brother, or your childhood as the oldest of 5 siblings, etc.
- Outline your goals for the first three months in the prospective job. This strategy can be especially effective if you are a candidate for a leadership position. You might introduce this option by stating: "If I were to be your project manager (or whatever the job title would be), my major objectives during the first three months would be to: . . .
- Acknowledge some positive event in your interviewer, personal or professional. You don't want to go overboard with this option, but people do like to be recognized. Remember, the hiring process, even with all the legal safeguards, is still done by human beings with all their subjective biases. Your comments may be most effective as a handwritten postscript. For instance, you know your interviewer was looking forward to a weekend of skiing, so you write: "Hope you had a relaxing weekend at Alpine Meadows with your family;" or if you know your interviewer was heading to a major conference: "Best wishes with your presentation in Montreal!"
- Remember, don't procrastinate about exactly what to write; get it on paper minus typos and get it in the mail! Save a copy of your letters to help generate ideas for future ones.
- Two brief thoughts on special cases. First, for those of you having telephone interviews in anticipation of on-site interviews, it is advantageous to then mail a note to your interviewer making any of the points cited above—especially if you want a face-to-face interview. Secondly, if your interview was a disaster, or if you decided post-interview that the job is not right for you, it is still necessary to write a thank you letter to the principal interviewer withdrawing your candidacy if appropriate. You never know when you will encounter this person in a professional context.

(Material used from comments of Tony Drapelick, Manager of Professional Development, School for International Training; Battleboro, Vermont)

## REASONS FOR REJECTION

- **Lack of Self-Knowledge.** An interviewer cannot determine where you fit into the organization until you explain your career interests and applicable skills.
- **Lack of Company Knowledge.** Most employers make information about themselves readily available, especially if they recruit on campus.
- **Lack of Questions.** When employers ask if you have any questions for them a negative response indicates a lack of interest on your part.
- **Lack of Enthusiasm.** Employers want to hire someone who is excited about the prospect of working with their organization.
- **Lack of Confidence.** If you doubt your ability to do the job, an employer will also experience doubt.
- **Poor Communication Skills.** The employer must be able to hear you, understand your words, and follow your train of thought. Otherwise, no matter how qualified you may be for a job opening, you put yourself at a disadvantage.

- **Unprofessional Application or Appearance.** It is true that you only have one opportunity to make a first impression. If your resume is sloppy or has typos, you are at an immediate disadvantage and may not even get an opportunity to interview. Additionally, if you present yourself at an interview inappropriately dressed, an employer may decide you wouldn't fit into their organization.

## TYPES OF INTERVIEWS

### Screening Interviews

These are usually shorter interviews used for the purpose of conducting a brief evaluation of a candidate. Employers are usually looking for reasons to screen an applicant out. Job offers do not come as a result of this interaction.

### One-On-One Interviews

These interviews are quite common and involve the candidate being questioned by one person.

### Phone Interviews

Upon receipt of a candidate's application materials some organizations will call to conduct a brief phone interview. It is important to remain composed if you get such a call. If the timing of the call is inconvenient, let the employer know. Ask if you can call them back at a more convenient time. Also, while conducting a phone interview, arrange to have a copy of your resume and cover letter in front of you to use for reference.

### Panel/Committee Interviews

This scenario involves a panel of interviewers each with questions to ask. These interviews are common for government, academic and some corporate positions. It is important to establish eye contact with each member of the committee early in the interview.

### Case Study Interviews

Some organizations, especially consulting firms and companies recruiting for entry-level training programs, rely on case study or situational questions to evaluate a candidate's analytical skills.

### Second Round or Site Interviews

Often, the interviewing process entails several rounds of interviews. If you are considered a serious candidate, after the first interview you may be contacted for a second interview with other members of the organization. If travel arrangements are involved, usually the company will pay for your expenses and make the necessary travel and lodging arrangements. Site interviews usually consist of a series of interviews with several individuals including your potential supervisor, co-workers, and higher ranking staff members. These interviews can range from very casual to very technical. You may spend a half or whole day interviewing, which may also involve a luncheon, dinner meeting, or social activity.

### Stress Interviews

Although many interviews can be nerve-racking, some are designed to cause the applicant stress. The interviewer may ask confrontational or particularly difficult questions. It is important to remain calm and think carefully about your answers. Don't be afraid to take time to think through your answers and don't get tricked into losing your temper. The purpose of these types of interviews is to evaluate your behavior and maturity in difficult situations. Stress questions are most commonly used for those positions in which your reaction to stress is critical.

## HELPFUL HINTS

**Arrive Early.** Ten to fifteen minutes can provide you with a cushion should some unforeseen problem occur.

**Bring Along Extra Copies of Your Resume.** If the interviewer has misplaced your information this will assist them and add to your image as a prepared person.

**Maintain Eye Contact.** Unwillingness to look someone in the eye is often taken as evasiveness.

**Ask for Clarification.** If you're confused by a question, ask the interviewer to restate it. This shows poise on your part and allows you to answer questions appropriately.

**Be Yourself.** Interviewers respond well to those candidates they feel are being sincere.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- *Smart Questions: Interview Your Way to Success*
- *The Smart Woman's Guide to Interviewing and Salary Negotiation*
- *Job Interviews That Mean Business*
- *Naked at the Interview*
- *New Dress for Success*
- *Sweaty Palms: The Neglected Art of Being Interviewed*
- *The Ultimate Interview*
- *Don't Slurp Your Soup: A Basic Guide to Business Etiquette*
- *Knock 'Em Dead: The Ultimate Job Seeker's Handbook*

## Sample Thank You Letter

PO BOX 12345  
Stanford, CA 94307

20 April 2000

Jane Alexander  
Project Coordinator  
Acme Graphics  
12345 Great Highway  
San Francisco, CA 94101

Dear Ms. Alexander:

Thank you so much for taking the time to interview with me yesterday. I enjoyed the opportunity to meet you and your colleagues, as well as visit the worksite of Acme Graphics. I was impressed with the quality of the facilities and the overall attitude of the employees.

After speaking with you, I am even more enthusiastic about the opportunity of working at Acme Graphics as a junior designer. Though I have enjoyed my previous experience as a design intern, the breadth of current projects and the hands-on, integrated philosophy of the design teams you described offer an exciting new dimension in the creative planning process for me. I work well in a fast-paced, creative environment, and appreciate the opportunity not only to design but develop the entire concept from start to finish. My experience as a marketing intern at an advertising agency exposed me to this "total approach" from the advertising perspective, and I feel confident that I can apply that experience to the demands of this position.

Thank you for considering me for the junior designer position. I look forward to hearing from you. Please express my appreciation to your colleagues for taking the time to meet with me and share their perspectives. In the meantime, good luck finishing the Levi's campaign!

Sincerely,

Sofia Sandoval