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## **Interviewing Skills**

Congratulations! After the job search and the resume and cover letter writing, you have landed yourself an interview! Successful interviewing is a combination of **content and presentation**. Eighty percent of interviewer's impression of you is achieved visually, so make it a positive one by smiling, maintaining good eye contact, and using a firm handshake. As you speak, be aware of your vocal delivery: your tone of voice, your articulation, and the energy level it demonstrates. Speak intelligently and articulate your thoughts in a concise manner.

Each interview and interviewer is different from any other, but interviews often have lots in common. Anticipation of many of the questions can enable you to be prepared with thoughtful and intelligent answers. You will do a much better job if you are prepared. Answer questions as succinctly as possible. Be prepared with your own questions for the recruiter. Focus on **your accomplishments** and **what you can do for them**.

Here are some guidelines to help you prepare for your interview. If you need further assistance, check the CDC library under Career Resources for more references. Good luck!

### **Before the Interview**

Prepare yourself physically and mentally. First, determine what you will wear and what your appearance will say about you. Second, research the organization, reflect on your accomplishments and qualities, and think about what makes you a great candidate for the position.

### **Physical Appearance**

- **Dress appropriately**, which means you should dress professionally in most cases. A business suit will be your best bet. Make sure it is tailored to fit. If you know that the interview will be a business casual occasion, then you may wear dress pants or a skirt with a blouse or a sweater set. Keep in mind that skirts should be no more than an inch or two above the knee.
- **Keep it simple!** Stick with dark colors such as black, gray, dark brown, and navy blue. Accessorize with plain jewelry if you wish, such as small earrings or a simple necklace. If you use make-up, do so conservatively.
- **Look clean and polished.** Take care of all the details! You might want to trim your hair, clip your fingernails, polish your shoes, and iron your clothing. If you wear pantyhose, keep an extra pair in your purse or briefcase in case you get a run on your way to the interview!

## **Mental Preparation**

- **Do more self-assessment.** Why are you the best candidate for the job? What skills and qualities can you offer the organization? What experiences do you want to address in the interview?
- **Be prepared to qualify and quantify your accomplishments using specific examples.** What have you accomplished? How did you do it? Who did it benefit?
- **Know the organization and position for which you are interviewing.** What skills are required? What technical competencies are required? What is the organization's philosophy? How does your position tie into that mission? What is the corporate culture like? Does the organization own you 60+ hours per week? Can you live with that? What is the professional track? Where do you want to be in five years?
- **Familiarize yourself with current events.** Be knowledgeable about the news, particularly about events associated with your intended field! Read the *Wall Street Journal* or *New York Times* for several weeks prior to the interview. Many interviewers throw in questions about a current financial question or a suit recently brought against the company. They may also ask if you have seen their new ad campaign. Pay special attention to the marketing pages of the above papers.

## **During the Interview**

### **First Impressions**

Your interview starts as soon as you leave your home! Realize that as you travel to your interview location, you do not know whom you might come across. The perfect stranger you sit next to on the bus, the bad driver in the car next to yours, or the person behind you in line at the coffee shop could be someone in the company. So take care to mind your manners and words even before you get to the organization's office.

- **Be early!** Arrive with plenty of time, so you can use the restroom to check your appearance and take some time to calm your nerves.
- **Offer a firm, but not crushing, handshake** with good eye contact as you greet your interviewer.
- **Make upbeat small talk.** Compliment the office decorations or the nice weather. Do not start off by complaining about anything. Wait for the interviewer's cue to begin the actual interview.
- **Choose the seat closest to and opposite the interviewer,** if you can, to show your confidence. Otherwise, sit wherever the interviewer tells you to.
- **Be polite, enthusiastic, confident, and calm!** Demonstrate your interest in the interviewer and the company!

### **The Question and Answer Portion**

The interview is an information exchange where you will answer questions about your background and experiences. It deals with facts, judgment, willingness, emotional maturity and manageability. In general, the interviewer is assessing your self-esteem, business comprehension, ability to get along with others, organizational and time management abilities, and degrees of energy and stamina. The questions may be open-ended, so your job is to fill in the blanks with specific experiences and competencies. Your goal during the interview is to inspire the interviewer's confidence in you.

- **Address different interviewers accordingly.** In most cases, you will meet with several levels of management. For example, the interviewer from human resources will more likely ask general questions about the company and position, while the interviewer who is your potential supervisor will ask more detailed questions about your specific skills, attributes, and experience with teamwork.
- **Observe your interviewer's body language and adjust your style of responses as appropriate.** Your interviewers will subconsciously convey their reactions to your answers in how they might sit, cross their arms, or look at you. Be attentive to such non-verbal clues. If you sense your answers are not received positively, take the hint and change the direction in which you are taking your response.
- **Concentrate and listen** to the questions carefully. Do not worry about what you will say next so much that you miss the point of the interviewer's question.
- **Be positive, decisive, confident, articulate, and clear as to why you want the job.**
- **Be honest!** Do not be tempted to exaggerate. You do not know what the interviewer might know about you.
- **Make eye contact** because it demonstrates confidence. **Do not stare** at the interviewer because it will make her or him uncomfortable. It is natural to look away when you speak or when you think about your answer, so relax!
- **Qualify your abilities and quantify your achievements.** Don't be vague about your accomplishments. Give concrete examples!
- **Give examples of your skills and experiences in the form of short success "stories."** Convince your interviewer of your abilities by recounting instances of how you have taken initiative, led others, made decisions, set and achieved goals, solved problems, and communicated well in the past. Be sure to be concise as you tell your success stories.
- **Pause to think about your answer!** It does not earn you bonus points to answer quickly. It is more important to reflect and compose an intelligent answer. If you need more time, avoid the "uhhs" and "umms" by repeating the question, saying "Now, let me see" or "I am glad you asked that question."
- **Treat every question as important.** Every answer you give tells the interviewer something about you. Use every question to your advantage to highlight your strengths!
- **Be prepared to interview the interviewer as well.** You will probably have an opportunity to ask 2-3 questions in the closing minutes of the interview. Go in with a well thought out list of questions through which you will gain a better understanding of: the organization's culture, how this function interfaces with the rest of the organization, and professional growth and development opportunities. Remember the interview is a 2-way street; you have to decide if you like the company, too!

## **After the Interview**

Just as your interview begins right when you leave home, your interview is not over until you get back home. Again, mind your manners and words as you exit the office building and commute home. You never know whom you might run into on the way.

Even after the interview is over, you still need to keep making a positive impression. Always send a thank you letter! For details on writing a thank you letter, please refer to the CDC handout on *Cover Letter and Thank You Letter Writing*.

# Types of Interviews

## **Format**

**Panel:** In a panel interview, you will meet with several people simultaneously. These people might be comprised of your immediate supervisor, your boss, and co-workers. The most senior person in the room will most likely be the moderator. The challenge of this format is to build rapport with each interviewer. To do so, you must make eye contact with all the panelists as you answer, not just the person who asked you the question. When possible, tie comments from different interviewers into the responses you give. Realize that the questions will tend to come in a rapid-fire, so be prepared to stay on your toes. Always remember to maintain control of the interview by focusing on your success stories in your answers!

**Case:** In a case interview, you will be presented a problem related to the field and asked how you might solve it. The goal is not for you to come up with the “right” solution or to test your business knowledge; rather it is to measure your common sense, logic, deductive reasoning, analytical skills, and problem-solving skills. Your interviewer might give you feedback and provide more information as you work out the problem.

Remember to tackle each case using a decision making model. Think about what you need to know to solve this problem and whether all the necessary information has been provided. If not, ask questions to gather the information necessary to come to an informed decision. Show how you would use that data to generate options. Finally, based on the data you’ve gathered, discuss the available options and your understanding of the situation; explain how you would make an appropriate decision or recommendation.

**Stress:** In a stress interview, the interviewer may fire irritating questions at you to assess your ability to adjust, level-headedness and communication skills. Keep in mind that it is an artificial scenario, and don’t let it get you sweating. While the question may push buttons for you, remember what the interview is looking for. The trick to answering such questions is to keep your cool, respond confidently and concisely to the challenge. Perhaps you might ask why the interviewer has that impression or for other clarification. Take a moment, if needed, before responding. Examples of the stress questions could include:

- We have tried to hire people from your school/your major before, and they never seem to work out. What makes you different?
- Why would you have accepted such uninteresting summer jobs?
- Why should I hire an outsider when I could fill the job with someone inside the company?
- Why have you been out of work for so long?
- Wouldn’t you be better off in another firm or field?

If you truly sense that things are slipping or that the interviewer lacks confidence in your abilities, address this concern. “I’m sensing that you have concerns about my ability to handle this position. Can you provide me with specifics so I may address those areas?”

**Telephone:** Many companies may use a telephone interview as a screening interview. While the pressure of seeing the interviewer face-to-face is absent, treat it like you would any other interview! Prepare yourself ahead of time. You may still want to get dressed up to put yourself in a professional mode. Take advantage of being alone and do what makes you comfortable. For example, stand and walk if you think well on your feet. Pre-arrange notes on your desk so you can reference them as you answer the questions. Look in the mirror and remember to smile, as your tone usually reflects your facial expression.

## **Styles**

**Open-ended:** Be prepared for open-ended interviews, where the interviewer asks few but broad questions. This is an opportunity for you to control the conversation for a period of time, so be strategic in referencing your skills and experiences that relate to the position. Generally, this type of interviewer expects you to give an articulate and aggressive presentation. Talk about how your knowledge and experience relate to the job in question and how you can contribute to the work of the organization. Demonstrate what you know about their organization, why you want a job with them, and whether you can perform in the particular job for which you are applying.

**Behavioral:** A very popular style of interviewing, behavioral interviews seek information on how you have behaved in a variety of specific professional, personal, and interpersonal situations in the past and what consequences resulted from your actions. The interviewer is interested in a number of common themes, such as leadership, communication, management, motivation, decisiveness, and interpersonal skills. To answer these questions well, keep in mind that you will have to reflect on specific situations from your experience. Tell a **STAR** story: state the situation, the task involved, the action you took, and the results you achieved. Remember to answer such questions with details and specifics! Example questions include:

What is your biggest achievement at this point in your life? What did you do to contribute to that achievement?

Talk about a time when you were faced with a difficult situation. How did you handle it?

Give an example of a time when you were in conflict with a supervisor or coworker. How did you deal with it?

Work at some point overwhelms everyone. Tell us about a situation when you have had these feelings and how you reacted.

As always, take the time to pause and think before you answer! Prepare yourself by thinking about your past work experiences before the interview.

## **Legal Issues**

Unfortunately, some interviewers, managers, and companies may discriminate in their interviewing and hiring practices. Know your rights! **Your interviewers should NOT ask questions about the following information: creed, nationality, race, marital status, family plans, age or birth date, and physical disabilities.** Be aware that the interviewer's questions may be more subtle. Also, if you were to volunteer any personal information, such as mentioning your first language or a significant other, then they may ask you more questions about that area of your personal life.

Realize that you don't have to answer questions that are irrelevant or inappropriate. When asked such questions, you may either politely refuse to answer based on your rights, or you may provide answers that you feel will not hurt you. If you feel that you might have been discriminated against in your interviewing and hiring process, you might consider filing charges with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC). The burden of proving the discrimination will be on you, however. In such a matter, consult an attorney.

## **Sample Questions**

Here are a number of popular interview questions. By no means is this list exhaustive, but it will serve as a good start as you prepare for your interview. Refer to the *Potential Questions for the Interviewing Process* handout for more examples.

## **Personal**

1. Tell me about yourself. (Be prepared for this question! You will surely receive it worded in one way or another. Work up a short statement describing how your academic preparation coupled with your experiences got you interested in this industry. Focus on how you are unique).
2. Describe your weaknesses. Describe your strengths. Describe your skills. (Try to do this to your best advantage. Make it relevant to the job you're applying for and directed to the person with whom you are talking.)
3. What do you judge your major successes or accomplishments to have been? Your failures? Your major disappointments? (You have to have answers. You do not have to expose any of your personal life!)
4. What were the three most important events/decisions of your life? What decisions have you most regretted? Why?
5. Are you a leader? Why do you say you are a leader? (Give examples!)
6. How did you like your summer (previous) job? What did you get out of it? What did you learn about yourself? What was the most rewarding thing about this (these) job(s)? Why did you decide to leave it?
7. What makes you want to be a \_\_\_\_\_?

## **Education**

1. Why did you choose Mount Holyoke College? Were you satisfied with your education?
2. What did you major in? Given your career interests, why didn't you major in \_\_\_\_\_? How has this field of study prepared you for this position?
3. How are you doing in school? What courses are you doing best in? The worst in? What have you gotten out of your courses?
4. What courses have you liked the most? The least?
5. Tell me about your high school/college years. (These general questions are the tough ones. Prepare brief structured answers.)

## **Job – Company – Industry**

1. Why are you interested in this field? This particular organization?
2. What do you think you'll be doing in the position you're applying for? What do you think this job requires and how do you match those requirements? What do you think the responsibilities of a \_\_\_\_\_ are? Why do you think you're suited for \_\_\_\_\_?

**Note:** Many of the interviewer's questions may sound like a musical theme with variations. They may repeat themes to see if you're consistent or because you need to expand your answers.

4. How do you judge a company when you are looking for a job?
5. In addition to the company literature we sent out, what sources did you use to find out about us? What have you actually read? To whom have you spoken?
6. What have you read about our company and products lately, outside of information in our material—in magazines, on TV, etc.?

7. In your research on our company, a) Do you see any specific problems we have? b) Is there any division in our organization that you are most interested in?

## **Location**

1. Why do you want to stay in New York / relocate to Chicago, etc.?
2. Are you free to relocate? What constraints do you have about relocation?
3. How do you feel about traveling? Do you mind the prospect of working abroad?

## **General Questions**

1. Employers may invite you to visit their place of business and spend a day meeting with a range of people. During the last interview of the day you may be asked about how your day went, whom you saw, what you discussed, what impressed you, etc. You should have some notes as to what went on (names of people, their positions, topics covered, etc.) so you can discuss this intelligently, even though you're very tired and eager to leave.
2. Women may be questioned more extensively about their motivation and direction as well as about their aggressiveness and ability to handle a tough situation.
3. Remember, after each answer you give, the interviewer may very well ask, "Why?" Be prepared to give reasons for everything.

With these guidelines in mind, you are well on your way to preparing yourself for the interview. Remember, when it comes down to it, the best advice is to be yourself! Good luck!!