

12.8 Interviewing for Success

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. Learn the types of interviews.
2. Know how to prepare for an interview.
3. Be successful in an interview.

In a job search, nothing is more exciting or more intimidating than an interview. Reaching the interview stage means that you are in serious consideration for the position, and the pressure feels cranked up. In this section, you will learn how to prepare yourself to “ace” this process.

Types of Interviews

In the process of exploring occupations and landing a job, you will likely participate in a variety of interviews. They are defined by their objective:

- **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.

Preparing for Interviews

Just as preparation is important for exams in college, preparation is key to success in interviews. Many of the principles are the same, but in an employment interview, the subject is *you*. Just as in an exam, the first step in preparation is to know your material.

Learn about the organization. In almost every interview situation, you’ll be asked, “What can you do for this company?” Practice your answer. Research press releases,

stories in the *Wall Street Journal*, annual reports, blogs, Web sites, the news, and so on. Know the company's philosophies, goals, plans, new products, targeted customers, new executives, and major directional changes.

Use your network. Do you know anyone who works for or has worked for this company or organization? Call or have lunch with him or her before your interview to learn more. Your competition likely won't have done their homework as well as you have. Your prospective employer will notice.

Review the job description. Be prepared to explain how your background qualifies you for the job. Did you find the job posting online? Be sure to have printed a copy, and bring it with you to the interview. Some companies take weeks to start calling people in for interviews, and by then the job description may have been removed from the site where you saw it.

Review your résumé. Think of examples that describe or illustrate your accomplishments. You will be asked about items on your résumé, and you need to be able to support them and go into more detail.

Use your study guide. Employment interviews, especially screening interviews, do not stray far from a standard list of questions. Find a quiet one to two hours to review the interview study guide provided here, prepare your answers, and actually practice them. Your answers should be short but complete.

Interview Study Guide

The following questions SuccessHawk, "Interview Questions to Anticipate," <http://www.successhawk.com/Interviewing/Interview-Questions-to-Anticipate> (accessed July 13, 2010). are typical in many employment interviews. If you prepare answers for them ahead of time, you will not be caught off guard during an interview.

- **Tell me about yourself.** Remember that one-minute elevator introduction you worked on for networking? Here's your starting place.
- **What can you offer us? Why should we hire you?** Make a list of your qualifications for the job. Include years of experience, education, special training, technical skills, inside knowledge of a product or market, and so on. Are you a customer of this product or service?

Use your list of transferable skills like communication, leadership, organization, attention to detail, and work ethic. Review the list objectively. Which items are most valuable to the employer? Use this information to write a brief "sales pitch" that describes your qualifications for the job. Structure the information in a logical fashion and then practice saying it aloud until your delivery is smooth, natural, and confident.

- **What are your strengths?** Provide context and scope when answering this question. By elaborating on your strengths, it's easier for the employer to see where and how you excel.

Think about your noteworthy and unusual achievements or experiences. What did you do to accomplish them? What kind of preparation did they require? Why are they unique?

Think about performance reviews you have received in a job. Have you won awards or received positive feedback from others in the organization or from a happy customer? What were the reasons for the positive attention?

If you are a student or recent graduate with limited professional experience, think about your papers, reports, projects, or group assignments. Think about the assignment and what you did to complete it. The same strengths that helped you academically will also help you succeed professionally.

- **What are your weaknesses?** Remember that employers are human and appreciate honesty. It's OK to acknowledge your weaknesses and explain steps you've taken to address them. It's also fair to point out how you've turned a weakness into a strength.
- **Where do you see yourself three to five years from now?** Think about your personal goals and answer as genuinely as possible. This is a good opportunity to ask the interviewer about the opportunities available to a person who succeeds in this job.
- **What attracted you to our company?** Draw from your research and personal knowledge of the company to answer this question. Keep in mind that this interview is about what you can do for them, so answering that you're attracted to the free snacks in the break room won't score any points.
- **Tell me about a time you were under pressure to meet a deadline and what you did.** When did you find pressure at school or work because something was due? Describe the problem, the actions you took, and the outcome. Choose examples in which you received positive feedback.
- **What will former employers say about you?** Be honest. Think about the positive things they will say about you.
- **What salary are you expecting?** This is a land-mine question and one you'll almost certainly face. Typically a company has budgeted a certain salary range for a position and will do their best to stay within it. A general rule for salary discussions is that he or she who says the first number loses. Ask what the salary range is and where the interviewer sees you fitting into that range.

You owe it to yourself to find out before the interview what the salary range is for a comparable position in the geographical region. You can learn this through your network or an online salary search.

- **What questions do you have for me?** Before the interview, think of questions you would like answered about the company, the job, or the industry. Having good questions will tell the interviewer a lot about your listening skills and your degree of preparation. If you can, tie your questions back to something the interviewer said earlier. Remember, an interview is not just the company checking you out, it's also you checking out the company.

Trick Questions in Interviews

These happen to the best of interviewees. The only wrong answer to an impossible question is "I don't know." Hiring managers are looking for employees who think through tough challenges. They want to know if you keep your cool under pressure, if you can think on your feet, whether you BS or maintain your credibility, and how you respond to the unfamiliar. So show them: think aloud.

Talk about what you know about the problem; work out the process in front of them. You are being judged not only on your ability to solve problems but also on your

intelligence and potential. There is no potential in “I don’t know.”

Prepare yourself physically. Like a final exam, an interview can cause anxiety, and too much anxiety can result in a poor interview. Make sure you eat well and get a good night’s sleep before the interview. Hunger, use of energy drinks, and lack of sleep all contribute to interview anxiety.

Dress to impress. Research indicates many job applicants have unsuccessful interviews because they didn’t dress professionally. If you’re not sure, ask the person who schedules you for an interview what the dress code is. A suit or jacket, dress slacks, dress shirt, and a tie are usually fine for men. A suit or blouse and a skirt or slacks are fine for women. The rule of thumb is to dress one notch above that group’s normal attire. If in doubt, a suit is never inappropriate for men or women. Remember, you’re going to a job interview, not a casual event.

Punctuality counts. Confirm the date and time of the interview a day or two before. Make sure you know how to get there and how long it takes. Arrive at least ten to fifteen minutes before your interview. You may be asked to complete an application or other form when you arrive. If not, it’s a good time to do some relaxation exercises.

Tips for Success during the Interview

Now is the time to demonstrate your listening, thinking, and communication skills. Avoid unexpected distractions, and turn off your cell phone before you even enter the building. Know whom you will be interviewing with and what his or her role is in the company; if possible, get something in writing from the interview coordinator so you can get the names spelled correctly (for follow-up purposes). Once you are face-to-face with the interviewer, do the following:

- Relax, take a deep breath, and smile. You should be genuinely pleased to be there, as you were selected from a pool of many other candidates.
- Be yourself. That’s whom you want them to hire, not someone you’re trying to act like.
- Keep your tone conversational but not too informal. Avoid slang and expletives.
- Make eye contact but don’t stare.
- When answering questions, keep your answers focused on your skills and knowledge.
- Avoid one-word answers, but be succinct and direct; don’t ramble.
- Be truthful. Any statements discovered to be untrue are grounds for not hiring you.
- If you don’t understand a question, ask for clarification.
- If you don’t have the exact fact an interviewer is asking for, offer to find out and get back to them.
- At the end of the interview, thank the interviewer and tell him or her you enjoyed your conversation. If the interviewer hasn’t already told you, it is appropriate to ask about the next steps.

After the Interview

Be sure to send a thank-you note to each person you interviewed with. It is also courteous to send a short note of thanks to the person who coordinated your schedule with the company, even if he or she didn’t interview you. This person is often asked for his or her impressions of you. Keep your notes short but personal; refer to a comment or

question from the interview that you found significant. An e-mail is usually acceptable, especially if the employer required you to submit an electronic application or résumé. Be sure to send it within twenty-four hours.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Successful interviewing depends on careful preparation.
- Most interview questions can be anticipated and prepared for.
- An interview is as important for you to evaluate the company and its working environment as it is for the company to evaluate your skills and “fit.”

CHECKPOINT EXERCISES

1. Practice, even with phone interviews, will make you more comfortable in any interview situation. Set up and complete three informational interviews about a field or industry you are interested in. Write about what you learned about yourself and your approach to interviews.
2. Practice, even with mock interviews, will make you more comfortable in any interview situation. Invite a friend to conduct a mock employment interview with you for a job you select from an Internet posting. Then switch roles. Write about what you learned about yourself and your approach to interviews.