



## Interview Skills

### Prepare for an interview

The key to a successful interview is preparation. Based on your resume, the interviewer has determined that you meet the qualifications required for the job. The interview will allow you to provide additional details about yourself and give you an opportunity to articulate how you will be a good fit for this position and how you will contribute to the organization. Although you can never predict the exact questions that an interviewer will ask, you can be prepared when it comes to answering questions that relate to your direct experience, your accomplishments and your resume. Follow these tips:

- **Research** the department through all possible sources (i.e. web, professional magazines, or direct contact with a professional working in that area). Specifically, you should be familiar with major developments and trends in the field as well as the mission and direction of the organization.
- Familiarize yourself with the **staff position description**; determine your deficits and how you intend to compensate for those.
- Know **who** you will be interviewing with and discuss the position with anyone you know who might have insights into the organization. This will target your questions and demonstrate your interest. Be ready for a variety of interviewer styles – some interviewers may be well versed in the process and will guide you smoothly from one question to the next, while others may have little experience in the art of interviewing and this could be more challenging.
- Learn to discuss your **values**; what sort of environment are you most comfortable working in? Thoughtful responses to these questions show that you have thought about the culture and values of the organization.
- Familiarize yourself with **your resume** so that you can talk confidently about your previous work experiences, education and training. You should also be able to discuss skills and accomplishments gained at each employment.
- Be ready to discuss your **strengths and weaknesses**. Provide examples from previous employment or volunteer experiences to showcase your skills. The answer should focus on something that is business related but not a critical job task. Talking about what is being done to overcome the weakness is key to answering this question.
- The interview is a **two-way street**; it is just as important for you to learn whether this might be a good fit for your needs as it is for the organization to learn whether you might be a good fit for their needs.
- When **preparing** for an interview, it may be helpful to review the following attributes that are valued by employers:
  - [Skills for Success](#) and [Leadership Skills for Success](#)
  - Communicating Effectively
  - Working Well in a Team
  - Problem Solving
  - Using Initiative
  - Being Well Organized
  - Being Adaptable

### Types of interviews

**Screening Interviews:** These are often done over the phone and are used as a way to reduce the applicant pile. First impressions are very important.

**On site interviews:** These take place at the organization. You usually will meet with several people at this interview. In some instances you may have to present on a topic relevant to your experience and the work you may be doing. You could meet with a panel of interviewers or meet with a series of people in separate meetings.

### What to expect

The interview typically starts before you even get into the room. Arrive early so that you can mentally and physically prepare yourself. You can use this time to relax and organize your thoughts. The recruiter begins to evaluate you the minute you are identified and continues to evaluate you in every way. Be firm with your handshake and use good eye contact.

### Appearance and effect

- You feel how you look, when you look good you feel good.
- Make sure that you look groomed and neat, your clothes and accessories should be conservative and neutral, rather than overt and distracting. Non verbal actions communicate volumes about you.
- Use good posture, eye contact and use this time as an opportunity to display enthusiasm, energy and good interpersonal skills.
- Use a firm voice to demonstrate your confidence and be articulate as it reveals your communication skills. The words you choose will say something about you, as well as your knowledge of the career field. Be prepared to communicate on an informal basis also, it will determine how well you can answer the unexpected under pressure.

### The balance of listening and talking

- Do not be afraid to ask clarifying questions about the interviewer's questions.
- Listen well so that you can identify opportunities to link your skills and qualifications to what the interviewer is looking for. It is acceptable to take notes.
- Do not interrupt the interviewer.
- Take time to formulate your thoughts before answering a tough question and balance talking with listening.
- Be as clear and concise as you can in your answers.
- Be honest.

### The interview questions

**Tough questions:** Questions can vary and may be categorized under Personal Assessment, Education and Experience, Career Ambition and Plans, Company or Organization.

**Experience questions:** These ask you about specific work related experiences that will identify if you have the skill set and experience to match the position. Be sure to always use examples.

**Behavioral/Competency based questions:** These usually begin, "Tell me about a time when ..." These questions offer insight about how you acted in previous situations and this can predict how you would react or behave in similar future situations.

**Opinion questions:** These ask about your opinion on specific issues or decisions. What would you do if...?

**Credential questions:** Related usually to your education and certifications.

- Do at least 65 – 70% of the talking, state your case and be brief and organized in your answers. Consider the STAR Method in framing your answers.
  - **Situation:** Give an example of a situation you were involved in that resulted in a positive outcome
  - **Task:** Describe the tasks involved in that situation
  - **Action:** Talk about the various actions involved in the situation's task
  - **Results:** What results directly followed because of your action

**Expect the unexpected.** You can often be asked questions that seem to bear no relevance to the position or your experience; these are simply asked to see how you react in certain situations e.g. "What time period would you like to have lived in?" These questions are intended to force you to react under some stress and pressure.

### Turning a Negative into a Positive

This question often comes in the format of what are your common weaknesses? Some common weaknesses are:

- Lack of urgency
- Discomfort with public speaking
- Perfectionism

The key is to demonstrate self awareness about a quality that is not one of your strengths. Talk about what you are doing to

improve and/or how you compensate for it. Be ready with a list of three 'weaknesses' and the pro-active response.

## Sample interview questions

1. Why are you interested in this position?
2. Why are you looking to leave your current position?
3. What is your ideal job/supervisor/environment?
4. What are your strengths/weaknesses?
5. What is your long term career goal? (five years from now)
6. What accomplishment are you most proud of?
7. What decisions have you been responsible for?
8. How do you handle conflict (people, situations)? Tell us about a time when you had to handle a difficult supervisor/customer?
9. Do you prefer working in teams or by yourself? Please give examples of each.
10. What management style works best for you?
11. What approaches have worked best for you in establishing relationships with colleagues, your supervisor and customers?
12. How do you work under pressure? Please give us an example of a stressful work situation and your involvement with it.
13. To what degree does your current work require dealing with details?
14. How would you solve a work problem? Please describe a time when you identified and resolved a specific problem?
15. What are your presentation skills? Are you comfortable speaking in public?

## The close - your turn to ask questions

When you are asked, “**Do you have any questions for me?**” you should ask questions that elicit positive responses from the interviewer. Your questions should also bring out your interest in and knowledge about the organization as well as, questions that draw on information that you have learned in the interview and may need clarification on. By asking well thought out questions, you show the employer that you are serious about the organization and need more information – it is a two-way process, the fit has to be right for you and for them.

- What are the responsibilities of this position?
- What qualities are you looking for in an ideal candidate?
- What are the reputations, training and tenures of the employees in this department?
- Do you support professional development? How?
- What do you see as the biggest challenge that someone would face during the first month, six months, year on the job?
- What projects do you see materializing over the next year?
- What is your supervisory style?
- What do you like most/least about working here?
- What more do you need from me?
- When are you planning to make a decision?
- What is the next step?

## Following up

You should **always** send a thank you letter following the interview to everyone you interviewed with. Ideally a mailed letter is preferable to an email. To be most effective, summarize what you most want the interviewer to remember about you.

It is important to debrief after the interview, in reflection you should think about what went well in the interview and what needs further work. What are the pros and cons of the job and any unanswered questions that you may have.

If you are aggressively job searching and doing lots of interviews, this is an effective way for you to continue fine tuning your interview skills and to treat it as a learning experience. It will help you to clarify and think critically about your own job search skills.