

Interviewing Guide 101: Before, During, and After

A job interview is an important part of the job search process. It is both an opportunity for an employer to assess your related skills and qualifications for a specific position, and for *you* to determine how closely that environment and role will match your own interests, goals, and expectations.

This document will cover:

Pre-interview – how to effectively prepare so that you make a great first impression

During the interview – answering questions, providing examples, and illustrating the “fit”

Post-interview – following up in a timely manner, and evaluating your performance.

PRE-INTERVIEW

Research and Preparation

You should never go on an interview without a thorough understanding of the needs of the hiring company. The job posting, in combination with some fairly simple research (via company website, networking contacts, etc.) should give you a solid understanding of what the company does, as well as the **requirements** and **key responsibilities** of the available position. During the interview, you should be prepared to demonstrate that you:

- 1) Can do that job
- 2) Want to do that job
- 3) Would fit in with the rest of the company.

To do that successfully, preparation (and lots of it) is necessary; here are some ideas to get you started:

- 1) Draw a line down the center of a piece of paper. On the left side, make a bulleted list of what the employer is looking for based on the job posting. On the right side, make a bulleted list of the qualities you possess that fit those requirements.
- 2) Research the company, the industry and the competition using LinkedIn, Google, networking contacts, Handshake and the company website.
- 3) Practice a firm (but not bone-crushing) and confident handshake with someone who will give an honest critique.
- 4) Prepare your answer to the question "Tell me about yourself," keeping in mind the three factors you need to convince them of (can do the job, want to do the job, would fit in).
- 5) Prepare answers to the 10 most common interview questions:
 - Tell me about yourself.
 - Why did you leave your last position?
 - What do you know about this company?
 - What are your goals?
 - What are your strengths and weaknesses?
 - Why do you want to work for this company?

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- What has been your most significant achievement?
 - How would your last boss and colleagues describe you?
 - Why should we hire you?
 - What are your salary expectations?
- 6) List approximately five questions to ask the interviewer about the job, the company and the industry. If you know you will have multiple interviews in the same day, create unique questions you want to ask each interviewer. If you can get their names ahead of time, look them up on LinkedIn and try to find information you can use to personalize your questions.
- 7) Research salary data (www.salary.com, www.onetonline.org, www.payscale.com, or www.bls.gov); determine your salary needs based on your living expenses (current and *anticipated*) -- what is your bottom line?
- 8) Practice “closing the interview” -- thanking the employer for his/her time and expressing interest in next steps.
- 9) Get permission from your references to use their names and distribute their contact information.
- 10) Write at least five success stories to answer *behavioral interview questions*.

It is almost a guarantee that an interview will begin with “Tell me about yourself,” so you should be able to answer that reliably. Luckily, you are the expert on yourself and you are the only person that can answer it correctly! Your answer should be informative but leave the interviewer wondering, hoping to learn more about you. It is also wise not to regurgitate your resume – they already have that information and liked you enough to interview you, so you should tell them something new! Your answer should be 1-2 minutes long, so don’t speed through it, but make sure you aren’t rambling. There is no singular way to answer this question, but it can be helpful to structure it as Past, Present, Future.

This question often includes or leads into the next question – “Why did you apply for this position?” Your answer should be a perfect transition into that explanation. For example:

Interviewer: “Thank you for coming in, Jane. To get started, please tell us a little about yourself”

Jane: “Great, thank you for having me! It’s great to meet all of you and I’m so excited to get the chance to tell you about why I’m the best fit for your role.

(Past) As you know, my name is Jane Smith. I am from Chelmsford, Massachusetts, and growing up I always loved learning. I was particularly interested in learning through different mediums and using visual aides to digest information. When I was beginning my college search, I researched career paths that would allow me to follow that passion and I found instructional design.

(Present) I attended UMass Lowell, where I double majored in Graphic Design and Psychology. I’ve spent the last four years developing my skillset to better understand how we learn and what visually stimulates our brains, and now I’m ready to take that knowledge into my professional career as an Instructional Designer.

(Future) When I found your job posting and researched your company, it seemed like a natural fit for me to contribute to the team.”

This answer is thorough, presents new information about your passions, and is succinct. It leaves the interviewer wanting to hear more about your expertise.

Behavioral Interview Questions

Behavioral questions are questions that focus on *how you handled specific situations in the past*. They are structured to elicit descriptions of your skills and help the company or organization determine how well your skills align with their identified needs. Behavioral questions most often measure “soft” skills, e.g., adaptability, initiative, leadership, motivation, negotiation, teamwork, planning, decision-making, conflict management, and handling change.

The philosophy behind behavioral interviewing is that the most accurate predictor of future performance is past performance. Behavioral interview questions are statistically more predictive than traditional interview questions.

Try using the **STARK** method to come up with examples and stories for behavioral interview questions:

S-T-A-R(K): Situation, Task, Action, Result(s), (Knowledge gained)

- First, set a framework for the interviewer by explaining the *situation* (**S**)
- Secondly, describe what your task was – what role were you playing in the scenario or what goal did you need to accomplish? (**T**)
- Next, explain what *actions* you took / decisions you made to resolve or improve the situation (**A**)
- Then, state the *results* of your actions with numerical metrics if possible (25% improvement) (**R**)
- Finally, it’s a great addition to indicate any *knowledge* gained from this experience. This could be immediate knowledge or later reflection on the outcome (**K**)

Example:

Question: Give me an example of a time when you assumed a leadership role when working on a team.

Response #1 (poor): *I feel that I always contribute to a team in different ways. I’m never content to sit back and wait to be told what needs to be done.*

Response #2 (good): *In my senior year I worked on a team project for a marketing class that required research, a class presentation and a 20-page paper. There were four of us on the team. We all contributed, and I took the lead in presenting our work to the class.*

Response #3 (best):

S = *In my senior year I worked on a four-person team project for a marketing class that required research, a class presentation and a 20-page paper.*

T = *I was responsible for 25% of the project, and we were tasked with dividing the work amongst the team.*

A = I suggested that we each identify our strengths and weaknesses so that we could determine who should work on what. From that, I led the team in outlining the essential elements of the paper. We discussed them and agreed on a focus for our research. My classmates seemed relieved to have a structure and clear goal.

R = This was the best team project I was involved in because we were all on the same page. We respected each other's strengths and weaknesses. We knew how we needed to contribute, and no one felt stepped on. Our professor was impressed and gave us the highest grade in the class.

K = I learned a lot from this experience. Communication is more than speaking and writing. Listening is an essential part of communicating effectively. As the lead, I needed to listen to all the members in order to clarify and summarize our decisions and assignments. It was gratifying to have enthusiastic participants. I learned that through mutual respect and utilizing our individual strengths we became a stronger team and I became a more effective leader.

Here are some examples of other behavioral interview questions:

- Give me an example of a time when you showed initiative.
- Describe a time when you were faced with a problem that you did not anticipate.
- Describe a difficult decision you made in the last year.
- Tell me about a time when you voiced a concern or disagreement to a co-worker or supervisor.
- Tell me about a situation in which you had to coordinate the work of several people to achieve a goal.
- Tell me about a time when you worked on a team and things were not going well.
- Describe a situation where others you were working with on a project disagreed with your ideas.
- Tell me about a time when you had to determine priorities in scheduling your time.
- Tell me about a time when your manager or supervisor was unavailable and a problem arose.
- Tell me about a time when you had to deal with a difficult customer.
- Walk me through a time when you had to deal with a conflict at work.
- Describe a time when you were the *least* satisfied at work; describe a time when you were *most* satisfied at work.
- Describe something creative that you have done.
- Describe one of your most *disappointing* experiences; describe one of your most *satisfying* experiences.

Questions to Ask the Interviewer

Before an interview, in addition to preparing answers to questions you expect to get, you should also be thinking about the questions you plan to ask the interviewer, and how you will “close” (or end) the interview. During the course of the conversation, many of your questions will most likely be answered without specifically asking them. It’s a good idea, however, as part of your interview preparation, to identify several questions to ask the interviewer. You should plan to have three questions prepared. One strategy for developing questions is to ask one about the company, one about the job, and one about the person interviewing you. Asking good, thoughtful questions shows your interest in the position and demonstrates the company research you’ve done. Here are some examples:

- What kind of assignments may I expect during the first six months of the job?
- Do you offer a training program? How long does it last?
- What products (or services) are in the development stage right now?
- Do you have plans for expansion? What are your growth projections for the next year?
- Why is this position open? (Is it a new position, or a replacement position?)
- What is the largest single challenge facing your staff (department, company, or industry)?
- What characteristics do top performers in this company seem to share?
- Why do you like working for this organization?
- How will my performance be evaluated? How frequently will I be evaluated?

Other Important Factors to Consider

- 1) Exactly where the interview will be held, how long it will take to get there (this will vary depending on the time of day) and, if you are driving, where you will park when you arrive
- 2) The name of the person you will be meeting with, and how many interviews in total you will be having that day
- 3) The items you should bring with you:
 - A padfolio containing several copies of your resume, a pad of paper, a pen, a copy of your references, and any questions you wrote down for the interviewer
 - Directions to the interview and (if needed) toll or parking money
- 4) Items you should NOT take with you:
 - Big, bulky coat or jacket (if possible)
 - Large purse or backpack
 - Cell phone
- 5) The first impression you will make when you arrive (professional interview attire, hygiene, grooming, posture, and handshake)

What to Wear

To make a positive impression on your interviewer, you want to walk-in or show-up virtually feeling comfortable and confident. There is no single right outfit that works for interviewing with every employer or for every candidate. Here are some tips to help you decide what to wear:

- Research what is the typical dress code for the organization or industry and plan to dress similarly. This often means business professional or business casual attire. When in doubt, dress up, not down.
- Choose colors that complement you and keep in mind that anything too bold or bright – whether it is a solid color or pattern – may be distracting.
- Clothing should fit you well. Items that are too large or too small will not look professional.
- Select accessories (belts, scarves, ties, jewelry) that complement your attire. If wearing a belt, it should match your shoes.
- Attire should be classic, not trendy, as you may be interviewing with people of all ages that have different expectations of what professional or semi-professional dress looks like.
- Shoes should be comfortable to walk in and polished if appropriate.
- If wearing fragrance or make-up, remember that less is more.
- If you don't own professional clothing, try to borrow some from a friend or check local thrift stores.

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You want the interviewer to remember that you can do the job, want to do the job, and would be an asset to the organization. Be sure that what you wear enhances the impression you make rather than detracting from it.

DURING THE INTERVIEW

Arrival

Try to arrive in the office – not the parking lot – of your interview about 10 minutes before it is scheduled to start. Research what the traffic will be like at the time you may be travelling to the interview. Factor in extra travel time, as you may have difficulty finding the correct office if it is a large or complex building, or you may need to go through security. If you have time beforehand, consider going to the restroom for one last check in the mirror. When you check in, you will likely be directed to take a seat in the lobby while you wait for your interviewer to come greet you. During that time, you can review your notes and the examples you prepared for the interview, or simply sit and take some deep, calming breaths (it is believed that oxygenation of the brain reduces anxiety levels and helps bring clarity and focus).

When the interviewer arrives to greet you, stand and introduce yourself with a smile and a professional (firm) handshake. Keep your posture tall and confident, and look the person in the eye when you shake his/her hand.

Your Conversation

When the conversation begins, try to do the following:

- 1) Focus on the points you have prepared without sounding rehearsed or stiff
- 2) Relax and enjoy the conversation
- 3) Learn what you can about the company, and share what you already know
- 4) Ask questions and listen
- 5) Smile appropriately; don't appear as though the interview is painful for you
- 6) Be sure to ask the questions you came prepared with, and inquire about next steps
- 7) As the interview comes to a close, thank the interviewer for his/her time and express your strong interest in the position and company
- 8) If you haven't already received it, ask for the interviewer's business card.

Avoid asking questions about salary or benefits until a job offer is presented to you. This includes questions regarding tuition reimbursement, vacation time, sick time, insurance benefits, relocation information, and salary. Let the employer bring up these topics first. By waiting until you have an offer to discuss salary and benefits, you have a better understanding of what the job entails and can advocate for your total compensation needs more appropriately.

Hiring managers report that the most common interview mistakes include not knowing anything about the company, talking negatively about a previous job / employer, answering questions with personal information, asking about benefits / salary, and talking too much. Do your best to avoid these mistakes by preparing for each and every interview!

The Close

At the very end of the interview, it's a good idea to ask questions that will help you understand the employer's decision-making and hiring timeframe, such as:

- What is the next step in the interview process?
- Would it make sense for me to follow up with you next week to see where you are in the process?
- When do you expect to make your final hiring decision?

POST-INTERVIEW

Within 24 hours, send a follow-up "thank you" letter or email to everyone you met with.

Next, think about what you did well and what needs improvement. In particular, consider these elements:

- Overall feeling of satisfaction with this interview.
- Did you arrive on time?
- How was your introduction -- good greeting / handshake / posture?
- Did you appear confident and professional at all times, speaking calmly and clearly?
- Did you show interest by smiling and asking questions, when appropriate?
- Did you provide the examples that you prepared for the behavioral questions?
- Did you discuss relevant experiences, academic projects, and/or skill sets?
- How was your nonverbal communication (body language)?
- Did you handle the difficult questions with ease, or did they fluster you?
- Did you establish a good rapport with the interviewer?
- Did you effectively "close" the interview by expressing interest and inquiring about next steps?
- What would you do differently the next time?

Finally, if the company contacts you with an offer, thank them and ask (courteously) for a couple of days to consider it. Make sure you get back to the company by the time you said you would.

This process can take a while! Don't panic.

If you have an interview and do not hear from the employer in a timely manner, reach out a few days after the timeline they provided. It is likely that the company is interviewing several people for the role, so they may not have an answer for you right away. After the interviews, recruiters and hiring managers must find time to meet and discuss candidates and HR must review the offer, all while everyone involved manages their additional responsibilities beyond this hiring committee.

If you were given a timeline of two weeks, you may contact your recruiter or interviewer once that timeline has expired, but not before. You want to appear eager but understanding and patient. You can email your contact and express that you are still very interested in the role and are checking the status of your application and their updated timeline. As always, make sure your email is polite and professional, even if you are frustrated with a potential delay.

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FINAL THOUGHTS

Keep in mind that hiring managers report that the most important factors when considering a candidate are:

- Subject matter knowledge / expertise
- Genuine interest in the company and position
- Energy and enthusiasm

Other “soft skills” that employers tend to look for include: leadership, planning / organization, ethics / integrity, knowledge, and applied learning. Prepare and practice specific examples of these traits and others that you know are important to the company.

Know what your market value is before you begin the interview process. To research typical starting salaries, talk to people you know who are working in your field of interest, and use internet resources such as the ones previously listed.

If you get turned down for a position that you were genuinely excited about (and qualified for), consider sending a follow-up email to the recruiter or hiring manager. In this email, thank them again for their time and consideration and let them know that you remain interested in the position and company. They won't be expecting this, and they may actually contact you if you've made a good impression and the position becomes available again.

And finally, don't underestimate the importance of a good first impression! Make sure your interview attire and accessories are appropriately professional. When in doubt, go for the more conservative option. Be polite and courteous to everyone you meet at the organization, and follow up with demonstrated interest in the organization and the opportunity.

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