

INTERVIEW STRATEGIES

The interview provides an employer the opportunity to see if you meet their needs, and gives you a chance to see if the organization is a good fit for you. Put your best foot forward and be yourself.

BEFORE THE INTERVIEW

When sending your resume and cover letter, research the employer so you can target your application materials. Once you have an interview, further research the employer. Use online resources and talk to people in the field who might know something about the employer.

Doing research on a company allows you to:

- Develop examples of accomplishments that are relevant to discuss during the interview.
- Sound knowledgeable if asked, “What do you know about our organization?”
- Create questions to ask the employer to help you in your decision if offered the position.

Prepare answers to common interview questions. Do not memorize your responses.

- Outline your answers and practice them aloud. Having an idea of what you will say, helps you sound prepared and increase your confidence.

Make sure you have the clothing to make a good first impression.

- **For conservative environments**, wear a dark suit.
- **For informal environments**, you may wear a jacket and dress pants or skirt.
- **Women** should wear closed toe shoes with a medium heel. It is best to wear pumps, rather than a chunky looking shoe.
- **Women**: skirts should not exceed two inches above the knee. When deciding about a skirt length, try sitting and crossing your legs. If your skirt rises to mid-thigh it is too short
- When wearing skirts you must also wear nylons (even in warm weather). Make sure your clothing fits properly.
- Use make up conservatively and do not use perfume.
- If you carry a purse, it should be professional (brown, black, taupe, or blue), without any pictures or patterns.
- **Men** should wear matching shoes and belt, preferable in black (No athletic shoes). Shoes should be polished.

Make a test run to the organization so you will know the building location and where to park.

Allow extra time for traffic.

- Arrive 10-15 minutes early for your interview. Bring extra copies of your resume and cover letter in a portfolio along with a reference list, pen, pencil and paper. Get a good night’s sleep before your interview.

COMMON TYPES OF INTERVIEWS

Telephone or screening interviews

Initial interviews by phone to screen candidates before spending time on site interviews.

- Expect general questions about your background and your interest in the position.
- Interviews are usually arranged in advance but be prepared for company calls at any time.
- Keep your cover letters alphabetized by company name along with the position advertisement. This will help you be prepared when scheduling appointments.
- Take phone calls in a quiet place where you will not be disturbed. It is preferable to not use a cell phone for screening interviews, as connections do not always work.

- Even though the employer cannot see you, do not eat, drink, or chew gum during your phone interview. Even though it sounds silly, make sure to smile. You will come across as more enthusiastic during the interview.

Behavioral Interviews

Almost every business organization will use a behavioral format for their interviews.

- Interviewers will ask questions to elicit examples of skills they feel necessary to the position.
- Employer wants to hear stories about accomplishments or traits. The key phrase to remember is “past performance predicts future success”.

Individual Interviews

Can range from 30 minutes to more than an hour. You may meet with several staff members on the same day. If the organization is large, you may meet with Human Resources, your potential supervisor, and colleagues.

- Questions from Human Resources will generally focus on clarifying your duties and the period of previous positions.
- Interviews with colleagues or a potential supervisor will focus more on your knowledge of the field and whether or not you would work well as part of the department.
- Greet each person with a firm handshake and a smile.

Panel Interviews

You will be interviewed by a committee or panel (often in addition to an individual interview). Panel members generally take turns asking questions.

- When asked a question in a group, maintain eye contact with the person who asked you the question and occasionally look at other panel members.

Group Interviews

A situation where you are interviewed with other candidates.

- The interviewer may ask you and the other candidates the same question. This gives the interviewer the chance to see how you interact with others and how quickly you might think on your feet (especially if another candidate has a similar answer).
- Demonstrate a cooperative attitude rather than competitive.

Stress Interviews

The organization will build in stressful events into the interview process such as; interruptions, delays for interviews, or the interviewer taking phone calls.

- Your goal is to remain professional and unflustered even if the interviewer does not seem to be treating you in a professional manner. This type of interview situation is infrequent.

TYPES OF INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

General Information

Questions are usually open-ended and will ask for general information. A typical opening question is “Tell me about yourself?” and can set the tone for the interview. It is your chance to discuss elements of your background or qualities that you feel would make you an ideal candidate.

- Be professional; do not discuss your family, dating status or leisure activities. If the company wants to know about hobbies, they will ask you.

- Discuss a few elements about your experience or training, a couple traits that would allow you to be successful in the position and your interest in their company/position. Keep your answer concise, 30 – 60 seconds is acceptable.
- **An example might be:**
After taking an accounting class in High School, I became interested in pursuing this career. I learned that accounting was an ideal career fit because it used my ability to attend to details, analyze and apply financial information and my proficiency with database management and accounting software. The accounting program at Elizabethtown College is well established, has a strong reputation and gave me the opportunity to benefit from small classes where we could exchange ideas with each other and our faculty. While in school, I had the opportunity to participate in an internship at ABC Public Accounting. Through this experience, I was able to assist the CPA's to compile and prepare tax information for both small business clients and individuals. My internship reinforced my decision to pursue a career in the public accounting sector and from my research; I became especially interested in a career with John Smith Company.

ACCOMPLISHMENT OR STRENGTH QUESTIONS

Interviewers will want to hear examples of strengths or accomplishments. You may find it helpful to describe things using a P – A – R technique¹. This technique is useful in your resume as well as during an interview. Prior to the interview, select at least seven examples of skills to discuss during the interview.

Describe accomplishments in the following format:

P	A	R
Challenge or situation faced	Steps taken or skills used	Outcome, using tangible terms if possible

In response to “Tell me about your greatest accomplishment” an example might be:

I had the opportunity to study abroad in my junior year. Although I have taken Spanish classes, I would not consider my language skills to be fluent. Additionally, I had never traveled outside of the country and had never traveled alone. My semester abroad was in Barcelona. All of my classes were in Spanish and I lived in the college housing. It was a great experience. Not only did I do well in my classes and benefit from immersing myself in another culture, but also I established friends that I regularly maintain contact with.

Other accomplishment/strength questions might include:

- In what classes did you excel (or enjoy) and why?
- Did you work on any class projects of which you were especially proud?
- What do you consider to be your greatest strength? (always provide an example)
- Tell me about a time you demonstrated _____ (the interviewer will list a skill).
- What was your greatest challenge?

WEAKNESS OR FAILURE QUESTIONS

Questions related to weaknesses or difficulties in your background. Some samples are:

- Tell me about a time you failed.
- In what class did you have the most difficulty?
- Have you ever had difficulty with a supervisor (coworker, classmate, customer)? If so, how did you handle the situation?
- Have you ever worked on a team project where someone was not pulling their weight?

- What are your three greatest weaknesses (they may only ask for one weakness)?

Employers do not expect you to be perfect but they do want to know that your weaknesses will not hamper your ability to do your work.

- Be selective when discussing weaknesses. Do not pick a skill that is critical to this position.
- Do not pick a weakness that does not sound believable. For example, the response “I work too hard”, doesn’t sound like a legitimate weakness. Instead, try to select an honest weakness that will not hurt your chances for the job.
- Try to end your example by reframing the negative in as positive terms as possible. Discuss what you learned, how you now compensate, or what steps you have taken to improve.

Sample:

“An area I struggle with is public speaking. Since I started college, I have taken several leadership roles and have offered to be the class presenter of group projects to further develop my skills. Through these activities and by practicing my material in advance, I have become more confident and effective in presentations.”

GOAL QUESTIONS

Employers will generally ask about your future goals. This gives them an idea of your motivation and commitment to professional growth. You will want to indicate how you plan to move ahead with your career.

Samples:

- Where do you see yourself in five years? Ten Years?
- What professional goals do you have?
- Do you want to pursue further educational training?

HYPOTHETICAL OR CASE QUESTIONS

By asking case questions, the employer can:

- Test your knowledge of the field
- See your problem solving abilities
- Have an idea of your response to difficult challenges

There may not be a right or wrong answer; instead, your role is to evaluate the situation and present alternatives in a logical manner. The employer is often more interested in how you arrive at a conclusion not just the answer itself.

Sample:

A private client has arrived with their tax records. They have indicated that they have additional income, which they acquired “under the table”. How would you advise them?

COMPANY CULTURE QUESTIONS

Employers want to know if you will fit in with the current staff and that you can function as part of the team. Answer questions honestly and positively.

Samples:

- What have you liked most about your previous jobs? Least preferred?
- How would you describe an ideal supervisor?
- Why did you pick this career field?
- What type of work responsibilities are the most challenging?
- How do you think you can contribute to our company?
- How would you describe your organizational (time management, interpersonal) skills?
- How would your faculty describe you? How would your friends describe you?

SALARY QUESTIONS

Before any interview have an idea of entry-level salaries. Give a range if possible. Do not bring up the question of salary but be prepared to respond if asked.

Sample:

Depending on the responsibilities and benefits of the position, I am seeking between \$35-\$40,000.

CLOSING THE INTERVIEW

Most interviews will end with the employer asking if you have any questions. Prepare 2-4 questions to ask each interviewer. Do not ask anything about salary or benefits unless the employer brings up the subject (as in a Human Resources interview). Focus on questions that indicate an interest in the company, position, and your fit for the position.

Sample Questions:

- Why do you enjoy working here?
- How do you see this position changing as the organization grows?
- What key challenges will be facing a person in this position?
- What are the key qualifications a candidate will need in order to be successful?
- If talking to a potential supervisor, you could ask about his/her management style.
- What initiatives will this department start in the next three years?
- When do you anticipate making your decision? What is the next steps in the hiring process?

FOLLOWING THE INTERVIEW

Immediately after the interview, jot down some notes about your conversation with the employer

- Identify valuable information you learned about the company or details about the position
- Use these notes to create a personalized thank you note for each person you met with. Write your note in a blank card or in a typed business format, (this presents a professional image).
- **Your thank you note should convey three ideas;**
 - Your appreciation of the employer's time
 - A reinforcement of your qualifications
 - Your continued interest in the position. If the employer will be making a final decision within a few days, you may email your letter.
- Send your thank you letter out within 24 hours after your interview.

1 Variations of this technique is described in many career resources; however, Yana Parker, used this particular description in her book: Parker, Yana, *The Damn Good Resume Catalog* (2002), Berkeley: Ten Speed Press.