

Interviewing & Dressing for Success

Once you've perfected your marketing materials, such as your resume and cover letter, it's time to focus on your verbal self-promotion and visual first impression. A strong resume may land you an interview, but a fantastic interview will win you a job offer! Interviewing is as much of an art as it is a science. An employer's decision to extend a job offer to you is based on many variables, some of which you may never know. Still, to improve your chances, this guide will help you prepare for and master the art of the job interview.

WHAT SHOULD I EXPECT?

An interview is an opportunity for you to tell the employer what he or she needs to know about you to decide whether or not to hire you. In a brief time period, you must articulate your strengths and why you are a good candidate for the position. Your resume is simply a preview of your background and qualifications. It is your interview that brings your experience and potential to life to encourage an employer to hire you.

Many people view interviewing as an inquisition, in which they are at the mercy of an authority, and thus feel a great deal of apprehension. A more useful interviewing metaphor is a conversation. A conversation implies that you share information about yourself with a person who has similar interests. After three or more years of school, you should have a lot to say. The interview gives you a time and a context to talk about all of your previous hard work, your career goals, and your aspirations to someone who is eager to listen, (an opportunity that doesn't happen very often in everyday life). So, instead of seeing the interview as something to dread, consider it an experience to look forward to.

DEALING WITH YOUR STAGE FRIGHT

If you have just read the previous paragraph and are thinking that the thought of interviewing still gives you butterflies, then first realize you are not alone. The fact that evaluation is an inherent part of interviewing causes anxiety for many people. Think about the following:

- ↳ What do I fear most about the interview situation?
- ↳ What is the worst thing that could happen?
- ↳ If I were giving advice to someone else in this situation, what would I tell him/her?

Often, when people are nervous, they are responding to an internal voice that warns them not to make a mistake or risk looking incompetent. These negative messages inhibit people from expressing their individuality. Because interviews rely on your positive energy, it is very important

to counteract this negative internal voice by strengthening positive self-messages. And look at it this way: you go into the interview without a job; the worst that will happen is you'll exit without one!

PREPARING FOR THE INTERVIEW

➤ KNOW YOURSELF

Knowing yourself will enable you to be more successful in the interviewing process. Ask yourself the following:

- In what kind of environment do I work best?
- What are my career goals in five years? Ten years?
- How could this job help me work towards those goals?
- What are my strengths and weaknesses?

➤ KNOW THE EMPLOYER

Educate yourself about the employer and the position. *"What can you do for my organization?"* is the motivating question on the mind of each employer. Think about this question as you prepare for, and answer, the employer's questions. Make sure the employer understands that you are the kind of person who will contribute to the organization once you understand the demands of the workplace and your role within it.

It is essential that you research the employer prior to your first interview. Examine its literature, visit its website, look it up on Hoovers.com, and if possible, talk with people it employs. Study the mission statement, goals, finances, and growth projections to get an idea of the company's direction. See if you can identify three overwhelming values the employer embraces. Think honestly about why you would like to be a part of this organization. As you prepare for the interview, practice stories that draw from your background and demonstrate your exposure and mastery of the employer's values.

➤ PRACTICE, PRACTICE, PRACTICE

Believe it or not, just as if you were rehearsing for a play, preparing for an interview involves talking to yourself in front of the mirror, and/or to a friend or loved one who is willing to critique your interview. It's important that you hear your voice (is it animated?) and see your face (do you look like you want to be there?). Some even suggest you take it a step further and practice tongue twisters as you drive to the interview. The point is

this: you want to make sure you are physically and mentally ready to meet the employer.

Practicing your responses to questions will help decrease anxiety. Believe it or not, the more you interview, the more you will respond to similar types of questions. You will hear ice breakers, such as "What do you think of the weather we've been having?" You will hear behavioral questions, such as "Can you tell me about a time you had to complete multiple projects at the same time?" You will hear situational questions, like "How would you respond to a team member who wasn't pulling his weight on a group effort?" And finally, you will hear questions that test your knowledge of the industry, the employer, or the job: "What do you know about our company?" Practicing responses to each of these is highly recommended.

RESPONDING TO QUESTIONS

In addition to the above, the following questions are commonly asked during initial interviews:

- How would you describe yourself?
- What motivates you to put forth your greatest effort?
- What are your short-term, long-term goals?
- What are your greatest strengths/weaknesses?
- What do you think you would like in this particular job?
- Do you think your grades are a good indication of your academic abilities?
- Do you prefer working by yourself or with others?
- What have you done that shows initiative and willingness to work?
- Pretend I'm your boss and I just told you the project you just turned in was not at all what I was looking for. How would you respond?
- Where do you see yourself 5 years from now?

SAMPLE QUESTIONS AND RESPONSES

Question: *Can you tell me a little about yourself?*

Your approach: The interviewer will often begin by asking this or a similar open-ended question, such as, "Why are you interested in the position?" Regardless of the specific question, you can make a confident first impression and help establish a direction for the rest of the interview. If you are able, summarize the following areas and highlight information that is relevant to each particular employer: "I am destined to work in corporate communication because even as a kid, I was comfortable speaking in front of groups, and I liked to put on skits and shows in school. And, when I started high school, I began working part-time in my mother's office and realized how much I would like to put my communication skills to work in a corporate atmosphere." Or, you might include a statement that ties

your academic background to a particular field: "I decided to major in Finance because it offered a wide range of courses related to analysis and quantification of results. In my current internship, I have been able to put these skills to use in various projects working with vendors and purchasing contracts."

Question: *How does your background fit the position I am hiring for?*

Your approach: "I believe my talents, academic training and applied experience are an excellent fit with this position because..." Think about it. Your entire goal in the interview is to help the employer see the fit between you and the vacant position. As you explain your skills and background, continually emphasize the connection to the job. It is not pushy to state that you want the position. For instance, "Through my job in retail, I became very detail-oriented as I organized merchandise and weekly scheduling. I know your position requires lots of attention to detail, and my past experiences and organizational skills make me well qualified. I am very interested in putting my skills to use in this position."

Question: *Can you tell me about a time you worked hard to accomplish something?*

Your approach: Organize your thoughts before you speak. Approach the question as if you were writing a paper. First, repeat the question, such as "A time when I worked hard to accomplish something." Next, make your point and give examples: "One example is my current internship. I had to work extremely hard in the beginning to establish myself as a competent professional who could take on advanced responsibilities. At first, my employer viewed me as a student worker who just made copies, until I took it upon myself to create an updated database of key clients. This project was a huge undertaking, but I executed it well and as a result, was offered higher profile tasks." Finally, summarize points and restate the question: "The experience in my internship was definitely a situation in which I had to work hard for something. I learned the value of taking initiative and the importance of creating my own opportunities."

Question: *How well do you handle pressure?*

Your approach: People remember ideas through stories, not lists. Don't just say, "I perform well under pressure." Instead, tell the employer how you organized and executed something successfully within time constraints. The more vivid specifics you include, without getting overly detailed, the more memorable you will be to the employer.

Question: *What are your weaknesses?*

Your approach: When people get nervous, they sometimes feel the need to confess all their faults. An employer does not want to know every weakness that you possess. An employer wants you to give a realistic picture of your abilities in a persuasive manner. Be positive when discussing weaknesses as well, because they can always be viewed also as potential assets. Explain how you have either overcome a weakness, are working on it, or have used it as a strength. For example, "When I first started in

my advertising internship, my desire to avoid conflict was a real problem. I sought out a mentor to coach me on ways to deal with conflict situations and I've now become much more effective in this area." Or, "I know that I tend to get bored by working on one project for too long and lose my intensity. So, now I concentrate on one main project until I feel restless and take a break by working on a secondary project for a short while. I find that by doing so, I get new ideas on the main project and my work overall is actually much better."

STAR Technique: When answering an interview question, tell your story. Look again at the sample interview questions that were posed earlier. As you try formulating your personal answers to those questions, try using this formula: be a STAR. First, describe the situation in detail by giving the overall context. Second, describe the task that you were responsible for – what was your role? Third, what action did you take to resolve the situation? Finally, what was the end result of the action that you took? By subscribing to the STAR formula and practicing outloud, your answers should present themselves clearly, succinctly, linearly, powerfully and positively.

HOW DO I DRESS?

Make a professional first impression and take what you wear to the interview seriously. How you look is just as important as what you say. Always make sure you feel fabulous as you're walking out the door for that interview. If you have any question about how you feel, change your outfit. What you're wearing should be the last thing on your mind when you're actually in the interview.

Each industry has its own dress code. Fields such as banking, accounting, and consulting frequently have a stricter set of guidelines compared to advertising, education, retail, and sales, which allow more casual dress. Even though suggested guidelines of professional dress may seem more formal than you would have imagined, consider that some career consultants recommend that the job seeker dress for a position two levels higher than the one for which you are being interviewed. This can mean dressing more formally for the interview than you will once you are in the job. The level of formality you project shows that you understand the importance of the situation and respect the person you are meeting. When in doubt, making a conservative clothing choice for your interview is usually the safest.

GENERAL TIPS

- Wear the more conservative suit. You should always look polished and professional. If unsure, always err on the side of being overdressed.
- Clothing should fit well and be clean and pressed.
- Natural fabrics such as wool and cotton wear well and look best.
- Jeans and tennis shoes are not at all appropriate regardless of what might be acceptable once hired.
- Keep jewelry to a minimum.

- Have neat, well-kept fingernails.
- Need a breath mint?
- It is recommended that no fragrances (perfume, cologne, etc.) be worn.
- Sport your best haircut, smile, be clean-shaven, make direct eye contact, and have a firm handshake.

MEN

- Dark colors such as navy blue, black and dark gray are best.
- Wear dark, well-polished shoes.
- Wear dark, over-the-calf socks.
- Wear a conservative tie (more vibrant colors may be appropriate for marketing or retail positions).
- Belt should match or complement the shoes you select.
- A dress watch is better than a big sport watch.
- Save the hats for the game.

WOMEN

- Wear dark, low, well-polished heels or other closed shoes.
- Keep hemlines at the knee or lower and avoid plunging necklines.
- Pantyhose should be of neutral color or plain in style. knee-highs are appropriate with pants.
- Blouses are best in solid colors and of natural fabrics (cotton and silk).
- Avoid bright colors (red may be appropriate, depending on the employer).
- Nail polish should either be worn well or not at all (no half on & half off and stick with clear or french).
- Go easy on the makeup.
- No exposed midrifts.

PAY ATTENTION TO NON-VERBAL BEHAVIOR

Your body language and appearance speak volumes in an interview setting. The following are some basic pointers:

- ★ Make sure you dress appropriately to the field you are entering.
- ★ Greet the interviewer with a smile and handshake.
- ★ Project your personality. Remember, if you get the job, you will be working with these people every day. Hiring is extremely subjective and influenced by how well the employer believes you will fit with the team. Let the sparkling parts of your personality be evident.
- ★ Put some "starch" in your back: sit up straight but not too rigid.
- ★ Maintain eye contact, especially when you are emphasizing a point.
- ★ Nod head: doing this while the employer talks will make him/her feel like you are paying close attention.
- ★ Lean slightly forward: this will help you appear more attentive when the employer is speaking.
- ★ Where is your chin? Elevate your chin slightly to give the impression of confidence, particularly when you are entering and leaving the interview setting.

- ★ Show your enthusiasm in a way that feels natural. If you tend to speak monotone and have low voice energy, use more non-verbal behaviors, including smiling. Also, work on varying the inflections in your voice, especially when you are emphasizing a point.

Enthusiasm is quite often the major selling point for the person who gets hired.

- ★ Listen, listen, listen! Employers rarely hire people who talk over them or don't respond to the questions asked.

THE FINAL MOMENTS

The first impression you provide is important, and so is the impression you leave as the interview session closes. Always prepare questions to ask the employer at the end of the interview that show you have done your homework and are interested in the job. Ask questions in such a way that indicates that you *do* know something about the employer, such as, *"I noticed in your annual report that you are planning to expand your company in the Northeast. In this position, would I be a part of that plan?"* Although you should think of your own questions based on your research and curiosity, here are some sample questions to get you started:

- What will a typical day look like in this position?*
- What is one of the first ways I will contribute to the company in this position?*
- What is the management style of this department?*
- Will I have client contact? If so, what kind of responsibility will I have?*
- How is job performance measured?*
- What are the problems I will face and try to solve in this position? (hint: The more time you can focus the employer on this topic, the more time you can devote to making a match with your qualifications).*

Don't forget to ask for the job! For instance, your last question could be, "what is the next step in the interviewing process?". After the employer responds (i.e. we will be getting back to candidates next Wednesday), you have the perfect opportunity to say, *"I've really appreciated your time today. Thanks for giving me the chance to share my background with you and to learn more about your opportunity. I am enthusiastic about the job and feel I would be an asset to your organization. I'd like the chance to work with you and hope to hear from you next Wednesday."*

FOLLOWING-UP AFTER THE INTERVIEW

It is essential to follow up after the interview by promptly sending a thank you note to all the parties that you interviewed with. (See Cover Letter and Other Correspondence Publication for content of thank you). Be sure to send the note within 24 hours of your meeting and heavily consider sending the note via e-mail, to ensure it reaches the employer quickly.

If you don't hear anything from the interviewer within the time-frame given during the interview, it is appropriate to call and inquire about the status of the hiring decision. Maintaining a positive, professional demeanor from the beginning of the hiring process to the end will help you be the person the employer keeps in mind for future opportunities.

PHONE OR GROUP INTERVIEWS

Occasionally, employers will utilize phone or group interviews as part of the interview process. For a phone interview, be prepared with your resume, notes, questions, a pen, and water readily accessible. Be sure you won't be interrupted. Stay calm and smile. To add energy, stand up or sit forward.

For a group interview, where there may be several people in the room interviewing you at once, try to relax and do smile. Ask for business cards before you begin, or at least write down names and titles to help you answer each question taking into consideration each person's role. When answering a question, begin by making eye contact with the person who asked the question, then make eye contact with the rest of the group during the answer, and end by looking at the person who asked the question.

WHAT IF THINGS DON'T GO MY WAY?

Try not to lose sleep over this. You will not hear "yes" as often as you like, and that is a guarantee. Be persistent. Explore a wide range of options. And please, don't take a "ding" letter personally. It's not about you as a person, but about your background as a fit to an opportunity. You will find that match for you. Interviewing is a subjective process. It is not about finding the smartest, nicest, or coolest candidate. It IS about finding a match, or a composite of skills, background, and personal traits that together meet an organizational need. When a strong interview generates a job offer for you, be sure to celebrate your good work. You deserve it!

THE CAREER CENTER CAN HELP

Consider touching base with a Career Center staff member during a Same Day appointment on quick questions you might have about upcoming or recent interviews. Following a Same Day appointment, you might find it helpful to attend an interviewing workshop and then schedule a "mock" or practice interview in the Career Center so that we can assess your interview technique in a low stress environment. Be sure to visit the Center's Career Resource Lab for a wide variety of books on interviewing and job search suggestions.