Interview Skills

Jobs are won or lost in the interview. No matter how good you looked on paper, no matter how well-crafted your cover letter, no matter how many people have recommended you, you only get the job offer if you nail your interview. And, even then, the other candidate may have just a bit more “something” or are a better fit for the employer. Think of the job interview in three stages: 1) establishing rapport, 2) gathering (or exchanging) information, and 3) closing.

Establishing rapport and setting the tone
- People make decisions about other people very quickly! Your physical appearance and initial responses are critical. If you start off poorly, it will take much effort to recover.

Small talk is actually “big talk.” Your enthusiasm, passion, and preparation will be evident from the start.

Gathering information:
- Questions by the interviewer may be open-ended, factual, or behavioral in nature. Throughout, the interviewer will be judging you on your attitude, authenticity, sincerity, and honesty. Most times, you’ll have an opportunity to ask your own questions. You should have some. If not, the interviewer will wonder how interested you are in the position.

Closing the deal:
- Ask when they will make a decision or what the next step in the process will be. Assure your interviewer that you are still very interested in the job. It’s okay to say “I enjoyed this conversation so much and it’s made me even more excited about the prospect of joining you.” Be sure to say thank you!

Once the interview is over, you must be sure to write a thank you note to your interviewer and get it to him/her as soon as possible.

INTERVIEWING TIPS

1) Before the interview
- Research the employer in order to become familiar with their history, professional growth, mission, services, benefits, etc.
- Brainstorm questions they might ask you.
- Have someone ask you interview questions, and have them provide feedback.
- Make sure you have something professional to wear.
- Be sure you have exact directions; know exactly where to go, and how long it takes.
- Prepare a list of questions to ask the employer.
- Realize that the interview is an opportunity to exchange information between an employer and a prospective employee. It has to be a fit for you as well as a fit for the organization.
- Adopt a positive attitude. Ask yourself, “Why not me?”
- Do research on the market value of your location, education, and experience.
- Get an idea of a salary range you are willing to accept. Define your range by starting with the minimum salary you would be willing to accept, and then establish the high end from there. Be sure to figure in benefits and other compensation and perks.
- Get a good night’s rest the night before the interview.

2) Going to the Interview
- Take extra copies of your resume, transcripts, and a list of references.
- Take along your list of questions for the employer.
- Plan to arrive 10-15 minutes early, but not earlier than that.
- Turn off your cell phone.
3) Opening the Interview and Answering Questions

- Offer a firm handshake, if appropriate.
- Introduce yourself by giving your first and last name.
- Make sure that the interviewer(s) has your resume.
- Maintain good eye contact with those who are interviewing.
- Speak clearly, slowly, and with good grammar and diction.
- Lean forward in your chair, sit straight, and be alert.
- Make sure the tone of your voice is loud enough to be heard by everyone in the room.
- Convey a positive image, enthusiasm, optimism, and a smile.
- Try to avoid nervous gestures like nodding, smiling too much, twitching leg, or exaggerated hand gestures.
- It’s fine to take time to think about the question before answering.
- If you do not understand the question, ask them to repeat or clarify it.
- Answer questions honestly and in a manner that conveys that you are sure of yourself.
- Do not give long answers to questions if possible or prolong the interview.
- Avoid “um,” “uh,” or “ah” as well as, “you know,” “like,” and “see” in your answers.
- If you do not know the answer to a question, it is all right to say that you do not know.
- Do not appear to brag or exaggerate your accomplishments and/or experiences, but don’t sell yourself short either. This is your time to shine.

4) Closing the Interview

- Be ready to ask several questions pertaining to the duties, training, work atmosphere, or advancement opportunities for the position for which you are applying.
- Be sure to ask when they plan to fill the position, when and how you will be notified, and when the start date would be.
- Shake hands again with the interviewer(s) and thank them for their time.
- Restate your interest in the position…leave them with a smile.

5) After the Interview

- Evaluate how the interview went and make notes. Write down highlights of the interview, and things that impressed you, and areas in which you might need improvement.
- Weigh the pros and cons of the position, and decide if you’re still interested.
- Complete any follow-up instructions they might have given you. (e.g. sending transcripts)
- Send a handwritten or typed thank you card or letter to let them know you appreciated their time, hospitality, and learning more about the employer. The thank-you should go to the highest ranking person you interviewed with, and when applicable thank the committee also in this letter.

Information you should have about the employer ahead of time:

All organizations: for-profit, non-profit, government:

- name of recruiter or employer contact
- organization goals
- who the clients or customers are
- people you know in the organization
- who the top management is
- recent items in the news and periodicals
- employee data: number of employees, racial and ethnic diversity, education
For-profit business:
- array of product line or services
- size of the firm relative to the industry
- growth potential for the industry
- percent of annual sales growth last five years
- percent of annual growth in earnings/share
- potential new markets, products, or service line
- who the competition is, price of stock
- number of plants, stores, or sales outlets
- community support programs

For schools:
- School (vision/mission, enrollment, curriculum)
- Community: (housing, leisure, religious centers, medical, industry)
- District test scores
- Student support (instructional strategies, learning centers, tutors)
- Professional development for new teachers

Questions you may be asked during the interview:

Self
1. Tell me about yourself.
2. What are your major strengths and weaknesses?
3. Describe most satisfying accomplishments.
4. Which geographic location do you prefer?

Work History/Education
5. Give some examples of your initiative, willingness to work, leadership skills, ability to follow directions.
6. How did you get along with your last boss/co-workers?
7. How well do you work under pressure?
8. How do you spend your spare time/vacations?
9. Why did you major in ______?
10. What college courses did you like the most? least?
12. Tell me about your college activities and interests.
13. Do your grades reflect your abilities?
14. What plans do you have for further study?
15. Can you get recommendations from past employers?
16. What are your plans for the future?

Goals
17. What job in our company do you want to work toward?
18. What is your ultimate career goal?
19. How long do you plan to stay with our company?
20. Tell me your preferences for routine, hours, overtime, travel, large vs. small company.
21. What do you know about the company?
22. Why do you think you are qualified for this job?
23. Why do you think you might like to work for our company?
24. What are your salary expectations?
25. Are you willing to spend time as a trainee?
26. What interests you about our product or service?
School District Interviews:

Be ready to talk about these topics and include examples where appropriate:

- Philosophy and beliefs
- Reasons for going into teaching
- Classroom management
- Instructional strategies
- Motivational strategies
- Evaluation and assessment
- Strengths and weaknesses as a teacher
- Differentiated instruction
- Teaching standards
- Technology integration
- Career goals
- Educational issues and trends
- Collaboration and teamwork
- Conflict resolution
- Family communication
- Cultural awareness/sensitivity

*Beware of illegal questions according to the Americans with Disabilities Act, the Civil Rights Act, the Equal Pay Act, Age Discrimination Act, Pregnancy Discrimination Act, and any state statutes.

Questions you may ask:

Job
1. What is the exact title of this position? Detail specific duties.
2. Is this a permanent full-time position?
3. When would the job begin?
4. Is there a probation period?
5. Please show me an organizational chart and where this position fits.
6. Where is the person who previously held this position?

Training
7. What type of training programs do you offer to new employees?
8. What opportunities are available for staff development?
9. What is the typical career path for a person in this position?
10. Is there an opportunity for advancement from this position?
11. How is promotion determined?
12. How is this position evaluated?

On-the-job
13. What opportunities exist for travel?
14. What is the policy concerning relocation?
15. To whom would I report? To whom would my supervisor report?
16. What are the short and long-range plans of the organization?
17. Where would I work? May I tour the facilities?
18. What is the salary range for this position? Is there a salary scale?
19. What are office policies concerning: sick leave, vacation leave, and flextime?
20. When do you plan to make your decision? May I call you on ______ to find out the results?

After the interview:
- Evaluate the interview — make notes to yourself.
- Send a thank you letter to the recruiter.
- Complete any follow-up instructions the recruiter may have given.
Behavior-Based Job Interviewing

The behavior-based interview (BBI) concept assumes that past behavior is the best predictor of future behavior. Therefore, an interviewer will ask a candidate about a situation the candidate may have faced in the past. Based on how the candidate handled the past situation, the interviewer can predict the job worthiness of the candidate in a similar situation with considerable accuracy.

BBI requires a structured procedure with a prescribed method of questioning and a predetermined set of questions. This method helps the interviewer close in on a scientific evaluation of the answers and of the candidate.

The candidates who do best in these conditions are those who have predicted the questions (or at least the topics) and have planned and practiced their answers. Students who understand the process and prepare for it can use the same techniques to great advantage in non-BBI interviews, as well.

Follow these steps to prepare for an interview:

- Evaluate your own background to identify your skills and experience related to the job objective.
- Develop and rehearse brief, one- to three-minute scenarios about how you used those skills, each illustrating a specific activity or task required by the job.
- Each “story” should explain the problem and your solution and should give the results in quantified terms, if possible.

Common Skills Targeted for Behavior Based Interviews:

- Alertness
- Assertiveness
- Commitment to Task
- Coping
- Creativity
- Decision Making
- Goal Setting
- Leadership
- Listening
- Management
- Oral Communication
- Organization/Planning
- Perception
- Problem Solving
- Team Building

Use the STAR acronym to respond to a behavior-based question:

**Situation** — tell the interviewer about the situation you were facing to set the stage, so he or she clearly understands the circumstances.

**Task** — explain what you were required to do in that situation.

**Action** — describe the decision-making process you went through and the action you undertook.

**Result** — describe how things turned out.

Be prepared to provide examples of occasions when results were not as expected. The skilled interviewer will probe your skill in handling failure and success. Be prepared for questions asking for more detail than you’ve already given.
Sample Behavior-Based Interview Questions

Give me an example of a time when you demonstrated initiative.

Thinking over your college experience, describe a situation in which you were challenged in using your communication skills. Tell me about it in detail.

Tell me about a time when you were able to successfully resolve a conflict with a co-worker.

Tell me about your experience in dealing with routine work. What problems did you overcome in order to focus on the details the job required?

Give me an example of a time when you set long-range goals. Tell me what your goal was, how you decided on the goal and the outcome.

What is the most difficult decision you made that involved other people who did not agree with your decision? Tell me about the process of making that decision and the results.

What was one of the most difficult problems you have solved? Tell me about it in detail.

Accuracy is often critical in producing quality results. Select a job that required you to complete paperwork and tell me what specific things you did to ensure accuracy in your results.

Describe a time when you had to make a quick decision and how you handled it.

Tell me about a time you failed.

Describe a time when you did not agree with someone’s point of view and how you handled it.

Tell me about a time when you used good judgment and logic in solving a problem.

Give an example of a time when you had numerous things that needed to be done. How did you prioritize? How did you manage your time? What was the outcome?

Describe a time when you had to make a quick decision and how you handled it.

Walk me through a time when you took on or were given a project that seemed complex or overwhelming. What was the outcome?

What is your greatest achievement and what steps did you take to get to that point?

Tell me about a time you worked as a member of a team. What was your role on the team?

Describe a time when you were a leader.

Give an example of a time you went beyond the call of duty.

**Education Behavior-Based Questions**

- Give me an example of a time where a student was upset and how you handled the situation.
- Tell me about a time when you handled a situation where a parent was upset.
- Describe a time when you confronted a student for being disruptive in class.
- Give me an example of a time where you used a certain technique to increase positive behavior.
- Tell me a time where you had to alter the way you presented the material to improve learning.
- Describe a time in class you did not handle a situation exactly the way you would have liked, and what you did to change that.
# Questions They Can’t Ask

Application and interview questions must be related to whether you can perform a job.

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<th>Inquiry Area</th>
<th>Illegal Questions</th>
<th>Legal Questions</th>
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| National Origin/Citizenship | Are you a U.S. citizen?  
Where were you/your parents born?  
What is your native tongue? | Are you authorized to work in the U.S.?  
What languages do you read/write/speak fluently (if job-related)? |
| Age                     | How old are you?  
When did you graduate?  
What's your birth date? | Are you over the age of 18? |
| Marital/Family Status   | What's your marital status?  
With whom do you live?  
Do you plan to have a family? When?  
How many children do you have?  
What are your child-care arrangements? | Would you be willing to relocate if necessary?  
Would you be able to travel for this job?  
Would you be able to work overtime if necessary? |
| Affiliations            | What clubs or organizations do you belong to? | List professional or trade groups that you belong to that are relevant to your ability to do the job. |
| Personal                | How tall are you?  
What do you weigh? (Okay if necessary for safety on the job) | Are you able to lift a ___-pound weight and carry it ___ yards, if it is part of the job? |
| Disabilities            | Do you have any disabilities?  
Please complete a medical history.  
Have you had any recent or past illnesses – give dates.  
What was the date of your last physical?  
How's your family's health?  
When did you lose your eyesight? How? | Are you able to perform the essential functions of the job? |
| Arrest Record           | Have you ever been arrested? | Have you ever been convicted of __________? |
| Military                | If you've been in the military, were you honorably discharged? | In what branch of the armed forces did you serve?  
What type of training did you receive in the military? |
Interview Attire

Even though many companies have relaxed the internal company dress code, interviews still follow the conservative standard. When in doubt, err on the conservative side. You should be doing the talking, not your clothes. If you’re not sure how to dress for the interview, call and ask! Call the Human Resources office, not the hiring manager you’re interviewing with.

Make sure you have appropriate interview attire and everything fits. Get your clothes ready the night before, so you don’t have to spend time getting them ready on the day of the interview. Bring a breath mint and use it before you enter the building.

Men and Women

- Conservative two-piece business suit (solid dark blue or grey is best)
- Conservative long-sleeved shirt/blouse (white is best, pastel is next best)
- Clean, polished conservative shoes
- Well-groomed hairstyle
- Clean, trimmed fingernails
- Minimal or no cologne or perfume
- Empty pockets—no bulges or tinkling coins
- No gum, candy or cigarettes
- Light briefcase or portfolio case
- No visible body piercing or tattoos

Men

- Silk necktie with a conservative pattern
- Dark shoes, dark socks (black, or match color to pants)
- Get a haircut; short hair always fares best in interviews
- No beards (unless you are interviewing for a job as a lumberjack!)
- Mustaches are a possible negative, but if you must, make sure it is neat and trimmed
- No rings other than wedding ring or college ring
- No earrings or piercings (if you normally wear one, take it out)

Women

- Always wear a suit with a jacket; no dresses
- Shoes with conservative heels, no open toes
- Conservative neckline and skirt length
- Conservative hosiery at or near skin color (and no runs!)
- No purses, small or large; carry a briefcase instead
- If you wear nail polish (not required), use clear or a conservative color
- Minimal use of makeup and jewelry
- Hair off your face and out of your eyes

Source: *The College Grad Job Hunter, 6th edition*, authored by Brian D. Krueger
INTERVIEW CHECKLIST

Preparation

— I have followed the guidelines for appropriate interview attire and grooming.
— I prepared for the interview by researching the organization.
— I know why I am applying for this position and how I am qualified.
— I prepared answers ahead of time to the most frequently asked interview questions.
— I prepared questions for the interviewer about the job and/or the organization.
— I arrived early to the interview.

Non-Verbals

— Upon meeting my interviewer(s) I extended my hand and gave a firm handshake.
— My body language supported my interest in the position I’m interviewing for.
— I have conveyed a self-confidence through my posture and my answers to questions.
— I maintained an appropriate amount of eye contact throughout the interview.

Responses

— I was able to convey my knowledge of the organization.
— I know what skills are needed for this job, and I was able to articulate them during the interview.
— I was able to describe specific examples of skills and attributes they are looking for on the job.
— I answered the question in about one to two minutes, being as succinct as possible.
— I answered the actual question the interviewer asked. If unsure, afterward I asked “Did that answer your question?”
— I asked for clarification if I didn’t understand the question.
— I was able to convey enthusiasm and energy throughout the interview.

Follow-Up

— I thanked everyone for their time and restated my interest in the position (if true).
— I sent a thank you note immediately.