WHAT IS AN INTERVIEW?

The thought of interviewing has the potential to create a high level of anxiety and fear. However, understanding the interviewing process, along with good preparation and knowing how to conduct yourself in an interview, can dispel those apprehensions.

Many people view themselves as victims in an interview, completely at the mercy of the interviewer's interrogation. In reality, the interview is designed to be a *mutual exchange of information* between two people in order for both to evaluate the fit between the applicant and the organization. As an applicant, you are determining if this is the right place and position for you, while you are also being evaluated to see if you are right for the organization.

TYPES OF INTERVIEWS

There are many different types of interviews designed to meet different needs. Generally speaking, there are two basic types of interviews. The first is the *screening interview*, intended to eliminate candidates who do not possess the necessary qualifications. Recruiting interviews conducted on campus are screening interviews. Typically, they last 30 to 45 minutes, and the applicant is evaluated on a checklist which may include enthusiasm, initiative, maturity, leadership potential, appearance, communication skills, experience, technical skills, and education. The candidates who are potentially best qualified to meet the organizational needs are invited for a second interview.

The *selection* interview is a longer, more thorough interview designed to identify the most qualified candidate for the position, and may last up to an hour or more. It is not uncommon for the candidate to go through a series of interviews with four or five organizational officials throughout the course of a half day or day long visitation.

INTERVIEW STRUCTURE

An interview may range from very structured, where the interviewer proceeds from a list of predetermined questions that are asked of all candidates, to the very unstructured, where candidates are asked a few open ended questions and are encouraged to talk about themselves. Most interviews are a combination of both.

In the very *structured* interview, the interviewer may make notes about the applicant's responses or code them on a checklist. After all candidates have been interviewed, their answers are compared in an attempt to be as objective as possible. This type of interview can be impersonal and is often used in screening interviews. You may look for timely opportunities in this type of situation to introduce pertinent information not asked by the interviewer.

Very *unstructured* interviews are comprised of open ended questions which allow the candidate to respond in a variety of ways. A typical question might be, "Tell me about yourself", or "What can you do for this organization?". Unstructured interviews offer more control to the candidate and the interviewer may be more concerned with how the situation is handled than with the actual content of the remarks. They may be more interested in your personality and ability to be self-directed. The ambiguity of the unstructured interview may cause some tension; however, you should be prepared to take the opportunity to expand upon your objectives, qualifications, and accomplishments.

BEFORE YOU INTERVIEW

Unfortunately, job offers are not always made to the most qualified candidates. Without proper preparation and interviewing skills, a very qualified candidate has the potential to lose an offer to someone who is more skilled at the interviewing process. All things being equal, the qualified candidate who does the best job of presenting himself or herself is likely to get the job offer. Thorough preparation is essential in presenting yourself and your qualifications to the interviewer in the best possible light.

Know Yourself

It is important to take some time to become consciously aware of the following in preparation for the interview:

1. **Your Interests:** What career fields or type of work inspire you? Are your general interests consistent with the particular job for which you are interviewing? You may be asked, "Why do you want to work in this field?"
2. **Your Values:** What is important to you? What is important in the work environment, supervision, diversity, creativity, teamwork, increasing responsibility?

3. **Your Skills and Abilities:** What are you good at? What skills do you have that will contribute to the organization? What skills do you need to acquire for the type of job you want?

4. **Your Experience:** What have you done that qualifies you for this position? Consider all previous jobs, volunteer work, summer employment, and any other experiences you’ve had.

5. **Your Education:** What education and training have you had that qualifies you for this position? Consider all schools attended, degrees and certificates earned, and other training or special courses taken.

6. **Your Personality:** How do you relate to others? Be sure you understand your style in working with others and in dealing with the job.

7. **Your Goals:** What do you want to be doing in five years? ...in ten? Clearly defined short and long range goals are vitally important. Employers look favorably upon candidates who have well-defined goals.

### Know the Organization

Employers are impressed with a candidate who has done his/her homework on the organization. The more time spent researching the organization, the better. If you are knowledgeable about the business and the concerns of the organization, you will be in a much better position to show how you can be a valuable asset to the employer. In addition, having a thorough understanding of the organization will greatly boost your self-confidence.

Learn as much about the organization as you can: its products, services, philosophy, organizational structure, size and location, financial standing, current plans, etc. One of the best ways to find out about an organization is to talk to people employed by them as well as other colleagues, industry experts, and the Career Development Center staff. Most companies have information in the form of web sites, annual reports, brochures, or fact sheets. Other sources include business directories, trade associations, newsletters, business magazines, and newspapers.

### Practice

Communicating in an articulate manner is essential in interviewing. Like anything else, the more you do it, the more comfortable you are with the process. Studies have shown that rehearsing for an interview can greatly improve performance. There are a variety of ways this can be done. The best method would be a mock interview; have someone ask you several of the sample interview questions. If that is not possible, read interview questions and tape record or videotape your responses. If nothing else, take some time to write out your responses to interview questions. Practice interviews will help you clarify responses in your mind as well as build self confidence in your communication skills. Avoid generic answers or reciting predetermined responses. However, be familiar with your general reactions and specific illustrations so that you can apply appropriate responses to the interview questions.

### Dress Appropriately

To create a favorable impression, be sure to come to the interview neatly groomed and appropriately dressed. Your clothes say a lot about you. Employers will generally assume they are seeing you at your best. If you are not looking your best, they may wonder how much worse it can get. A good rule of thumb is to know what the typical dress norms are for the organization, and dress one step above that. Generally, you’ll want to dress conservatively.

**Men:**

A suit that is dark blue or a shade of gray is considered appropriate with a pressed white cotton shirt and conservative tie. Dark, over the calf socks with black or brown lace up or slip on shoes are best. Be sure to have a clean haircut and neatly groomed fingernails. Wear a modest amount of light cologne if any at all.

**Women:**

The basic suit is also best for women in dark or medium blue, dark maroon, or shades of gray. Women commonly wear tailored shirts or blouses with soft bows, small pleats or ruffles at the collar. For shoes, a medium heeled pump in a color complimentary to the suit is recommended. Avoid distracting hair styles, jewelry, nail polish, excessive makeup or perfume.

### Other Preparation Tips
• Know where to go and be on time. If you are at all uncertain, call the secretary for the exact address and directions. Leave extra time for any traffic problems and arrive early. It is important to be at the interviewer’s office 10-15 minutes early; if you are 30 minutes early, you can use the extra time to relax or prepare for the interview in an outer office or in your car.

• Be sure to know the name and title of your interviewer. Greet the interviewer with a smile, a firm handshake and good eye contact.

• Bring at least one extra copy of your resume with you since you may need it for reference if filling out an application. Also, bring a typewritten list of your references.

• Bring a pen and a small notebook. Do not take notes during the interview, but you may want to write down important information or evaluation notes afterwards.

**DURING THE INTERVIEW**

**Below is a list of the basic components of an interview.**

• First impression
• Small talk
• You are interviewed
• Your chance to ask questions
• Closing
• Follow-up, thank you note

Remember that it is normal to be nervous and that the increased flow of adrenaline can work to your advantage, however be relaxed, honest and sincere in your approach to the interview. Be yourself and focus on your positive qualities.

Upon being introduced to the interviewer, you want to communicate an impression of enthusiasm and energy. Introduce yourself with a smile and a firm handshake, stating that you are pleased to meet him/her. Wait to be invited to sit down, taking your cue from the interviewer. Be aware of your non-verbal behavior. Take a posture that is open and attentive, leaning slightly forward as opposed to slouching in your seat. Sit squarely facing the interviewer in an open position (no crossed legs). Maintain good eye contact showing your interest and directness without staring at the interviewer.

The interviewer is likely to ask you a mixture of direct as well as open-ended questions. Direct questions are designed to elicit specific information whereas open-ended questions will allow you to elaborate upon your qualifications, skills and abilities. Remember to answer questions by focusing on experiences and accomplishments you have had that relate to the job for which you are applying. Relevant details and examples from job experiences, offices held, college work, educational travel, special projects, honors, and pertinent hobbies can highlight your abilities.

Tell the interviewer about your abilities and qualities, but always be brief, sincere and truthful in your responses. Bluffing is easily spotted and will probably come back to haunt you later. Don’t say you can do something when you know you cannot. You’ll earn much more respect by being honest than you will by stretching the truth.

Know yourself and what you can do for the company. Focus attention on your strengths and past successes. If you are questioned about your weaknesses, answer by describing what you are doing to overcome them.

**There are six basic areas that employers will ask questions of:**

1. Questions about personal characteristics and opinions of yourself.
2. Questions about decisions, goals, and the future.
3. Questions about abilities, skills, and qualifications.
4. Questions about education and training experiences.
5. Questions about work experience.
6. Questions about work organizations, job positions, and geographical areas.

**Listed below are sample interview questions:***

1. Tell me a little about yourself?
2. Why do you want to work in this field (job)?
3. How would you improve the design of a giraffe?
4. Which of your accomplishments give you the most satisfaction. Why?
5. What are your greatest strengths?
6. What are your weaknesses?
7. What contributions could you make to the job you seek?
8. Why should I hire you?
9. Give me an example of a major problem you have solved.
10. What is important to you, salary or the job itself?
11. Are you willing to relocate?
12. What would you like to be doing in five years?
13. What do you do in your free time?
14. Can you supervise people? How do you know?
15. Are you prepared to travel?
16. What are your long term goals?
17. How quickly will you be able to contribute to this department?
18. How were your grades in college? (Why were they that low?)
19. What people in life do you most admire?
20. Describe your relationship with your last supervisor.
21. Why didn’t you return to the company you worked for last summer?
22. This job requires some skill in computers. How do you feel about working with computers or other technical equipment?
23. Why did you want to interview at this company?
24. What is your salary requirement?

*taken from Business Week Careers Job Search publication*
Salary

Usually you won't have to bring up the issue of salary. If the employer is interested in you, you may be asked "What salary are you expecting?" This can be a frightening question because if you state a figure too high, you may price yourself out of a job. On the other hand, if your figure is too low, you may receive the position only to find out later that you have cost yourself some money. The important thing is to research the salary range for that position and generally state a figure slightly on the high side of the range. Actual salary can be negotiated later.

Sources of salary information: Occupational Outlook Handbook, National Association of Colleges and Employers’ Salary Survey, American Almanac of Jobs and Salaries, professional journals and personal interviews with people in the field.

Interviewing the Interviewer

During the course of the interview, you will probably have an opportunity to ask questions of the employer. A candidate is evaluated by the intelligent and relevant questions asked as well as his/her responses in the interview. This will also allow you to assess if the organization is a good fit for you. Employers are impressed with a candidate who is interested enough in the organization to ask pertinent questions. Your questions should reflect a sincere and genuine interest in the position, the organization and the employer's needs.

Some sample questions you might ask in an interview are:

1. What would you describe as the cutting edge or growing edge of your organization?
2. In your opinion, what is the personality of this organization?
3. What will make the difference, at the end of the first year, in whether you feel that I have done a good job or not?
4. What has it meant for you to work here?
5. What are the organizational goals, objectives, and direction this year?
6. What are the opportunities for growth/new responsibilities?
7. What do you think will be the biggest problems confronting the person in this position?
8. Where did my predecessor go? How long was he/she with you?
9. What are the intangible expectations for the position as well as the job description?
10. What kind of ongoing training does the organization offer?
AFTER THE INTERVIEW

Upon the conclusion of the interview, the employer is likely to indicate when you can expect to hear from them concerning your status in the selection process. Regardless of the outcome of your interview, it is important to send a brief thank you letter to your interviewer. You should communicate your appreciation for their interest and time spent and express your ongoing interest in the position. You may want to remind the interviewer of the position for which you are applying and the date and location of the interview. Be sure to produce a neatly typewritten letter that conveys a professional image.

Take some time immediately following the interview to evaluate your performance. Regardless if it was a positive or negative experience, you can always learn and gain greater insight to interviewing by critically examining the process you have experienced.

Along with the thank you letter, you may want to follow up with a phone call within a week to further communicate your interest in the position. This may set you apart from other candidates as one who is persistent (without being a pest), indicating enthusiasm and interest in the position. Well-timed follow-up can go a long way in creating a favorable impression in the mind of the employer.

HANDLING ILLEGAL QUESTIONS
(taken from “Planning Job Choices 2000”)

If asked an illegal question, you have three options:

1. You can answer the question—you’re free to do so, if you wish. However, if you choose to answer an illegal question, remember that you are giving information that isn’t related to the job; in fact, you might be giving the “wrong” answer, which could harm your chances of getting the job.

2. You can refuse to answer the question, which is well within your rights. Unfortunately, depending on how you phrase your refusal, you run the risk of coming off as uncooperative or confrontational—hardly words an employer would use to describe the “ideal” candidate.

3. You can examine the question for its intent and respond with an answer as it might apply to the job. For example, the interviewer asks, “Are you a U.S. citizen?” or “What country are you from?” You’ve been asked an illegal question. You could respond, however, with “I am authorized to work in the United States.” Similarly, let’s say the interviewer asks, “Who is going to take care of your children when you have to travel for the job?” You might answer, “I can meet the travel and work schedule that this job requires.”
Listed below are examples of some illegal questions and their legal counterparts.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Inquiry Area</th>
<th>Illegal Questions</th>
<th>Legal Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>National Origin/</td>
<td>*Are you a U.S. citizen?</td>
<td>*Are you authorized to work in the United States?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Citizenship</td>
<td>*Where were you/your parents born?</td>
<td>*What language do you read/speak/write fluently? (This question is okay only if this ability is relevant to the performance of job.)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>*What is your “native tongue?”</td>
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<td>Age</td>
<td>*How old are you?</td>
<td>*Are you over the age of 18?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>*When did you graduate?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>*What’s your birth date?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Marital/Family</td>
<td>*What’s your marital status?</td>
<td>*Would you be willing to relocate if necessary?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Status</td>
<td>*With whom do you live?</td>
<td>*Would you be able and willing to travel as needed for the job? (This question is okay if it is asked of all applicants for the job).</td>
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<td></td>
<td>*Do you plan to have a family? When?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>*How many kids do you have?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>*What are your child-care arrangements?</td>
<td>*Would you be able and willing to work overtime as necessary? (Again, this question is okay assuming it is asked of all applicants for the job.)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Affiliations</td>
<td>*What clubs or social organizations do you belong to?</td>
<td>*List any professional or trade groups or other organizations that you belong to that you consider relevant to your ability to perform this job.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal</td>
<td>*How tall are you? How much do you weigh? (Questions about height and weight are not acceptable unless minimum standards are essential for the safe performance of the job.)</td>
<td>*Are you able to lift a 50-pound weight and carry it 100 yards, as that is part of the job?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inquiry Area</td>
<td>Illegal Questions</td>
<td>Legal Questions</td>
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</table>
| Disabilities | *Do you have any disabilities?  
*Please complete the following medical history.  
*Have you had any recent or past illnesses or operations?  
If yes, list them and give dates when these occurred.  
*What was the date of your last physical exam?  
*How’s your family’s health?  
*When did you lose your eyesight?  
*Do you need an accommodation to perform the job? (This question can be asked only after a job offer has been made.) | *Are you able to perform the essential functions of this job? (This question is okay if the interviewer has thoroughly described the job.)  
*Can you demonstrate how you would perform the following job-related functions?  
*As part of the hiring process after a job offer has been made, you will be required to undergo a medical exam. (Exam results must be kept strictly confidential, except medical/safety personnel may be informed if emergency medical treatment is required, and supervisors may be informed about necessary job accommodations, based on exam results.) |
| Arrest Record | *Have you ever been arrested? | *Have you ever been convicted of ________? (The crime named should be reasonably related to the performance of the job in question.) |
| 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 or education did you receive in the military? |

**FOR MORE INFORMATION**

Suggested books on interviewing available at the Career Development Center:

**Knock 'Em Dead With Great Answers to Tough Interview Questions**, Yate  
**Interview For Success**, Krannich  
**Successful Interviewing For College Seniors**, Shingleton  
**How To Turn An Interview Into A Job**, Allen

Also Available:

Mock-interviews arranged by phone or stop by the Career Development Center to make an appointment.