

Successful Interviewing

Source: The Career Center at Carnegie Mellon, Carnegie Mellon University

Overview

The interview is one of the most important steps in the process of building a successful career. The following provides a helpful guide to doing it effectively.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Overview

- 1 Pre-Interview
- 2 During the Interview
- 3 After the Interview
- 4 Types of Interviews
- 5 Stages and Topics Covered During The Initial Interview
- 6 Commonly Asked Interview Questions
- 7 Behavioral Interview Questions
- 8 Questions to Ask During an Interview
- 9 Dressing for Success
- 10 Elements of a Polished Look

1. Pre-Interview

Self-Assessment - Compile a list of personal strengths and past accomplishments to boost your confidence. Identify and evaluate your:

- education
- experiences
- skills
- accomplishments
- strengths and weaknesses

Note which qualities you want to convey to the interviewer. Also note those you do not want to discuss during the interview.

Research the Employer - Gather as much information about the employer as possible. Communication will be better and you will have a more comfortable and productive exchange. The more you know, the more confident you are likely to feel.

Some information you may want to know:

- size of the organization
- location of facilities
- structure of organization
- past, current and potential growth
- product line, industry, service, clients, potential markets
- stock history
- the competition
- training provisions
- length of time in assignments
- recent news items, trends, problems
- name of the interviewer

Prepare a list of well-researched questions for the interviewer.

Practice Interview Techniques - Before the interview, you are encouraged to participate in The Career Center's Mock Interview Program. You may also want to meet with your Career Consultant in a role-playing interview situation or arrange to have a mock interview videotape session. Please see the receptionist in the Career Resource Center for details.

- Rehearse how you will describe your qualifications and career aspirations.
- Know what you want to communicate and how you are going to communicate it.

Prepare Yourself - Logistics and materials are extremely important.

- Know the name, title and level of responsibility of the recruiter
- Arrive early (10-15 minutes before the interview)
- Dress to project an image of confidence and success while reflecting the interviewer's organization
- Prepare to bring additional materials, such as a transcript, samples of your work, and an updated résumé, if needed.

2. During the Interview

Entrance - Have a positive and cheerful attitude. Be courteous to those you meet and interview with. Give the interviewer a warm greeting with a firm handshake. Build rapport; attitude should be one of openness or sensitivity to the interviewer's style and a feeling of mutual responsibility for creating a comfortable atmosphere and establishing common ground.

Your Presentation - Relax, be yourself and think of the interview as an exchange of information between two individuals.

Components of a strong answer:

- backing up a statement with a specific example
- sharing the outcome or solution to a specific problem
- summarizing to emphasize your strengths

Nonverbal Cues

Positive:

- Occasional affirmative nodding of the head
- Leaning forward
- Sitting with hands, feet, and arms unfolded
- Smiling appropriately
- Sitting erect in the chair
- Maintaining a pleasant facial expression
- Firm handshake
- Appropriate dress, matching the interviewer's organization
- Good eye contact

Negative:

- Inappropriate facial expression or lack of expression
- A weak and ineffectual handshake
- Inappropriate dress
- Poor body posture, either sitting or walking
- Lack of eye contact
- Squirming in the seat or sitting on the edge of the chair
- Nervous habits or gestures

- Frowning

Be sure to bring some extra copies of your résumé, in case someone doesn't have one or they ask you for one in the interview.

Non-Verbal Behaviors - In general, nonverbal cues are 50% of the interview. Be aware of posture, eye contact, hand gestures, facial expressions, and active listening.

Verbal Behaviors - Use active verbs, concrete examples; be concise and complete, summarize and make transitions. Be open and thoughtful.

Have your questions ready to ask. They should reflect the amount of research you have done rather than your lack of knowledge about the employer. It is good to bring a written copy of your questions with you so the employer knows you came prepared.

Exit - Thank the interviewer. Give him/her a firm handshake and walk confidently from the interview.

3. After the Interview

Debrief Yourself - Write down everything you feel you handled right and wrong. Note any information you may need to include in your thank you letter. Use the interview as a learning experience.

Write a Thank You Letter - In a thank you letter, personalize yourself - try to set yourself apart from other applicants. Also, strengthen or add a point about your qualifications in relation to the position.

4. Types of Interviews

Interviewing styles vary from employer to employer and interviewer to interviewer. To better prepare for an interview, students are encouraged to be familiar with the different types of interviews that may be encountered.

Screening Interview

The goal of this interview is to get the facts from a student by identifying relevant skills and abilities, while verifying the résumé and looking for a solid candidate. It is usually less than one hour, and depending on the employer and location, can take the form of a campus, site visit, video, or telephone interview.

Behavioral Interview

This interview is based on the idea that a student's past behavior is useful in predicting future performance. Typical questions center around how a student has handled past situations where skills, abilities and teamwork have been demonstrated. Areas could include project work, relevant work experiences, difficult situations, accomplishments, and leadership roles. The questions usually begin with, "Tell me about a time when you..."

Video Interview

The interviewing recruiting technology is changing and there may be a time when students will be interviewed using video conferencing equipment. This equipment is used by employers to conduct screening, behavioral and other types of interviews. Even though the interviewer is not in the room, all noise and movement can be seen and heard. The following are tips to help students prepare for this type of interview:

- Treat a video interview as seriously as any other type of interview.
- Dark clothing is best suited to a video interview.

- Students are encouraged to avoid fabrics with busy patterns and solid white or red clothing as these combinations do not come across well on video.
- Speak clearly and slowly as the sound system is powerful enough to pick up regular conversations.
- Allow the interviewer to finish speaking before beginning a response.
- Avoid fidgeting and making unnecessary movement as this can be distracting to the interviewer.
- Smile and follow basic rules of interviewing etiquette.

Telephone Interview

This interview is sometimes used as a screening interview for a student who is a distance from the employer. It is used to assess whether or not the student should be considered for an on-site interview. Occasionally, students seeking internships and summer jobs have been interviewed and hired using this method.

Group Interview

A group interview could involve several people taking turns asking questions or presenting scenarios for the student to respond to or solve. It could be used as a group discussion that can help determine how a student interacts with other members of the group who could be potential colleagues.

Case Interview

This interview is the favorite of strategic consulting firms. Typically, you will be given a scenario and asked to identify the problem and a resolution. This is used to assess your mental acuity. Take your time and be creative-but if you realize your first solution won't work, back out of it and try again.

Improper or Illegal Interview Questions

If you believe you have been asked an improper or illegal question at any time in the interview process, do not dialogue or accuse the interviewer to his/her face but do bring you concern to the Director of the Career Center. In this way, the issue can be addressed without harming your job prospects. Illegal questions may include, but are not limited to:

- Age
- Personal information
- Disabilities
- Marital/family status
- National origin

If you are asked an illegal question, you have three options:

1. You can answer the question.
2. You can refuse to answer the question; unfortunately this may harm your chances of getting the job.
3. You can ask the intent of the question and answer as you see fit.

5. Stages and Topics Covered During The Initial Interview

Stages	Interviewer Topic	Interviewer Looks For
1.First Impressions	Introduction/greeting, Small talk about weather, traffic, record of a sports team	Firm handshake, eye contact, appearance and dress appropriate to the business, ease in social

		situations, good manners, and poise
	Interviewer Topic	Interviewer Looks For
2.Your Record	EDUCATION	
	Reasons for choice of school/major, grades, effort required for them, special areas of interest	Intellectual abilities, breadth and depth of knowledge, relevance of course work to career
	Courses enjoyed most or least and the reasons, special achievements, toughest problems, value of education as career preparation, reaction to teachers, high school record, SAT scores	Special/general interest, willingness to work hard, relation between ability/achievement, ability to cope with problems
	Interviewer Topic	Interviewer Looks For
	WORK EXPERIENCE	
	Nature of jobs held, why undertaken, level of responsibility reached, duties liked most/least, supervisory experience, relations with others	Sensible use of resources (time, energy, money), high energy level, vitality, enthusiasm, leadership ability, interest in responsibility, willingness to follow directions, ability to get along with others, seriousness of purpose
	Interviewer Topic	Interviewer Looks For
	ACTIVITIES/INTERESTS	
	Role in extracurricular, athletic, community and social service activities, personal interests(hobbies, sports, cultural interests)	Ability to motivate/make things happen, positive "can do" attitude, diversity of interests, social conscience, good citizenship
	Interviewer Topic	Interviewer Looks For
3.Your Career Goals	Type of work desired, immediate objectives, long-term objectives, interest in this organization, other companies being considered, desire for future training / education, geographical preferences and limitations, attitude toward relocation, health factors that might affect job performance	Realistic knowledge of strengths and weaknesses, preparation for employment, knowledge of opportunities, seriousness of purpose, career-oriented rather than job-oriented, knowledge of the company, real interest in the company, work interests in line with

		talents, company's chance to get and keep you
	Interviewer Topic	Interviewer Looks For
4. The Organization	Organizational opportunities where you might fit, current and future projects, major divisions/departments, training programs, education, other benefits	Informed and relevant questions, indications of interest in answers, appropriate but not undue interest in salary or benefits
	Interviewer Topic	Interviewer Looks For
5. Conclusion	Further steps you should take (application, transcript, references), further steps company will take - outline how application handled, to which departments it will be sent, time of notifications of decision, cordial farewell	Candidate's attention to information as a sign of continued interest

Source: Peterson's Guide to Engineering, Science, and Computer Jobs

6. Commonly Asked Interview Questions

1. Why did you choose the career for which you are preparing?
2. What do you consider to be your greatest strength? Weakness?
3. How do you think a friend, classmate, or professor who know you well would describe you?
4. Why should I hire you?
5. What qualifications do you have that make you think you will be successful in this job?
6. In what ways do you think you can make a contribution to our organization?
7. What two or three accomplishments have given you the most satisfaction? Why?
8. Do you have plans for continued study?
9. In what part-time or summer jobs have you been most interested? Why?
10. Why did you decide to seek a position with our organization?

7. Behavioral Interview Questions

The concept behind behavioral interviews lies in the notion that your past performance is the best predictor of future performance. Interviewers ask for specific examples of specific events in order to draw a conclusion as to how you would perform in a similar situation. The questions are more probing than those in traditional interviews and discourage vague, canned, or hypothetical answers. The interviewer determines the capabilities and traits that are necessary for success in a position and then asks questions that are designated to determine whether the candidate has the ability or not based on specific past experiences.

1. Give an example of a time when you could not participate in a discussion or could not finish a task because you did not have enough information.

2. Give an example of a time when you had to be relatively quick in coming to a decision.
3. Tell me about a time when you had to use your spoken communications skills in order to get a point across that was important to you.
4. Describe a situation where you felt it necessary to be attentive and vigilant to your environment.
5. Give me an example of a time when you use your fact-finding skills to gain information needed to solve a problem; then tell me how you analyzed the information and came to a decision.
6. Give me an example of an important goal you had set and tell me about your progress in reaching it.
7. Describe the most significant written document, report, or presentation that you've completed.
8. Give me an example of a time when you had to go above and beyond the call of duty in order to get the job done.
9. Describe a time when you felt it was necessary to modify or change your actions in order to respond to the needs of another person.
10. What did you do in a project or class to contribute toward a teamwork environment? Be specific.

8. Questions to Ask During an Interview

Prepare a list of well-researched questions to ask the interviewer. Keep in mind that your questions should reflect the amount of research you have done rather than your lack of research. The questions below are guidelines; create and adapt questions to meet your individual needs and interview situation.

1. Which parts of the job are most challenging?
2. What do you enjoy most about your job? Least?
3. What activities are routinely performed in this job?
4. What other departments/divisions do you interact with the most?
5. How much travel is involved and to where?
6. How are new product teams formed?
7. Where will the position be located?
8. Will relocation be required in the future? To where?
9. What is the length of the training program/period?
10. What is the average time to move within a particular career path?

9. Dressing for Success

A student's professional image is an important part of the job search campaign, especially during the interview process. A polished "dress for success" appearance creates a positive first impression. This is essential so that the employer can move on to learning more about the student and qualifications without any distractions or hesitancy. Research literature on interviewing supports this: approximately eighty percent (80%) of the hiring decisions are impacted by those first few moments. It is important for students to invest in professional looking attire with colors and designs that are appropriate for the industry and produce confidence. For interviews, conservative attire rather than a fashion statement is best. However, the style of dress should be reflective of the type of work or industry. Students are encouraged to ask a professional in the field or a Career Center staff member what is most appropriate. When in doubt, wear a suit.

10. Elements of a Polished Look

- Pressed clothes and polished shoes
- Little or no cologne/perfume
- Fresh breath
- Clean fingernails
- Neat hair
- Genuine smile

Men

- Charcoal, navy or gray suit
- White long-sleeved dress shirt
- Neatly trimmed hair, mustache, and sideburns
- Blazer and well-pressed trousers with matching tie
- Conservative tie
- Black lace-up shoes
- Minimal jewelry
- Double breasted suits for certain situations

Women

- Classic suit with notched collar or collarless
- Hosiery
- Sophisticated, updated blouse
- Knee level hemline
- Closed toe pumps with moderate to low heel
- Lightened makeup and neutral nail polish
- Neatly styled or pulled back hair
- Minimal jewelry