

## EFFECTIVE EMPLOYMENT INTERVIEWS

The interview portion of the job search tends to produce the most anxiety in job candidates who may feel they are being analyzed, judged, or manipulated. The interview may be perceived as a threat rather than an opportunity! These negative impressions can be neutralized and even transformed into positives by realizing that an employment interview is basically a conversation with a purpose between two or more people. The mutual objective is to evaluate the degree of fit between the employer's needs and the candidate's interests and qualifications. The additional challenge to you, the candidate, is to convince the interviewer that you are the best person for the job! Successful interviews require preparation, practice, and presence.

### ***Preparation***

Preparation involves self-assessment and employer research. You must thoroughly analyze your interests, values, strengths, weaknesses, and accomplishments to determine how your knowledge, experience and skills can contribute to the employer's needs. You must also find out everything you can about the employer: history, products or services, sales, market. There are many resources to assist you with this investigation including employment and company directories, Internet home pages, annual reports, periodicals, newspaper articles, and networking contacts. Your research will allow you to determine the initial degree of fit between the employer's mission, philosophy and policies and your values and goals. During the interview, your research should help you better market your qualifications and ask knowledgeable and pertinent questions, thus demonstrating your initiative and thoroughness to the employer.

Some useful facts to know about organizations are:

- History, philosophy, goals
  - Publicly or privately owned
  - Background of top management people
  - Geographical locations
  - Number of office sites and/or subsidiaries
  - Relocation policies
  - Employee turnover rate
  - Potential growth/mergers
  - Potential products or services
  - Year founded
  - Organizational structure
  - Size
  - Location of corporate headquarters
  - Types of training programs
  - Promotional and career path for your field
  - Annual sales growth for past five years
  - Complete product line or services
  - Competition
- Names (correct spelling) and titles of your contact people

### ***Practice***

See the next section on "Types of Interviews" for sample interviewing questions. Do a web search on interviewing questions; i.e., [QuintCareers](#). Formulate your responses to each of these questions and say your responses out loud. Then practice in the mirror, on tape, or with a friend, so you get more comfortable hearing your own voice and your responses become more polished. Schedule a recorded practice interview session with our Career Development Department so you can observe your initial presentation and impression.

### ***Presence***

Hiring decisions are usually made in the first 30 seconds to five minutes of the interview, so positive first impressions are essential! Your interview begins the moment you are in sight of the employer. You are being observed throughout the entire time that you are visiting, not only during the formal office interview. "Presence" includes your **appearance, attitude, and communication skills.**

**Appearance:** Good hygiene, grooming (i.e., clean hair, no body odor, fresh breath, etc.) and appropriate dress are essential. Update eyeglasses to reflect mainstream fashion. Do not smoke or chew gum. Avoid too much jewelry (and no distracting jewelry), showing too much skin, wearing too tight or inappropriate attire, too much makeup, bright nail polish or nail art, any visible piercings or tattoos, and too much cologne, perfume, or aftershave. Clothes should be pressed and should fit you well (i.e. right size and length). If in doubt about what to wear, call the company's human resources and ask what is appropriate interview attire. Several days before your interview do a "dress rehearsal;" try on all your interview clothes in front of a three-way mirror.

**Men:** Wear a dark suit (navy or gray), pressed white long-sleeved button-down shirt, leather belt, polished shoes, clean leather briefcase, and a conservative tie. A fresh shave, haircut and trimmed nails are essential.

**Women:** Wear a pant suit or skirt suit (length at or slightly below, the knee) (dark, traditional colors – avoid pastels or bright colors), nude hose, polished pumps and coordinated accessories (clean matching handbag or leather briefcase). A stylish haircut, trimmed nails and appropriate make-up are important.

**Attitude:** You need to convey a sense of professionalism, confidence, enthusiasm, friendliness and sincerity! Be considerate and polite to everyone you meet. Arrive about ten minutes before your actual appointment time. Remember the importance of a firm (not hard) handshake, direct eye contact, proper posture and appropriate facial expression and gestures. Above all, be yourself!

**Communication Skills:** You may be the most qualified candidate for the job, but unless you can convince the interviewer that you have the necessary skills and experience, a less capable candidate who has superior communication skills might get the job offer. Communication skills (speaking and listening) are critical to success!

Be certain that you follow the directions for the structure or format of the interview and clearly and concisely answer the question that was asked. Be sure to actively listen so you are not asking for information the interviewer has already given you! When you are asked a question, try to keep your answer to two minutes or less. Don't be afraid to pause for a moment to collect your thoughts. Turn off your cell phone and any other devices or watches that may make a sound during the interview.

### **Finishing Touches**

Bring extra copies of your application materials and any supporting materials, and a list of former employers, addresses and telephone numbers and salary history in the event that you are asked to provide this information at the time of the interview.

Immediately after the interview, send a thank you letter to everyone you met (ask for business cards or the correct spelling of names). This follow-up will set you apart from your competition and give additional evidence of your good communication skills.

## TYPES OF EMPLOYMENT INTERVIEWS

During your job search process, there are several types of interviews that you may encounter. You may not know in advance which type of interview you will be facing.

### **Screening Interview:**

This is a preliminary interview conducted in person or over the telephone. During this time, questions are asked to determine whether you have the basic qualifications to warrant subsequent consideration. You should note that these interviews are typically done to screen candidates out, not in, so take steps to ensure that you remain a viable candidate! For a phone interview, have your resume and list of questions in front of you.

### **Structured Interview:**

Most traditional interviews are based on this format, where the interviewer explores certain predetermined areas using questions that have been written in advance. Often, the interviewer also has a list of the experiences, skills, and personality traits that the “ideal” candidate possesses, and compares you to this profile.

### **Sample Questions:**

- Tell me about yourself.
- What are your strengths? *(Itemize your strengths and skills and provide supporting stories/examples for each.)*
- What are your weaknesses? *(Prepare a few weaknesses, including a plan of improvement to each. Weaknesses should be fixable and not essential to the job.)*
- Why are you applying for this job?
- Why are you interested in our organization?
- Does your GPA reflect your abilities?
- How do you determine success?
- What have your experiences taught you about working with people?
- How have your prior experiences prepared you for this position?
- What can you contribute to this company?
- What motivates you?
- What de-motivates you?
- What three words would people who know you well use to describe you?
- According to people who know you well, what is one reason why I shouldn't hire you?
- Describe the type of manager you prefer.
- What have you accomplished in your former position?
- What recent book or article have you read?
- What type of work environment appeals to you most?
- What characteristics do you think are important for this position?
- Name two management skills that you think you have.
- Why are you leaving your current employer?
- Why should we hire you?

### **Behavior Based Interviews:**

Behavior based interviews rest on the premise that past performance predicts future performance. Employers are looking for key competencies, for example, communication skills, decision-making

abilities, creativity, and teamwork. Your answer to a behavior based question must tell a story by giving a specific example of a situation you handled successfully. Examples of past behavior may be drawn from courses, work experience, activities or internships. To prepare, analyze both your skills and those sought by the employer and identify past experiences where you demonstrated those skills.

Use the *STAR* model to organize your responses to behavioral questions:

**SITUATION/TASK:** Briefly present a challenge or situation in which you found yourself or a task you were required to do.

**ACTION:** Discuss step-by-step-what you did, why you did it and what were the alternatives.

**RESULTS:** Finish by sharing the outcome of your actions. What did you achieve? What did you learn from this experience and have you used this learning since?

**Sample Questions:**

- Tell me about a time when you had to work with a difficult boss.
- Give an example of a situation where you took charge.
- Give evidence of your ability to be a team player.
- Give an example of an innovative solution you developed and what you did with it.
- Describe the system you use for keeping track of multiple projects.
- What problems have you solved and what is the process you used?
- Give an example of a time when you failed and how you handled it.
- What types of situations put you under pressure, and how do you deal with it?
- Describe a time when you got co-workers or classmates who dislike each other to work together.
- Tell me about a time when you failed to meet a deadline. What did you learn?
- Tell me about your most difficult decision and how did you go about making it?
- What are your team-player qualities? Give examples.
- Tell me about a team project of which you are particularly proud. What was your contribution?
- Describe a situation where you had to work with a difficult person, how did you handle it?

***Situational Interview:***

In this type of interview, candidates are required to perform job-related tasks. If you are interviewing for a job as an accountant, you may be asked to enter information on a spreadsheet. A computer programmer might be asked to write some code; a trainer could facilitate a workshop.

***Stress Interview:***

In this format, the interviewer is intentionally attempting to upset you. This is done to see how you react under pressure. You may be asked questions that make you uncomfortable (but are still legal in nature), or you may even be interrupted as you are speaking.

**Sample Questions:**

- Was there anything today that you were afraid I was going to ask you? Why would that make you uncomfortable?
- You seem overqualified for this position. Why should I take a chance on hiring you?
- What makes you think you can handle this position?

***Group Interview:***

In this setting, two or more company/organization representatives may interview you simultaneously. At times, one of the interviewers may be the person designated to ask “stress questions.” In a group interview, it is best to answer the interviewers' questions in turn and maintain eye contact with the individual whose question you are answering. Make an effort to make occasional eye contact with all of

the individuals involved in the group interview. Similarly, you could be interviewed with one or more other job candidates at the same time.

### **Multiple Interviews:**

You may have a series of interviews with various representatives of the company or organization. During the first interview, you are usually required to provide basic information on your skills and abilities. In subsequent interviews, the interviewer will focus more on how you would perform the job in relation to the company's goals and objectives.

### **Legal/Illegal Questions:**

Not all interview questions are legal under the [U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission](#) (EEOC). Interview/pre-employment questions and tests must be job related. Generally, interviewers from human resource departments are well versed in what questions can and cannot be asked and adhere to these standards and guidelines. However, not all hiring interviewers are informed or compliant.

If you are asked an illegal question, you have three options: answer, refuse to answer (tricky to do tactfully) or answer through your understanding of the employer's intent. For example, if you are asked if you have children, you might reply that there's nothing in your life to prevent you from doing the travel that the position requires. Watch also that your own comments do not introduce topics that should not be discussed! The [types of discrimination](#) prohibited by the laws of the EEOC are: Age (40 or older), Disability, Genetic Information, National Origin, Pregnancy, Race/Color, Religion, and Sex. The EEOC also offers additional pre-employment inquiry guidelines on other areas such as: Arrest & Conviction, Citizenship, Credit Rating or Economic Status, Height & Weight, Marital Status/Number of Children. (A full listing is available on the [EEOC](#) web site.)

### **Candidate Questions:**

You have as much responsibility for the interview as the interviewer does. Questioning allows you to assume this role. Your questions give you the chance to free the interview from a repeatedly used, rigidly structured format. Questions can be used to gather more information about the position, to clarify any areas of confusion, and to elicit feelings. While it is a good idea to have several questions prepared in advance, be ready to build others based on information that comes up in the actual interview. Ask your most important questions early, use open-ended questions, and be sure your questions are well informed and answerable. Stick to questions that matter!

### **Sample Questions:**

- What are the most immediate challenges of this position?
- What skills are the most essential to do the job well?
- What is the top priority of the person who accepts this job?
- What is the typical career path after a successful entry-level position?
- What sort of training is provided?
- What is your most serious challenge from a competitor?
- What is your evaluation or performance appraisal process? How will my performance be measured?
- What is the company's strategic plan or long-term goals for the next five years?
- Can you tell me about the selection process and timetable?
- Can you discuss your take on the company's corporate culture? What are the company's values?
- Why did you come to work here? What keeps you here?
- What are the traits and skills of people who are the most successful within the organization?
- How would you describe the management style/philosophy of this company? Of your department?