Interviewing Skills

Career Services - ISM
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Introduction

The interview is often perceived as an unpleasant rite of passage. But once you have a better understanding of the interview process and the basic skills needed, you might find it more like a pleasant conversation between two new acquaintances.

One misconception that many people have who are new to the interview process is that the interviewer holds all the power. That is not true. You need to be interviewing the employer as he/she interviews you. Both you and the employer need to decide if you both meet each other’s goals, values and culture. There needs to be a “fit”.

The following information will break down the parts of an interview, interview dos and don’ts, review basic interview questions and suggest some questions you may want to ask an employer. Remember that practice makes perfect. You will want to create and practice your responses to the most common questions. Also, you can practice a first interview through a mock interview with your career advisor, a peer, or professional in your desired industry.

Interview Preparation

Before you begin the interview process, it is important to know what you are looking for in a company and position. Do you want to travel? Do you like to work with a team of people or independently? Are you looking to relocate? Spend some time thinking about your career goals. Also think about desired skills, those skills all employers are seeking, regardless of the job duties.

Desired Skills:
- Teamwork
- Decision Making
- Problem Solving
- Organization & Ability to Prioritize
- Communication
- Analytical
- Technical
- Ability to Sell

Source: Job Outlook 2014, National Association of Colleges and Employers

Think how you have developed these skills and characteristics during your classroom experiences, activities, internships, volunteerism, etc… Once you have narrowed down the types of positions for which you are interested, you then need to prepare for the interview questions. Think about your strengths and weaknesses. Also what you have accomplished and your future career goals.
Next, you need to do your research on the employer. Employers are looking for candidates who have done their homework and have a general understanding of the company’s products and/or services. To find information, use the Internet. Most companies will have a web site that is a wealth of information. A company’s social media pages are also a great place to get up to date information. In addition, alumni contacts can be helpful as well as company sponsored information sessions.

For a list of information sessions, please go to TartanTRAK and CareerNavigator.

Last, learn your interview’s name. It will be provided prior to the interview.

**Types of Interviews**
- First round – Introduction to skills and fit
- Second round – Often at company location. Meeting many groups and individuals including manager, team, HR.
- 1:1 – You are being interviewed by one person
- Panel – You will be interviewed by a group of professionals. All will contribute input into the hiring decision.
- Meal – The interview is conducted over a meal. Not only are skills and fit assessed, but also your ability to represent the organization in a social situation.
- Phone – The interview is conducted over the phone. Challenging as 60% of communication is absent.

**Interview Structure**

Most interviews, whether on-campus, at a job fair or at an employer’s site, will have the same structure.

**#1: Introduction:** The interview will start out with an introduction to establish a relationship between you and the interviewer. He/she will try to help you relax by asking simple questions such as how your year is going, did you have trouble finding parking (if you are at the employer’s site), etc... Even though this may be a time for you to settle in and try to relax, keep in mind that the interviewer is forming his/her first impression of you. You want to make sure you have good eye contact, wait to ask to be seated and shake the interviewer’s hand firmly. Do not forget good posture. The way you carry yourself tells about your self-confidence.

**#2: Questions from Interviewer:** The interviewer will ask a variety of questions that will range from your education, work and internship experiences, activities, career plans and self-assessment. The interviewer will use open-ended questions that will let you describe your background. The interviewer may probe in depth into certain areas to evaluate your knowledge and background. Your goal is to communicate clearly how your experiences lend themselves to the position. This is your chance to sell yourself.
Certainly one of the goals of the interview is to determine if you have the skills and knowledge needed to do the job. In addition, the interviewer is trying to determine if you are a “fit” for the company and position. He/she is evaluating how you handle yourself in a stressful situation. He/she is looking at your communication skills, self-confidence, ability to relate to others, motivation, interest in the position and values. There is a list of commonly asked questions at the end of this handout. Formulate answers to the questions to help clarify your thoughts and ease stress.

#3: Your Questions: The interviewer will ask if you have any questions. This will give you an opportunity to show you did your homework and to clarify any information that has already been provided. When developing your questions, make sure they are well thought out. Do not ask questions which could be answered from the company website or literature.

When developing questions, consider what you need to know to make an informed decision about employment with this company. Remember that you are interviewing them as well as they are interviewing you. There is a list of suggested candidate questions at the end of this handout to help out.

#4: Closing: The interviewer should inform you of the next step in the process. If he/she does not, you may ask in a professional manner. Express your appreciation for the opportunity to speak with him/her and “ask for the position” by indicating your interest and making a final statement regarding your qualifications.

Interview Dos
- Be 5-10 minutes early.
- If you are traveling off campus, leave with time to spare. You never know when you might encounter a traffic problem or bad directions.
- If traveling off campus, take the interview contact information. You can call the interviewer if you run into an unforeseen problem.
- If traveling off campus, take money! You may need change for a toll road, parking meter or garage.
- Smile and make eye contact during the interview.
- Dress professionally. Career Services can answer questions you have about your interview attire.
- Use the interviewer’s name. Start off with Mr. Jones or Ms. Smith; do not use their first name until you are asked.
- Be a good listener! Fully listen to the question before you formulate your response.
- Speak clearly, slowly and confidently.
- Remain positive about your education and work experience, even if it was not. You can always find something positive or have learned something valuable from every experience you have had.
- Answer questions with examples of specific circumstances, action and results achieved. Prove that you are able to do the job.
- Ask for clarification if you are not sure what the employer is asking.
Interview Don’ts
• Do not be late.
• Do not let the interviewer’s casual approach fool you. Maintain a professional image. Do not be overly familiar.
• Do not giggle or be overly enthusiastic.
• Do not ramble. Answer questions fully and directly.
• Do not interrupt.
• Do not discuss your personal problems.
• Do not use flattery.
• Do not be vague. Elaborate on your answers.
• Do not be arrogant.
• Do not criticize your professors or past employers.
• Do not lose your temper.
• Do not name drop.
• Do not drink alcohol if the interview is over a meal.

Interview Follow-up
After the interview, send a thank you letter. It will set you apart from many of the other applicants. The thank you letter can be in the form of an email, and should briefly thank the interviewer for their time. Reiterate your interest in the position. Also, take any notes regarding the interview to help prepare for a second interview. Collect and organize the business cards that were given to you.

At the end of the interview, you should have learned what will be the next step in the interview process. Typically, you will receive some word from the employer within approximately two weeks. If you have not heard from the employer in that time span, you should follow up on the process by phone or email. Ask for some indication as to the status of your candidacy or the employer’s timeline for hiring decisions.

Second Interview
Your second, and maybe third interview, will usually be held at the employer’s site. While the actual interview structure will be similar, the questions will be more in-depth and you will meet with a variety of people.

Making Arrangements
Clarify all travel details with the employer, including date(s) of visit, lodging, contact person, travel/flight information, time of arrival, local transportation, and itinerary. It is common practice for most employers to assume all reasonable travel expenses incurred by a candidate who is invited to visit the employer’s office. If this is not stated, seek clarification. Be conservative in making arrangements, as some employers will judge your maturity and integrity by the manner in which you manage and report your expenses. Do not forget to save your receipts.

The Players
The person who originally interviewed you will probably serve as your host, or will at least greet you and orient you to the process. You will then likely interview with the hiring manager (who will be your prospective supervisor), and perhaps his/her
supervisor. You may also meet and interview with those who work in related functions.

The Interview
This interview will be more in-depth because it will determine whether or not you get the job. The questions will require longer, more detailed answers, so you will need to know more specific information about the organization and have intelligent questions to ask. It may lead to further tests or background checks.

Testing
Employers are using a variety of tests or checks, such as personality tests, criminal background and credit checks or drug tests. The US Chamber of Commerce estimates that approximately half of the Fortune 500 companies currently engage in drug testing either in the selection process or as part of random testing programs. If asked to take a drug test, say yes. You may also be asked to take a skills test to measure your level of knowledge on certain topics or skills.

Interview Questions
You will be faced with a variety of interview questions. The interviewer will be asking questions in which he/she is gathering basic information such as your date of graduation, major, favorite courses. Other questions will be used to probe into your experiences and maybe weaknesses. These questions are open-ended and require well thought out answers.

• **Common questions**: why Carnegie Mellon, what is your favorite class and why?
• **Behavioral questions**: Using past experiences to predict future performance.
• **Technical questions**: Assess your skills and knowledge in a technical area.
• **Case questions**: Given a business, technical, etc... case to solve within a certain time frame.

Behavioral Interview
Behavioral interviewing is a popular style used by interviewers. The interviewer will ask open-ended questions about your past experience and how you handled them to gauge how you will handle future situations. Your response should be based on the STAR system:

**Situation**: Identify the problem
**Task**: Define your objective
**Action**: Describe the steps you took to achieve your objective.
**Results**: Measure your effectiveness.

For example, an interviewer may ask you to describe a time when you needed to move a group to a consensus. Using the STAR system, here is a response:
I am president of the Heinz College Consulting Club and we needed to decide on a club sponsored activity for the fall semester. Some of the members wanted to host
a social event, while others wanted to arrange a professional speaker to visit campus to discuss the field of consulting (Situation). My job was to facilitate the discussion between the members and reach a consensus (Task). I used a flip chart and wrote down each groups’ reasons for wanting to organize their chosen event. There was discussion and then a realization that by hosting a guest speaker on campus, we could combine a professional event with an added social event in the form of a reception (Action). The decision was made for the group as a whole to invite a guest speaker for a campus event, followed by a reception. The event was a large success, with over 100 student attendees (Results).

**General Questions**
1. Tell me about yourself?
2. Tell me something about yourself that is not on your resume?
3. What are your strengths?
4. What are your weaknesses?
5. Why did you choose to major in _____?
6. What are your career goals or future plans?
7. What do you know about our organization?
8. Why did you choose to interview for this position?
9. What were your grades in school?
10. What courses did you enjoy most?
11. If you had your education to do over again, what would you do differently?
12. Tell me about a typical day at ________ job?
13. What did you like about your supervisor? Dislike?
14. What kind of supervisor do you prefer?
15. What have you learned from the jobs you’ve held?
16. Which jobs have you liked best?
17. Describe your work style?
18. What skills, training and experience do you have that qualify you for the position?
19. What motivates you?
20. How do you motivate others?
21. What organizations do you belong to?
22. Have you held any leadership positions?
23. What did you learn from being involved in these organizations?
24. Are you willing to relocate?
25. Are you willing to travel?
26. What two or three accomplishments have given you the most satisfaction? Why?
27. Do you have plans for continued study?
28. Why should I hire you?
29. How do you think a friend, classmate, or professor who knows you well would describe you?
30. In what ways do you think you can make a contribution to our organization?
**Behavioral Questions**
31. Describe a time when you were faced with problems or stresses at work or school that tested your coping skills. What did you do?
32. Give an example of a time when you had to be relatively quick in coming to a decision.
33. Tell me about a time when you had to use your spoken communication skills in order to get a point across that was important to you.
34. Tell me about a specific occasion when you conformed to a policy even though you did not agree with it.
35. Give me an example of a time when you used 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.
36. Give me an example of an important goal you had to set and tell me about your progress in reaching that goal.
37. Describe the most significant written document, report, or presentation that you’ve completed.
38. Give me an example of a time when you had to go above and beyond the call of duty in order to get a job done.
39. 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.
40. Give me an example of a problem you faced on the job or in the classroom, and tell me how you solved it.
41. Tell me about a situation in the past year in which you had to deal with a very upset customer, coworker or peer.
42. Describe your most recent group effort.
43. Describe the most creative project you have completed.
44. Give me an example of when you felt you were able to build motivation in your coworkers or peers.
45. Give an example of a time when you had to be relatively quick incoming to a decision.
46. 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.

**Questions You Can Ask During an Interview**
1. What will the training program be like?
2. Where do people go after they leave the position?
3. What characteristics are you looking for?
4. What growth/reduction areas do you anticipate in the future for this organization?
5. What major challenges is this organization facing?
6. What are the organization’s growth plans?
7. What is the next step in the selection process?
8. How will my performance be evaluated?
9. What commitment does the organization have to the career development and training of its employees?
10. What is the attrition rate of new hires within one/three/five years?
11. How does this position and department fit into the organization as a whole?
12. How would you describe the work atmosphere in the organization?
13. What would I be expected to accomplish in the first six months on the job? In the first year?
14. Does the job require much travel?

A great way to leave a lasting impression on your interviewer is to ask a question with substance. Try to formulate some questions based on the research you have done on the company in preparation for the interview. For example: I read that you recently undertook a new marketing strategy. What have the outcomes been so far?

**Illegal Questions**
An employer’s questions, whether on a job application, in an interview or during the testing process must be related to the job for which you are applying.

Examples of illegal interview questions:
Are you a U.S. Citizen?
How old are you?
Are you single or married?
Do you have kids?
To what clubs or social organizations do you belong?
How tall are you?
How much do you weigh?
Do you have any disabilities?
Have you ever been arrested?

If you are asked an illegal question, you have three options:
• You can answer the question.
• You can refuse to answer the question, which is well within your rights. Make sure you phrase your refusal in a polite, professional manner so as not to appear uncooperative or confrontational.
• You can examine the question for its intent and respond with an answer as it might apply to the job. For example: “What country are you from?” You can respond, “I am authorized to work in the United States.”

**Conclusion**
The interview process is not easy but with preparation, much of the anxiety can be eliminated.