

Formal Interviewing

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Introduction to Interviewing

The definition of an employment interview is a planned, purposeful conversation designed to determine the relative “suitability” of a job applicant for a specific position.

For the job applicant, the interview represents an opportunity to communicate one’s skills, experiences and qualifications as they relate to the requirements of the position and the needs of the employer. The employment interview is also used to gather information about the company, the work environment and about the position for which they are applying.

The employer has a “need” that you may be able to meet. It is your goal to identify that need and demonstrate to the employer in what ways you are the one for the job. The more you know about the job, the employer and the industry, the better prepared you will be to target your qualifications. For the candidate it is an opportunity to really sell themselves and demonstrate their unique attributes and qualifications.

For the employer the job interview fulfills the purpose of determining if the candidate is suitable for a specific job and if they seem to be a good fit for the culture of the department or organization. The employer has reviewed the requirements of the job and the departmental or company needs. Required or preferred skills, qualifications, and characteristics have been determined. The employer uses the interview time to verify what they know about you and to talk about your qualifications.

The employer has determined the required and preferred skills and characteristics needed and utilizes the employment interview to evaluate the applicant by weighing job related and personal skills and traits. During the employment interview, the employer will ask a series of questions designed to determine if the candidate is a good fit for the requirements of the job. Most questions are designed to find out more about you, your qualifications, or to test your reactions in a given situation. Your task is to match your qualifications to the job requirements.

An interviewer for a major company stated “There are two things we look for in the interview. First, is the person a good fit for the job and second are they a good fit for the organization.” They added, “we look for ‘good chemistry’ with the candidate at the interview.” They suggested that the candidates should ask themselves, “Am I comfortable with the environment, with the manager I will be working for, and the fellow employees with whom I will work? Can I be really happy in this job and with this organization?”

Another interviewer said, “We hire for the future. We look for people who are adaptable and well rounded. We are looking for people who can change with the changing demands of the market place.”

The quotes above suggest that interviewers are often looking for more than simply the ability to do the duties described in the job description. They are looking at the character and quality of the candidate. The job interview situation is **the** place where these qualities of character and personality can come through the best.

Interviewers tend to evaluate the applicant based on many of the following traits:

Appearance	Commitment
Personality	Team Work
Self-Motivation	Future Potential
Self-Management	Decisiveness
Skills and Ability	Willingness
Self-Confidence	Longevity
Goals	Ability & Willingness to follow instruction
Education	Mental Flexibility
Job History	Attitude

SKILLS the Employer may Wish to Find:

- Technical or job specific knowledge and skills needed to perform the job.
- Proficiency in field of study: Engineering, Accounting, Finance, Management, Marketing, Human Resources, Computer, etcetera.
- Flexibility – the ability to adapt quickly to new workplace demands
- Ability to think creatively as you cope with new challenges
- Analytical or problem solving skills
- Capacity to take responsibility and other “self management” skills
- Enthusiasm – willing to give 100% to the job. Alert, responsive, energetic
- A high energy level – willingness to work hard and a commitment to devoting the prime hours of the day to the job
- Maturity – knowing how to handle oneself in a business situation.
- Basic skills to interact effectively with other members of the team:
 - ✓ Ability to listen and to clearly communicate thoughts
 - ✓ Ability to interact effectively with other members of the team and to get along with different personalities – Teamwork!
 - ✓ Effective interpersonal skills
 - ✓ Recognize when, where and how to assume leadership role

Before the Interview...

- Do research on the company and industry
- Analyze the skills that will be needed in this situation
- Take some time to do a self-assessment of your skills, abilities, interests, and accomplishments.
- Review your resume
- Review standard interview questions and prepare answers
- Whenever possible, do a practice interview
- Discover relaxation techniques that will work for you

“Pop Quiz” – A Self Assessment Exercise

- Can you name the work activities you do well and most enjoy?
- Can you list at least 5 marketable skills and abilities you possess?
- For each of your most important job related experiences, can you list:
 - 5 responsibilities you had
 - 5 things you learned
 - Contributions you made or things you accomplished
- Describe your greatest strength/weakness

QUESTIONS FOR YOURSELF

World of Work...

- Can you name at least five position titles that might be appropriate to your interests and abilities and for which you are qualified?
- Are you able to identify the skills and qualifications needed for the job?
- Do you know the type of organization for which you would like to work?
- Can you describe the characteristics of the work environment in which you would be happiest and most productive?
- Can you describe the qualities or characteristics of your ideal manager?
- Can you clearly and confidently state your career goals?
- Can you summarize in 3-5 sentences your work history and experience?
- What skills do you most enjoy using?
- What are the accomplishments and achievements of which you are most proud?
- Are there areas where you need improvement, more training or experience?
- What is important to you and to what do you aspire?
- What are your central or key values and how have they shaped your life?
- What lifestyle do you want and where do you want to live? Are you willing to relocate?
- What are your hobbies, interests and activities?
- What are your salary requirements, from minimum acceptable to where you would like to be?
- In general, what things do you really want your potential employer to know about you
And what things might they want to know about you?

SKILLS IDENTIFICATION

(Excerpted from Creative Job Search, Minnesota Workforce Center)

Skills identification is essential to a successful job search. Employers want to know what it is you can do for them. Skills are abilities and they reflect doing, acting and accomplishing. They are verbs and action words. Everyone has skills, many of which employers are looking for in an employee. It is vital to your interviewing success that you be able to identify your skills and describe them to an employer. You are not ready to approach the employer until you have identified your skills and are able to communicate to the potential employer that you have what it takes to do the job.

You may wish to complete the following exercise to assist in skill identification...

1. List by title the jobs you have held. Start with your most recent position and work backwards.
2. Write a detailed description of four to five major duties.
3. Think of the skills needed to accomplish each duty. Write those skills down. Look for both job content and self-management skills. Include tools or equipment used, knowledge applied, etc.
4. Do the same thing with other work-related activities including hobbies, volunteer work and community involvement.
5. Go through your list and select those skills that match your job goal(s). These are the skills you will use in your job search effort.

Preparation is the key to interview success. First, you must know yourself and second you need to know about the organization with which you are seeking employment.

Researching the Organization

Know as much about the organization as possible. This will help you determine if you really want to work for them or in that industry. It will show the employer that you are intelligent, that you “do your homework,” and it will help you ask astute questions during the interview.

- Begin by going to the company website, most research for larger organizations can be done on line.
- Obtain any published literature, PR materials and publications.
- Get the annual report and any articles you can find on the organization, the industry or service sector.
- Read about the scope of the organization: their main and subsidiary business, product or services.
- Check for articles published in regional newspapers and business periodicals or industry publications.
- Seek information on whether the organization or the industry is growing. Ask where they have been and where are they headed. Determine what aspects are most profitable.
- What does the organizational structure look like? What are the names and positions of the managers and officers?
- If possible, research the specific department or division that you are considering. Know the name of your potential boss and their boss if possible.

For help with company research consult a research librarian in the University of St Thomas’ Keffer on the Minneapolis campus. The library can guide you in written and electronic resources and has access to a wealth of relevant information.

“Face Validity”

In science, face validity refers to the simple fact that something looks right at first glance. Obviously, you want to have as much “face validity” as possible and make a good impression on the interviewer.

Here are some very simple tips:

- **Get a good nights rest** and do not consume any alcohol the night before the interview. Even a hint of alcohol breath could be the end of the job prospect. Personal hygiene must be excellent. Make sure breath is fresh and clothing is free of food odors. Very little or no cologne is preferred. And, easy does it on the make up and jewelry. Look as natural and fresh as possible. Make sure your hair is neat and business like.
- **Dress conservatively and neatly.** Do not try to make any fashion statement or take a fashion risk for the interview. If you are in doubt as to what to wear visit your local department store for suggestions on appropriate business attire. If you are called back for more interviews and you only have one interview outfit you can simply wear a different colored shirt or blouse or a different tie. Clothing needs to be clean and well pressed. Women’s shoes should be low healed and conservative. Men’s shoes should be well polished and not have worn down heels or soles. Again, business-like and conservative is the dress for the day.
- **Be on time and Never Late!** If you are more than 10 minutes early, wait outside and do not announce yourself. It is better to be early than be late. Arriving early may give you a few minutes to review your resume and think about your strategy for the interview. You may want to do a test run the day before to see where the office is, how long it will take to drive there. Take rush hour traffic and parking into consideration in your calculations
- **Upon introduction, shake hands firmly, make good eye contact and smile.** Avoid the “cold fish” or the “bone crusher” handshake. Using the person’s name, tell them you are glad to meet them. Be warm, open and courteous but do not be overly familiar. Avoid any nervous mannerisms such as tapping your fingers, looking at your watch, fidgeting, kicking your foot, and overly loud laughter. Don’t allow yourself to talk too fast and don’t try to take over the interview (that’s a really big turn off for the interviewer!) You want to portray a relaxed and confident air.
- **Practice.** It may be very helpful to do a *mock interview* with a member of the *Life/Work Center* staff. The mock interview will help you determine how you present yourself to others and provide you with a chance to practice interviewing. These rehearsal interviews are video taped and can be very instructive.
- **Be Prepared.** Bring along some extra copies of your resume in case they are needed. You may also want to bring references as well as any examples of your work, such as writing samples or marketing pieces that you had done.

THE JOB INTERVIEW

As much as you can remain relaxed, poised, alert and attentive to questions. **Remember** that the employment interview is the process by which the employer is trying to assess your fit with a specific job, your fit with the organization and your overall personality.

When answering interview questions, the employer is looking for concise but descriptive responses. Focused interviewing techniques are often used to draw out information from the candidate. If you are able to respond with the “**STAR**” **technique**, your responses will be concise and descriptive and the interview will proceed more effectively.

What is a STAR?

S - Describe the situation.

T - What was the task that had to be done?

A – What action did you take?

R – What were the results?

Having some STAR responses prepared in advance can help you be sure you don't leave until the employer knows all you want them to know about who you are and what you have to offer the organization.

Another way to convince an employer to hire you is to use a “**Prove It**” **approach**.

- Pick a skill
- Qualify an example or describe the circumstances using “who, what, when, where, why or how”
- Quantify the example with measurable data, such as dollars, percentages, numbers, frequency, years, months, hours, etc.
- Specify results...tell what happened?
- Link it up! Reinforce your value by using one of these examples:
 - Increased profit
 - Decreased turnover
 - Improved productivity
 - Improved worker morale
 - Less personal frustration
 - Solutions to problems

There are three main types of interviews: structured, un-structured and behavioral. Each of these has its advantages and challenges.

The *structured interview* is the most common type. The interviewer will have a set of questions that will be asked of all candidates. Candidates will be rated on how well they answered the questions and how they handled the process of interviewing. They will be looking for evidence of your ability to do the work and your attitudes about work. They will watch how you reason and how you respond when you don't know an answer or are unsure. Stay calm, think before answering. Be concise and don't ramble. Don't pretend to knowledge or skill you don't have.

The **unstructured interview** is used less frequently but can be a little un-nerving. Some interviewers will seem to “lay back” and not give much structure to the process. They will ask very open-ended questions and allow you to talk as little or much as you want. This approach demonstrates what you will likely do in a situation that is not highly structured or is ambiguous. Careful - this technique can result in a nervous tendency to “be a motor mouth” and say more than you may want to say if the question had been more structured. The **unstructured interview** can have the effect of being “a projective screen” onto which you project your underlying personality. Think before responding and don’t ramble. Ask “did that cover the subject well enough” or “did I answer your question satisfactorily?” Take time to make key points if they are not already made. You could say “I think there a few things you might want to know about me” Cite past work experience, why you think you would be a good fit for this job or company, your goals, etc.)

The last type of interview strategy is **the behavioral interview**. Behavioral interviewing is a popular style of interviewing being used by organizations in their hiring processes. The underlying belief is that the most accurate predictor of future performance is past performance in a similar situation. The behavioral interviewing approach is more probing and seeks to pinpoint certain characteristics. It provides more objective facts on which to base employment decisions.

In the interview, your response needs to be specific and detailed. You will want to tell about a particular situation that relates to the question. Tell briefly about the situation, what you did specifically and the positive outcome or results. Your interviewing preparation should include identifying examples of situations where you have demonstrated the behaviors sought by the company.

The interviewer determines the capabilities and traits that are essential for success in the position. Areas of probing may include assertiveness, clarification, commitment to task, dealing with ambiguity, decision making, interaction, leadership, management skills, communication skills, organizational skills, problem solving, team building and others. Questions are designed to determine whether the applicant does or does not have the ability based on specific past experiences. The interviewer is listening for factual information, outcome, and especially the individual’s role in achieving that outcome.

The candidate can prepare for behavioral interviews by identifying specific examples for each of the traits. One of the best strategies to prepare for a **behavioral interview** is to think of specific situations from your life that demonstrate how you reason and problem solve, how you relate to others, how you function in teams, and how you deal with crisis and opportunity. Remember that skill with people and problem solving ability are central aspects of most jobs. If you lack work experience then use examples from school or other situations. For example, you can describe how you handled person on a school project that did not hold up their share of the work or how you were highly creative and motivated on a project or assignment.

It is also helpful to identify an unsuccessful example of a time when things didn’t work out as planned. This provides opportunities to turn a negative into a positive through such statements as “the mistake caused me to delay the project, but it helped me to develop a project tracking system which would reduce the chances of this happening again.”

The behavioral interview technique is highly specific. After some preliminary questions, the interviewer will ask the candidate about a very specific example. They might say “tell me about a time when you encountered a problem at work and did not know how to handle it.” Or, “tell me about a situation at work where you had to learn something very quickly and implement your learning.” The interviewer may even give you a specific scenario.

“Suppose you were given a brand new sales territory to cover. The possible consumers know nothing of your company and the product. What strategy would you use to get started in the territory?”

Sample Behavioral Interviewing Questions:

The job applicant will want to note that behavioral interviewing or competency-based questions often start with a lead in phrase. This should alert the applicant to the important fact that specific examples are being asked for. Examples of lead-ins include:

- “Describe a time when you...”*
- “Give an example of a time in which you...”*
- “Tell me about a time when you...” “when you didn’t want to ____”*
- “Tell me about a specific job experience in which you...”*
- “Give me an example of a specific occasion when you...”*
- “Describe a situation in which you were called upon to...”*
- “Describe the most significant...”*
- “What did you do in your last job in order to...”*
- “How often in the last year were you called upon to...”*

The interviewer might ask:

Give me an example of a time when you were...

- especially hard working, not motivated to work hard
- proud of your ability to cope, disappointed with your coping skills
- especially adaptable, “hardheaded”
- motivated by a good boss, de-motivated by a bad boss
- especially creative, not able to use your creative skills
- able to accept change, resistant to change

Decision Making and Problem Solving

- Give me an example of a time when you had to keep from speaking up or making a decision because you did not have enough information.
- Give me an example of a time when you had to be quick in coming to a decision

Leadership

- What is the toughest group that you have had to get cooperation from?
- Have you ever had difficulty getting others to accept your ideas? What was your approach? Did it work?

Motivation

- Give me an example of a time when you went above and beyond the call of duty to get the job done.
- Describe a situation when you were able to have a positive influence on the actions of others.

Communication

- Tell me about a specific situation where you had to get something across to someone you found difficult to understand.
- Tell me about a situation when you had to be assertive in order to get a point across that was important to you.
- Have you ever had to “sell” an idea to your co-workers or a group? How did you do it? Did they “buy” it?

Interpersonal Skills

- What have you done in the past to contribute toward a teamwork environment?
- Describe a recent unpopular decision you made and what the result was.

Planning and Organization

- How do you decide what gets top priority when scheduling your time?
- What do you do when your schedule is suddenly interrupted? Give an example.

After the initial behavioral question, the interviewer may seek to elicit more details by asking probing questions involving the candidate’s thoughts, feelings, behaviors, dialogue and closure or how the situation turned out. Some examples include:

“What were you thinking when that happened?” “What was your reaction?”
“What did you actually do?” “What did you actually say?”
“What did other people say in response?” “How did it finally turn out?”
“What happened?” “What was the end result?”
“Tell me more...”
“Is there anything else I should know about this situation?”

Commonly Asked Interview Questions

1. **Tell me about yourself?** (keep your response to one to two minutes and use your resume summary as a place to start.)
2. **What do you know about the company?** (This is where your research pays off.)
3. **Why do you want to work for us?** (Don’t overemphasize what you want, talk about their needs; how you can make a contribution, solve a company problem, etc.)
4. **Why should we hire you?** (Because of your knowledge, experience, abilities, skills)
5. **What can you do for us that someone else can’t?** (Relate past experiences that show you’ve had success in solving previous employer problems that may be similar to theirs.)
6. **What do you look for in a job?** An opportunity to use your skills, to perform & be recognized.
7. **What skills and qualifications are essential for success in the position of _____?**

8. **How long would it take for you to make a meaningful contribution?** (Not long, you expect only a brief period of adjustment and learning)
9. **How does this assignment fit into your overall career plan?**
10. **Describe your management style.** (Open door management is best, you get the job done on time or inform your management.)
11. **What do you believe is the most difficult part of being a supervisor of people?**
12. **Why are you looking for a new career?**
13. **How would your colleagues describe you?**
14. **How would your boss describe you?** (Think back to the positives on your last performance review.)
15. **How would you describe yourself?** (Be detailed and avoid generic answers such as “hard worker”).
16. **What do you think of your present or past boss?** (NEVER bad mouth a previous employer).
17. **What were the five most significant accomplishments in your last position?**
18. **What were the five most significant accomplishments in your career so far?**
19. **Can you work well under deadlines and pressure?**
20. **How much do you expect if we offer you this position?** (Be careful! The market value of the job may be the key. It is good to speak in ranges, “depending on the scope of responsibilities.” “My understanding is that a job like the one you’re describing may be in the \$ range.”)
21. **Why do you want to work with us?** (Speak to the needs of the employer!)
22. **What other positions are you considering?**
23. **Have you kept up in your field with additional training?**
24. **What are your career goals?**
25. **What are your strong points?**
26. **What are your weak points?** (take a weakness and turn it into a strength by stating what you learned or how you have worked to overcome it.)
27. **How did you do in school?**
28. **What position do you expect to have in 2 to 5 years?**
29. **If you took the job what would you accomplish in the first year?**
30. **What was wrong with your current or last position?**
31. **What kind of hours are you used to working or would like to work?**
32. **Do you have your reference list with you? (Remember don’t give it out unless it is asked for).**
33. **Can you explain your salary history?**
34. **What questions didn’t I ask that you expected?**
35. **Do you have any questions for me?** (Come prepared to ask at least 2-3 questions. See the list below for ideas.)
36. **Do you have anything to add?** (Summarize by emphasizing your qualifications as they apply to this job. Also, cover anything that you missed from your opening.)

Sample questions you may want to ask the interviewer

(Be careful how many you ask & pick questions with care. Ask about what you really want to know. This is your chance to gather information.)

1. Why is this position open?
2. How often has it been filled in the past five years? What were the main reasons?
3. What would you like done differently by the next person who fills this position?
4. What are some of the objectives you would like to see accomplished in this job?
5. What is most pressing? What would you like to have done in the next 3 months?
6. What are some of the long-term objectives you would like to see completed?
7. What are some of the more difficult problems one would face in this position?
8. How do you think that these could best be handled?
9. What type of support does this position receive in terms of people, finances, etc?
10. What freedom would I have in determining my own work objectives, deadlines, and methods of measurement?
11. What advancement opportunities are available for the person who is successful in this position, and within what time frame?
12. In what ways has this organization been most successful in terms of products and services over the years?
13. What significant changes do you foresee in the near future?
14. What are the most significant factors affecting your business today?
15. How have changes in technology affected your business?
16. What are the long range plans of the organization?
17. How is one evaluated in this position?
18. What accounts for success within the company?
19. What do you wish you knew about the company before you started?
20. How would top management describe the corporate culture and how does this compare with things in the organization as they really are at the lower levels?
21. What is this company's philosophy towards their employees?
22. What makes your association with this employer enjoyable?

These questions are presented only as interviewing guidelines. They are meant to help you prepare for the interview. Some questions may or may not be appropriate for your interviewing situation.

By practicing your responses to some of these questions, hopefully you will not be taken off guard. **Most importantly, relax, go with the flow, and before you know it, you'll be in your next job.**