



Articles of Interest

The Interview Process

Looking for a job is a full-time job. Many hours of work go into a successful job search campaign. The interview is a critical step toward the goal of employment. It is at the interview that the job is won or lost. The best test of any job search is the number of interviews you are offered. If you are consistently being interviewed, you should expect job offers. If you are not getting interviews, you need to reevaluate your job search strategy.

An employment interview is simply a meeting between you and a potential employer to discuss your qualifications and see if there is a "fit." The employer wants to verify what they know about you and talk about your qualifications. If you have been called for an interview, you can assume that the employer is interested in you. The employer has a need that you may be able to meet. It is your goal to identify that need and convince the employer that you are the one for the job.

Interviews can be stressful, but when you are well prepared there is no reason to panic. An interview generally lasts from 30 to 60 minutes and most questions fall into standard categories.

Preparation

Preparation is the key to success in a calculated job search campaign. Preparation will help win the interview and will improve interview success. Begin by gathering all the information and documents you may need for the interview. Bring extra copies of your résumé, a typed list of references and letter(s) of recommendation. You may also want to bring school transcripts, licenses and certifications. If you have them, work samples are also powerful tools (e.g., designs, drawings, writings). Finally, bring a pen and pad of paper for taking notes.

The more you know about the job, the employer, and the industry, the better prepared you will be to target your qualifications. Up to this point you should have been gathering some of this information. Now is the time to intensify your research and expand your knowledge. There are many sources of information. Ask the employer for a position description. Research employer profiles at any Chamber of Commerce or local library. Network with anyone you know who works for the company or for a related company. Check their Internet Web site if they have one.

The next step is to match your qualifications to the requirements of the job. A good approach is to write out your qualifications along with the job requirements. Think about some standard interview questions and how you might respond. Most questions are designed to find out more about you, your qualifications, or to test your reactions in a given situation. If you lack experience or skills in a required area, think about how you might make up for those deficiencies.

The Interview

The purpose of an interview is to become acquainted and to learn about one another. The employer wants to learn how you "fit into the organization", but it is also an opportunity for you to evaluate the company. Employers use a variety of interview formats. There are series of interviews, panel interviews, phone interviews, or the traditional one-on-one interviews. Sometimes staff from the personnel or human resource departments will conduct an initial screening and the hiring authority will conduct the actual interview. Whatever the form or process, the interview is a basic effort to learn your qualifications.

During an interview it is important that you be yourself. It is advised that you get a good night's sleep and plan your travel to arrive in plenty of time. However, you should present yourself for the interview no more than 15 minutes early.

Interview Questions

The interview is a sales meeting and you are both the salesperson and the product. The basic question in every interview, whether it is asked or not, is "Why should I hire you?" All other questions center on this one issue. Basic interview questions can take a variety of forms. Generally, questions will ask about your qualifications, experience, skills and motivation. If you have prepared for the interview and are confident about your qualifications, none of these questions should be difficult.

Listen carefully to each question asked in the interview. Take your time in responding and make sure your answers are positive. Express a good attitude and show that you are willing to work, eager to learn, and are flexible. If you are unsure of a question, do not be afraid to ask for clarification. Sometimes a good strategy is to end your response with a question for the interviewer.

Focus on your qualifications but also look for opportunities to personalize the interview. There is nothing wrong with injecting some personal insight about your life. However, do not get too personal or dwell too long on non-job related topics.

Show your potential to the company. Support your answers with examples from your experience. Avoid "yes" or "no" responses to questions.

Use caution if you are questioned about your salary requirements. The best strategy is to avoid the question until you have been offered a job. Questions about salary asked before there is a job offer are usually screening questions that may eliminate you from consideration. You can ask what the salary range is and state that you are within it's range, or are open or negotiable.

Keep in mind that the interview is not over when you are asked if you have any questions. Come prepared to ask a couple of specific questions that again show your knowledge and interest in the job. This is not the time to ask about pay or benefits.

Closing the Interview

Close the interview in the same friendly, positive manner in which you started. If you want the job, say so. Summarize your qualifications again before leaving. When the interview is over, leave promptly. Do not overstay your time.

After the Interview

Think about the interview and learn from the experience. Evaluate the success and failures by asking yourself these questions:

- What points did I make that seemed to interest the employer?
- Did I present my qualifications well? Did I overlook qualifications that were important for the job?
- Did I learn all I needed to know about the job?
- Did I talk too much? Too little?
- Was I too assertive? Not assertive enough?
- Was I dressed appropriately?
- Did I effectively close the interview?

The more you learn from the interview, the easier the next one will become. You will become more confident. Make a list of specific ways you can improve your next interview.

Finally, write a "thank-you" note or letter to each person who took part in the interview. Thank the employer for their time, restate your interest and qualifications for the job, and remind them of your intent to follow-up. Mail the letter the day of the interview.

Additional Tips

- Maintain good eye contact throughout the interview.
- Do not be a clock watcher.
- Do not discuss illegal or discriminatory subjects such as race, religion, age, national origin, equal rights or gender.
- Dress a step above what you would wear on the job.
- Be aware of nonverbal body language.

Do not:

- Put your hands in your pockets.
- Chew a pencil or other object.
- Clench or wring your hands.
- Tap a pen or pencil.
- Fiddle with jewelry.
- Jingle keys or coins in your pocket.



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Employers' List of Top Interview Mistakes

Employers are looking for persons who not only have the necessary experience and skills, but also demonstrate self-confidence and a willingness to become a team player. These interview mistakes have cost many people job opportunities - avoid them in order to secure your next job!

- Inability to express oneself clearly. Answered questions with "yes" or "no" but offered no explanation or further information.
- Lacking career direction - undefined short- and long-term goals.
- Came unprepared, i.e., had little or no knowledge of the company.
- Arrived late and claimed that the directions given were wrong.
- Poor personal appearance; dressed too casually or sloppily.
- Poor hygiene.
- Brought a friend/parent/child/pet along.
- Did not ask questions about the job.
- Too interested in salary, vacation and benefits.
- Evasiveness; unwilling to account for time when unemployed.
- Detailed health problems at length.
- Lacked confidence; displayed nervous mannerisms.
- Demonstrated overaggressive, overbearing, or conceited behavior.
- Presented a sloppy or inaccurate résumé.
- Forgot to bring extra copies of the résumé and could not provide any references.
- Lacked courtesy, maturity or tact.
- Displayed indifference or lack of enthusiasm.
- Criticized previous employers.
- Had no appreciation for the value of experience.
- Did not look the interviewer in the eye.



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Common Interview Questions

To be a successful interviewee, you will need to fine tune your skills and be prepared to answer a wide variety of questions. Below is a list of commonly asked questions.

Background Questions

Background questions are geared more to your personal growth, including your personality, education, and overall career development. They are used to determine if you are a well-rounded individual leading a happy, balanced life.

Example Q&A:

Q: "What do you consider to be your greatest accomplishments to date?"

A: "While I always enjoyed the challenge of learning and wanted to obtain a college degree, my family did not find value in a college degree. I was able to finance my education through scholarships and work, and last year I became the first college graduate in my family."

- Tell me about yourself.
- How would your friends and past employers describe you?
- What makes you lose your temper?
- Where do you see yourself five years from now? Ten years?
- How satisfied are you with your career progress?
- How do you make use of your spare time?
- Why did you choose your college major? How did this prepare you for your career?
- What classes did you enjoy the most? The least?

Work History Questions

Work history questions are used to determine if you have the skills and experience to perform the job, and if you have a good work ethic. Sometimes, you may be asked to perform a task, such as typing, proofreading, or finding a solution for a given problem. In your answers, try to show your knowledge of the company.

Example Q&A:

Q: "Why did you leave your last job?"

A: "While I enjoyed my work environment, I felt ready for more responsibility and challenge, but there were no opportunities in the near future at (my last employer). Since (employer you are applying to) is known nationwide for its quality products and has grown 25% in the last year, I feel it would be a mutually beneficial work experience."

- What do you know about our company?
- Why do you want to work here?
- What can you contribute to this company's success?
- Give me an example of your creativity/problem-solving ability/initiative/reliability.
- Do you work well under pressure?
- What situations do you find stressful and how do you deal with them?
- What are your three greatest strengths? Three greatest weaknesses?
- Tell me about your last performance evaluation.
- In your last job, what additional responsibilities or projects did you undertake?
- Can I see an example of your work?
- What is your explanation for the gap in employment shown on your résumé?
- Have you ever been fired or asked to resign?
- How many days a year did you miss at your last job? Why?
- How often are you late to work? Why?

- You seem overqualified for this position. Why do you want this job?
- How do you feel about travel/relocation/overtime/weekend work?

Management Questions

These questions are often used to determine what kind of management style you work well with and if you fit the company's work philosophy. Refrain from criticizing former employees or employers.

Example Q&A:

Q: "Describe a problem you had with your last supervisor and how you resolved it."

A: "Due to a miscommunication, I was unaware that my supervisor would be out of the office for three days to attend a conference and would therefore be unable to sign necessary paperwork. I found his hotel number and faxed him the papers to be signed and returned. To avoid future issues, I suggested using a manager's log to record issues, schedules, and projects, thereby improving communication."

- To what type of managerial style do you respond best?
- What do you see as the major role of management? Why?
- Who is involved in your planning process? In what ways do you involve them?
- What methods and techniques do you employ when managing others? How effective are these?
- How do you motivate employees and maintain good morale?
- How do you go about planning for department results?
- What is the proper balance between managerial control and employee independence?

Stress Questions

Stress questions are intended to test your response to stressful situations. Take a deep breath, remain calm, and give a positive answer focusing on what you learned or how you have changed.

Example Q&A:

Q: "Describe a flaw in your working style."

A: "In the past, I have procrastinated on large projects, resulting in requests for deadline extensions. However, I have learned to break projects down into smaller steps, schedule my time better, and now I finish projects before deadlines."

- What aspects of your work are most often criticized?
- You seem underqualified for this position. Why should I hire you?
- Describe a time when you failed to solve a conflict with a co-worker.
- Describe a time when you failed to perform your job.
- What would you do if I told you that I thought you were giving a very poor interview today?

Questions to Ask the Interviewer

Remember, you should be evaluating if this company will fit your career development plans. Asking the interviewer questions will not only give you more information on which to base a decision, but will also express your interest in the company and the position. Do not inquire about salary, vacation, bonuses, retirement packages or any other benefits.

- Why is this position available?
- What are the specific duties of the job? What would be my responsibilities?
- What would you like me to accomplish in this position?
- What characteristics would a candidate need to have in order to excel in this position?
- How would you describe the style of management and reporting structure?
- What short- and long-term problems or opportunities does this department face?
- Tell me about the growth plans and goals for the position, department, and company.
- What are the advantages and disadvantages of this position?
- How is one's performance evaluated? How often?
- I am very interested in this position. Is there anything I can do to improve my standing?
- When do you plan on making a hiring decision? May I call in a week to see how I stand?