

Robert R. McComsey Career Development Center



INTERVIEWING SKILLS

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Hours: 8:30-4:30 Monday-Friday
Walk-in hours: 1:00-4:30 Tues., Wed., and Thurs.

Introduction

An interview is an exchange of information to find a person and a position that are right for each other. It allows the employer to evaluate your personality, communication skills, attitudes, values, motivation, interests, and technical skills, above and beyond what is contained on your resume. The interview also enables you to gain information about the company so that you can make an informed choice.

An interview is a discussion between equals. You need always treat the interviewer(s) with respect, but never act submissive or afraid.

Preparing for the interview

A. Self-preparation

Thorough self-examination and lots of practice are necessary. We recommend you schedule at least one mock interview with a counselor at the Career Development Center.

Prepare your agenda. Based on the job description and the information obtained while researching the potential employer, develop a list of four to six (possibly more) strengths, experiences or characteristics that you possess and are essential to being successful.

Prepare for behavioral interviews. The ability to respond to questions regarding your qualifications using personal examples is essential to effective interviewing. Behavioral interviews are also referred to as the STAR Technique and are outlined below.¹ (This technique is also referred to as the SAR and PAR techniques as well).

<u>Situation or Task</u>	<i>Describe the situation that you were in or the task that you needed to accomplish. You must describe a specific event or situation, not a generalized description of what you have done in the past. Be sure to give enough detail for the interviewer to understand. This situation can be from a previous job, from a volunteer experience, or any relevant event.</i>
<u>Action you took</u>	<i>Describe the action you took and be sure to keep the focus on you. Even if you are discussing a group project or effort, describe what you did -- not the efforts of the team. Don't tell what you might do, tell what you did.</i>
<u>Results you achieved</u>	<i>What happened? How did the event end? What did you accomplish? What did you learn?</i>

¹ http://www.quintcareers.com/STAR_interviewing.html

B. Employer Research

You must know enough about the employer to justify why you are looking for a job with them, and to come up with insightful questions about the organization. Types of information to have might include:

- Job description & job title you're interviewing for
- Name of the interviewer
- Geographic location of home office, branches, stores
- Organizational structure
- Divisions/departments that interest you
- Areas they are eliminating - Products/Services
- Training Programs
- Size of company
- Career paths
- How long have they been in business
- Types of clients
- Growth in the past and future potential
- New products and services they are developing
- Employee benefits
- Literature produced by company
- Professional journals (library)
- Magazine articles

Besides looking on the web (we recommend www.hoovers.com and www.Thomasregister.com), this information can be found in professional journals in the library, magazine articles, Moody's Industrial Manual (library), National Job Bank (in the CDC), National Trade and Professional Associations, and Standard & Poors Industry Survey (library)

C. Nuts and Bolts

- Be sure to carry a few extra copies of your resume and your references. We also recommend you bring copies of your transcript, even if not specifically requested.
- Take along a pen or pencil.
- Make sure you know where you are going, and will be able to arrive about 10 minutes before your interview is scheduled to begin - being late is the worst possible first impression. Factor in driving time, time to find a parking spot, and time to walk from there to the interview location.
- Leave your personal life at home. Before entering the interview area, take a minute to clear your head of any school or home-related concerns.
- Have a list of questions prepared beforehand - write them down if you think you may forget them once you are in the interview.
- Prepare and bring a portfolio - useful for ALL majors. Please ask a counselor at the CDC if you are unsure of what to put into a portfolio.

Interview Day

Nonverbal impressions

The first five minutes are the most important - initial impressions are seldom changed during the course of an interview. Therefore, be sure that everything that happens in those first five minutes conveys the fact that you are a professional. This includes:

- Being on time, preferably 5 - 15 minutes early.
- Dressing appropriately and professionally. It is better to be a little more formally dressed than the position calls for than to be underdressed.

- Starting right out with a firm handshake, a smile, and good eye contact.
- Being conservative with things like perfume, jewelry, hairstyle, and other means of “self-expression.” There is plenty of time for those after you get the job offer.
- Do not smoke - even if invited - or chew gum. (If you smoke, it would pay to keep your interview suit in a place that will not pick up the smoke).
- Be aware of the effects of body language as far as eye contact, crossing your arms and legs, how comfortable you are in the outfit you are wearing, etc. A mock interview with a counselor at the Career Development Center will help you pinpoint areas where your body language is saying something different than what you are saying verbally.

Types of interviews

Although you should be told up front what to expect, in many cases you may be in the dark until you begin your interview. Be prepared for any of the following types of interviews:

- **Pre-screening** - quicker and less intense than the other types, yet in many ways it’s the most important type since it determines whether you’ll be invited to continue in the process.
- **One person** - done by the hiring authority such as the company president, department supervisor, school principal, etc. This can last anywhere from 30 minutes to a few hours.
- **Group** – you will meet with several people during the course of the interview, which could last up to a day. This might mean you will be interviewing with several people at once, or that you will have several one-on-one interviews.
- **Several candidates at the same time** - the company may have several people interviewing at the same time. You may have some sessions together and some separate.

Some general tips

- Every person you meet during the course of the day is a potential evaluator. Be personable and polite to everyone, and do not relax so much that your professional demeanor slips.
- Demonstrate enthusiasm, interest, and confidence.
- Do not use the words “think,” “guess,” or “feel,” which sound indecisive. Avoid vague phrases such as “pretty good,” or “fairly well.” Use positive words to describe your skills.
- Be prepared with specific examples of how you have demonstrated your skills (SAP).
- Listen effectively, paraphrase to clarify and confirm the interviewer’s question, and answer what is asked.
- Make an effort to talk more deliberately and articulately than usual. Most people tend to speed up their speech when they are nervous.
- Maintain reasonable eye contact. Never look down at the floor while you are contemplating an answer or out the window when the employer is speaking to you.

Follow up

As soon as possible after your interview, you should send a letter of thanks to all the people you met and talked with that day. While it may not affect the probability of getting a job offer, it is a common courtesy, and just may make the difference. The thank you letter should reaffirm interest in the position, highlight one or two qualifications, and show your understanding of etiquette. The letter provides one last opportunity to stand out among your competition. The thank you letter is a business communication and should be typed, or emailed, instead of handwritten for most types of companies. Please see our handout “Thank You and No Thank You Letters” for ideas.

On average, you should hear within two weeks from the organization with an offer or a “thanks-but-no-thanks” letter. At the conclusion of the interview, find out how long you can expect to wait regarding an employment decision, and feel free to contact the company to check on delays if you do not hear within a few days after the estimated time.

Do not be afraid to turn down a job offer if, after careful consideration, you feel it is not the right step for your career goals. If this is necessary, do so in writing and courteously, since you never know what personal or professional ties this organization may have with others in your field.

Watch out ...Common Pitfalls

- Avoid constant use of filler words like “you know,” “right,” “like,” etc.
- Do not apologize for shortcomings and avoid any comment that can be construed negatively. Negative information is weighed more heavily than positive.
- Do not answer questions with just a yes or no. Use relevant examples.
- Do not ask yes or no questions; open-ended questions will get more information from the employer and will allow him or her the chance to talk.
- Be responsive. Interviewers hate to feel as if they’re dragging information out of you.
- Do not stretch the truth - a routine reference check is almost certain to happen. Along those same lines, remember that if something appears on your resume it is fair game to be discussed in the interview. Keep yourself current.
- Do not mumble; articulate your words and say “yes” instead of “yeah.”
- What happens if the employers ask a difficult question that you were not prepared for? Rather than give a poor answer, ask for a minute to think about it, and then give a quality response.
- Do not ask what the salary/benefits are (although you should be prepared to give a reasonable range if asked for one). This type of conversation is more appropriate after the organization is in the final stages of the hiring process, and you have a good idea of what you are worth to them.
- Do not trail off at the end of your sentences, or raise your voice so that your answer sounds like a question.

General Questions to be Prepared For

Although this is by no means a complete list, you should review the following questions and think about how you would answer them. Whenever possible, support your answers with specific examples from your own experience. Keep in mind that all these questions are designed to answer one thing for the employer: what can you do for the organization that the other candidates cannot? Although technical questions are not listed, you will always be asked questions specific to your field.

1. Tell me about yourself (this question or some variation of it begins almost 80% of all interviews).
2. What do you see yourself doing five years from now?
3. What are your long-range career objectives, and how does this position fit into them?
4. How did you become interested in this career?
5. What are your most important strengths and weaknesses – give me a specific example of each.
6. How would you describe yourself?
7. How would a professor or friend describe *you*?
8. Describe a specific time when you used your leadership skills.
9. Why should I hire you?
10. In what ways can you make a contribution to our organization?
11. Describe your ideal relationship with a supervisor.
12. What accomplishment are you most proud of, and why?
13. What has been your greatest professional disappointment, and why?
14. How did you choose Alfred University/your academic major?

15. Tell me about a time you disagreed with a teacher or supervisor. What was it in regard to, and what happened?
16. What academic subjects did you like best? Least?
17. Are your grades a good indication of your ability to succeed?
18. Do you have plans for continuing your education?
19. In what type of work environment are you most comfortable?
20. Why did you decide to seek a position with this organization?
21. What do you know about this organization?
22. Will you relocate/are you willing to travel?
23. Tell me about a specific time you messed up a project. What exactly happened, and what did you learn from it?
24. Tell me about (something on your resume)
25. What did you like/dislike about your last supervisor/job?
26. What three words best describe you?
27. Do you prefer working with others or alone?
28. What type of person/situation frustrates you most?
29. What are the broad responsibilities of a (e.g.) market analyst?
30. Tell me about the last major project you planned. What was it, how did you plan it, what was the outcome?
31. How do you deal with stressful situations?
32. If you were going to be stranded on a desert island, what three books would you bring?
33. Do you have any questions?

If you are unsure about how to answer any of these questions to your advantage, let us know! We can give you some ideas.

Sample questions you may want to ask:

1. What will my duties be?
2. To whom will I report?
3. How will my performance be evaluated?
4. What are the opportunities for advancement?
5. How is success in this position measured and rewarded?
6. How are goals for the job set?
7. What is the formal mission of the organization?
8. How are new teams formed?
9. What type of training is available?
10. What would my first assignment be?
11. What do you consider the skills/characteristics a person needs to do a great job in this organization?
12. What is the structure of the organization (who reports to whom)
13. How much travel is required, and to where?
14. Is there any way I can further clarify any of my qualifications?

Please feel free to browse through our career library or sign out one of our many books on the interviewing process. Better yet, call #2164 to schedule an appointment for a mock interview with a counselor.

Illegal questions

During the course of your interview, you may be asked a question that is considered illegal by federal, state or local laws. Most of the time, the employer will ask out of genuine curiosity or interest rather than to use your answer to discriminate against you. The fact remains, however, that these types of questions are not relevant to whether or not you can perform the functions of the job at hand. Below are some examples of illegal questions and their legal counterparts.*

<i>Inquiry Area</i>	<i>Illegal Questions</i>	<i>Legal Counterparts</i>
<i>Citizenship and Nationality</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Are you a U.S. citizen? •Where were your parents born? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Are you authorized to work in the United States? •What languages do you read, write or speak fluently?
<i>Age</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •How old are you? •When did you graduate from...? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Are you over the age of 18?
<i>Marital/Family</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •What is your marital status? •How many kids do you have? •What do you do about child care? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Can you relocate if necessary?^a •Can you travel/work overtime as needed?^a
<i>Personal</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •How tall are you/how much do you weigh? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Are you able to (e.g.) lift up to 50 pounds at a time and carry it 100 yards?^b
<i>Ability</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Do you have any disabilities? •Please complete the following medical history •How did you lose your leg? When? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Are you able to perform the functions of the job with or without accommodation? •After a job offer is made, you may be required to undergo a medical exam. •Can you demonstrate how you would perform the following job function?
<i>Arrest Record</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Have you ever been arrested? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Have you ever been convicted of...?^c
<i>Military</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Were you honorably discharged? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •In what branch of the Armed Forces did you serve? •What type of training or education did you receive in the military?

*See next page for footnotes

a acceptable as long as it is a function of the job and all applicants are asked the same question

b questions about height and weight are not acceptable unless minimum standards are established for safety reasons

c the crime named should be reasonably related to the performance of the job in question

If you are asked an illegal question, you have the following options:

- 1.** Go ahead and answer - but realize that you are giving information that is not job related and may impact you negatively.
- 2.** Refuse to answer – you will be within your rights but may run the risk of seeming uncooperative.
- 3.** Take a second to figure out what the intent is behind the question, and answer to that. Example: If the employer asks, "Do you plan to have children?" you might reply "I can, and will, be able to meet the travel and work schedule that this job requires."

Source: Interview to Win. Planning Job Choices, 1996, 54-60.