



Practical Strategies for Interview Success

For Graduate Students

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Introduction to Interviews

The goal of this booklet is to help lessen your anxiety about interviewing. A major cause of communication anxiety is fear of the unknown. While it is true that you can't predict everything that might happen during an interview, you do have quite a lot of control in the situation. One way to decrease your communication anxiety about interviewing is to be well informed on the topic. If you understand the interviewer's role, your role, and the process, it should lessen some of your anxiety.

Interviewing is the most widely accepted method of selecting employees. The goal of an interview is to find out if you fit with the organization, if you have the skills you say you have, and if you can do the job. Based on your resume, they already have a good idea of your skill set. So the primary reason for the interview is to assess your personality and to fact check your skills. Some things you should know about the interview process are as follows:

From the interviewer's perspective: Because interviewing is time consuming and expensive, the goal is to get the best people with the fewest number of interviews. Interviewers don't want to waste time and money, so if they are interviewing you it's because they want to hire you. They want you to succeed. In fact, in any communication situation it is uncomfortable for all involved if any party performs poorly.

The company is taking a risk in any hiring decision by relying on the skills of the interviewer to select the best possible candidate. Interviewers look for interviewees who take the interview process seriously. Skilled interviewers know how to get the best performance out of each interviewee but you also have to be prepared to give your best performance.

Finally, while the interviewer is evaluating whether to offer you a job, she is also trying to sell the company and position to you to increase the chances that you will accept the position if offered. Listen to what the interviewer is telling you explicitly and implicitly about the company.

From the interviewee's perspective: Your role is to be well prepared. You have total control over how you prepare for the interview. Being an excellent interviewee is not a natural talent, it is learned behavior. When you prepare well and practice effectively your skills will improve. And the more interview experiences you get the better your skills will be. It may help to remember that sometimes interviewers are also anxious during interviews.

You should view the interview as an opportunity to showcase your skills. The best way to do this is to spend time analyzing your skill set and figuring out the best way to present your skills during the interview. The better you know yourself, the easier it will be to convince an interviewer you will be a good hire.

While you are primarily an interviewee in this situation, you should also be an interviewer. You should plan on staying in this job for at least a year, so you need to determine if this is the right position and the right company for you.

Being a strong interviewee is essential to career success. Studies show the job doesn't always go to the most qualified candidate, it goes to the best interviewee.

The Process: You may have a phone interview before you have a face to face interview. The phone interview is an initial screening to narrow the candidate pool to those more likely to be hired. For more information on how to be successful in a phone interview see the Career Center website graduate student section, nonacademic job search, Interview Process, Quick Tips, "*Types of Interviews.*"

Once you have passed the initial screening you will be contacted about an onsite interview. While you are setting up the time and location you may want to ask a few questions that will help you prepare: 1) How should I dress for the interview? 2) Who will interview me? 3) Should I bring anything else in addition to my resume? 4) About how long will the interview last?

Be sure you get good directions to the interview location. If possible, drive to the interview location a few days before the interview, at the same time as the interview, to see how long it takes and to make sure you know where to go.

Face to face interviews may be one on one or a panel situation.

One on One

In this situation you meet with one person who asks you questions. In this situation a skilled interviewer can help elicit the best performance from the interviewee. This situation may be a little less formal than a panel interview. The questions are often tailored to each candidate and there is more freedom to follow up on areas that arise during the interview. It is also easier for the interviewer and interviewee to build rapport during the interview.

The disadvantages are that only one person evaluates you, so if you don't make a strong impression on this interviewer you may not move forward. If the interviewer is less skilled, that can actually create more tension. Finally, it puts more pressure on the interviewer as the only one to make the decision.

Panel Interviews

Panel interviews have always been used in academia, non profits and government agencies. Today they are becoming more common in the private sector since hiring decisions are often made by consensus rather than by one person. The advantages to panel interviews are many. It is easier to get a group of people together to meet a candidate at the same time than schedule separate interviews. There are more eyes and ears and therefore more impressions to compare when evaluating each interviewee. The group usually includes future coworkers, so you and they can see your potential as a new member of the group. Since there are more people involved in the decision making, the input from one person who doesn't support you might carry less weight.

In addition to the advantages, there are potential disadvantages for the interviewee. It is harder to build rapport with many people rather than one. Panel interviews tend to be more formal with a standard set of questions asked of each interviewee. Some of the panel members will have little to no formal interview training and may not be as skilled with the process. They can be more stressful for the interviewee. In fact, some companies use panels as they know it creates more stress for the interviewee and they believe your true nature will come through when you are under stress.

When setting up the interview be sure to ask if it is a panel interview. If possible get the names and job titles of the panelists. Do your research on these people. Your preparation process should be the same as preparing for a one on one interview. 1) Ask everyone's name and write it down. Use their names whenever possible. 2) Try to connect ideas and make references to previous answers. 3) Look at everyone. 4) Try to relax and build rapport as best you can.

See this as an opportunity for you to learn about the people you'll work with directly. How do they work as a team? Watch their nonverbal behavior. Do they seem to get along with each other? Are they using open body postures? Do they interact with each other, or stare straight at you? If someone appears unapproachable in their body language, perhaps you can focus on them a little more and overcome their resistance. They should be on their best behavior during this time. How they treat others and you now is an indication of how they'll treat you once you work there.

Effective Interview Preparation

If you want to be a successful interviewee you need to prepare yourself well. If you do the necessary work beforehand, the interview process will be less stressful.

1. Make a list of your selling points. What are your strengths, weaknesses, interests and career goals?
2. Research the company. Know what they do and any current news about the organization.
3. Study the job announcement and connect your skills to this position.
4. Anticipate likely questions and prepare answers for them. But don't try to script word for word or memorize.
5. Review your resume carefully. Interviewers may refer to your resume to generate questions.
6. Prepare answers to relevant questions about the position and company. Be a story teller. Create concise, organized responses.
7. Consider how you might respond to any illegal questions you are asked. http://jobsearchtech.about.com/od/interview/l/aa022403_3.htm
8. Keep the interviewer's perspective in mind. Focus on what you can do for them.
9. Prepare some questions to ask them. Describe your ideal candidate? How would you describe the office culture? What characteristics are necessary for success here?
10. Practice, practice, practice. Be sure to practice out loud. If possible have someone conduct mock interviews with you. The more you practice your responses the more confident you'll be during the interview.

Preparing Responses

When preparing your responses use the SAR(L) approach to develop stories that illustrate your skills in a concrete way.

Question: Tell me about a time you had to deal with conflict with a coworker

Situation: I was part of a lab team at UCI working on a project with 3 other graduate students and my advisor. My advisor gave us clear guidelines and a timeline for when he wanted things completed. One of the members was behind on his work and it was preventing the rest of us from meeting our timelines.

Action: I wanted to find out what the problem was, but I didn't want him to feel defensive. I approached him and said I noticed he seemed to be having difficulty meeting deadlines and asked if there was some way I could help. He explained that he wasn't very interested in his part of the project and felt left out of vital decisions. So I asked him what we could do differently to make him feel more a part of the team.

Results: We had a talk as a group about how we could work together more effectively and we addressed the concerns he had. After that he met deadlines and even got some things done early and made more contributions to the project that helped us meet our goals.

Learn: This experience helped me learn about my own prejudgments and behaviors. I initially assumed he was being a flake and didn't care about the project. After talking to him I realized I was wrong and was glad I wasn't too critical. Now when I have an issue with someone's performance I try not to prejudge and I use a problem solving rather than critical approach.

Preparing to Meet Objections

If you are a Ph.D. looking for work in business or industry it may be helpful to consider some of the stereotypes and objections employers have about Ph.D.'s. Some employers may share these stereotypes with you during the interview and ask questions based on them. Others might hold these views, but not directly address them. So whether these views are made explicit or remain implicit you need to be aware of them and work to counter these objections in all your application materials and during your interviews.

1. You want to start at the top
2. Ph.D.'s have book smarts, but lack street smarts
3. You lack the skills necessary for success in a business/industry job
4. You "failed out" of the academic job market now, but will go back later
5. We'll have to pay you more
6. Ph.D.'s don't talk like "normal" people
7. Ph.D.'s lack management/collaborative skills
8. Ph.D.'s won't follow directions

Sample Standard Interview Questions

Personal

Tell me about yourself.

What are your major strengths and weaknesses?

What motivates you to put forth your greatest effort?

What achievements from your past work experience are you most proud of?

Why should we hire you over another candidate?

School Background

How does your graduate school experience relate to this job?

What was the most difficult aspect of obtaining a graduate degree?

What were your favorite courses? Least favorite? Why?

If you could relive your college experiences, what would you do differently?

What extracurricular activities did you participate in and what did you learn from those experiences?

Work Experience

What prior work experience have you had and how does it relate to this job?
 How is your graduate work relevant to industry?
 How would your past supervisors describe you?
 What were your most significant accomplishments in your prior work experience?
 What did you enjoy most about your previous work experience? Least?
 Have you ever worked on a project outside your area of expertise?
 Have you ever led a research team in a formal manner?
 Have you given presentations before? What settings? How large were the groups?

Employer Knowledge

Why are you interested in this position?
 Why are you interested in this particular company?
 What can you offer us?
 What attracts you to this particular industry?
 What do you know about our company?
 Who else are you interviewing with in your job search?

Goals and Objectives

What are your short and long-term goals?
 Please describe your ideal work setting.
 What major accomplishment would you like to achieve in your life and why?
 What are your career interests?
 What rewards are most important to you in your career and why?

Sample Behavioral Interview Questions

An interviewer's biggest underlying question is "Can you do the job?" They are seeking proof that you can do what you say you can do. The most commonly used strategy for getting the proof is the behavioral interview. The theory behind behavioral interviews is that the best predictor of future performance is past performance. Behavioral interview questions require the interviewee to provide examples of times when they have performed the skills needed for the job. You need to provide specific examples to convince the interviewer you have the skills they need.

1. Describe a situation where you were able to successfully persuade someone.
2. Describe a time when you faced a stressful situation that demonstrates your coping skills.
3. Give an example of a time you used good judgment and logic in solving a problem.
4. Give me an example of a time you set a goal and achieved it.
5. Give me an example of a time you tried to do something and failed.
6. Give me an example of a time you took the initiative and led.

7. Give me an example of a time you motivated others.
8. Give me an example of a time you anticipated a problem and developed preventative measures.
9. Give me an example of a time you had to make a split second decision
10. What's your typical approach to conflict?
11. Tell me about a time you had to go above and beyond the call of duty to get a job done.
12. Tell me about a time you had too many things to do and had to prioritize.
13. Tell me about a time you had to deal with an upset customer or coworker.
14. Tell me about a time you delegated effectively.
15. Tell me about a time your active listening skills paid off.
16. Tell me about a time you had to work with a difficult person.
17. What type of supervisor works best for you?

Effective Nonverbal Behavior for Interviews

Studies show that 65-90% of the meaning of a message is carried through nonverbal channels. That means what you say is heavily influenced by how you say it. When your verbal and nonverbal messages conflict, people will believe the nonverbal. If you appear to lack confidence, sound hesitant or in anyway appear under prepared that impression will override any response you give.

When preparing for an interview you must consider your nonverbal presence. You may have the best content in your responses, but they will be ineffective if you don't deliver them well. If you have the opportunity to have yourself videotaped while practicing for your interview you can assess your nonverbal presence and work on areas that need improvement.

How to make a good first impression

The initial hiring decision is often made within the first 30-60 seconds of the interview. This means your first impression is vital to your success during the rest of the interview.

1. Remember you are "on stage" from the time you enter the building until you leave. Monitor your lobby behavior.
2. Turn off your cell phone. Don't put it on vibrate as that still makes a distracting sound.
3. Dress appropriately for the interview. Be neat, clean, pleasant smelling (avoid perfumes or colognes on interview days, have a breath mint before entering the building).
4. Bring a few copies of your resume in a folder/portfolio.
5. Make your presence known 10 minutes before the interview, but not sooner. You should arrive earlier, but don't make your presence known too soon as it can make the interviewer feel rushed.
6. Smile warmly to **everyone** you meet. You want to appear pleasant, confident and prepared.

7. Give a good, firm handshake. Practice shaking hands to be sure you get it right, not too tight or too limp.
8. Think of something to say as an introduction. It can be a simple greeting, "Thank you for taking the time to speak with me today, I look forward to learning more about this position." Or if you happen to know something about them or the business you can mention that, "I noticed your company made the best places to work list for the 5th year." Anything you can do to connect on a personal level early on will add to the interviewer's feelings of good will toward you.
9. Let them direct you where and when to sit. Try to keep a smile on your face.
10. Take a deep breath and think positively.

How to present yourself during the interview

1. Maintain a pleasant smile and facial expression as you speak.
2. Sit to the front of the chair leaning slightly forward with both feet on the floor to get into the most approachable/comfortable body position.
3. Maintain good eye contact with the interviewer. Making eye contact with the person you are talking with will calm your nerves and help you feel more confident in addition to creating a favorable impression.
4. Listen carefully to the question asked. It is O.K. to pause before answering. If you aren't sure what they're asking you can rephrase the question yourself or ask for clarification.
5. Don't be afraid to show enthusiasm and excitement for the job. Vary your tone and vocal inflection.
6. Be sure your vocal volume and speed are at appropriate levels.
7. Speak confidently about yourself and your skills. Don't hesitate when answering. Don't be self critical.
8. Use gestures and an open body posture as you speak. Lean towards the interviewer as you speak. If you are at a table keep your hands on the table, rather than in your lap when not gesturing.
9. Monitor your nervous habits, such as foot tapping, playing with hair/pens/buttons, clearing your throat, shifting posture.
10. Be yourself. Interviewers can spot insincerity and a false persona.

Responding to questions

1. Answer the questions asked.
2. Be careful to use proper grammar and the right level of formality in your speech.
3. Keep your responses between 20 seconds and 2 minutes. This will be easier if you have prepared well. If you ramble you will appear unprepared, unorganized and will annoy the interviewer.
4. Never interrupt the interviewer.
5. Try to structure your responses. "I have 2 main strengths they are..." or "When I have multiple tasks and a short time frame I use a 3 step approach..."

6. Try to use words from the job description in your response. “The ad mentioned you needed someone with good presentation skills. I’ve developed strong presentation skills through presenting and observing others who present well.”
7. If you draw a blank you can ask to come back to the question later. If you really don’t have a good answer it is better to be honest than to try to bluff your way through. When you get home after the interview to write your thank you notes you can include a response to the missed question.
8. Try to use the interviewer’s name occasionally.
9. In your responses try to show that you care about the company and position. Interviewers are looking for people who really want to work for them.
10. Summarize your main ideas at the end. Give the interviewer 2-3 key things they should remember about you that would make you a great asset to the company. Ask for the job if you really want it.

Asking Questions

During your preparation you should have prepared questions to ask the interviewer(s). Always have questions to ask to show you are prepared and interested in the position and the company. You will be evaluated based on the questions you ask. Listen carefully during the interview as some of your questions may be answered or new ones might come to mind. Never be the first one to bring up salary issues.

Always ask what the next steps are. Some companies have multiple interviews with candidates before making a hiring decision, so you might need to come back. Find out when they expect to make a decision, who will contact you and what you should expect if contacted.

Things you should never do in an interview

1. Speak negatively of any past employer or coworker.
2. Be negative in any of your responses.
3. Be rude to anyone you meet at the site.
4. Be late.
5. Be defensive.
6. Show a lack of knowledge about the company.
7. Be aggressive.
8. Be overly confident or egotistical.
9. Lie.
10. Make inappropriate comments.

11. Appear
- a. unapproachable
 - b. hard to get along with
 - c. irresponsible
 - d. lazy
 - e. prone to anger
 - f. uninterested
 - g. unstable

Interview Follow Up

Your interview follow up speaks volumes about your professionalism. You should write a Thank You note to everyone who interviewed you. This is easier if you researched the interviewer(s) before the interview or ask for business cards before you leave. If you want to leave a lasting impression, write a Thank You note to the Receptionist or Administrative Assistant who greeted you when you arrived.

It is acceptable to send email Thank You notes and you should do that the same day or day after the interview. In the Thank You note try to tailor the message to the recipient, i.e. "Bob, I appreciated your response to my question about the leadership style at Anycorp. It helped me get a sense of what it would be like to work there."

This is also an opportunity for you to add anything you forgot. If you couldn't think of a response to a question, or you thought of something after the interview ended you can address that in the letter to the interviewer. If it was a panel interview include this only in the note to the person who asked the question.

If you didn't research salary and benefits at the company before the interview now would be a good time to do that to prepare for the offer.

Self Evaluation

After the interview you should do a thorough self evaluation and identify any areas that need improvement. Every interview is an opportunity to hone your interview skills. The skills you use to increase your success in an interview situation are also transferrable to any job you get. The time you invest in analyzing yourself will pay off in the long run since this will not be the last interview you do in your career, even if you do get the job.

You should perform your self analysis as soon after the interview as possible. The longer you wait the less likely you will be to remember your strengths and

weaknesses. Overall you are exploring what you did well and where you need to improve. Ask yourself the following questions and record your responses.

1. Was I specific enough in my responses?
2. Were my examples well developed and clearly connected to the questions?
3. Did I connect with the interviewer(s)?
4. Did I effectively communicate my main ideas?
5. What information was I lacking?
6. How did the interviewer(s) perceive me as a candidate?
7. How can I improve my preparation process?
8. How can I improve my performance?
9. What did I learn?
10. If I could do the interview again what would I do differently?