



## Interview Preparation

If you've been invited for an interview, the employer has a certain degree of confidence that you can do the job, so you must prepare.

### Researching the employer:

The importance of "doing your homework" before the interview cannot be overstated. One of the first questions you may be asked is "what do you know about our company?" Unless you are able to speak intelligently about what they do, you may not be able to recover for the rest of the interview.

### What should you find out about the company?

- What products or services do they provide? Is there anything new they will be promoting soon?
- Have they received any publicity lately? What are the most important aspects of the company's history? Have they been bought? Recently merged?
- What are the current trends or issues in that industry? What kind of predictions is there for their type of business?
- Who are the key players in the company and/or industry?
- Who is their competition? How do their products and/or services compare?
- Does the company have a mission statement?
- What is the organizational culture like? Conservative? Risk taking?

### Where can you find this type of information?

- Go to one of more search engines on the internet and type in the company's name to see if they have a website. Visiting a company's website can result in a wealth of information.
- Check out the resources available at your library. Moody's Manual and Standard & Poor's Register of Corporations and two directories that provide the information on various companies. Also do a computer search by company name for any recent newspaper or magazine articles to learn of any current events involving that company.
- Call the company itself and ask if they will send literature, brochures, etc for you to review before your interview.
- Visit the following websites to learn more about the companies you are interested in:
  1. Hoovers Online (<http://www.hoovers.com>) Provides profile information on public and private companies
  2. Better Business Bureau (<http://www.bbb.org>) Find out what the BBB has to say about the company
  3. WhoWhere? EDGAR (<http://www.whowhere.com>) Company information, stock quotes, internet addresses, business activities, and press releases for a wide variety of companies)

### Developing your interviewing strategy:

You only have a limited period of time to express to the interviewer why your skills will benefit them, so be succinct, but with enough depth to be meaningful.

- Make a list of the key points you want to make sure you cover in the interview. This could include your most valuable skills, your knowledge of their market, a networking contact you made there.
- Insert these points in appropriate places during your interview to ensure the interviewer receives this important information, even if he or she does not directly ask a question, which should elicit this response.
- Develop a three to four sentence statement about yourself, which describes your best skills and attributes. Having this kind of statement prepared in advance keeps you focused on expressing your most important assets without rambling. It can also be used as a starting point to the questions "tell me about yourself."
- Think of examples that illustrate your skills. For example, if an interviewer asks "what are your strengths?" replying with "I'm a good communicator" is not very descriptive. Backing up this claim with "I would say I am a good communicator based on several experiences that I had in my last job. For instance..."
- Practice interviewing with a friend. Have a friend ask sample questions that you can respond to. Answering questions out loud, verses in your head, will bring potential problems in your responses to light before the actual interview. Also, ask your friend for feedback on your nonverbal language, eye contact, etc.

**Tips before you go:**

“Dress for Success” and plan your interview outfit. Because dress codes differ widely in today’s offices, try to find out what employees at the company generally wear. (Note: One a “casual Friday” it is still important to dress professionally)

- Get directions to the company, know how long it will take to arrive, and plan on extra time for traffic jams
- Bring extra copies of your resume, reference, list, and samples of your work (if appropriate)
- Bring a pad of paper and professional looking pen to jot down notes
- Think of questions you want to ask the interviewer. The types of questions you ask give the interviewer an important indicator of your interest level and knowledge of the company

**Interview Time**

You’ve done all your preparation and now it’s time to knock them dead in the interview. Here’s a look at the “life of the interview” and some suggestions on how to make it through successfully from beginning to end.

**In the beginning:**

- Arrive a little early. Take a few minutes to find the restroom, check your appearance, and collect your thoughts. Enter the office ready to have a great interview.
- When the interviewer greets you, smile warmly and give a firm handshake. Greet everyone you come in contact with pleasantly and politely.
- Expect a few minutes of small talk. Check your surroundings for clues on the personality of your interviewer and culture of the company.
- Be aware of your nonverbal behavior. Maintain eye contact without staring. Don’t cross your arms across your chest, and do not slouch in your chair. If you are concerned about gesticulating too much, keep your hands folded in your lap.

**Going strong:**

- Listen carefully to the questions you are asked. Take a moment to reflect on a difficult question before jumping into a response. Ask for clarification of a question if you need it.
- Be positive in all your comments about previous employers and coworkers. Even if a direct question is asked which requires you to discuss something potentially negative (i.e. “What kind of people or bosses do you have a difficult time working with?”) find a way to say what you learned from the experience, how this ultimately helped you in some way, etc. Conclude your answer on a positive note.
- Your interviewer will probably ask you open-ended questions, which require more than a yes/no answer. If your interviewer is less experienced and doesn’t ask these types of questions, be sure to elaborate on your responses to provide a complete picture of your skills.
- Give plenty of concrete examples of your abilities. If appropriate, tell a short story about how you solved a problem, took the initiative on a project, motivated coworkers, etc. A brief story that illustrates your personality and talents in action will be remembered more than a dry statement on a specific skill.
- Express your enthusiasm for the position but don’t come across as needy. A desperate candidate is not an attractive one. Even if you do really want the job, appear confident that you know you would be an asset to several organizations.
- Ask questions. It shows you are genuinely interested in the position and have taken the time to prepare for this meeting. Don’t dominate the interview, but take some responsibility for managing it. Many interviewers enjoy a candidate who can take the initiative in moving the interview along. As a rule of thumb, prepare 5-8 questions prior to the interview.
- If the interview is getting off track on unrelated tangents, subtly bring the conversation back around to your strengths and what you can offer the company.
- Remember that you are interviewing the interviewer as well. Both of you have the same goal, which is to determine if you are a good match for each other. Find out what you need to know so that you can make an informed decision if the job is offered to you.

**Wrapping it up:**

- Follow the interviewer’s lead about when the interview is coming to a close. Don’t initiate this step yourself.
- Conclude with more than “thanks for your time.” Express your interest in the company again and reinforce briefly why you are a good match for the position.
- Find out what the next step is. Do they have more candidates to interview? Will there be a second interview? When does the position start? Is there any other information you can supply to help the interviewer in his or her decision.
- Ask if you can follow up in a few days to see how the decision-making process is coming along. Thank the interviewer for meeting with you.

- Always send a thank you letter to your interviewer (s). This is yet another way to gain positive exposure. Once again, say more than “thanks.” Comment on something you learned from the interviewer if appropriate. Also reiterate in a few sentences how you can benefit the company.
- And finally, if you feel the interview did not go well, remember that interviewing is a skill like anything else that can be improved upon. Learn from the experience and move on.

### **Interview Questions:**

The following are a list of common interview questions. If you come to the interview with a clear understanding of who you are, your particular strengths and abilities, and what you want, you will be able to answer any of these questions.

1. Tell me about yourself.
2. What do you know about our company?
3. What special qualities do you bring to this job?
4. What are your greatest strengths and weaknesses?
5. What do you want to be doing in five years? Ten years?
6. What do you look for in a manager?
7. How would your coworkers and boss describe you?
8. Tell me about a difficult work situation and how you handled it.
9. Describe how you typically approach a project.
10. How do you motivate people and what is your management style?
11. What would you want to work on first if you were offered the job?
12. Why should we hire you?
13. What was your toughest job challenge and how did you deal with it?
14. Why would you want to work for us?
15. What do you think it takes to succeed here?
16. Do you prefer to work with others or on your own?
17. What do you look for in a job?
18. Why did you leave your last job?
19. How do you spend your spare time?
20. Describe your ideal work environment.
21. What motivates you?
22. What decisions are difficult for you to make?
23. How do you handle stress?
24. Tell me about the best job you ever had.
25. Do you have any questions?

### **You may want to ask your interviewer:**

Asking intelligent questions of your interviewer accomplishes two important goals. First, it shows your interest and understanding of the position and company. And secondly, it provides you with the information you need to make an informed decision about accepting an offer should you be extended one. Below are some sample questions to consider.

### **Questions about the company:**

1. What plans does the company have for future growth?
2. What specific goals do you have for this department and how does this position fit into those goals?
3. Is it common for the company to promote from within?
4. Can you describe the corporate culture there?
5. What is the company’s philosophy (regarding customer service, employee relations, quality, etc.)?

### **Questions about the market share (only if not available through library or internet research):**

1. What are the primary goods and/or services?
2. Who are your customers and/or suppliers?
3. How is this market special and what is the company’s market share?
4. What can you tell me about the competition?

### **Questions about the position:**

1. What kind of personal qualities are you seeking in candidates for this position?
2. Is this a new position? If not, why did the last person in this leave?
3. What is the typical career path for someone in this position?
4. Can you describe the reporting lines (hierarchy)?
5. What is expected of the successful candidate?

6. What is the timeframe for achieving these expectations?
7. Who will provide the training for this position?

**Closing questions:**

1. What is the decision timeframe and will there be a follow up interview?
2. Do you have sufficient information about my qualifications to make a decision, or may I provide additional information?
3. What are the next steps? (Who will contact whom and when?)

**Benefit questions:**

1. What is the benefit package?
2. What is the vacation entitlement?
3. Are relocation expenses covered

## **Don't Let Tough Questions Sabotage Your Interview**

Expect to be asked several probing, hardball questions during your next job interview. In fact, if you aren't asked a few "stress" questions, your interview probably isn't going as well as you might think.

Difficult, unsettling questions have become part of most interviewers' repertoires as they try to eliminate bad hires by screening candidates more carefully. The trick to fielding such clever queries is to realize why they're asked: primarily to gauge how fast you can think and how well you perform under pressure.

If you practice answering tricky career-related questions, you'll be more apt to respond to them confidently. The following are 10 typical stress questions and strategies on how you might answer them. Boning up before your next interview can put you ahead of other job seekers who try to wing it.

### **1. Could you tell me a little about yourself?**

This seemingly innocuous, open-ended question can be intimidating. If you aren't prepared, you won't know what to say or how long to talk, especially since the interview is just beginning.

Realize that most interviewers use this question not only to gather information, but also to assess your poise, style of delivery and communication ability. Don't launch into a mini-speech about your childhood, schooling, hobbies, early career and personal likes and dislikes. Instead, cite recent personal and professional work experiences that relate to the position you're seeking and that support your resume credentials.

"Everything you say about yourself should fit together to form a cohesive pattern that conveys the message: I have unique qualities that make me the right person to fill this position," says Kathryn Petras, co-author in Hoboken, N.J., with Ross Petras, of "The Only Job Hunting Guide You'll Ever Need" (Poseidon Press, 1989).

One caution: This question is a great opportunity to sell yourself. At this stage of the interview, however, it's best to remain concise and low-key.

### **2. Why did you leave your previous employer, or why are you leaving your present job?**

You don't need to give a long-winded answer, but don't be defensive, especially if you left due to problems with your boss or co-workers. Career experts agree that it isn't wise to air your frustrations about a previous or current job or co-workers during interviews. You may be perceived as a chronic malcontent or difficult to work with.

Perhaps the best answer is that you're seeking greater opportunity, challenges or responsibility. Don't use "more money" as a reason. It's usually obvious that if you're changing jobs, you hope to obtain a better salary.

**3. What are your greatest strengths?** This question allows you to describe your strongest attributes and skills. Be sure to mention assets that are directly related to the responsibilities of the open job. Briefly summarize your work experience and your strongest qualities and achievements.

Mitchell Berger, president of Howard-Sloan Professional Search Inc., a New York recruiting firm, advises job seekers to include four specific skills that employers value highly: self-motivation, initiative, the ability to work in a team and a willingness to work long hours. Additional qualities employers admire include good communication skills, loyalty, reliability, integrity, promptness and self-confidence.

Pause before answering so it doesn't seem like you're reciting a rehearsed list. Illustrating abstract qualities with examples from your last job also helps personalize your answer.

"Interviewers, like all people, remember examples, so be specific," says Ms. Petras. "Don't say that your greatest strength is your 'attention to goals,' and that you're 'motivated by challenges' and a 'perfectionist' unless you have memorable examples to prove it.

#### **4. What are your weaknesses?**

This question is potentially more harmful than helpful and can also intimidate applicants. Realize that most interviewers don't expect you to be perfect or reveal your true weaknesses. They're just probing for soft spots.

You may win points for honesty by admitting to a major weakness, but you'll also reduce your chances of getting hired. Conversely, if you give a flip answer, or respond with, "Well, I don't really have any weaknesses," you may be perceived as arrogant or lacking in candor or self-knowledge.

Most career advisers recommend turning this question around and presenting a personal weakness as a professional strength. "Your objective isn't to discuss your weaknesses as much as it is to discuss how and why even your shortcomings make you an ideal candidate," says Ms. Petras.

Assume that you're detail-oriented, a workaholic and that you neglect friends and family when working on important projects. You can turn these weaknesses around by saying that you're very meticulous and remain involved in projects until you've ironed out all the problems, even if it means working overtime. This way you've cast your weaknesses into positives most bosses would find irresistible.

#### **5. What type of salary do you have in mind?**

Interviewers usually ask this question to determine whether the company can afford you. If possible, defer your answer until the end of the interview when you'll know if you're a serious candidate. By answering too quickly and stating a salary that's too high or too low, you may be disqualified from consideration.

If the interviewer still insists that you name a figure, ask about the position's salary range. If you don't receive a satisfactory answer and you can't stall further, cite a figure that meets your requirements and the standards within the industry. It's better to err a little on the high side since the final offer is invariably going to be lower than you requested. Then, say that it's the job, not the salary, that interests you.

Be honest if the interviewer asks what you're currently earning, or earned previously, because the amount can be verified by W-2's.

**\*\*On the application for employment, you will want to show full transparency by disclosing your current base salary. However, under "desired salary" you should always write down "negotiable."**

#### **6. What do you like most and least about your present job?**

This question allows the interviewer to gather clues about the type of environment or corporate culture that suits you. Concentrate your answer on areas that are relevant to the position and be specific. Don't say, "I liked the atmosphere." Instead, say, "I enjoyed the camaraderie of being part of a team."

When discussing least-liked aspects of your present or previous job, try to mention an area of responsibility that's far removed from the functions of the job you're seeking. But be sure your answer indicates that you either performed the assignment well or that you learned something useful. This shows that you stick with tasks that don't particularly interest you.

## **7. Are you applying for any other jobs?**

Hardly anyone expects you to say "no" to this question in today's job market. If you do, the interviewer may think you're either naive about business conditions or not serious about job hunting. Instead, say you're exploring several openings that might fit your talents and potential.

Don't say that you're already weighing job offers, however. You may be viewed as uninterested in the job. "Interviewers are drawn to job candidates who really want to work for their company," says Mr. Berger. "Candidates who say, 'I think I'm interested,' usually lose to those who know they are and say so enthusiastically." On the other hand, don't wear your enthusiasm on your sleeve. You might inadvertently convey that you're desperate for the job and have already been turned down by other employers.

## **8. Why should we hire you?**

This question entices job seekers to really sell themselves. However, many don't realize why it's asked and answer ineffectively. It's a mistake, for example, to say what you hope to gain from a job. Instead, to borrow from a famous phrase, "Ask not what the company can do for you, ask what you can do for the company."

"The interviewer who asks you this is really probing your readiness for the job, your ability to handle it, your willingness to work hard at it and your fitness for the job," says Manan Faux, a New York-based author who has written about executive interviews.

Show your readiness by describing how your experience, career progression, qualities and achievements make you an asset. Highlight your ability by discussing your specific skills and accomplishments. Your willingness to work will be evident in your commitment to whatever challenges you undertake. To show fitness, say you're reliable, have integrity and will accommodate yourself to any difficulties the job entails.

## **9. Where do you hope to be in five years?**

The worst answer to this question is to say that you want to be president of the company or have the interviewer's position. These responses are too flip or threatening. Instead, "talk about what motivates you, especially what will motivate you on this job," says Ms. Faux.

"Without saying you want the boss's job, describe where you would like to be in your career in five years, as well as what you hope to have accomplished," she says.

Employers prefer candidates who think in terms of the future and set realistic goals. Saying that you're not sure where you want to be in five years may undermine your chances of landing the job. "Answers like this are a turnoff," says Annette Robson, professional employment manager at Unisys Corp. in Philadelphia. "I'm looking for people who know what they want to do and who believe that their goals and the company's are in sync."

## **10. Do you have any questions? Can you think of anything else you'd like to add?**

Don't say "no," or that everything has been thoroughly discussed. The interviewer isn't likely to have uncovered every critical qualification you have for the job. Even if nothing crucial was omitted, you should try to restate why you're the most logical candidate for the opening.

If you think the interviewer has any doubts, now's the time to cast your candidacy more positively. While you can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear, a bad interview can sometimes be turned around by countering any misconceptions that have emerged.

By saying you don't have any questions, the interviewer also may assume you're not interested in the job. Have some intelligent questions ready that show you're knowledgeable about the company and the opening. This presumes that you've done your homework and read articles about the company in trade magazines or professional journals.

Having a positive attitude and practicing in advance can help you to field tricky questions with ease. Your calmness under fire will show that you can handle crises on the job just as easily.

