

Preparation for the Interview

Preparation is essential when you are entering the competitive job market. There are several steps to follow:

1. **Research the company and position** with which you will be interviewing so you can ask appropriate questions. Try to obtain a more detailed job description beforehand so you can avoid any surprises at the interview (this may not be available to you in many cases). Use social media such as LinkedIn to learn about your interviewer.
2. **Practice your answers** to potential interview questions. Ask someone to ask you questions or read them by yourself and rehearse aloud – not just in your head. Do not memorize your responses; just familiarize yourself with some key points you want to make. Record yourself and listen to your responses. It is more effective if you can tell a story about yourself to get the point across – as long as you are concise.
3. **Evaluate your current skills** and level of expertise:
 - Work History
 - Strengths
 - Examples of specific past success
 - Experiences
 - Abilities
 - Challenges you experienced and overcame
4. **Determine any “transferable skills.”** What are the skills in your former jobs that you can use in the new position?
 - Money Management
 - Meeting Deadlines
 - Problem Solving
 - Organizing/Managing things or procedures
 - Managing other people directly or indirectly
 - Training
 - Assembling
 - Writing
 - Computer usage (Mac and/or PC, software)
 - Computer programming
 - Customer Service
 - Meal preparation
 - Report writing

5. **Know your resume** in detail. If something is not on your resume, don't talk about it; your credibility may be questioned.
6. **Know directions and other basics.** Make sure you know exactly where you are going and how to get to the location. When you schedule the interview, ask for the following information: parking, directions, how many people you will be meeting, and with whom you are meeting.
7. **Attend the interview well rested.**
8. **Learn about the workplace culture** to help you decide the appropriate attire for an interview. It's okay to ask about appropriate dress when you schedule. It's preferable to be slightly overdressed than underdressed. Make sure your style of dress is appropriate for the job position.
9. **Ask the interviewer questions** about the company and the position at the end of the interview (samples at the end of this document).
10. **Send thank-you** notes.

What to Wear: Appropriate Dress for the Interview

Please note that the correct clothing to wear will depend, in part, on the organization. Corporate offices will be more formal and other organizations may be less so.

Men: Suit or dress pants with button-down shirt and jacket, or (if casual) dressy khaki pants and a nice button-down shirt; polished shoes and appropriate socks

Women: Pants suit, skirt suit, coordinated separates with jacket, or work dress

Avoid:

- Loud Colors
- Heavy perfume/cologne
- Sneakers, sandals, or open-toed shoes
- Short skirts
- Wild hairstyles – no fashion statements
- Head dressings except for religious purposes
- Excessive make-up
- Clanging excessive jewelry (keep it modest)
- Displaying of tattoos or unusual body piercings; be aware that in certain customer service positions, piercings and related jewelry may be prohibited for safety and/or company branding reasons

Bring a brief case, messenger bag, or nice satchel large enough to hold paper, pens, resumes, and references. Hold the bag on your left side so you can easily shake hands.

Once you are seated, it is fine to take brief notes to help you remember specific things you want to ask about at the end of the interview. Focus on the interviewer, not your note-taking.

Do not chew gum, eat, or bring food and/or drinks (coffee or other) into an interview. If you are not offered water, feel free to ask for a glass of water so you have it if you need it.

What to Expect the Day of the Interview

Arrive early (10-15 minutes). Make sure you know where you are going! Get all specific directions ahead of time and be sure you allow time to park or walk from public transportation. Take time to check your appearance in the restroom before the interview, and use the restroom if needed.

Always bring extra hard copies of resumes and reference sheets. You never know who else may want to meet you last minute – such as the director of the department, potential co-workers, CEO, etc.

Assume someone is watching you at all times. Body language, behavior, and how you choose to use your time while you are waiting are all measures that reflect your ability to work in that organization.

Non-verbal Communication:

- Shake hands firmly
- Make direct eye contact with everyone
- Sit up in your chair; don't slouch
- Smile
- Speak clearly and concisely
- Avoid gum chewing
- Turn off your cell phone
- Use active listening
- Do not interrupt
- Avoid folding or crossing your arms

Verbal Communication:

- Avoid slang, profanity, and casual speech, e.g., "I was workin' there for two years."
- Use proper English, e.g., "Yes" vs. "Yeah," "Hello" vs. "Hey"
- Remember manners, e.g., "Please," "Thank you"
- Use correct grammar, e.g., "My team and I" vs. "Me and my team"
- Avoid religious comments, e.g., "God Bless," "Have a blessed day"

Interviews are highly subjective – Make every effort to "connect" with the interviewer.

The interviewer has probably already spoken to a range of candidates and has more to meet after you.

Listen to the complete question before you answer it.

Be personable and respond to the question without going off on long tangents – interviewers are almost always very busy people.

Keep in mind that – outside of the human resources person or recruiter – many hiring managers are not that experienced at interviewing. You need to help them understand who you are and be memorable – in a good way!

What can you do to be memorable? Tell stories about yourself that respond to questions. For each of the questions in this handout, develop those true stories about yourself in a way that showcases your skills, knowledge, thought process, and enthusiasm.

The interviewer is looking for three key things:

1. If and how you will fit into the organization and its culture as a person
2. Ability and skills to do the job
3. Willingness to do the job

Interview Follow-Up

You must follow up with a thank-you note and acknowledge the interview and your interest in the position. Done well, this is a great way to make a great final impression!

- Obtain the correct titles and names of all the people who interviewed you. (Ideally, do get each person's business card.)
- Write individual thank-you notes or letters within 24 hours to each person who interviewed you.
- Email thank-you notes are fine – as long as you also send a handwritten note. Again, this can make a big impression because it is easy to send an email while writing a note and mailing it takes more effort.
- Vary each thank-you letter a bit in case recipients compare notes (and they will). Say something specific about each individual conversation to show you were listening.

Interview Questions

The basic goals are:

- Answer the question clearly
- Give specific examples
- Say what you learned
- Summarize your response

Keep your answers positive and don't ramble.

Be specific – if you leave room for the interviewer to guess, it won't help you. This could be a reason for the interviewer to think you are hiding something or just don't have the skills, knowledge, etc. s/he needs.

Here are some typical questions that interviewers ask. Suggested ideas for how to respond follow in the next section.

GENERAL & OPEN/CLOSE QUESTIONS

- Tell me about yourself. (Don't ramble, don't start from birth – tell your story as it applies to the job.)
- What particular skills and/or experiences make you the best match for this position?
- Where do you see this position within the context of your overall career path and goals?
- Who was the best boss you ever had and why?
- Who was the worst boss you ever had and why?
- What are your top 2-3 greatest strengths? What about weaknesses or areas for improvement?
- Tell me about a conflict you have had in a work environment and how you resolved it?
- Tell me about your present or last job. Why did you choose it? Why did you/do you want to leave?
- What was your primary contribution/achievement in your last or current position? Biggest challenge?
- What are your short-term and long-term career goals?
- What are some positive aspects of your last employment/employer? What are some negative aspects?
- After learning about this opportunity, what made you take the next step and apply for the job?
- Describe a situation in which you were able to successfully persuade someone to change their mind about an issue.
- Describe a time when you were faced with a stressful situation that demonstrated your coping skills.

- Give me a specific example of a time when you used good judgment and logic in solving a problem.
- Give me an example of a time when you set a big goal and how you achieved it.
- Give me a specific example of a time when you had to conform to a policy or procedure with which you did not agree. How did you handle it?
- Tell me anything else you would like us to know about you that will aid us in making our decision.
- What questions would you like to ask me?

CUSTOMER SERVICE QUESTIONS

- Describe for me a time when you went out of your way to give great service to a customer.
- Tell me about a time when you asked for feedback on your customer service skills from your manager or co-worker and then used that response to improve your work.
- Describe a time when you dealt with a difficult guest/client-relations problem. How? What was the outcome? What did you learn?
- Tell me about a time when you knew that your customer might not get what he or she needed on time. How did you handle this?
- Tell me about a time when you had to say “no” to a customer because it was against company policy.
- Tell me about a time when you had trouble working with a difficult or demanding customer. How did you handle this?
- Tell me about a situation in which you “lost it” or did not do your best with a customer. What did you do about this?
- Describe a time when you exceeded a customer’s expectations.
- Describe a time when you lost a customer. What would you do differently? Why?
- How would you define guest/client/customer satisfaction?
- Give an example something you do to build repeat business with a customer.
- What types of behaviors do you find most annoying or frustrating in a client/customer? How do you handle those behaviors?

TEAMWORK QUESTIONS

- Tell me about a time when you were a part of a great team. What was your role and how did you contribute to the team’s success?
- We often work in teams. Tell me about a time when you worked on a team project that failed. Why do you think it failed?
- Tell me about a time when you needed to work as part of a team to satisfy a client or resolve an issue.
- When groups work together, conflict can occur. Tell me about a time that conflict occurred in one of your work groups and how you responded.
- Tell me about a time you pitched in to help a team member finish a project even though it “wasn’t your job.” What was the result?

Sample Answers to Typical Questions

1. What is your greatest strength?

Samples of Strengths:

- Computer skills
- Foreign language skills
- Planning skills
- Writing skills
- Ability to stay calm & focused under pressure
- Goal oriented – once I make a decision to accomplish something it gets done well.
- Ability to multi-task, detail-oriented
- “Soft” strengths include traits such as curiosity, collaborative approach to working with others, communication, management of others, and similar

Short Story Technique Exercise

- Identify 5-10 strengths – things that you are good at that make you stand out from the competition.
- Circle 3 strengths that would contribute most to the position you are seeking.
- Think of examples of these strengths in your previous jobs, volunteer activities, internships, and life.
- Develop a short story from those experiences to demonstrate one of your strengths.

Answer: Most people who know me would say that I am very organized.

Example: In my last job at Macy’s, for example, I was put in charge of the annual inventory-restocking process for my department.

Learned: I learned quite a bit about inventory management using a database program xyz. (These are also transferable skills.)

2. What are your major weaknesses?

State a non-damaging weakness that you turned around. Put a positive spin on your response, e.g., “I used to procrastinate, and now I”

Talk about skills and knowledge you “want to improve” on instead of using the word “weakness.”

Don’t be afraid to use appropriate humor: “Well, I have a big weakness for chocolate! Actually, I’d say the area I most need to improve on involves my spreadsheet skills.”

3. Tell me about yourself

Remember, this is a job interview, not a psychological or personal interview. The interviewer is interested in the information about you that relates to your qualifications for employment, such as education, work experiences and extracurricular activities.

Do not ramble and be aware of non-verbal cues from the interviewer. Is s/he bored, looking around, focusing on paperwork . . . if you see this happening, you've gone off track and need to wrap it up.

4. What do you do best? Three examples, in story form**5. Best/worst boss?**

Be careful not to be vindictive. Talk about behaviors, not personalities and remember that negatives statements may reflect on you. Talk about why you thrived under a boss ("I got to try lots of new things." "She really mentored me and helped me learn how to make better decisions.") and what bothered you ("He checked on me so often that it interrupted my work." "My boss liked to communicate only by email, and I like to sit down with my boss every couple weeks to catch up. I found it hard to get guidance and discuss work issues just by email.")

6. What are some examples of where you faced and overcame adversity? Three examples, in story form**7. What are your long term goals or plans for the future?**

This is just asking if you can be depended on and will you stay for a good amount of time. Also, your answer shows if you are interested in the industry or if it is "just a job."

8. Why should I hire you?

Recap your key points: "I have what it takes to.....(responsibilities), and I've really enjoyed our conversation. I think I'd be a great fit for this company." Mention those transferable skills. Stress what you have to offer the employer, not how nice it would be to work there or what you want from the employer.

9. Why do you want to work for here?

You must have an answer prepared ahead of time. A common pet peeve of interviewers is a poor response to this question. Research the employer/department before your interview. If you say, "I don't know much about the company . . ." – you've probably lost out on the job right then.

10. Why did you leave your last job?

You were fired – be as clear as possible and state why. If you don't, they think you are hiding something. Tell the truth and don't say anything negative about the former employer. Try to put a positive spin on it.

Sample answer: "I was very successful at Best Buy and I was training to be a shift supervisor. On my shift, money was stolen out of an unlocked box in the office and after an investigation, they could not pinpoint anyone. They fired three of us.

I was pretty down on myself, but I quickly used it as motivation to begin a career in a more stable industry."

Another example: "I was desperate for work and took the wrong job without looking around the corner. I won't make that mistake again. I'd prefer an environment that is congenial, structured, and team-oriented, where my best talents can shine and make a substantial contribution."

OR: "After thinking about why I left, I realize I should have done some things differently. That job was a learning experience and I think I'm wiser now. I'd like the chance to prove that to you."

Illegal questions: Employers Cannot Ask About These Topics

- Marital status (married/single, kids/no kids, etc.)
- Race/National Origin/Ethnicity
- Physical Disabilities
- Age
- Religion
- Sexual Orientation
- Gender
- Specific questions about transportation unless a certain type of vehicle is required for the job (Do you have a car?)

Questions to Ask at the End of the Interview

You must ask questions at the end of an interview. At the very least, find out what the next step in the process will be. It is much better to have at least 4-5 substantive questions.

And, it's okay and useful to ask the same questions to several interviewers so you can compare their answers. Here are some good questions for you, the applicant.

- Why is this job open?
- Would I be reporting to you or someone else? Who? Will I get to meet him/her?
- How long have you worked here and what do you like about working here?
- What do you think will be the biggest challenge for the new incoming person in this position?
- What is a typical day for this position?
- I saw on the company website that . . ., can you tell me more about that?
- What are the plans for growth of the company?
- What type of training would I receive if you hired me?
- What are the opportunities for growth?
- Where are you in the interviewing process? What is the next step?
- When will I hear from you about your decision?
- Would you like my references?