

## PREPARING FOR INTERVIEWS

Interviews serve two purposes. For the prospective employer the interview is an opportunity to gather information about a candidate and to assess the “fit” between the candidate and the position. For you -- the candidate -- the interview is an opportunity to highlight your skills, abilities, personal qualities, and enthusiasm for the position.

### “WHAT ARE EMPLOYERS *REALLY* TRYING TO ASSESS?”

As they gather information about a candidate, employers rely heavily on interviews to answer three key questions.

#### **Does this candidate have the skills and abilities needed to do the job effectively?**

Convincing an employer that you possess these skills and abilities requires that you have more than just a superficial understanding of the job. Research the position through online resources including the employer’s website, Occupational Outlook Handbook as well as search engines. Your next step is to conduct informational interviews with individuals who are employed in this field. These professionals will be able to provide first hand information about the responsibilities and requirements of the position. Once you have an understanding of these expectations, review your resume and identify specific activities, work experiences, or classes that have allowed you to develop and *demonstrate* the skills, abilities, or specialized knowledge being sought.

#### **Does this candidate possess the enthusiasm and work ethic needed to do what will be expected?**

In answering this question, employers are focusing not so much on your skills and abilities, but on your personal qualities and your character.

Using online resources to research the employer and industry will allow you to demonstrate your knowledge of the position and industry *as well as* your investment in the interview process. Highlighting accomplishments or experiences that were especially challenging and that required a great deal of perseverance will provide the employer with examples of your high energy level, diligence, and ability to commit to a goal.

#### **Will this candidate be a cooperative team player and fit in well with our organization?**

Once an employer is confident that you possess the ability, enthusiasm and work ethic for a position the last question focuses more on your personality and interpersonal skills. One way to prepare for this part of the interview is to request honest feedback about how you come across to others from trusted supervisors and peers. Essentially the employer is trying to find out what it would be like to work with you on a daily basis.

### ”I HEAR THAT FIRST IMPRESSIONS ARE EVERYTHING. WHAT DO I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT WARDROBE AND APPEARANCE?”

First impressions may not be “*everything*”, but before you’ve even said a word, the employer will have developed an impression of you based on your appearance. You can’t afford to have that initial impression to be anything less than positive.

Proper attire for an interview for both men and women typically consists of well-tailored conservative business suits in dark blues or grays. Pair your suit with a clean, pressed shirt or blouse in white or blue and well-polished dress shoes. Men should wear a conservative tie. It is also recommended that men

should be clean shaven and women should avoid excessive make-up. All candidates should avoid excessive jewelry and should be neat, well-groomed and avoid using cologne or perfume.

You need not bring a briefcase, but we suggest that you bring a simple leather portfolio with a notepad, a pen, and a few extra copies of your resume. Be aware of your body language. Maintain eye contact and offer a firm handshake.

### “WHAT QUESTIONS AM I LIKELY TO ENCOUNTER?”

Most interviews will include some variation of these five basic questions.

1. Why are you interested in this position?
2. Why should we hire you?
3. Why do you want to work in this organization?
4. What makes you think you can do this job?
5. What motivates you?

Use Google to obtain a list of commonly asked interview questions as well as industry specific interview questions. Practice your response to these questions!

### “BEHAVIORAL INTERVIEWS”

Behavioral Interviewing, or Structured Behavioral Interviewing, is by design a more systematic and standardized process of evaluating candidates than is typical of the “traditional” interview. It is being used more routinely and by more organizations with the primary intent of increasing their success rates in hiring. The foundation of this kind of interview is the simple but important axiom that the best predictor of future (work) performance is past performance in a similar circumstance. Therefore, the questions that are asked of you will tend to be behaviorally focused, and evocative of how you responded to a variety of specific personal and interpersonal situations and the results of the actions you took in each situation.

### “SO WHAT KINDS OF QUESTIONS SHOULD I EXPECT?”

Behavioral interviews are designed to assess your “real” ability or skill level in functioning in any number of work related activities by delving into how you functioned in your past situations. As with any sort of interview, there are a number of common behavioral “themes” or “performance dimensions” that most recruiters are likely to assess. These include (but are not limited to) leadership, interpersonal, communication, multi-tasking, management and cognitive skills, transition ability (e.g., personal flexibility, tolerance for ambiguity), motivation, decisiveness and commitment. The kinds of inquiries you’d hear from a recruiter might resemble the following:

- What is your biggest achievement? What did you do to contribute to that achievement?
- Cite an example of when you were faced with an unpleasant task. How did you go about facing it?
- Give me the most recent example of a conflict you had with a coworker or a supervisor. How did you handle it?
- Describe a situation in which you had to use your communication skills in order to make an important point.
- Tell me about a time when you used a persuasive argument to help someone or a group see things from a different perspective? How did you do it?
- Share an example of an important personal goal and how you accomplished it.
- Have you ever had too many different tasks to complete at the same time? What was your style in managing these?
- We’ve all had times when we felt overwhelmed by a project. Give me an example of when this happened to you. How did you react to the situation?

## “WHAT’S THE BEST WAY TO ANSWER THESE QUESTIONS”

Use the **STAR** method to respond to behavioral questions:

- S**=Describe the **Situation**
- T**= Describe the **Task** which needed to be accomplished
- A**=Describe the **Action** which you took
- R**= Describe the **Result**

For any job interview, begin with an analysis of what you believe to be the most important skills, abilities, and personal qualities needed to successfully fulfill the various responsibilities of the position. Once identified, think carefully about any kind of “working” experience that you’ve had that required you to use these skills, what courses of action or strategies you used to accomplish the tasks, and what positive results came about from your diligence. It is often the case that an interviewer will seek a relatively high level of detail in your responses (e.g., the conversation you had, the mood of the person you were talking to, your specific thought processes at the time of action, etc.). Some behavioral questions are complex and require a multifaceted response, so take your time in constructing your answers. Don’t worry about pausing during the interview to do so, as recruiters will expect you to give adequate thought to your responses. Don’t be put off by the fact that the interviewer may be taking voluminous notes as you talk. It is common for recruiters to have to objectively rate you based on exacting measures of your specific responses.

## “OKAY. IT’S MY TURN. WHAT KINDS OF QUESTIONS SHOULD I BE ASKING?”

During most interview employers will ask, “Do you have any questions?” Prepare three to five questions that demonstrate your research about the organization. .

You may wish to inquire about some of the following:

- Information from the organization’s web site
- Information about the organization’s mission statement
- Information gained from articles written about this organization
- The length and content of a training program
- The department’s long term goals (and the role planned for you in meeting those goals)
- The career path of your predecessor(s) in the position

If your 3-5 questions have been answered by others but you are given the chance in another interview to ask questions, re-use your initial questions. Not only might this interviewer have a different response but you should always have questions for each interviewer.

Do not ask questions about salary, vacations, and benefits. The employer will provide ample opportunity to learn about these issues once an offer has been extended.

**Don’t leave an interview without letting interviewer know how interested you are or without asking for the job. If you want the job make sure that you communicate this to the employer!**

## “WHAT ABOUT SECOND INTERVIEWS?”

Initial interviews are usually screening interviews and are often conducted by individuals who have the ability to eliminate you from the selection process, but not the power to hire you. Decisions to hire a candidate are usually not made until after a second or third interview.

A second interview often involves a full day of interviews with several staff members at the organization's office. You can plan on meeting your prospective supervisor, the departmental and/or district manager, other managers, and prospective co-workers. Typically, at least one meal will be included on the agenda. Keep in mind that you will not necessarily know who the "decision maker" is during your day of interviews, so it is important that you put forth your best effort in each interview. In most cases, once you have been invited for a second or final interview the employer is fairly confident that you can do the job. The final interview provides the employer and candidate an opportunity to assess environmental fit.

### "HOW SHOULD I FOLLOW UP AFTER AN INTERVIEW?"

Immediately after each interview send a thank you note to the individual(s) who interviewed you. The note should be brief. It may be e-mailed, hand-written or typed on letter quality bond paper and, ideally, should be received within two or three days of the interview. In writing such a note, you will have an opportunity to highlight or comment on topics which were discussed in the interview and will be able to reinforce your interest in the position. You may also wish to send a brief thank you note to any members of support staff (secretaries, receptionists) in the organization that were especially helpful to you during the selection process. Each note should differ by referring to something specific you discussed in the interview.

Follow the interviewers' instructions regarding follow-up. If the recruiter doesn't indicate when you should expect to hear from the organization, it is appropriate to ask. If you do not hear from the employer after the time period indicated, call or email your contact to express your continued interest in the position.

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