

Interviewing

How to Prepare for an Interview

Preparing for your first interview can be a little nerve-racking. You'll either have no idea what to expect, or you allow your imagination to get the best of you and you wake up in a cold sweat from a series of worst-case scenario nightmares where you end up tripping over your chair, ripping the suit that you borrowed, insulting your interviewer and confessing to that shop-lifting incident when you were five. The good news is that it doesn't have to be this way.

Although you can never predict the exact questions that an interviewer will ask you, you can prepare yourself for their best shot by getting into the interviewer's head. One way to accomplish this is by looking at the results from a 1999 survey of employers done by the National Association for Colleges and Employers (NACE) to discover what the top characteristics they look for in job candidates.

Take a look at the Top 10 Personal Characteristics, start taking a personal inventory and see how you measure up in these categories. Think of one or two examples of how you have proven yourself in these areas in the past and be thoughtful about how these characteristics would be valuable in the work place environment that you are hoping to get in to.

What Happens During the Interview?

The interviewing process can be scary if you don't know what to expect. To make it easier on you, keep in mind that all interviews fit a general pattern. The typical interview will last 30 minutes, although some may be longer. A typical structure is as follows:

- Five minutes: greeting and small talk
- Fifteen minutes: a mutual discussion of your background and credentials as they relate to the needs of the employer
- Five minutes: you have an opportunity to ask questions
- Five minutes: wrap-up/ discuss next steps in the process

As you can see, there is not a lot of time to state your case. The employer may try to do most of the talking. When you do respond to questions or ask your own, your statements should be concise and organized. But don't be too brief. This could be your last chance to market yourself to the employer!

The Greeting, First Impressions and Small Talk

Monster.com's Interviewing Coach, Carole Martin advises that the typical interview starts before you even get into the inner sanctum. It's a good idea to arrive at least 15 minutes early. You can use the time to relax, organize your thoughts, and even wipe your sweaty palms with a handkerchief, if necessary. The recruiter begins to evaluate you the minute you are identified and

continues to evaluate you in every way. For example, he or she is analyzing the way you shake their hand upon being introduced. Be firm, it shows confidence. Don't be afraid to extend your hand first. This shows assertiveness.

First Impressions

A study conducted by a University of Toledo psychology professor, concluded that the first 30 seconds make or break the connection between two people when they meet for the first time. In other words, the next time you're on an interview, the interviewer may be drawing conclusions about you before you've even gotten to the real interview!

Here are some tips to ensure your first impression is a positive one:

Appearance counts. When you look good, you feel good. Make sure you look groomed and neat. If you were a book, would someone want to read more? Your clothes and accessories should be conservative and neutral, rather than wild and loud. Your clothes are your packaging and should not take attention away from the product.

Nonverbal communication sometimes conveys a stronger message than verbal communication. According to one UCLA study, 93 percent of a person's communication effectiveness is determined by nonverbal communication. When you slouch, whether sitting or standing, you're saying volumes about you and your confidence level. Sit up straight -- like your mother always told you to. When you stand, make yourself as tall as possible: shoulders back and head held high. Eye contact and smiles can indicate a confident and upbeat attitude. You will notice that many job postings ask for enthusiasm and energy. This is a good opportunity to demonstrate your social and interpersonal skills as well as your excitement about the opportunity for which you're interviewing.

Once again, the handshake sends a strong tactile message. Whether your hands are hot and sweaty or cold and clammy, you can try some tricks to control the temperature. To cool your hands, try running cold water on the insides of your wrists. Use hot water if your hands are cool. If you have particularly sweaty hands, try using a deodorant gel (antiperspirant) as a lotion. Your voice and the volume of your speech convey a strong impression.

Whether the interview's over the phone or face-to-face, you should speak with enthusiasm and energy. Use a firm voice to demonstrate your confidence. Your vocabulary reveals your communication skills and ability to interact with people, especially ones you've not met before. The words you choose will say something about you, as well as your knowledge of the industry. It is important to use "their" words and talk "their" talk.

Are you prepared for Small Talk?

Many recruiters will begin the interview with some small talk. Topics may range from the current weather outside to favorite vacation spots and will rarely focus on anything that brings out your relevant experience. Nonetheless, you are still being evaluated.

Recruiters are trained to evaluate candidates on many different points. They may be judging how well you communicate on an informal basis. Smile, contribute and show interest in the topic, regardless of whether or not you truly care.

Strategy for Discussing Your Credentials

The main part of the interview starts when the recruiter begins discussing the organization and the position for which you are interviewing. This will be followed by some questions regarding your past experiences.

Many times recruiters will ask why you chose the major you did or what your career goals are. These questions are designed to determine your goal direction. Employers seek people who have direction and motivation. This can be demonstrated by your answers to these innocent-sounding questions. It's a good idea to think about what the recruiter is trying to find out about you by asking certain questions. For example, if you are asked to discuss a time when you had a conflict with a colleague, keep in mind that the recruiter is looking for someone who is confident about his or her own beliefs, but open to other people's ideas as well. Most of the time, he or she is looking for collaboration and compromise. Give them a specific example and walk them through the situation, step by step. A good story telling technique is a huge plus when interviewing because it keeps the recruiter interested. So give only the essential background information and get to the point!

As the interview turns to talk about your qualifications, be prepared to deal with aspects of your background that could be construed as negative, i.e., low grade point average, no participation in outside activities, no related work experience. It is up to you to convince the recruiter that although these points appear negative, positive attributes can be found in them. A low GPA could stem from having to fully support yourself through college; you might have no related work experience, but plenty of experience that shows you to be a loyal and valued employee.

It's Your Turn to Ask Questions

When the recruiter asks, "Do you have any questions for me?" it's important to have a few ready. Dr. C. Randall Powell, author of *Career Planning Today*, suggests some excellent strategies for dealing with this issue. He says questions should elicit positive responses from the employer. Also, the questions should bring out your interest in and knowledge of the organization. Show the recruiter that you have done your homework.

By asking intelligent, well-thought-out questions, you show the employer you are serious about the organization and need more information.

Wrap Up

The interview isn't over until you walk out the door. The conclusion of the interview usually lasts five minutes and is very important. During this time the recruiter is assessing your overall performance.

It is important to remain enthusiastic and courteous. Often the conclusion of the interview is indicated when the recruiter stands up. However, if you feel the interview has reached its conclusion, feel free to stand up first.

Shake the recruiter's hand and thank him or her for considering you. Being forthright is a quality that most employers will respect, indicating that you feel you have presented your case and the decision is now up to the employer.

Overall - Expect the Unexpected

During the interview, you may be asked some unusual questions. Don't act too surprised. Many times questions are asked simply to see how you react. For example, surprise questions could range from, "Tell me a joke" to "What time period would you like to have lived in?" These are not the kind of questions for which you can prepare in advance so don't spend time worrying about them in advance. Stay cool, think and give an honest answer. Your reaction time and the response you give will be evaluated by the employer, but again, there's no way to anticipate questions like these. While these questions are not always used, they are intended to force you to react under some stress and pressure.

Evaluations Made by Recruiters

The employer will be observing and evaluating you during the interview. Erwin S. Stanton, author of *Successful Personnel Recruiting and Selection*, indicates some evaluations made by the employer during the interview include:

1. How mentally alert and responsive is the job candidate?
2. Is the applicant able to draw proper inferences and conclusions during the course of the interview?
3. Does the applicant demonstrate a degree of intellectual depth when communicating, or is his/her thinking shallow and lacking depth?
4. Has the candidate used good judgment and common sense regarding life planning up to this point?
5. What is applicant's capacity for problem-solving activities?
6. How well does candidate respond to stress and pressure?

Make sure your answers will show you in a positive light when using this evaluation criteria.

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