

the interview

Preparation, practice and a touch of salesmanship will take you a long way toward landing your dream job.

Interview Preparation: The Key to Success

Going to an interview without preparation is similar to playing in the game of the year without practice. You can probably make it through, but will the outcome be a win? The interview process is designed to identify candidates who are capable of doing the work or learning it quickly; are willing and eager to do the job; need little supervision or motivation; and are friendly and easy to get along with. If you do the work to prepare beforehand, you can put yourself in the best possible position to succeed.

Step 1

Research the organization. Effective interview preparation begins with thorough research on the company and industry you are targeting. Go beyond the annual report and the company's website. Check Cowles Library or online resources for articles about the industry or the specific firm in business publications, newspapers and professional journals.

Call the company to find out as much as possible about the way it does business and to request any publications it will share. Talk with people who work for the organization. This research will help you prepare for the interview and also help you decide whether it's the type of organization you want to work for.

Step 2

Know and understand the position for which you are applying. The more you know about the position and all it entails, the better prepared you will be. Ask for a copy of the position description before the interview. This will allow you to provide relevant, detailed examples of your work and educational history, matching your skills with those that are necessary to succeed in the position for which you are applying.

Step 3

Know yourself and how you can help the company. Ask yourself:

- What can I do for this company?
(What are my strengths?)

- What could get in the way of success?
(What are my weaknesses?)
- What motivates me to succeed or to do my best?
(Money, prestige, promotions?)
- What do I really like/want to do?
- What values do I have that I am not willing to compromise? (Family, lifestyle, location?)

This process of researching firms and thinking about your goals and objectives can be an interesting, enlightening experience.

The Telephone Interview

A telephone interview can be one of the most uncomfortable pieces of the job-seeking puzzle. The telephone interview, also known as the screening interview, is used increasingly by companies to maximize the recruiter's time and save on travel expenses. The purpose of the interview is to eliminate candidates who are not qualified and to reduce the number of face-to-face interviews.

Your goal in a telephone interview is to be invited for a personal interview. Some tips for telephone interviews:

1. Be prepared by having your résumé, any interview notes and company research organized by the phone.
2. Wear professional attire if it will help you be more focused.
3. Practice making short, concise answers to possible questions. Short, succinct sentences are more easily understood over the phone. Because you can't see the interviewer, it's easy to launch into long, drawn-out answers and not know you have lost their interest.
4. Smile. You will be amazed at how this changes your tone of voice.
5. Do not eat, smoke, drink or do anything that would hinder your speech. Sit or stand while talking, as you are more likely to conduct yourself in a business-like manner.
6. Avoid discussion about potential compensation, company benefits and problems at your current employer in this initial screening interview.
7. Take notes. Have a glass of water handy in case your mouth gets dry.

Sell Yourself — You Have a Lot to Offer

A survey of recent college graduates showed that six out of ten people don't get the job they want because they don't sell themselves during the interview process. Below are suggestions from some of those graduates on how to sell yourself effectively.

- **Lead with professional highlights.** Most interviews begin with the question, "Tell me about yourself." Talk about your accomplishments, skills and abilities — NOT your childhood, family, hobbies or personal interests.
- **Show some enthusiasm,** and participate in the conversation. Use examples or stories to explain what you mean. Look the manager in the eye. Sit on the edge of your seat. Use your hands to illustrate what you mean. Smile. Add humor. Ask questions about the organization.
- **Show what you can do for the company.** You know what skills the manager is looking for, so explain how you can help get the job done.
- **Show that you are a team player.** Managers are leery of people who always say, "I did this ..." When possible, say, "We did this ..."
- **Put together a closing statement.** When the interview is coming to a close, summarize your strengths. Explain why you should be hired. Ask for the job.

Know What Employers Want

Through a variety of questions and/or situations presented during a job interview, managers try to determine whether the qualified candidate has many of the common attributes that are linked to successful performers.

The following list from a National Association of Colleges and Employers Survey outlines the top 10 qualities employers seek.

- Communication skills (verbal and written)
- Strong work ethic
- Teamwork skills
- Initiative
- Analytical skills
- Computer skills
- Flexibility/adaptability
- Interpersonal skills
- Problem-solving skills
- Technical skills

In your past work, leadership or internship experience, which of these skills have you used effectively? Practice communicating to a prospective employer how these strengths make you the ideal candidate for the position.

Dress for Success

For professional jobs, a business suit is the standard attire. If possible, wear your suit a few times and have it cleaned once before you interview. New clothes you are not truly comfortable in can contribute to nervousness. You can wear a different blouse/shirt and accessories if you need some variety for subsequent interviews.

Play it safe and be conservative about your hairstyle, shoes, jewelry and cologne. While some employers may be more liberal about acceptable dress than others, don't risk offending someone who has the power to offer you a job. Once you are hired, you will have plenty of time to observe how flexible your new employer is about dress codes and to express your individuality within acceptable limits.

Set Your Watch

Be on time for the interview. Make sure you have directions and know where parking is available. Plan to arrive about 15 minutes early. Check in with the interviewer or the assistant about 10 minutes prior to your scheduled appointment. Use your waiting time to check your appearance, review the questions and answers you have prepared, and read any company literature that may be on display. Take advantage of this time to get a feel for the work environment by observing the surroundings and interactions among staff.

Common Interview Questions

Tell me about yourself.

Prepare a 30- to 60-second "infomercial" packed with information that the interviewer would find interesting — your education, work experience and reasons you are interested in the position.

What do you plan to do five years from now?

Suggest that you will have advanced beyond your current stage and that you are looking forward to new challenges, which you should describe as specifically as possible.

Why did you attend Drake University?

State your reasons for your decision, such as size, available major, location and/or cost.

Why did you major in _____?

Relate your major to your professional interests and skills.

What are your greatest strengths/weaknesses?

Match one or two strengths to the job requirements. Be honest about your weaknesses, but turn a negative into a positive. For example: "In school I procrastinated at times. But I enjoyed working under the resulting pressure, and I always met deadlines." Be sure to emphasize how you confront what you find difficult more than the difficulty itself.

Why do you want to work for us?

Describe how you can make a contribution to meeting company goals.

Tell me about your previous job experience.

Be specific in terms of your accomplishments in summer, part-time or full-time jobs. Include volunteer or extracurricular experiences and other activities that relate to the situation that you are discussing.

Why should we hire you?

Match the benefits from your education, skills and experience to the job requirements.

What are your salary requirements?

Answer with the question, "What is the salary range for this position?" You should have a range in mind based on what other graduates in similar positions are starting at and your personal budget.

Is there anything more you would like to know?

Use this opportunity to clarify any issues, ask questions that you have prepared and to make any points that may not have been discussed.

Behavioral or Situational Interviews

The norm in interviewing is the behavioral or situational interview, because past performance may be the best predictor of future job success. Successful behavioral/situational interviewing requires slightly different preparation techniques. You need to be prepared to answer the questions with stories and examples that demonstrate your assets, skills and qualifications for the position. Some examples of questions are:

- Give examples from school, work or campus activities that demonstrate you are a self-starter.
- Tell us about a time in the past year when you had to deal with a difficult team member and describe what you did.
- Describe a time when you were under a lot of stress and how you handled it.
- Tell us about a time during school, work or campus activities when you demonstrated leadership qualities.

To prepare, think of several stories that illustrate your strengths. Practice telling the stories until they are brief and concise, one to three minutes long. By practicing before the interview, you will be ready with specifics that will show the interviewer how valuable you are.

STAR Method

To formulate an organized, thorough and detailed response use the STAR Method as a guide. Use these steps for a quick check if you are flustered with your response.

Situation:

Provide an overview, relevant background information, and be specific.

Task:

Describe the goal(s) of the situation.

Action:

Address your specific actions and contributions (as opposed to the team).

Result:

Describe the outcome of your actions.

To Ask or Not to Ask ... No Question!

Employers expect to be asked questions. Well-thought-out, probing questions show sincere interest, forethought and an alert mind. Lack of questions could show a lack of interest in the job or organization. Prepare to ask four to five questions in each interview.

Be alert

Don't ask questions that have been addressed in the interview, unless you want more detail. Questions you might ask include:

- What are the day-to-day responsibilities of this position? Or: What might a typical day be like in this position/department?
- Could you tell me about the training for this job? Is there a formal program?
- Is this a new position, or has the job been held by someone else? If the latter is so, is the person still with the company? Or: Why did he/she leave?
- How did you get started in this company? What has made you successful?
- How will performance be evaluated and how often?
- What is the typical career path?
- How would you describe the culture of the organization?
- How will the final hiring decision be made? By whom? When?
- What is the next step?

Sell Yourself Again After the Interview

After an interview, make notes on questions you were asked and how you responded. If you wish you would have said something else, jot down the answer you'd rather use next time. If you gave a strong answer that you want to remember, make sure you write it down. Prior to your next interview, review the questions you were asked and the answers you want to give.

Sending a thank you letter or e-mail after the interview is important. It also is a second chance to sell yourself. This letter or e-mail should be sent within 48 hours, regardless of whether you are interested in the job. It never hurts to leave an interviewer with a positive impression.