

Interviewing Skills

Persons School of Marlboro College

January, 2003

INFORMATION & RESEARCH

No where is the axiom "Information is Power" more clearly apparent than as an interview tool. When you have researched an organization or institution, you will experience an increase in self-confidence that will help diminish overall interview anxiety. You will also be able to communicate with the interviewers as a 'peer' rather than just another applicant. Your self-confidence will not only be evident to you, but will also be noted by the interviewers throughout the interview.

In addition to making you feel more confident and well prepared, this research will generate 'quality' questions that will further enhance your ability to relate to the interviewers as a peer.

Some questions you should consider while you are researching are:

- What services does this organizations provide? You want to have as comprehensive a picture of what they do as possible.
- What are some of the problems facing this organization? Other similar organizations? (e.g. market factors, government regulations, funding challenges)
- What major organizational changes have taken place in this organization/institution in the last year? What are some of the factors that influenced this change?
- What are they highlighting on their web site?
- Who are their competitors? How are they viewed in the general marketplace? How are the services that they provide viewed in their industry/field?
- What new projects, new technology, new funding sources have they developed in the last year?

For most of our research needs today, we need only to go to the organization's web site. If the web site is 'down' or 'under construction' or if they don't have a web site, contact the organization and ask for a brochure or any materials that they have available. If you are really interested in a particular organization, you can research them in the library to see if they have been in the 'news', either newspapers or trade journals. It is very impressive to be aware of recent achievements. It helps establish your credibility and builds rapport between you and the interviewers.

Note: As you are conducting your review of relevant information, keep a pad or piece of paper handy to write down questions that occur to you as you are reading. You will use these questions in the interview to display your knowledge and interest in the opportunity as well as the organization.

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POSSIBLE QUESTIONS TO EXPECT FROM THE INTERVIEWER

1. a. What career goals have you established for yourself in the next five years?
b. What are your goals for professional development in the next 3 years?
c. How do you plan to achieve your goals?

2. a. What event or experiences initially sparked your interest in the field?
b. Why did you choose to enter this career?

3. You have no direct experience doing precisely this kind of work. What can you bring to our organization that will offset that limitation?

4. a. What is one significant problem you have overcome and how did you do it?
b. What has been your biggest obstacle in adapting to another country and culture? How have you responded to that challenge?

5. Compared with Vermont, "X" (large urban area) is much faster-paced, stressful and congested. How do you know you can make that transition easily?

6. Tell me about a challenging work project. Was this also your most successful project?

7. What has been the biggest shortcoming in your work? What have you done to address that shortcoming?

8. How have you measured your own success in previous positions?

9. Given your understanding of this job, can you tell me what your primary goals would be during your first 3 months with the organization?

10. How do you tend to manage disagreements in the workplace? Can you give me an example?

11. Tell me about the qualities you seek in a supervisor.

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12. Describe the best supervisor you've ever worked for.

13. How would you describe your supervisor's management style?

14. a. How would you describe your relationship with your last supervisor?
b. How would your last supervisor describe you and rate your job performance?

15. Why have your recent positions been of such short duration?

16. Why did you leave your last job?

17. What salary expectations do you have for this job?

18. What aspects of your last job did you like the most? and least?

19. Why should we hire you?

20. Describe your major skills – both professionally and personally.

21. What two or three accomplishments have given you the most satisfaction?

22. Why did you decide to seek a position with this company?

23. What two or three things are most important to you in your job?

24. What have you learned from your mistakes?

25. In what way will you make a contribution to our organization?

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26. What criticism have you received that has been most useful to you?
27. What are your prominent work habits?
28. What are your three greatest strengths?
29. What are your three greatest weaknesses?
30. What types of things did you and your supervisor disagree on? agree on?
31. What motivates you the most?
32. Do you work well under pressure?
33. What kinds of work situations irritate you?
34. Were you ever fired from a job and why?
35. How much responsibility do you like?
36. Why did you leave your last job/position?
37. Tell me something about yourself.
38. We are one of almost two dozen organizations/institutions that are addressing this issue with a similar constituency. In your perception, what factors make our organization unique? What specifically attracts you to this organization?
39. What procedures or methods do you use to evaluate your student progress besides using tests?

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Applicant Questions

- How would you describe the ideal candidate for this position?
- What are the challenges and opportunities that come with this position?
- Why do you like working for this organization?
- What are the goals of this department? Have they been recently modified?
- What is the most important goal to be achieved by the successful candidate in the first year?
- What would you most like to see an employee in this position do to improve job function?
- Could you share with me your thoughts on the organization's mission?
- What other people and departments will the candidate be working closely with in this position?
- What is the potential for growth and advancement within this organization?
- What organizations do you perceive to be your main competitors? How do you view your organization's work in comparison?
- What changes do you anticipate for the organization in the next few years in terms of technology, structure, scope, etc.?
- Could you share a few of the accomplishments for this department within the last year?
- How is information communicated within the department, and with other departments?
- How would you describe your organization's management style?

Note: You should prepare 8-10 questions in advance of your interview. Don't forget to have a 'mix' of general questions (from above list), and specific questions based on your research on the organization and knowledge of the position.

Remember:

Your questions demonstrate your interest in the position and organization, your knowledge of both, and that you are a serious professional. They also help create and maintain rapport between you and the interviewers.

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AGENDA

Company/Organization: _____ Date/Time _____

Position: _____ Location: _____

Interviewer(s): _____

List 4-5 key things that you want to communicate to the interviewer (accomplishments, credentials, specialized training, experience, etc.):

List some special things that you can do for the organization/institution (how you can anticipate their needs):

Quality questions you will ask the interviewer(s) (in order of importance – put additional questions on back):

Research notes:

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Preparation Checklist

- ❑ Reviewed and organized my research on institution/organization – Highlighted sections of WebPages and/or prepared notes to use in the interview.
- ❑ Selected and prepared interview clothes. Everything is cleaned, pressed, shined, etc.
- ❑ Refocused my career goals and personal strengths to meet the job description.
- ❑ Have good understanding of what the employer is looking for/needs and how to convince the interviewer(s) that I am the best candidate for the position. (Specific ways in which I will contribute to the organization/institution.)
- ❑ Filled out the interview agenda. You can create this as a 'Word' document, and bring it with you to the interview. (See "Interview Skills-Agenda" handout)
- ❑ Answered all the organizational research questions I need to for this interview. (Questions that arise as result of your research; e.g. The organization's web page states that they are using 'FKR31J' software to track program costs, and you are unfamiliar with that software.)
- ❑ Practiced general interview questions I might be asked. (See handout-"Interview Skills-Possible Questions to expect from the Interviewer".)
- ❑ Answered all situational or behavioral questions I need to for this interview. (See handouts on Behavioral Interviewing.)
- ❑ Formulated a list of questions I need to ask the interviewer (Q's should be a mix of specific Q's, usually from your research, and general Q's-see handout: "Interview Skills-Applicant Questions").
- ❑ Have all paperwork to bring to the interview collected: **Résumé, copies of letters of recommendation, reference list, interview agenda and selected web pages. (For MATs, samples of your work or a small portfolio.)**
- ❑ Know name(s) of interviewer(s), have confirmed date and time of interview and have directions to the site.

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UNIVERSAL HIRING RULE

Any employer will hire any individual if the employer is convinced that the hire will produce more value than it costs.

Convinced is the key word. No matter how extensive your background may be, the interviewer needs to see clearly that what you offer generates more value than it costs. The fundamental focus of the interview is on value.

This is true during times of recession, depression, high unemployment, or even layoffs in your industry.

TEN WAYS TO CREATE VALUE

- Generate revenue: introduce new products, new markets, and new sales.
- Cut costs: reduce overhead, purchase intelligently, and pare down unnecessary expenses.
- Increase productivity: develop more efficient work systems, training programs, service plans.
- Be innovative: gracefully challenge old models and traditional methods, improve packaging and design.
- Improve quality: enhance value to customers, reduce defects, and promote shrewd inspection.
- Save time: improve workflow, organize delivery methods.
- Focus on customers: understand their needs, ensure customer satisfaction.
- Use technology: computerize, communicate with E-mail and LAN, train employees to make technological leaps.
- Motivate others: get people to collaborate and cooperate.
- Transform problems into opportunities: focus on possibilities, redirect negative scrutiny to positive attention, open up new ways of thinking, being and doing.

YOU'RE UNIQUE SELLING PROPOSITION

Articulating your singularity is easier when you know the company's particular needs and challenges. You can then make a convincing case for how your capabilities will enhance the employer's achievements and exceed the standard job requirements.

SOME UNIQUE PROPOSITIONS

- You have worked on problems similar to those the employer faces, and from different perspectives.
- You have knowledge of a particular technology that can ease bottlenecks, reduce costs, and speed service.
- Your particular combination of training and experience makes you especially qualified to serve the employer's vision.
- You understand the competitive situation in detail.
- You have talked to customers and know their concerns.
- You comprehend underlying issues even better than those within the organization.
- Your qualitative self-assessment projects you far ahead of those with otherwise similar qualities (integrity, persistence, leadership, etc ..)
- You thoroughly understand a particular market and could provide access to this market for the employer.
- You rise to a challenge and will not give up until it's met.

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BUILDING RAPPORT

Rapport is a feeling of mutual trust between you and the interviewer that allows for openness and a free flow of information. Once rapport is established, the interview will become a more interactive conversation about possibilities rather than a single series of questions and answers.

How to build rapport:

- **See the interviewer as a person**, not a function. Speak to her/him as you would to a colleague.
- **Address the interviewer formally** and, if invited, by her/his first name. Use the name of the department or company in conversation as often as you can.
- **Ask how much time has been allotted for the interview.** Remind the interviewer when there are five or ten minutes left and ask for more time if you need it.
- **Speak the interviewer's language.** Personnel interviewers may not know all of the jargon of the position. Use lay terms if the interviewer is not familiar with technical terms.
- **Demonstrate that you are listening.** Physical gestures (nodding, facial expressions, etc..) communicate awareness. When something is not clear, ask the interviewer for clarification.
- **Reflect on what the interviewer tells you** and indicate that you understand it:

Interviewer: *"We're looking for people who can take over the project on their own and complete it with a minimum of direct supervision".*

Candidate: *"I see you are willing to give people responsibility and authority. This was rare in some organizations where I've been associated. Could you give me a picture of how this works? How frequently would I need to report results to my manager?"*

- **Relax.** Be yourself. Laugh or express amazement or surprise when appropriate. Overuse of slang, however, may create too casual an impression.
- **Elicit feedback.** *"Am I giving the information you need?"* or *"Was I clear?"*
- **Be personable, but not overly familiar.** People want to know what interests and excites you, but be careful to avoid political or controversial social topics. If the interview is promoting more social chatter than is necessary, deftly steer the interview back on track with a question about the job.

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BEHAVIORAL INTERVIEWING

What exactly is behavioral interviewing?

Behavioral interviewing is a new style of interviewing that more and more companies and organizations are using in their hiring processes. The basic premise behind behavioral interviewing is this: **The most accurate predictor of future performance is past performance in a similar situation.** It provides more objective facts on which to base employment decisions than other interviewing methods. Traditional interviewers ask general questions such as "Tell me about yourself." The process of behavioral interviewing is much more probing and tries to pinpoint certain characteristics.

Important Points About Behavioral Interviewing:

- Employers predetermine which skills are necessary for the job opening and then ask very pointed questions to determine if the candidate possesses those skills. To assess which skills the employer is seeking, talk with alumni, read the company literature carefully and listen closely during the company's information session.
- In the interview, your response needs to be specific and detailed. Tell them about a particular situation that relates to the question, not a general one. Tell them briefly the situation, what you did specifically and the positive result or outcome. Frame it in a three-step process:
 1. situation,
 2. action,
 3. result/outcome.
- The interviewee tells a story for a few minutes. Typically, the interviewer will pick apart the story to try to get at the specific behavior(s). The interviewer can probe further for more depth or detail such as "What were you thinking at that point?" or "Tell me more about your meeting with that person," or "Lead me through your decision process."
- Always listen carefully to the question, ask for clarification if necessary and make sure you answer the question completely.
- Your interview preparation should include identifying examples of situations where you have demonstrated the behaviors sought by a company.
- Your resume will serve as a good guide when answering these questions. Refresh your memory regarding your achievements in the past couple of years. Demonstration of the desired behaviors may be proven in many ways. Use examples from past internships, classes, activities, team involvement, community service, and work experience. In addition, you may use examples of which you may be especially proud such as running a marathon, running for student body president, exhibiting paintings at an art show, climbing half of the high peaks in the Adirondacks or biking across the country.

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BEHAVIORAL (OR BEHAVIOR-BASED) QUESTIONS

Behavioral questions are based on the concept that “past behavior can predict future behavior.” As quoted loosely from a “Behavioral Interviews” handout from Barnard College Career Services, July 1994: Employers are very interested in understanding how you have handled situations in the past which may be similar to situations you might face within their organization, so that they may determine whether your actions will likely be effective in their organization. The goal of the interview is to produce enough examples of past behavior to predict accurately future behavior in the target position. Behavioral questions have three characteristics:

Behavioral questions produce behavioral reports or stories. By asking the applicant to think of, and describe, the actions they took in particular situations (often at work, although potentially outside of work) in their past experiences. Behavioral questions are carefully worded and direct applicants to discuss what they have actually said and done in the past.

Behavioral questions discourage theoretical responses. By directing applicants to describe specific past situations, behavioral questions require the applicant to describe past actions -- and prevent the applicant from offering theoretical answers, feelings, or opinions -- to help the interviewer truly understand whether or not the applicant is a good candidate for this position.

Behavioral questions do not lead the applicant to the “right” answer. Behavioral questions are asked exactly the same to all applicants, and because they ask the applicant to describe actions they took in specific situations, they do not imply a “correct” answer. Examples of behavioral interviewing questions:

- Describe an instance where you set your sights on a high/demanding goal and saw it through to completion, despite obstacles.
- Summarize a situation where you took the initiative to get others going on an important issue, and played a leading role to achieve the results wanted.
- Describe a problem situation where you had to seek out relevant information, define key issues, and decide on which steps to take to get desired results.
- Describe an instance where you make effective use of facts to secure the agreement of others.
- Give an example of how you worked effectively with people to accomplish an important result.
- Describe a creative/innovative idea that you produced which led to a significant contribution to the success of an activity or project.
- Provide an example of how you assessed a situation and achieved good results by focusing on the most important priorities.
- Provide an example of how you acquired a technical skill and converted it into practical application.

www.babson.edu/ccd/uintrvie.htm

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DO'S AND DON'TS

"Do's"

- Do have neat appearance including recent haircut, clean nails, clean and pressed clothes, etc.
- Do use the rest room, and hang-up coat and any outerwear before the interview
- Do get a good night's sleep.
- Do smile and maintain eye contact since interviewers place a great deal of emphasis on this.
- Do appear enthusiastic, using moderate gestures to make a point.
- Do speak clearly.
- Do find out the interviewer's name and use it occasionally during the interview.
- Do research the organization ahead of time to determine the dress code and the work environment.
- Do defer to the interviewer in setting the pace of the interview.
- Do write out questions to ask before the interview.
- Do indicate your interest in the job.
- Do let the interviewer end the interview, but try to make the closing remarks yourself.
- Do inquire about when you might expect to hear from the interviewer next.

Don'ts

- Don't drink coffee or other caffeinated beverages before the interview; it causes you to sweat and if you drink more than one cup, it can make you jittery.
- Don't be late for the interview.
- Don't wear perfume or cologne.
- Don't sit down or dash to your chair until the interviewer gives some indication to be seated; otherwise you appear overanxious.
- Don't lean on the interviewer's desk. Sit erect in your chair.
- Don't demonstrate your nervousness by tapping you fingers, swinging your legs, playing with your hands or fidgeting with your clothes or play with your hair.
- Don't appear to eavesdrop on any phone calls the interviewer receives in your presence.
- Don't read materials on the interviewer's desk.
- Don't over-extend your humor or tell too many jokes.
- Don't answer questions with one or two word remarks.
- Don't dominate the conversation or interrupt the interviewer.
- Don't mumble.
- Don't try to impress the interviewer by bragging.
- Don't lie.
- Don't criticize your current or former employer, classmates or school.
- Don't show anger or irritation during the interview.
- Don't answer any questions that you consider too personal.
- Don't ask if you can have the job.
- Don't mention salary during the initial interview.

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COMMUNICATION TIPS

Remember, in an interview you are 100% responsible for messages being received, either by you or the other party.

If the interviewer asks a question that you do not understand don't try to "fake it", or mumble an answer, ask to have the question repeated. There is no quicker way to disqualify yourself than by making up answers to a question you don't understand.

Keep observing the interviewer to see if what you are saying is getting through. If not, rephrase your message and check with the interviewer to make sure you are being understood.

Avoid unnecessary information. Answer the questions with the required information, add anything you feel is necessary or will communicate your abilities, and then end your response.

Be observant. If you see that the interviewer's attention is wandering, change the subject or ask a question.

Eliminate negativity, gossip, complaining and criticism (especially of past employers) from your comments. ("If you can't say anything good; don't say anything at all.")

Avoid being tentative. Words and phrases such as "possibly", "somewhat", "I hope", "I think I can", "I'll try my best", express some doubts about your abilities and competence. Instead preface your statements with phrases like "I am confident that".

Refer to your accomplishments, not just your responsibilities. Be specific. Use numbers whenever possible (for example, "My suggestion saved the program over \$16,000 in one year."). Use active verbs such as "I designed/directed/improved/increased/trimmed/researched", etc.

Lighten up! Don't be so serious that the interview loses energy and the interviewer becomes bored. Remember that people want to hire someone who will be pleasant to work with. Smile, laugh, and be amused as frequently as you can while acting appropriately.

Remember that an interview is a conversation. Like any conversation, it works best when both parties participate equally and keep the flow of the conversation moving right along.

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INTERVIEW SKILLS

THE 'CLOSE'

'CLOSING' THE INTERVIEW:

As the interview is coming to the end, you have to do what all good salespeople do- **'Close the sale'!** If you remember that there are three things to do before leaving the interview, you will be able to leave the interview knowing that you have done your best.

Note: When you hear the interviewer say: "Do you have any more questions?", then that is your signal to remember **'1, 2, 3'**.

The three things are:

1. Ask the interviewer (if more than one person, ask the 'lead' person) when they expect to make a decision.
2. Deliver one last positive job-related statement (e.g. "I am very excited about the possibility of joining your team, and I look forward to hearing from you soon.")
3. Thank them for their time.

The 'Thank You' letter (or card)

The very last thing you need to do when the interview is over is to send the 'Thank You' letter. If you have established a warm rapport with the interviewers, you can elect to send a card instead of a letter. If you're not sure, send a letter (see examples in the "Cover Letters and More" folder).

Remember: The 'Thank You' letter is the most powerful tool in the job search process. It always brings your candidacy to a very professional 'close', and is often the determining factor in the decision to hire.