



The Employment Interview

Think of an interview as an exchange of information. Employers use the interview to determine if you are qualified for their open position. You, the potential employee, use the interview to gather information about the job and the organization, so that you can decide whether to accept an offer if one is made.

There is more to an employment interview, however, than showing up, talking, and going home to wait for the phone to ring. Each interview is actually a three-step process consisting of preparation, the actual interview, and follow-up. To be successful you will need to complete all three steps.

PREPARING FOR THE INTERVIEW

Preparing for an interview involves researching both yourself and the job for which you are interviewing. The more thorough your preparation, the easier the interview.

Self-assessment is a process that helps you identify the skills you want to use in a job and the interests and values you want reflected in your work. A thoughtful self-assessment enables you to present yourself to the interviewer as a focused, self-confident individual who understands his or her own abilities and how they can be used. If you need help determining which skills you want to use in the work place, arrange an appointment with one of the Career Development staff.

Researching the organization with which you are interviewing is equally important. The more you know about the employer, the more the interviewer will be convinced of your interest in the organization. Find out about the goals or mission of the organization's recent past, current state, and future direction. Read the company's website. Talk to people you know with connections in the field or industry. Other useful resources include annual reports, recruiting literature, trade journals, and websites like www.glassdoor.com. Useful information to have on a potential employer includes:

- Products, programs, services the organization provides
- Location of headquarters and offices
- Relative size of the organization within the field
- Potential growth of the organization
- Recent items in the news about the organization
- Percent of annual sales growth in past five years
- Agency mission or purpose
- Funding sources

The last part of preparation is developing a strategy. Look at the questions in the next section. Using what you know about yourself and about the job, come up with a plan for how to present yourself. What are the crucial facts about yourself that you want to be sure the interviewer knows? What characteristics do you think the employer is most interested in? What are your greatest strengths for the job? Weaknesses? What do you most need to know about the job and the organization to enable you to decide whether to accept an offer?

Career Development offers mock interview sessions to help you prepare for the "real thing." Contact the office to set up a time to meet with a counselor.

CAREER CONNECTIONS CENTER

THE INTERVIEW

Can you do the job?

Will you do the job?

Will you fit in with our organization?

The employer's goal in the interview is to answer these three questions. Any questions the interviewer asks relate to these basic issues. Everything about you—your answers to questions, the questions you ask, your manner and dress—should address these concerns. First impressions count. So . . .

- Dress professionally and appropriately. Avoid excessive jewelry or trendy styles. Wear an interview suit in a neutral color (navy, black, gray).
- Keep your résumés in a portfolio and always bring extra copies on résumé paper.
- Arrive a few minutes early.
- Shake hands firmly.
- Show interest in the interviewer, the job, and the employer. Enthusiasm is important. Make eye contact.
- Be candid and relaxed. Don't sound like a recorded message. You may find it helpful to practice answering questions through a mock interview with Career Development staff.
- Present yourself positively and honestly; highlight your past achievements. Give examples of when and how you have successfully used your abilities. Share credit for your accomplishments when appropriate.
- Answer the questions asked and stop talking. Don't be afraid of silence. Careful listening is as important as articulate answering.
- Express yourself clearly and vividly when answering questions. No formula can give you the answer to all the questions, but a good rule of thumb is: state your claim in one sentence; explain what you mean by that claim in two or three sentences; support your claim by giving a specific example from your past.
- Avoid negativity, especially in discussing past bosses or co-workers.
- Make sure to get a business card from each person you meet with.

The Interviewer's Questions

The interviewer will ask questions about your school and work experience, your strengths and weaknesses, and your short- and long-term goals. Behind these questions are the main concerns of: do you have the skills and motivation to do the job well and will you be a welcome addition to the organization's team? A good interviewer will often follow up your answer with a question based on the information you have just given. Be prepared to respond thoughtfully as an interviewer probes more deeply into a topic, even if it may seem irrelevant to the job you are seeking. Listen carefully to the interviewer and watch his/her responses, so that you can determine the concern that motivates the question. Is she or he worried that you'll quit and go back to school after a year or two? Does she or he think your experience might not relate to the job? Try to answer the hidden questions, as well as those that are spoken.

Common questions include:

- Tell me a bit about yourself.
- Why are you interested in this position?
- Tell me about your strengths in relation to this position.
- What do you consider a weakness? How have you worked on improving that weakness?
- Where would you like to be in five years?
- How would your peers describe you?

- Why should we hire you?
- In what ways do you think you can make a contribution to this organization?
- Tell me about the accomplishment you are most proud of and why.
- Describe your most rewarding college experience.
- What led you to choose your major or field of study?
- Do you think that your grades are a good indication of your academic achievement?
- How do you work under pressure?
- In what part-time or summer jobs have you been most interested? Why?
- What two or three things are most important to you in your job?
- What are the most important rewards you expect in your career?
- How do you motivate yourself and others?
- Give me an example of your time management skills.
- What other positions are you applying for?
- How do you like to be supervised?
- What are your short- and long-term goals?
- Do you plan to pursue an advanced degree?
- How do you prioritize and juggle multiple tasks?

Another common interviewing practice is to ask behavioral questions that present a situation to uncover how you would behave or react to a typical scenario. Some examples of situational or behavioral questions include:

- Have you ever had to convince others to see your point of view? How did you go about persuading them?
- Tell me about a time when a project you worked on failed. How did you respond?
- Give an example of a time when you needed to make a difficult decision.
- Tell me about a time when you faced a significant challenge.
- You disagree with a decision your supervisor has made. How would you handle it?
- Describe a situation where you needed to take a leadership position. What was the outcome? Did you encounter any conflicts? If so, how were they resolved?

The interviewer asks questions such as these to get past the “pat” interview responses and probe into what your problem solving abilities are and how you might truly react to a work situation. These questions can be more challenging. Prepare by thinking specifically about situations in classes, activities, and previous work situations that demonstrate your skills and abilities.

Your Questions

The questions you ask can be as important as the ones you answer. Not only will they help you obtain information you need, they demonstrate your sincere interest in the job. Don’t miss this opportunity to use questions to present your abilities. Avoid asking questions that could be answered by annual reports or other easily available materials; you will appear unprepared. Avoid asking questions simply to flaunt your preparation for the interview or to impress the interviewer with the question itself. Your questions should arise from genuine interest in the topic.

Questions you may want to ask an employer include:

- How would you describe a typical day on the job?
- What do you consider to be the most important day-to-day responsibilities on the job?
- What are some typical first-year assignments?

- To whom does this position report? What is the overall structure of the department where the position is located?
- What kind of training is there for new hires?
- Are there any professional development opportunities or opportunities to go to seminars and conferences?
- What do you see as the strengths of the department?
- How is an employee evaluated and promoted? What is a realistic time frame for advancement?
- What is the retention rate of people in the position for which I am interviewing?
- What are the characteristics of a successful person at your organization?
- Questions specific to the industry.
- What is the timeline for filling the position?

Remember to think about how you intend to close the interview. It is your last chance to give the interviewer a positive impression. Make sure the employer knows you still want the job.

FOLLOW-UP

Send the interviewer a short thank-you letter. In addition to showing that you appreciate the interviewer's time, this is a chance to reiterate your interest in and qualifications for the job. It will also help the interviewer remember you. Refer to the Thank-You Note handout for details.

Contact the employer to express your on-going interest in the position if you have not heard anything within the hiring time frame given at the interview.

Finally, evaluate the interview. Write down the questions you found most difficult to answer. How could you have improved the interview? Are you satisfied with your answers to difficult questions, or can you think of better ways to respond to them? Do you need to do more research? Meet with Career Development staff to talk about how to make your next interview even better!

Questions? For further assistance, please contact Career Development at cservices@clarku.edu.