The Interview

Preparing for the interview

Do some research

You will first want to look into the position you are interviewing for: what are its specific duties and responsibilities? Review the job posting and make a note of the specific qualifications. If you feel this does not prepare you enough, look at job postings for similar positions. Try not to get discouraged if you don’t meet all the specified requirements; think about your transferable skills and how they make you a stronger candidate. (Remember, if you’re going in for an interview, the employer’s interest is already piqued!)

Next, you will want to know as much as you can about the company or organization where you are trying to be hired. Pay particular attention to the organization’s mission, and try to understand how the job you will be interviewing for fits into that mission. You will also want to know as much as possible about the company’s products/services. This is important so you can formulate thoughtful responses to questions asked of you, and also so that you can make good questions to ask yourself. It can also help you see whether the job is a good fit for you or not. (University of California Berkeley, 2005)

Tie your experience to the job

Once you have researched the position and the company, it is time to see how your particular skills and abilities apply to what you have learned. Ask yourself what it is about this job that makes you a good candidate. For each of the skills and experience you have at your disposal, try to figure out how they apply to the situation at hand. You are not necessarily trying to impress the interviewer with the widest variety of experiences—you want to emphasize the ones which put you in the best light, and downplay those that don’t. Remember that you are not simply relaying information; you are trying to “sell” yourself as the best fit for the job you are applying for. (University of Tennessee, n.d.)

Know your interview types

The behavioral interview stems from the belief that past behavior reliably predicts future behavior. Therefore, you should expect questions which concern what you did to achieve the competencies and skills you now possess, and how they have been applied in the past. To answer questions in this style, apply the STAR principle: explain the Situation or Task involved; describe what Action you took to complete or resolve it; and finally tell what the Results of your actions were. In this way, you highlight the process by which you came to learn what you did in a way that emphasizes your accomplishment. (University of Tennessee, n.d.)

The panel interview involves a search committee of at least three people who interview you at once. This interview style is common in medium to large organizations, and you should probably expect it. Perhaps the best way to prepare for such an interview is to find out who is on the search committee (just ask!) and use the company’s website or other materials to find out a
little about them. One thing to keep in mind is to maintain eye contact with all committee members. (University of California Berkeley, 2005)

*Practice, practice, practice*

Here are some methods you can use to prepare:

- Practice saying your responses out loud to interview questions. You can gauge your facial expressions if you practice in front of a mirror. See the list of potential questions at the end of this document for some ideas on what might be asked of you.
- You can also ask a friend or family member to pretend to be an employer, ask you a list of questions, and give you feedback.
- Finally, you can video- or audiotape your responses and review your performance. You should ask yourself the following questions: how can I improve, did I look/sound relaxed, and did I sound enthusiastic? (University of California Berkeley, 2005)

*Prepare questions of your own*

Interviewing is not a one-way street; just as your interviewers will have questions to ask you, so should you also have questions to ask them. It is not just a formality that they ask you if you have any questions: in asking this, they are trying to judge your interest in the position and the organization. In addition, this is your opportunity to find out anything you could not in your research that will help you make your decision if you are offered the job.

It can be difficult to come up with good questions to ask at this point. Here are a few examples to get you started:

- What’s the biggest challenge facing this department right now?
- How would you describe the management style in this department? How are decisions made?
- How does this position fit into the overall organizational structure?
- Do you have any concerns about my background that I can answer now? (University of California Berkeley, 2005)

*During the interview*

You should plan to arrive at least 10-15 minutes before your scheduled interview. Ask for accurate directions and take into account how far you must travel to reach your destination, traffic you might encounter, parking, and even time zone changes if it’s a long trip.

Be sure to bring the following with you:

- Academic transcripts
- Extra copies of your resume
List of at least 3 professional references
Pen and paper
All of these items should be organized in a professional folder, preferably a portfolio

You should not bring the following:

- Backpacks or book bags
- Large handbag
- Laptop computers (unless it is required for a presentation)

Managing first impressions

Often, people can form an opinion of someone they meet in the first 30 seconds; therefore everything you do, and how you look, are extremely important in leaving a good first impression. Once formed, these opinions can be difficult to change, so it is imperative that you try to eliminate any negatives before they happen. Here are some tips to leave a good first impression:

- Make sure your clothing is clean and pressed
- Shoes polished
- Pay attention to personal grooming (hair, nails, etc.)
- Minimal use of perfume or aftershave
- Avoid wearing too much or large jewelry (no nose rings, big dangling earrings, etc.)
- Smile and look alert! Nothing leaves a better first impression and communicates enthusiasm.
- Give a firm hand shake
- Introduce yourself with confidence (Example: “Hello, Mr. Jones, I’m Sue Smith. It’s very nice to meet you.”) (University of Tennessee, n.d.)

There are a few things to remember about first impressions. First, no one is perfect, and everyone occasionally leaves a bad impression; try not to get caught up in any mistakes you may have made. Just forget about it and move on—don’t let it affect the rest of the interview. Second, you want to know as much as possible about the impression you are leaving; it never hurts to ask questions that get at whether there are any undesired ideas about your competence and fit for the job. Third, and most important, is that eye contact is paramount in every phase of the interview. Nothing communicates enthusiasm like maintaining eye contact, and nothing communicates disinterest and boredom like failing to do so. (Jensen, 1999)

Closing the Interview

Once you are done asking your questions, you will probably hear a comment similar to, “Well, if you don’t have anything else, that should be all for today. Thanks for coming.” This is a perfect time to make a strong closing statement by summarizing your qualifications and expressing your interest in the position.

Here’s a sample script to get you started on your own personalized closing:
“This sounds like an exciting opportunity—just the kind I am looking for. I believe my (insert your most relevant strengths and experience here—be brief) make me a good candidate for this position. I look forward to the next step in the selection process.” (Jensen, 1999)

After The Interview

It is very important to send a thank-you note as a follow-up to the interview. It is of particular importance if you feel you left a bad impression in some area or another—this is your chance to correct that impression directly. This simple step can put you back in the running for the position if you can counteract lingering doubts about you in the minds of your interviewers. Even if you feel the interview went well, however, you should still follow up: not only is it considerate to thank the interviewers for their time and energy, but also, only about one in three people send thank-you letters after their interviews. This is a chance for you to set yourself apart once again, and you should always use such opportunities. (Jensen, 1999)

Behavioral Interview Question Examples

Interpersonal skills

- When working on a team project, have you ever had an experience where there was strong disagreement among team members or a team member who didn’t do their part? What did you do?
- Give us an example where you mediated a conflict.
- Tell us about a time when you had to be assertive.

Communication skills

- Tell us about a time when your active listening skills really paid off.
- Tell us about a time when you had to present complex information. How did you ensure that the other person understood?
- Tell us about a time when you were able to use persuasion to successfully convince someone to see things your way.
- Tell us about a time in which you had to use your written communication skills in order to get across an important point.

Initiative

- Give an example where you pushed yourself to do more than the minimum.
- Tell us about projects you have initiated. What prompted you to begin them?
- Give an example of a situation that could not have happened successfully without you being there.
Planning and organization

- How do you determine priorities in scheduling your time? Give us an example.
- Give us an example of an important goal that you set in the past. Tell us about your success in reaching it.
- Describe a situation when you had many projects or assignments due at the same time. What steps did you take to get them all done?

Flexibility

- Describe a situation in which you were able to overcome a “personality conflict” in order to get results.
- Describe a time where you were faced with problems or stresses that tested your coping skills.

Leadership

- Tell us about a time when you influenced the outcome of a project by taking a leadership role.
- Describe your leadership style and give us an example of a situation where you successfully led a group.
- Discuss situations where you have turned ideas into action.
- Tell us about a time you had to lead people who did not want to be led.

Creativity/innovation

- When did you provide a solution that was outside the box?
- What is the most creative thing you have done?

Decision-making

- Give an example of a time you had to make a difficult decision.
- Describe a time you had to defend your decision.
- Summarize a situation where you had to seek out relevant information, define key issues, and determine the steps to get a desired result. (University of California Berkeley, 2005)