

## Preparing for Your Interview

Whether you're applying for a job or admission to graduate school, the interview is the most critical component in your gaining acceptance. Thorough preparation is the key to a successful interview. Like getting ready for a test, preparing for an interview demands concentrated effort. Below are some tips to use as you prepare yourself.

### Interview Tips

- ❖ Research your potential employer or graduate program. Learn as much as you can so you can carry on a conversation with interviewers. Begin by checking company, agency or organization websites: review articles, annual reports, company brochures, etc. Talk to current or former employees if you can. Learn about their current efforts and activities so you can ask educated questions in the interview. If you're applying to a graduate program, search their web site. Learn about the faculty in your prospective program; review their research and/or writing. Talk to graduate program advisors and current graduate students about requirements for admission and details about the program.
- ❖ Develop a personal statement that details how your knowledge, skills, experiences and philosophy fit with and enhance the company or graduate program. Provide detail at the same time keeping it concise and targeted toward your goal.
- ❖ Prepare answers to general and behavioral interview questions (see below). Spend time answering each question fully. Remember, the interviewer not only wants to learn about your experiences, knowledge and skills, s/he also wants to know how well you articulate your thoughts and opinions.
- ❖ Practice your answers to the interview questions in front of the mirror, or with a friend or family. Go over your interview script until you know your answers without notes. In the interview, you do most of the talking.
- ❖ Dress well for your interview. Your appearance creates the interviewer's first and lasting impression of you. You should dress appropriately to match the professional standards of the workplace or program for the position you are seeking. Take out hardware and cover tattoos for the interview. Once you have the job and you learn they're acceptable at your work site you can show them. Remember, professional dress on your part shows respect for your interviewer.

Women should wear a dress or matching top and pants or skirt outfit and minimal makeup and jewelry. Men should wear slacks and an aloha shirt tucked in. Both should wear closed toe shoes and avoid using cologne or perfume. Your hair should be neat – pull it back if it's long, cut it if you keep it short. Be sure to shower and use deodorant; women use light makeup if any. For your interview, go clean and conservative.

- ❖ Prepare a professional looking portfolio or folder to carry into the interview with you. Include in the folder extra copies of your resume, references, a pen, blank paper, copies of any forms which were required prior to the interview. You can also include a sample of your writing and documentation of projects you've completed.

- ❖ Arrive early for your interview so you have time to settle in and do a final run through of your script. It's also a good time to observe the people with whom you may be working or studying. Remember that as you wait, people are also checking you out as a potential employee or student.
- ❖ During your interview, take time to breathe and focus yourself. An interview is a stressful situation and you can cut down some of that stress by calming yourself and taking some deep breaths of air. Sit forward and upright on your chair. Rest your hands on your lap or on the table. Avoid nervous gestures (like playing with your hair, tapping the table or your feet, saying "uh").
- ❖ Commit to the two P's of interviewing: Prepare and Practice.

### Stages of the Interview

**Reception:** This is your opportunity to create a good first impression. Before you meet with the employer, be sure that your energy level is positive and you are appropriately dressed and groomed. As you walk into the office, show your positive attitude by introducing yourself to the secretary or assistant and explain your reason for coming. Shake hands with the interviewer when you meet her/him and introduce yourself. Thank them for the opportunity to meet with them. Be sure to smile and maintain eye contact through your interview.

**Questioning:** The interviewer/employer will show you your seat, introduce other members of the committee and together, they'll ask 8-12 questions that will tell them if you're qualified for the position. Listen carefully to the questions. Answer with appropriate details about your skills and experiences. If you don't understand a question or are unsure about what the employer said, ask the employer to clarify or repeat the question for you.

**Your turn:** When the interviewer finishes their questions, they will ask if you have any questions of your own. Come to the interview prepared with 3 or 4 questions you can ask: questions that clarify your job duties, questions that give you more information about the business, or questions about benefits. Do not ask about pay or benefits until you are offered the job. The questions you ask should reflect your preparation (see sample questions below).

**Leaving:** If this is a position you really want, create a lasting impression with the interviewer. Tell them again why you are a strong candidate for the position. Describe three key strengths you can offer them. If the employer doesn't bring it up, ask when you might expect a decision or what the next step in the process is. Shake their hand again and thank them for the interview. Following the interview (the next day at the latest), email or write the employer a thank-you note repeating your interest in the position.

### **After the Interview:**

- As you prepare to leave your interview, thank your interviewer/s for their time. Ask when and how you might hear their decision and ask if they would like any other materials or information from you.

- Following your interview, write or email a thank you note to your interviewer, noting your interest in the position. Repeat your key strengths and say you look forward to hearing their decision. If they requested additional information in the interview, send it out immediately.
- Take some time to reflect on how your interview went. How can you improve for next time? Congratulate yourself as you go through each interview and know that with each experience you will get better.
- Stay in touch with the business or program (on a weekly basis unless they tell you otherwise) to make sure they have all your documents and to hear the progress on the position.

### **Interview Script Worksheet**

Before your interview, take time to write down answers to many of the questions (below) that you may be asked in your interview. Review the information until it is firmly in your mind. You can be fairly certain you will be asked the following questions, in addition to another 10 or 12:

- Tell me about yourself. (Talk about specific experiences you have that make you a strong candidate for the position or program.)
- Why do you want to work for us/this company? Why do you want to attend this graduate program?
- What are some of your weaknesses?
- What are your five year goals?
- Why should we hire you?

### **Types of Questions Interviewers Ask**

Interviewers may ask several types of questions to assist in evaluating your strengths and “fit” with the organization. The real question behind all other questions is, “**How valuable can you be to me and this program or business?**” Be prepared to articulate the knowledge, skills, and experience you have that will benefit the program or business.

**Behavioral questions** should be expected in an interview. These are questions in which you are asked to describe specific situations when you have demonstrated a skill critical for success in the position you are seeking. For example, instead of asking, “Do you have communication skills?” an interviewer might say, “Describe a time when you persuaded someone to accept your recommendations to make a policy change.” Other examples may include questions like those below. Take time to formulate answers for them.

- What did you do in your last job to contribute toward a teamwork environment? Be specific.
- Tell me about a time when you performed well in a crisis.
- Describe a project you lead. What did you do to keep it on track?
- Give an example of one of your weaknesses and where it hindered you in making a decision.

- Describe a time when you juggled several things at the same time.
- Describe a time when you were under pressure and did not meet a deadline.
- Tell me when you were disappointed with your performance. What did you do to prevent that from happening again in the future?
- Describe a situation from the past in which you worked effectively with a group of people. Tell me how you used your leadership ability effectively.
- Tell me a time when you had a conflict with a co-worker. What did you do about the situation? What else could you have done?
- Tell me about a time when you had made a decision you knew would be unpopular.
- Describe a time when you directed others to accomplish a task? What was your role?
- Describe a work-related situation in which you were faced with problems or stresses, which tested your coping skills. What did you do?

Be prepared to answer **General questions** about your education, work experiences, achievements, activities, skills, specific career goals, strengths, weaknesses and interest in the organization. Examples of these types of questions may include:

- Tell me about yourself.  
(Talk about specific experiences you have that make you a strong candidate for the position or program.)
- Why are you qualified for this job?  
(Describe specific skills, knowledge, strengths you have for the position.)
- Why do you want to work for this company? What do you know about us?
- How has your college experience prepared you for your career in this field?
- What are your short- and long range goals? Do you have any plans for future education?
- What would be the ideal job for you?
- How do you plan to achieve your career goals?
- What do you think about relocation? Travel on the job? Working over 40 hours a week?
- Why should I hire you?

- What is a weakness you have?

**Technical questions** may be asked during the interview as well. Technical questions are designed to test your problem-solving and critical thinking skills, as well as your analytical ability, so it is probably not useful to spend time preparing for them. Your whole education has prepared for you this. Don't bluff; the recruiter probably knows the proper answer. If you do not know the answer it is best to say so and point out where you might find the information if you had to solve a similar problem.

### How to Answer Interview Questions

Employers want to know details about your skills and experience. They are looking for concrete examples. So be prepared to give provide them with prepared descriptions. You can use the STAR method demonstrated below to help you give complete responses to behavioral interview questions.

<b>S</b> ituation	What was the context of the experience? Where did this experience take place?
<b>T</b> ask	What were you asked to do? What was the specific duty or project you did?
<b>A</b> ction	How did you accomplish your task? What did you do to complete the project?
<b>R</b> esult	What did you accomplish? What happened as a result of your actions?

### An Example

Interviewer's Question: Tell me about a time when you performed well in a crisis.

Your Answer: When I was working as a tutor at Windward Community College Learning Center, a student came in very upset about failing a math test. It is my duty to provide our students with service, from intake until they leave our center. I listened to her as she blamed me, her teacher and the college for her poor performance. I remained calm and empathized with her about her disappointment. I made several suggestions for her to pursue a remedy. In short time she took responsibility for her actions, arranged with her professor to retake the test, and since then has referred many students to our center based on her 'good experience' with us. I was able to help diffuse her emotions and work toward a solution that helped us too.

Take time to provide your interviewer with very specific details about your experience, your role in the situation, the action you took and the result you obtained. The more specific information you can provide in a concise manner, the better they will understand your potential for their program or business.

### Questions You Can Ask

At this point in the interview, the interviewer will usually say "Do you have any questions for us"? You definitely want to take time to prepare a few questions for them. The best ones are those that demonstrate your interest in and understanding of the company or program.

- I noticed on your website that you anticipate steady growth in the next five years. How will that affect this position?

- How do you anticipate future developments in technology impacting this program/business?
- What results do you expect to get from the person in this position?
- What do you see as the biggest challenge in this position?
- What are the possibilities for advancement in your company?
- Is there anything more you would like to know about me in terms of my strengths and how I can contribute to your company or organization or program?
- What can I do between now and when you make an offer to assure I get this job/this graduate position?

**Most employers and graduate chairs look for:**

- A strong academic record  
Relevant coursework, successful completion of degrees, academic awards.
- Skills & Achievements  
Work, internship, practicum experiences and extra-curricular activities, achievements and good experiences are strong evidence to help in understanding the type of person you are.
- Technical Skills  
Most fields have essential technical skills - be prepared to describe yours and the computer applications you know.
- Also demonstrate...  
Your analytical ability to place problems in a wide but relevant perspective.  
Your ability to work efficiently alone and with others on a team.  
Your ability to get things done.

Remember the key to a good interview is preparation and practice. Take time for both and you'll do a great job of presenting yourself to a potential employer or graduate chair.