

Interview Prep

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Prep #1: Before the Interview

Interviewing Isn't Just About How You Answer the Questions

Effective interviewing is more than simply responding to the tough questions with the best answers, it also requires knowing the questions to ask, in return, so that you can learn all the information you need to make an educated decision. Job candidates sometimes have their eyes so set on the goal of getting a job that they fail to completely evaluate the position or company's fit for their own needs, goals and interests.

To avoid misunderstandings, equal responsibility falls to the candidate to clarify expectations of the position, prior to accepting a job. How many times have you heard a friend or colleague comment, "This job isn't what they said it would be."

Some questions you may want to ask a potential employer, include:

- What do you see as this position's responsibilities on a daily basis? Weekly? Monthly?
- How, if at all, do you see these responsibilities changing over time?
- What do you feel are the *most* important responsibilities of this position? (take notes!)
- What are some additional aspects of this position that are unique to your company?

Never forget that you have some amount of control regarding the course of this interview. By being prepared and perfecting your responses, and taking an active and participatory role in the process, you'll not only make the interview process easier and more productive for you, but for your interviewer as well.

The Tough Questions

Before the first interview, prepare answers to interview questions that are especially difficult for you to answer. These questions may be as "simple" as "Why do you want to work here?" or as complicated as "Why did you leave your last position?" or "Why should we hire you?"

References

Before accepting the first interview, you should get your references in order and you may want to request that a letter of recommendation be written on your behalf. This is not something you should be thinking about after references have been requested.

Contrary to common practice, you don't want to provide references prior to an interview or include them with your resume submission, unless the job ad specifically states that references are to be included.

Keep in mind that a potential job may not live up to your expectations. You're not going to know for certain until after you've had the opportunity to interview. There's no good reason to have your references contacted needlessly or repeatedly for jobs you don't plan to accept. References contacted repeatedly also tend to lose their enthusiasm in the repeated telling.

Another reason to hold on to your reference list information until the interview is that you want the opportunity to be able to contact your references prior to the interviewer's call, so that you can give them a heads-up, "John Doe from ABC company is going to be calling you sometime today or tomorrow. I interviewed with him today about the Project Manager position they have open." This will give you the opportunity to tell your reference about the important issues discussed at the interview. A reference who is prepared for a call, and not caught off-guard, will appreciate the heads-up, and by understanding what the interviewer is hoping to secure, beforehand, will likely provide a better reference. Your references want to help you, make this process as easy for them as possible.

Your reference list should match your resume and cover letter in letterhead style and stationery, and should include the following information for each reference listed:

Reference Name

Current Title, Current Company

Relationship to You (Mentor, Coworker, Supervisor, Client, etc.)

Phone Number

Optional e-mail address

Make sure your references have given you permission to provide the numbers you're releasing. Providing e-mail addresses for your references is an additional option, but again, get your reference's permission prior to releasing this personal information.

Dress For Success

Attention needs to be placed on appropriate interview attire, and the time to do this is before the first interview is scheduled.

Interview attire should not necessarily reflect the style or uniform of the company or position for which you're interviewing. In other words, if the company dress code is relaxed (khaki slacks, casual shirts), your attire for the interview should remain conservative, professional, and appropriate to the event (a business interview).

A suit coat and tie is appropriate interview attire for men, a dress suit or suit jacket with tailored slacks is appropriate interview attire for women. Avoid loud patterns or excessive color. You don't want to distract your interviewer by your attire.

Your clothing need not be new, but it should be in good condition; clean, well-pressed and well-fitted. If your interview clothes are new, make sure they feel comfortable, natural and fit well. Try your interview clothes on before an interview is scheduled (sit, stand, and walk in them), and make sure they're comfortable, as well as appropriate. See how the combination of clothes you've put together really look when worn together - "Wow, this tie does not match this jacket," or "This jacket needs to be tailored, it's just too long for me" are things that should be determined long before having to walk out the door for an interview meeting.

Interview Attire Checklist:

- Don't wear cologne (this may be offensive to your interviewer, no matter how good it smells to you).
- Make sure your socks match, each other and the outfit you're wearing.
- Wear shoes that are in good condition, match your attire, and are comfortable to wear. No open toes.
- If you carry a purse or briefcase, these too should be conservative in color and design.
- Make certain your hands and nails are clean and in good condition (you probably "speak" with your hands more than you're aware). Men should not wear polish. Women's polish should be conservative in color and nails should not be an excessive length.
- Check your clothing for stains, tears, loose stitching and/or loose buttons - and repair.
- Do not smoke and avoid being around others who are smoking ~ the odor will stay on your clothing and may be offensive. If you have worn the clothing previously, have it cleaned or dry-cleaned to remove all cologne, smoking, and other odors.
- Limit the amount of jewelry you wear. Keep it simple and conservative.

Prep #2: You Have An Interview!

Congratulations! Being requested to interview is a clear indication of your potential as a job candidate for this position at this company. Very few employers will interview candidates they feel are unqualified. Knowing this, it's now your job to convince the employer or hiring manager that you're not just a potential candidate, but you're the right person for the job.

The following are some preparatory steps you can take before and during the interview that will aid your chances for a successful outcome:

Where Am I Going?

Knowing where you are going is half the battle. I mean this both literally and figuratively.

How well you present yourself will depend on how well you know yourself. What do you have to offer? What are your unique professional and personal characteristics, as they directly relate to the positions you are targeting? What are your personal and professional aspirations? What is it you are looking to achieve?

When that self-knowledge, or literal meaning of "knowing where you are going," is completed, you need to take care of the figurative meaning of "knowing where you're going" by figuring out where the interview is going to be held and how you're going to get there.

One of the first things you should do after an interview is scheduled is to drive to the interview location (at least a day before the actual interview) to determine the location and how long it takes to get there. You certainly don't want to be late for this all-important appointment by underestimating travel time or travel conditions (or worse, get completely lost). By driving to the location at the same time of day for which your

appointment's scheduled, you'll be able to clock the time it takes you to get there, identify the level of traffic and any potential hold-ups (due to construction or road conditions), and locate where you'll be able to park your vehicle (is there a parking fee involved?). If you're taking a bus or other form of public transportation, you should time the distance from your bus stop to the front door of the building.

Once at the location, you should determine which building entry leads to your interviewer's office, and on which floor the office is located. Is there a public restroom close by? Knowing this will save you time if you want one last opportunity to check a mirror, fix a tie or comb your hair.

If you add at least ten minutes to your travel time, you'll help to avoid any unexpected delays. If this added time makes you a few minutes early for your appointment, so much the better.

Darn, I Forgot To Ask . . .

Prepare a brief, written list of questions to take with you. A question you desperately wanted to ask the night before may vanish once you find yourself in the interview. Some questions may have arisen during the phone contact you had with the interviewer in setting up the interview appointment ("Mr. Jones mentioned _____, I need to ask him about that"). Or you may have questions regarding information you have learned about the company during your homework investigation ("ABC Company is showing expansion into the European Market. I'd like to learn more about this").

Don't trust your powers of memory during an interview appointment, and don't allow the interviewer to take total control of the course the interview. This is a two-way exchange, and the only way that you can learn all the information you need to know to make an informed decision is by asking the types of questions that are meaningful to you.

Expect your interviewer to ask, "Are there any questions you have about ABC Company?" or "Is there anything else you would like to know?" and be prepared to have a response. Having been given this opportunity to address questions at your interviewer's convenience, don't assume that this same invitation will apply the next day. In other words, your interviewer may not appreciate a follow up call that begins with, "Mr. Jones, after our interview I realized I had a few more questions I'd like you to answer . . ."

What Did They Say?!

It's a good idea to take notes during the interview. The very first thing you should write down is your interviewer's name (this may not be the same person who called you), including the correct spelling.

During the interview, write down the key criteria discussed and reiterate this information with your interviewer, "As I understand it, Mr. Jones, this position will require . . ." Using these notes to clarify your understanding of the position, both its responsibilities and expectations, and communicate your understanding back to your interviewer - this is called "mirroring." Mirroring will help clear any potential misunderstanding and will also give you a better record of what was discussed during the interview.

The notes you take will also be used when you write your follow up "Thank you" note, following the interview.

What To Take

Be prepared to bring along at least two clean copies of your resume to the interview. You may be interviewed by more than one person, and you will want to make sure these additional interviewers have clean copies of your presentation (rather than a photocopied version). You also may be required to complete an application. Having your resume with you will help you complete the form without trying to remember specific dates and events.

Bring at least two copies of your reference list to the interview appointment (one to give, one to use to call your references following the interview). Provide this to your interviewer only after you've determined this is a position you still want to pursue. There's no need (or benefit) in having your references contacted needlessly.

Here are some suggestions of items to take:

- Directions and phone number for the company, in case something deters your arrival.
- A folder (to prevent bending) containing at least two clean copies of your resume and two copies of your reference list.
- A pad of paper with a list of prepared questions you want to ask (and for taking additional notes).
- Two pens (now is not the time for your only pen to run out of ink).
- A comb or hairbrush and a pocket mirror.

- Tissues, wet naps, or a small washcloth (these can be a lifesaver).
- Toothbrush and toothpaste or breath spray.
- Travel-size antiperspirant.
- Umbrella (if there is any potential for rain).
- Women: an extra pair of pantyhose or clear nail polish for quick repair. Men: an extra tie.
- Correct change for parking, if necessary.

Final Preparation

- Re-read all the information you have gathered about the company and re-read your prepared questions.
- Practice your interview responses to tough questions (best if done out loud).
- Make time to relax, even if it's just for 10 minutes, and do positive affirmation exercises (envision yourself working for this company and envision a positive outcome to the interview).
- Continue to give yourself positive messages throughout the day ("I'm a great candidate for this position" - "I can make a positive difference in this company").
- Get a good night's sleep, and get up earlier than normal for early morning appointments, so that you have plenty of time before the interview to get ready and relax.
- Eat well (do not skip meals!), and avoid foods that commonly disagree with you.
- Even if your interview appointment is scheduled for your lunch hour, prepare to take something with you that can be eaten beforehand. Dry cereal and a bottle of water will work in a pinch to stop stomach noises and nervous stomach acid.
- Confirm that baby sitters will arrive on time, and have a back up plan if this fails.
- Have backup transportation.
- Make certain any other responsibilities are accounted for, in case the interview runs long.
- For people who suffer from sweaty palms during stressful situations, apply antiperspirant followed by foot or body powder to the palms of your hands, and blot with a facial tissue or cloth.

Prep #3: After The Interview

You've had the interview. Now it's time for taking notes.

Write down everything you can remember from the interview, including:

- The responsibilities of the position as you understand them
- Any key points or concerns discussed at the interview (particularly any deficits noted)
- Specific goals of the company and/or company projects for which the position is responsible
- Names of key personnel in the company (and the correct spelling and pronunciation)
- Any other issues or information you have learned about the company or interviewer that is of value

Contacting Your References

Contact each of your references to let him or her know that a call will be coming and from whom (name of interviewer/name of company). Tell each of your references about the position (title and responsibilities) and any key areas that need to be addressed - What is the interviewer trying to secure in potential candidates for the position?

Writing The "Thank you" Letter

A "Thank you" card should be sent within 24 hours following an interview. It's preferable to send an actual card, rather than a letter (more personable), handwritten - if your handwriting is neat and legible. You should send a "Thank you" card to each individual involved in your interview.

Include the following in your letter:

- Your interviewer's name (and correct spelling). If there was more than one interviewer, each should receive his or her own personalized thank you letter.
- Key points discussed during the interview. These should include the objective of the position you're targeting, the goal and mission of company or department, and any special concerns or considerations discussed.
- Any positive contributions you feel your particular skills and experience will bring to this particular company's goals and missions (including any that were actually discussed during the interview).