Interview Strategies

Overview

During an interview, the potential employer wants to assess whether or not you can do the job, how much you want the job and how you will fit within the team or organization. Each organization will find unique ways to recruit and interview candidates. Throughout your career you may be invited to the following types of interviews: Screening (in person or telephone), Panel or Individual, Testing or Experiential and Group, just to name a few.

Prepare to Succeed

Preparation is the key to successful interview performance and a lack of preparation is one of the most cited reasons by human resource professionals for poor interview performance. Prepare for success by completing the following steps:

Know your Skills and Challenges

Understanding and effectively articulating your skills shows the employer what you have to offer and will enable the employer to see why you are a good candidate for the job. Three categories of skills that you have to offer are: personal, transferable and knowledge skills. It is important that you take the time to identify the skills you possess in these areas that are relevant to the position. It is also important that you prepare to intelligently discuss one or two weaknesses and how you are addressing these. Being able to do so demonstrates self-awareness and a willingness to proactively address limitations.

Resources:

- Identifying Skills and Building Competencies online workshop and handout

Research the Organization and Job

A thorough understanding of the organization and the job will help you to determine if the company is a good fit for you, build your confidence and demonstrate your motivation to the employer. This includes knowledge of the company values, priorities and workplace environment. Information can be gathered through the company website, LinkedIn, and from people who work for the organization. Prepare and link stories of your past experiences to what you have learned about the company and about the job.

Following up after the interview is a professional courtesy, and in some cases may help you stand out over other candidates who do not take the time to say thank you. This should be done the same day, and can be mailed and or emailed. As well, reflect upon what went well and what could be improved. Making a mistake is not a problem but not learning from your mistakes is! Lastly, celebrate the fact that you have just completed an interview. You are one interview closer to securing a job.
**Know Your Accomplishments and Prepare Your Accomplishment Stories**

Knowing and being able to describe your accomplishments will enable you to tell employers how you have demonstrated relevant skills in real life situations and how you can add value to them. This is much more convincing than just telling the employer you have a specific skill. In addition, knowing your accomplishments will also prepare you to answer Behavioural Descriptive Interview (BDI) questions which are discussed later. Your accomplishments can come from your education, work and personal life and should include both individual and team achievements. It is helpful to summarize your accomplishments in writing. There are various ways to do this and we present one method of doing so below. Use the **SAR** formula at the end of the handout to summarize several of your accomplishments.

**Situation:** Describe the circumstance of your accomplishment by providing enough details to so that the interviewer understands the context of your story.

**Action:** Describe the specific actions you took and the sequence in which you did them. Your goal is to demonstrate your skills. If this is a team based accomplishment, describe your role in relation to the team.

**Result:** Explain what the positive results of your actions were in order to show the employer how your skills are effective and how you can benefit the employer. Summarize in one or two sentences what you learned or what your accomplishment says about key competencies wanted by the employer.

**Create Intelligent Questions**

After the formal interview is over the employer will invite you to ask questions. Asking good questions shows your interest in the position and can create a positive impression with the interviewer. As well, good questions can help you to determine if the position is a good fit for you. Appropriate questions make the interviewer think and cannot be answered by a review of the employer’s website or job posting.

**Rehearse and Get Feedback**

Significantly enhance your performance during the interview by anticipating what questions you will be asked and then preparing and practicing your responses. When practicing verbal responses remember to speak slowly, enunciate your words and project your voice. As well, your verbal responses should typically be between one to two minutes. Suggested ways to rehearse include:

- Write answers in point form
- Record answers so you can listen or watch yourself
- Role play with a friend or schedule an appointment with a Career Development Specialist

Follow-up and reflect after each interview.
Types of Interview Questions

Non-direct Questions

Non-direct questions are general and do not ask for specific information. One of the most common non-direct questions is “Tell us about yourself.” Interviewees often struggle with answering these questions because of their ambiguous nature. The key to success is to anticipate what the employer is looking for and make your answers relevant to the position. For example, when answering “tell me about yourself” you would talk about how your education has provided you with the skills required for the position; however, you would not talk about your childhood as this is not relevant. Keep your answers succinct, typically no longer than two minutes and where appropriate include examples. Most importantly, be genuine!

Examples of non-direct questions:

1. Tell me about yourself.
2. Why should we hire you?
3. What do you see as your greatest strengths?
4. What do you consider your major weaknesses? How will they affect your performance?
5. What do you expect to be doing in five years?

Direct Questions

These types of questions predetermine the focus of your answer. Your information should be clear and specific. These questions, whether they relate to technical or transferable skills, can be relatively easy to answer if you have completed thorough research on yourself. Be sure to elaborate on your responses as some of these questions can be answered with a yes or no.

Examples of direct questions:

1. Describe your past work experience.
2. What was your favourite course?
3. What do you know about our products or services?
4. Tell us about your level of competency using ________ software.
5. Are you competitive?

Behavior Descriptive Interview Questions

Behavioural descriptive interview (BDI) questions involve questions about what you did in a particular situation. BDI questions are based on the premise that past performance predicts future performance. Therefore it is important that you limit your examples to situations that you handled well. For an effective response use the SAR model previously mentioned.

Examples of BDI questions:

1. Describe a time when you had to take on something new and had little or no guidance or support. How did you handle it?
2. Describe an important goal you have set and tell me how you reached it.
3. Tell us about a situation in which you had to handle a variety of projects simultaneously.
4. Tell us about a time you came up with an innovative solution to a problem.
5. Describe a situation or project where you made a mistake.

**Scenario or Hypothetical Questions**

These questions are similar to BDI questions in that they assess your ability to handle situations you might encounter on the job; however, they differ in that you are being asked what you would do rather than what you have done in the past. The employer wants to understand your ethics and your problem-solving ability. Provide your answer in a logical sequence relating to the situation. Do not rush to answer the question if you are unsure how to answer it. In some cases it may be helpful to follow a problem-solving model as follows:

1. Gather information and evaluate
2. Weigh your alternatives
3. Make a decision and communicate
4. Monitor results and modify if necessary

Examples of scenario or hypothetical questions:

1. What would you do if you knew that you would not make a project deadline?
2. You are working on a project and a co-worker gives you some unwanted advice. How would you handle this?
3. What would you do if the work of a team member was not up to expectations?
4. How would you react if you believed strongly in a recommendation you made to management but they rejected it?

For more examples of additional interview questions, [see our Interview Guide.](#)

**Questions for the Employer**

Asking questions demonstrates your interest in the opportunity. Avoid any questions you could have found out yourself or that they have already told you. As well, be respectful of the interviewer’s time constraints.

Examples of questions:

1. Would you please describe what a typical day on the job would look like?
2. What is the first task or problem that would need attention?
3. What professional development opportunities are provided?
4. What would you like to say about the new hire a year from now?
5. What do you like most about working here?
Illegal Questions

Not all interview questions are legal. An illegal question is one that requires you to provide information that has no bearing on the position you are being interviewed for. Typically, questions about age, religion, family status, disabilities and gender orientation are illegal.

You can simply answer the question without revealing that it may be offensive. You can refuse to answer the question though this may affect your chances of securing the position or you can examine the question for its intent and respond with an answer as it might apply to the job. If you cannot see the intent behind the question, then ask “Can you tell me how this relates to my ability to fill the position?”

Examples of illegal questions:

1. What is your religious background?
2. Are you married?
3. Are you planning on having any children in the near future?
4. How old are you?
5. Do you have any disabilities or health problems?

For more examples of illegal questions, see our Interview Guide.

Tricky Questions

These questions are those that are unpredictable and the interviewer may be asking to reveal possible ‘hidden problems’ or to show the candidate’s authenticity.

Examples of tricky questions:

1. Why have you been out of work so long and how many others were laid off?
2. If employed, how do you manage time for interviews?
3. Where would you really like to work?
4. How does this position compare to others that you are applying for?
5. If you won the lottery, would you still work?

For more examples of tricky questions, see our Interview Guide.

Salary Questions

These can be ‘trick’ questions and it can certainly be a way to quickly omit candidates. It is the question that most candidates dread being asked and foremost, candidates usually do not know how to answer without putting themselves in a “lose-lose” situation.

If you ‘name your salary’ and it is considered too high by the potential employer, you will risk taking yourself out of the competition. On the other hand, if you quote a low salary amount, you may be underselling and underrepresenting yourself.

The best advice in this situation would be that you learn how to ask the employers about their ‘range’ so that you know what the organization is willing to support. You can refrain from providing a number and
ask to have further discussion if a potential offer is on the table. You can also answer the question without providing a number and say something like “Money is not my primary value for hire, it is only a factor in the equation.”

Post Interview – Thank you

Taking the time to perform follow up and say a “thank you” to the interviewer(s) is certainly a good way to show good manners, share your appreciation for their time and consideration of your candidacy, and it can reiterate your interest and enthusiasm.

Please note: even if you decide that you do not want the potential job, follow-up is a respectful way to possibly withdraw your application, convey your appreciation and decline in a way that, with any luck, you will still not ‘close any doors’ for yourself in the future with that particular organization. Leave them with a good impression.

What should a thank you include?

• Keep it brief, but specific and concise with positive content;
• Address the interviewer(s) by name. If you did not take business card(s), perform your research and ensure that you have personalized this with the name(s) of those that interviewed you;
• Remember that you can restate the reasons why you want the job, recap why you could be the ideal ‘fit’ and/or how you would contribute to the organization and that you hope to hear back;
• It can also be a time to address any unresolved points that were missed from the interview; you can also note something that you learned or liked about the company.

Additional Tips

• Do not delay - send it promptly (within 48 hours) as good business etiquette, though 24 hours is recommended;
• You can choose to send your post interview note via email. This will most likely ensure that it will get to your recipient;
• You may choose to hand write a thank you note, you may choose to deliver it to the location within the time frame;
• You may also want to ask yourself about the structure of the interview – “Was it an informal or formal process?” as this may advise your decision on how to deliver your thank you message;
• If your note is handwritten, include the date so that you can show that it was written within a 48 hour period from your interview;
• Proofread your thank you note and triple check for spelling errors and grammatical errors, any typos and ensure that you have the correct spelling and title of the interviewer(s).

Additional Resources

• Quintessential Careers Content Index has information on types of interviews and interview questions
• Alberta Learning Information Systems (ALIS) provides information on interviewing