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University of Pittsburgh
Graduate School of Public
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YOU'RE
HIRED!

Interview Guide

Everything you need to know about interviewing – from how to answer behavioral-based questions, to tips for phone and Skype interviews, to questions that you can ask the employer!

Interview Guide

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Tips for Interview Success

DO:

- ✓ Provide a firm handshake to all interviewers
- ✓ Make eye contact with everyone in the room when speaking
- ✓ Smile!
- ✓ Speak clearly and avoid saying things like, “uh” and “like”
- ✓ Dress appropriately
- ✓ Be on time!
- ✓ Answer questions thoroughly but to the point
- ✓ Speak about your accomplishments; Refer to specific examples from your experience to answer questions
- ✓ Thank the interviewer(s) for their time and send a thank you email or note shortly after the interview (this can be a make it or break it step in the interview process!)
- ✓ Ask questions about the position/company

DO NOT:

- × Veer off topic
- × Wear too much makeup or perfume/cologne
- × Speak negatively about past experiences/coworkers/supervisors
- × Chew gum during the interview
- × Smoke cigarettes before the interview
- × Forget the names of the interviewers
- × Bring up salary
- × Forget to turn off your cell phone!
- × Use too many hand gestures while speaking
- × Slouch; sit upright but do not be too rigid either

Commonly Asked Interview Questions

- 1. Tell me about yourself** – Your answer should be a brief summary of your background. Where and what degree(s) you have, your work experience, and any other really relevant experience or accomplishments you have.
- 2. What is your greatest strength as an employee?** – This should be a transferrable skill; something that is a valuable asset regardless of the job. For example, you might talk about your ability to multi-task, attention to detail, or communication skills. Try to refer to a specific example of a time you used this skill particularly effectively.
- 3. What is your biggest weakness as an employee?** – Be careful, this is a tricky question! Do not admit to being late or not being able to prioritize! Use this question to indirectly showcase another one of your strengths. A good answer might be, “Sometimes I can be a bit too detail oriented and it makes me a perfectionist. I have to learn when to let a project go and decide it is the best I can make it.”
- 4. Tell me about a time when you worked with a difficult coworker.** – Be sure not to digress into a rant about someone who didn’t do their job well or who everyone in your past office hated. Use this question to describe a specific situation in which you worked with someone who was difficult. Be sure to talk about how you were able to overcome your differences and accomplish the task despite the situation.
- 5. Why should I hire you?** – This question gives you the chance to tell the employer what you can do for them. Talk about your strengths overall, and add specific details as to how your skills will be able to fit into the position. For example, say something like, “I am confident that my database skills will come in handy since you mentioned that you need a better method for data collection. I can create and manage a database that will solve the problem.” Make sure to talk about more than one skill.
- 6. Why do you want to work for us?** – Do not answer this question by talking about how the position will look great on your resume and will be a good stepping stone for your future career goals. Instead, focus on speaking about the quality of the organization, how you agree with their mission/values/goals, and how you feel that the position will be a great fit for both you and the employer.
- 7. Where do you see yourself in five years?** – If an employer asks this question, they are most likely trying to determine how long you plan to stay in the position. Even if the position is something you only plan to do for a year or two, do not say so in your answer. Your answer will depend on what your plans are, and the type of employer you are interviewing with. For example, if you are interviewing with a large government agency, it

would be appropriate to say that in five years you hope to have moved up in the agency and to be making a career for yourself there. If you are interviewing at a small nonprofit where there may not be much room for growth, then your answer will need to change.

- 8. Why should we consider you over a candidate with more experience?** – This may be an important question, particularly if you have little or no outside work experience. This is your chance to prove to the employer that experience isn't everything. You may want to talk about your fresh approach to the position, your eagerness to learn new things, and your willingness to do whatever it takes to be successful in the position.

- 9. What kind of work environment is best for you?** – This question is your opportunity to talk about being able to work independently, as well as part of a team. Use your judgment... if the position is one where you'll work on a lot of group projects, than emphasize that you work best in a team-oriented environment where people are often collaborating.

- 10. How would former coworkers/teachers/classmates describe you?** – What the employer really wants to know is what kind of employee you'll be, and whether you will fit into the culture of the office. Try to think of what positive things others would say about you and be honest. Focus on strengths of your personality like dependability and cooperation, and avoid things like "the class clown."

Illegal Interview Questions

If an employer asks you any of the following illegal questions, you have a few options. You may answer them if you feel comfortable doing so, ask what the relevance of the question is, or state simply that you prefer not to answer the question. You also have the right to report any illegal or inappropriate interview questions to the EEOC.

- 1. How old are you?** – Unless you are a minor, an employer may only ask if you are over 18.
- 2. Do you have children?** – Most of the time, the employer is probably concerned about childcare issues, but any question about your family or childcare is illegal.
- 3. Do you have any medical conditions?** – Unless the question is specific to a part of the job description, (i.e. the job requires that you can lift 50 pounds and the employer asks if you have a condition which would prevent that), these questions are illegal.
- 4. Any other questions regarding your personal life.** – If you are not sure whether a question is legal, but are uncomfortable answering it, politely ask the interviewer how it pertains to the job. If they can give you a reasonable answer, then you must decide if you want to answer the question. If not, tell them that you do not feel as though the question is appropriate to the position.

Sample Questions for You to Ask the Interviewer

You should *always* come to an interview prepared with questions to ask the interviewer. It shows your interest in the company and position, and your enthusiasm for learning more about it. Here are some sample questions that you can use. These questions can be asked at any interview. After researching the organization and position for which you are interviewing, add some more specific questions of your own. You should be prepared to ask at least three questions.

1. What do you see as the greatest challenge of this position?
2. Why have you decided to look outside the company to fill this position?
3. What are the company's growth plans?
4. Why is this position open?
5. Who are the major customers/clients for the organization?
6. How is job performance measured?
7. What is the background of the supervisor for this position?
8. What are the most important functions of this job?
9. How long have you worked for this company? What is your favorite thing about it?
10. What opportunities are available for someone who performs well in this position?
11. What do you like best about working here?
12. What goals do you expect the person who takes this job to achieve?
13. How is performance evaluated and recognized?
14. What is the next step in the process?

Behavioral Interviewing Basics

“An interview is a chance for you to present yourself...as a resource person. ‘Behavioral interviews’ are very big with organizations. These are interviews where it is no longer good enough just to make vague claims, such as “I am good at this, or I am good at that.” These days, employers want proof, evidence and real-life examples from your past, that demonstrate you have the skills, performance, and achievement you claim.”

(What Color Is Your Parachute?, Bolles, Richard Nelson)

Behavioral vs. Traditional Interviews

- Instead of asking you how you would behave in a particular situation, the interviewer will ask you how you did behave (remember-they are looking for concrete evidence of your skills and performance!).
- More “probing” in nature; the interviewer will ask a lot of questions and follow-up questions about your answers.
- The interviewer will ask you to provide details and will not allow you to generalize or theorize about several events or broad ideas.
- The interview will be a more structured process that will concentrate on areas that are important to the interviewer, rather than allowing you to concentrate on your areas of strength.

Behavioral Interview Questions

- Tell me about a time that you had to work as a team. What was your role?
- Almost all personal and work situations will require us to interact with some people we dislike. Describe a situation like this and explain how you handled it.
- Tell me about a time that you had to work with a difficult person. How did you handle that?
- Give me an example of a time when you took initiative in developing an innovative idea for a project or process to achieve better results.
- Tell me about a time when you faced an obstacle. What did you do to overcome it?
- Describe a problem that seemed almost overwhelming to you. How did you handle it?
- Tell me about a time when you used a creative or unique approach to solve a problem.
- Tell me about the biggest decision you have ever had to make. What steps did you take to arrive at the decision?
- Describe a situation that best illustrates your leadership ability.
- Tell me about a time when you had to choose between two or more important opportunities; how did you make that decision?
- Describe a situation where you had a major role in organizing and planning an important event. How did you go about it?
- Tell me about a time in your life where you experienced a lack of motivation. What caused

this? What did you do about it?

How to Prepare for a Behavioral Interview

- Determine the competencies and qualifications the employer is looking for; this is always an important thing to do before any interviews.
- Recall recent situations that show favorable behaviors or actions, particularly those involving coursework, work experience, leadership, teamwork, initiative and planning. Be prepared with the details and final outcome of these situations.
- Be specific and honest. The interviewer is not interested in generalizations, be sure to give a detailed answer.
- Use the STAR technique (see next page for details).

The STAR Technique

When answering behavioral interview questions, the STAR Technique is a good way to present your experiences to an employer.

Situation – Describe a situation that answer the question and reflects positively on you. Be positive and tactful.

Example: Recently, I was part of a group project in my Communications class. We had an assignment to design an effective public relations campaign for a company.

Task – Describe your task that was associated with the situation you chose to discuss.

Example: we chose to market a bank opening a new office in a small community. We had to come up with a new marketing plan and media kit designed to introduce the company to its new community and solicit new bank customers.

Action – Talk about what action you took to solve the task presented in the previous step. What factors did you face? What steps did you follow to handle the situation?

Example: As the project team leader, I set up an appointment with the Director of Marketing at XYZ Bank and got her insight on the project. After that meeting, I came up with a creative marketing plan which was enthusiastically received by other group members. I then assigned each group member a particular task, based on his or her area of interest. I monitored the group's progress to make sure we were meeting our deadlines and also put together a strong oral presentation to make to the class.

Result – Share the result of your work. How did the situation end? Make sure your example had a positive result or was a positive learning experience.

Example: The project allowed me to develop the management skills necessary for a position such as this one. The most rewarding part of the project was that the group received the highest grade in the class and the professor currently uses our project as an example in her class.

Phone and Skype Interviews

Interviews conducted via phone or Skype are on the rise; each of these types of interviews requires unique preparation. Here are a few things you can do to better prepare yourself:

1. Secure and prepare your interview space ahead of time.

As soon as you schedule your phone or Skype interview, the next step should be to figure out where you're going to have the interview. It should be a quiet space, free of loud noises and other distractions. If you have roommates, be sure to prepare them ahead of time. If it is a Skype interview, make sure you tidy up the space around you (remember, they can see everything in the background!). Check the lighting in the place that you intend to have the Skype interview; you want to make sure your interviewers can see you! Don't have an ideal place to interview? Contact career services; we can help you set up a private area for your interview!

2. Charge it up!

Make sure that you have fully charged your phone and/or computer; if you're using Skype, test out the connection ahead of time and make sure everything is up and running prior to your interview.

3. Remember: it's still an interview!!

It may be a unique situation, but this is still an interview, so you want to make sure you look the part for a Skype interview. Formal interview attire is your best option. Be sure to sit up straight, maintain eye contact with your interviewers, and SMILE! If you are on the phone, remember that it can be tricky to express enthusiasm since you can't rely on nonverbal cues; make sure you express your interest in the conversation by practicing active listening and interjecting the conversation with the occasional "yes" or other affirmations that you are still there and paying attention. It may be tempting to become distracted while on the phone, but be sure to keep your focus on the interview; nothing is more distracting to an employer than the sound of a keyboard tapping in the background.

4. Practice, practice, practice!

Like any interview, you will feel more at ease if you practice. Practice your answers out loud with someone (career services is available for mock interviews), and practice speaking in front of your webcam to become more comfortable with that situation. *(Hint: one advantage to a phone interview is that you can have your notes and resume right in front of you! You don't want to read off of the page, but it's a good idea to have some reminders and key points)*

Additional Resources:

[How to Nail a Skype Interview](#) (Forbes, 2013)

[10 Tips to Avoid Bombing Your Skype Interview](#) (U.S. News & World Report, 2012)

[Ace Your Phone Interview](#) (CBS News, 2011)