Tips on Interviewing

Congratulations! You have a job interview. Now that you have completed your resume and cover letter, the next step in the job search process is designed to evaluate whether your experience, skills and personality match the needs of the organization. The interview is an exchange; the employer is evaluating you, and you should be assessing the employer. Interviewees must work with the interviewer, relating skills, special talents, and personal qualifications to the requirements of the position or training program. The interview is the best vehicle an employer has to evaluate you regarding: how well do you express yourself? what are your motivations? are you someone with whom I want to work with?

Making the most of an interview requires research and preparation beforehand, a strategy during the interview, and appropriate follow-up afterwards.

I. TYPES OF INTERVIEWS

Screening
The first discussion you have with an employer is typically a brief, 30 minute conversation. At this stage the conversation is general, but still important. The recruiter's task is to reduce the candidate pool to a manageable number.

Phone
The phone interview is a possible substitute for either the screening or second interview, especially if budgets are tight or the distance is long. When a recruiter calls to conduct a phone interview, ask to schedule the call at a later time when you are sure you will have privacy and quiet. You do not have to begin answering questions on the spot. Your tone of voice, conversational style, and energy level, as well as what you say, contribute to the evaluation.

Call-back/Selection
The recruiter may want or need second opinions on his/her evaluation of you. The interviewers at this stage are those who will directly supervise or work with you and may not be professional interviewers or recruiters. Keep in mind that your audience has changed. Depending on the situation, the employer's objective at this stage is to identify a few (2-5) finalists for the position or to make a hiring decision. (Note: sometimes employers will have two or more rounds of call-back interviews. Be patient and use all you learn in each round to advance in the process. It's good news to be asked back!) This interview typically takes place on-site at the employer's office and involves several interviewers. Questions are a bit more penetrating, often requiring you to apply your experience to job-related situations. You will be expected to ask more sophisticated questions given all you have learned.
Often, second or on-site interviews require that you eat a meal with your interviewers. Being interviewed over a meal is challenging. Do not mistake it as less important than the other conversations during the day. Be sure to order food that is easy to eat (quiche instead of spaghetti) so you can concentrate on the conversation rather than the mechanics of eating! It is a good idea to decline alcoholic beverages even if those interviewing you order them.

**Group**

You may be interviewed by a group of individuals, perhaps a search committee or management team. The challenge here is to connect with all interviewers by maintaining eye contact with each member of the group as you respond to the questions. Offer to provide group members with a copy of your resume if needed.

A variation on the group interview is when you are one of a group of candidates. You may be asked to complete a group assignment. Interviewers observe the group to assess your leadership style and your ability to work on a team.

**II. TYPES OF INTERVIEW QUESTIONS** (See also CSO guide on Interview Questions & Legal Issues)

**Resume-Based**

These types of questions are the most common and standard. Questions are based on specific components of your resume, that is, your internships, summer jobs, activities, etc. These questions are often phrased as "Tell me about what you did (at your internship)" or "What responsibilities did you take on as (Treasurer of your club)??" To prepare for these, think about each item on your resume and what was important about each. What did you learn? How did you grow? What skills did you gain?

**Theoretical**

Questions such as "What are your strengths and weaknesses?" or "How would you describe yourself?" are also very common questions. You can best answer these questions by anticipating questions based on the job description and preparing some responses, citing examples from your resume.

**Behavioral**

This type of interview question is based on the theory that past behaviors predict future behaviors. These questions will often be phrased as "Tell me about a time when (you had to be creative to solve a problem)." Preparing for these types of questions can best be done by knowing yourself and your skills and abilities. Review your resume and understand how experiences you may have had relate to the specific skills required in the position.
III. STAGES OF THE INTERVIEW

Greeting
Make sure you have a firm hand shake and excellent eye contact. This stage is the "how's-the-weather-this-is-a-beautiful-campus" chit chat. Relax, participate, and enjoy it. You are demonstrating a basic social skill which is important in virtually every job.

Q&A
The interviewer will want you to talk about your experiences so that he/she can evaluate you on the organization's criteria. You should do most of the talking in this phase. Make sure you emphasize your 3-5 prepared key points that you want the employer to know about you.

You will then be asked if you have any questions about the organization, program, or job. Don't ask questions which should have been answered in your research. Ideally you have identified insightful questions to ask through your research and conversations. See the CSO guide Interview Questions & Legal Issues for a list of potential questions to ask during an interview.

Closing
The interviewer will likely be watching the time and will give overt cues that the interview is approaching the end. He/she often will tell you about the next step(s) in the hiring process. If he/she does not, it is a good idea to ask. Be sure to thank the interviewer for his/her time and restate your interest in the program or position. Ask the interviewer for a business card so that you can write a thank-you letter, which should be sent out within 24 hours of the interview.

IV. PREPARING FOR INTERVIEWS

Research the Organization, Position, and Salary -- Check out NewsEdge which provides the most up to date information about companies. Know the employer, the field and the position. Read literature on the employer, including annual reports and their web site(if appropriate). Consult periodicals and newspapers to learn of current, newsworthy issues at the organization and, especially, within the field. Researching competing organizations can give you good information to use as a comparison. Thoroughly understand the requirements of the job or training program. Do not waste time in the interview asking for this information if it is available elsewhere. See the CSO guide How to Research Employers.

Talk to alums or others who work for this employer or at similar organizations. Find out what personal success factors are considered in the organization and be sure your presentation includes them. Use the Alumni/ae Career Advisory Network to make contacts and arrange informational interviews.
Know last year's salary range for your discipline and degree level. Consult resources in Career Services for last year's salary ranges, look at Job Smart, which provides salary information on the web, or talk to alumni/ae in the field for guidance. NEVER initiate a discussion of salary, especially in an initial interview. The employer will discuss salary at or about the time an offer is extended. Never state salary requirements which can box you into a corner. You may want to show that you have done your research by suggesting a range (keep it wide!).

Know Thyself
Understanding yourself is fundamental to successful interviewing. Based on your research, identify experiences, skills, successes, and personal characteristics that meet the needs of the position or training program. If you are having difficulty identifying your skills, you may want to ask previous supervisors what your skills are.

Think broadly about organizational needs and how you fit into the big picture. Be able to articulate your career objectives and how this position fits your immediate plans.

Review the CSO guide Interview Questions & Legal Issues and map out a strategy for some of the questions. Think about what is behind the question and address those issues. For example, "What are your weaknesses?" is not a question about your fallibility but, rather, a way to see how you handle stress, how self-critical you are, and how you are working to improve any identifiable weak points in your personality or experience. For each response you make, introduce your point, develop it, then bring your answer to a close. Rambling and going off on tangents are classic interviewing downfalls! Focus your thoughts around these key questions: "Why are you interested in ABC organization?", "Tell me about yourself", "Why should I hire you?"

Practice
Know how interviews "feel." Do not use your first interview as a proving ground. Instead, practice in a no-risk situation. A recruiter can easily tell if you are treating the conversation as a practice interview. At that point, the interview is compromised and the result is a waste of your time and the recruiter's time.

Schedule a videotaped practice interview with a career specialist or check the CSO for practice interview dates with alumni. Seeing yourself as others see you is the single most effective and efficient way to learn interviewing skills.

Practice, but don't rehearse or memorize your answers. It is virtually impossible to predict the questions employers will ask. You should, however, have several main points or agenda items you want to bring up which link the needs of the organization to your experiences. Use the questions asked as a means to address these items or ideas.

Presenting Yourself

- Confidence comes from preparation. Think of the difference in your attitude when you are about to take an exam when you understand the subject matter as
compared to when you are "winging it." A positive view of yourself is critically important.

- Display a "can-do" attitude, but be sure you support it with examples from your experience.
- Be direct, assertive, energetic, and friendly, beginning with the handshake, and continuing throughout the conversation. Establishing a rapport is as much your responsibility as the employer's.
- Be aware of body language. Maintain good eye contact, but don't stare. Control distracting and/or nervous habits, and don't slouch! Try to smile and relax. Remember to LISTEN. Good communication skills refer to your ability to listen as well as speak.
- Do not wait for the "right" questions in order to talk about your skills and experience and how they qualify you for the position. Any question or line of conversation should be an opportunity for you to get across points you have on your agenda. The art of interviewing is to discuss your qualifications in a conversational give-and-take style and to be clear and economical in your answers.
- With second or final interviews, you may be asked the same question by several different people throughout the day. Try to give a consistent enthusiastic response to each of these questions. You may be bored by the fourth time you hear a question, but don't let this boredom show!
- Speak through your experiences at every opportunity. Concrete examples which "show" are much more compelling than broad generalizations which simply "tell."

V. LOGISTICS ON THE DAY OF THE INTERVIEW

**Dress**
Dress professionally. Do not be eliminated in the first few seconds of an interview because your appearance is inconsistent with the "culture" of the organization. When in doubt, always wear a navy blue or black suit. Being neat and conservative is the safest bet. For further advice, talk with a staff member at the CSO.

**Arrive Early**
Allow a generous amount of travel time and arrive early. Use the extra 10-15 minutes once you arrive to relax, collect your thoughts, and observe what's going on around you. You need to be polite and professional to everyone you meet. You never know who will be evaluating you. Get a feel for the work environment. Learn all you can now about whether you want to work in this environment.

**After the Interview**
Ask for a business card from each person with whom you speak or make sure names and titles are printed on your agenda. Think about the interview and make some notes on what you learned about the job, organization, or career field.
Be sure to write the interviewer(s) a brief thank-you note within 24 hours after your interview. See the CSO guide How to Write Thank-You and other Business Letters. If you arranged to have the expenses of an on-site interview reimbursed, submit an expense report complete with receipts.

**Follow-up**

If you do not hear from the company within the specified amount of time, call. Ask about the status of your candidacy. Talk with your host, the person who arranged the interview.

If you are rejected, you will be disappointed, but don't grieve. If an interview doesn't go well, learn from your mistakes. (Another reason to plan a practice interview!) Perhaps the position was not a good match for you. Think about it. Were you, in fact, really enthusiastic about the position? If you want guidance on how to do better next time, you may call your host and request feedback. However, not all employers can or will agree to such a request.

If you receive an offer in writing, respond immediately! Offer thanks and suggest a date by which you will inform him/her of your decision. Confirm the terms of agreement in your letter: starting salary, job title, location. (See the CSO guide How to Write Thank-You and other Business Letters.) If you receive a verbal offer, it is best not to accept it on the spot. If, however, this is your third or fourth round of interviews, you may be prepared to do so. Typically you thank the caller for the offer and ask about a date by which you can inform him/her of your decision. Always ask for an adequate amount of time for making the decision. Confirm that a letter has been sent detailing the offer.

**Travel Arrangements**

Most of these logistical tips apply to on-site visits, second and/or final interviews.

- Clarify travel arrangements prior to your visit. Some companies will prepay tickets or provide you with a travel advance. Make sure you understand the reimbursement procedures for your expenses. Confirm your hotel reservations and/or rental car, if the company does not do so for you.
- Ask the company contact for an agenda or at least a general idea of how your day will be structured so you can be prepared.
- Have a contingency plan. If flights are canceled due to weather conditions, what will you do? Ask for phone numbers, in case your departure is delayed, so that you can keep your host informed after business hours.
- Obtain a map of the area, if necessary. Bring extra cash and/or credit cards. Extra resumes, paper, and a pen will be useful as well.
- Keep records and receipts. If you arrive the night before your interview, you will most likely have dinner in the hotel. Keep receipts for taxis, tolls, parking, meals, etc. Keep records of the people with whom you speak on the phone to confirm reservations and travel plans. Be honest and do not invite all your friends to dinner on the organization's tab!
- If you have the opportunity to look around the area while you are visiting the organization, you may feel more comfortable making a job choice. Some
companies include a city tour with your visit. If they don't, ask or stay an extra day.

- Get a good night's sleep and eat an adequate breakfast. If you are nervous, think twice about a cup of coffee with breakfast.

If you have questions about accepting or rejecting an offer or handling any other challenging interview questions or situations, feel free to talk with a career specialist at the Career Services Office.

- Legal information
- Questions: Recruiters may ask and you may ask

Some Resources Available in the CSO Library are:

- Last Minute Interview Tips by Brandon Toropov
- Naked at the Interview, Tips and Quizzes to prepare you for your first real job by Burton Jay Nadler
- Dynamite Answers to Interview Questions, no more sweaty palms! by Caryl Rae Krannich & Ronald L. Krannich, Ph.Ds
- Interviewing, Effective techniques to help you answer tough questions and make a great impression by The WSJ National Business Employment Weekly