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## **Job-Interview FAQs**

By Katharine Hansen, PhD

Have questions about job interviewing? Chances are you can get them answered here – in this comprehensive collection of frequently asked questions (FAQ) about interviewing

### **What is the purpose of a job interview?**

Few job-seekers are hired sight-unseen. The purpose of a job interview is for hiring decision-makers to meet you in person, see how you express yourself and present your qualifications, and determine how well you fit into the vacant job and the organization.

### **How do job-seekers get job interviews?**

Typically, employers publicize vacancies, to which candidates apply with a resume or application and often a cover letter. Because a large portion of vacancies are not publicized, employers find candidates to interview through employee referrals, networking efforts by prospective workers, recruiters, and employer searches of social-media profiles, among other methods.

Sometimes job-seekers can secure interviews through cold-calling methods, contacting an employer to explore employment with the organization even when vacancies may not exist. An employer may interview such a candidate with an eye toward future openings, or may even create a position for the job-seeker.

To schedule a job interview after initial contact has been made with the organization, a job-seeker usually needs to persist and follow up rather than sitting back and waiting for the employer to respond.

### **Does having an interview mean I will get the job?**

Not necessarily. While landing an interview certainly moves you a step closer to getting a job offer, other candidates have likely also been invited to interview, and the one who proves – in the interview – to be the best fit for the organization and the job will likely get the offer.

### **What types of job interviews exist?**

Interviews are categorized according to when they occur in the hiring process, the communication means by which they are conducted, the number of people involved in

the interview, and the approach used in questioning the applicant. An interview can fall into more than one of these categories.

- *First interview or screening interview:* A first or screening interview is often conducted to
- pre-qualify candidates and narrow down the pool of interviewees. It is often conducted by an organization's human-resources department rather than the hiring manager. It is also often conducted by phone.
- *Second, third, and subsequent interviews.* The number of interviews an employer conducts varies widely, but each interview in the process is intended to further narrow the field.

How the interview is conducted:

**On-the-spot interview:** Spontaneous, on-the-spot interviews can occur when a job-seeker goes from business to business to inquire about openings and complete applications. This scenario is common among teen job-seekers who seek jobs in retail, the service sector, and the hospitality field. Anytime you are looking for jobs in person, you should be prepared for an on-the-spot interview to occur. Dress nicely, know a little something about the companies you visit, and brush up on common interview questions before you venture out.

- **Phone interview:** Increasingly, phone interviews are used to screen applicants because
- they are cheaper for the employer to conduct than are fact-to-face interviews.
- **On-site interview:** Interviews held at the employer's site, your prospective future workplace, are the most common type of interview.
- **On-campus interview:** Company recruiters who specialize in recruiting college students regularly visit college campuses to interview upcoming grads. Although the guidelines for any interview apply to on-campus interviews, consult with the staff at your school's career-services office for any special recommendations for interviewing with college recruiters.
- **Interview over a meal:** Interviews that take place while interviewer and interviewee are engaged in a meal are not uncommon. Be sure you know the rules of dining etiquette. Don't order anything that might result in a mess (e.g., crab legs, pasta with sauce), and avoid alcohol.
- **Videoconference interview:** As a cost-cutting measure, employers are increasingly using technology to interview candidates remotely rather than paying travel costs to bring interviewees to their location. Job-seekers interviewed by video need to be aware of how they come across on camera and polish their on-camera communication skills.

How many people are involved in the interview?

- **Group interview:** In a group interview, one or more interviewers may interview multiple candidates at the same time.
- **Panel interview:** In a panel interview, one candidate is interviewed by a panel of people representing the employer. One of the most important things to remember in a panel interview is to make eye contact with everyone on the panel even when responding to a question posed by an individual panelist.

- **Serial interview:** Instead of being interviewed by a simultaneous panel of multiple people, the candidate is interviewed by multiple people one at a time.

Questioning/content approach used in interview (note that interviewers commonly combine aspects of these approaches):

- **Traditional interview questions:** Essentially, traditional interview questions are those that don't fit into the other categories described. They are also the kinds of frequently asked questions you've probably been asked in interviews and that you can find lists of all over the Internet – questions like: "Tell me about yourself." "What are your strengths and weaknesses?" "Why should we hire you?"
- **Behavioral interview questions:** The interviewee is asked about past behavior in various situations, based on the premise that past behavior is the best predictor of future behavior on the job.
- **Situational interview questions:** A situational interview is similar to a behavioral interview, except while behavioral questions focus on a past experience, situational questions focus on a hypothetical situation. For example, in a behavioral interview, the interviewer might start a question with, "Tell me about a time you had to deal with..." In a situational interview, the interviewer asks, "How would you handle..."
- **Resume interview questions:** This line of questioning focuses on the content of your resume. The interviewer uses the resume as an outline and asks questions such as, "Tell me more about this job and what you did." The best preparation for a resume interview is to ... know your resume!
- **Presentation interview approach:** An interviewee may deliver interview content in the form of a presentation on his or her own initiative – or at the behest of the employer.
- **Case interview questions:** As defined by MIT's Careers Handbook, in a case interview, "you are introduced to a business dilemma facing a particular company. You are asked to analyze the situation, identify key business issues, and discuss how you would address the problems involved." A case question may be a calculation/estimation/guesstimate/numerical/market sizing case or even a brainteaser/logical puzzle/IQ question.
- **Off-the-wall interview questions:** These are weird, wacky, gimmicky, and off-beat "wild card" questions that seem to have nothing to do with your ability to handle a job.
- Example: "If you could be any kind of animal, what animal would you be?" They are often asked so the interviewer to see how well you can think on your feet, to see if you'll get rattled, to test your creativity or sense of humor, or to challenge you.

### **How does the interviewee know what kind of interview will be conducted?**

You can always try asking. Contact the assistant to the person who will be interviewing you and ask if that person can tell you what to expect in the interview, what style of question, for example. If you can't get an answer, consult your network to see if anyone you know (or that one of your contacts knows) can tell you what interviews are like at this organization. You can also consult the interview section at Glassdoor.com, <http://www.glassdoor.com/Interview/index.htm>, a large collection of job-seeker descriptions of what interviews are like in various organizations.

## How can job-seekers prepare for interviews?

Interview preparation comprises three major components:

- Content preparation
- Nonverbal preparation
- Logistical preparation

## What are the best ways to prepare interview content?

Interview content consists of everything you say in the interview. Here's a brief summary of how best to prepare each aspect of content:

**Greeting and small talk with interviewer:** Plan to greet the interviewer warmly, and express appreciation for his or her taking the time to meet with you. Be responsive when the interviewer asks small-talk questions about, for example, the weather or your journey to the interview location. If you're in interviewer's office, observe your surroundings for items you might comment on, such as an interesting collection or a piece of artwork.

### **Responses to interview questions:**

Find and familiarize yourself with lists of typically asked interview questions. Consider composing written responses to questions to cement them in your mind. You may want to try mind-mapping. Engage in mock and video-recorded interviews to practice your responses.

**Your demonstration of your knowledge about the hiring organization:** You must research the employer with which you are interviewing because you will most likely be asked questions that require knowledge of the organization.

**The questions you ask the interviewer:** To show your interest and enthusiasm, you need to go into the interview armed with a list of questions to ask the interviewer.

## What are the best ways to prepare interview nonverbals?

Interview nonverbals consist of everything you express about yourself in the interview that is not content. Here's a brief summary of how best to prepare each aspect of your nonverbals:

- **Your appearance – attire and grooming:** Neat, clean, and conservative are the watchwords. Choose your outfit ahead of time, and make sure it's clean and in good repair.
- **Your positive nonverbal behaviors:** Get comfortable with the behaviors that will help project you as strong, confident interviewee. You smile shows your enthusiasm. Your firm handshake conveys self-assurance. Strong voice projection indicates confidence. Good eye contact shows how well you connect with others. Small, controlled hand gestures animate your interview responses. Practice these behaviors in mock interviews.
- **Your avoidance of negative nonverbal behaviors:** Learn the negative behaviors that can derail your interview. The first of these are the opposites of those listed in the previous item – serious expression, weak handshake, timid voice, lack of eye contact. You can do even more damage with nervous tics you

may not even be aware you're exhibiting – foot tapping, leg shaking, hair flicking, finger drumming, face touching, throat clearing, and the like. Having an interviewing partner watch for these behaviors during a mock interview will help, but even better is to videorecord yourself to see how your nonverbals appear.

- **Your attitude.** You must be positive and enthusiastic in the interview. You must act as though you want to be there and that you truly want the job. The more you research the job and employer and prepare yourself in all the other ways suggested here, the more confident and enthusiastic you'll be.

### **What are the best ways to prepare for interview logistics?**

Interview logistics consist of everything related to getting to the right place at the right time with the right materials for the interview. Here's a brief summary of how best to prepare each aspect of your interview logistics:

- **Right place:** Be sure you know where the interview will take place. Get directions from the organization or search for directions online. If possible, conduct a "dry run" to the location beforehand to ensure you know how to get there.
- **Right time:** The day before your interview, call to confirm the time. Be sure you know how long it will take you to get there (you'll know if you did a dry run), and allow time for getting lost, traffic, construction detours, and finding a place to park. Also allow time to get there 15 minutes early.
- **Right materials:** Always bring your resume to the interview; in fact, bring multiple copies since you probably don't know how many people will interview you. If you have a career portfolio, bring that, too. Bring a pen and a notepad; you may not choose to take notes in the interview, but you may want to jot down important information right afterward while it's fresh in your mind. Consider bringing an "emergency kit" for last-minute contingencies – safety pins, needle and thread, stain-removal wipes, extra pair of hose, shoeshine wipes, breath mints, comb, and the like.

### **What are the most important things to remember in the interview?**

The interviewer will probably decide very quickly -- as quickly as the first five minutes -- if you are a good fit for the job, so the first impression you make is critical. Establishing chemistry and rapport with the interviewer is a big step toward making that strong first impression. Maintain rapport, energy, and enthusiasm throughout the interview. Respond to questions fully but concisely. Don't ramble. Learn how to handle sticky interview situations and initiate damage control.

### **What are some of the biggest mistakes job-seekers make in interviews?**

In research we conducted, the top three were 1) treating gatekeepers (receptionists, assistants, and the like) poorly; 2) projecting a negative attitude; and 3) giving long, rambling, unfocused responses.

### **What kinds of questions should the job-seeker expect?**

In addition to possible behavioral, situational, and off-the-wall questions, the most common categories of questions you might expect:

- The Tell Me About Yourself question
- The Strengths Question
- The Weaknesses Question
- "Future" Questions
- Conflict with a Boss Question
- The Why Should We Hire You? Question. See also Why Should We Hire You?
- The Ideal Job Question
- The Information vs. People Question
- The Successful Manager Question
- The Educational Preparation Question
- The How Much Training Question
- The GPA Question
- Yes or No Questions
- Company Knowledge Questions
- "Thought" Questions
- Money/Salary Questions
- Decision-Making Skills Questions
- Off-the-Wall Questions
- "Choice of College" Question
- Work Experience Questions
- Technical Expertise Questions

### **How should I handle illegal or inappropriate questions?**

It's best to address the concern behind the question rather than the question itself by saying something like: "There is nothing about my personal status that would get in the way of my doing a great job for your company." While it may also be tempting to point out the illegality of the question, doing so likely won't endear you to the interviewer.

### **What if I draw a blank and can't answer a question?**

First, repeat the question back to the interviewer (or ask him or her to repeat it) to buy yourself a little time. If you're still not ready, it's perfectly OK to take a moment to think about your response; in fact, it's best to pause before every response to ensure you're not blurting out ill-composed answers. If you are truly stumped, ask if you can come back to that question later. You may lose some points, and the interviewer might not return to that question, but asking to come back to it is better than babbling or remaining silent.

### **What should the job-seeker do at the end of the interview?**

It's important to let the interviewer know you want the job (assuming you do). How aggressive you are in doing so is sometimes the difference between an offer and nothing, but it is up to you to decide how strongly you want to close the interview. At a minimum, ask about the next step in the

process, how many other candidates are being considered, and an estimate of the

timetable for completing the process -- what some marketers might call the trial close, in which you are feeling out the interviewer. However, if you truly feel the interview was a good one, that you are a great fit for the position, and that you have overcome all the interviewer's objections, go ahead and ask for the job. Best case, you'll get the offer; worst case, you'll be told you need to wait.

It's also important to ask for business cards of everyone you interview with so you ensure the proper details in your thank-you letter. Finally, if the interviewer does not offer an exit handshake, take the initiative to do so.

### **What should the job-seeker do after the interview?**

First, write down everything you want to remember and want to follow up on from the interview. Then send an email thank-you note to the interviewer as soon as possible. Follow up, however, with a thank-you letter or note sent via postal mail, just to make an extra impression and keep your name in front of the employer. Job-seekers frequently overlook thank-you notes, so those who send them stand out. Sometimes, a thank you can tip the hiring balance in your favor. Continue to follow up with the employer based on the hiring timeline described to you at the end of the interview.