Employment Interviews

The University of Chicago Graham School Career Resources

You should use the interview to highlight your most relevant skills and experience as well as gather information about the job and the organization, so that you can decide whether or not to accept an offer if one is made.

In the entire interview process you play a major role in keeping the flow of communication interesting. You must make your resume come alive and explain how your experiences relate to the employer’s specific needs.

Types of Interviews

Telephone Interviews
Employers frequently use telephone interviews to determine whether or not you should be interviewed in person. Always be professional when you answer the phone because you never know when an employer may call. Your voice mail should play a professional-sounding message. Treat phone interviews as in-person interviews – dress professionally, be articulate and poised, and smile when you talk. If you treat the situation casually just because the interviewer cannot see you, that will come across in the conversation even if you don’t realize it.

Site Visits
Site visits can range from short interviews to elaborate all day events and group interview situations. You need to be prepared for anything and everything. Be sure you have all the travel information you need to make your visit go smoothly. You may ask for an agenda, or at least how long you might expect to be at the interview. When you interact with the organization’s employees, be polite to everyone, from the receptionist to upper-level managers, as well as other candidates interviewing with you. You will be watched and evaluated throughout your visit, even during meals and social functions.
Interviews via Video
Many employers are now using video technology for interviews. This may happen in lieu of an initial phone interview, or in place of an on-campus interview. Download the program (often Skype) now, if you haven't done so before. Start using it to understand how the program works and what the different features do.

Some important SKYPE tips are:

- Make sure your microphone/webcam are in working order
- Make sure you have a strong internet connection
- Make your username something professional. If possible, choose something resembling your e-mail address.
- Next, look around the room where you'll be interviewing. You will want to make sure the room is clean and that there aren't any distracting objects behind you. Be certain there is nothing that could be misunderstood as reflecting poorly on your personality or character.
- To avoid distractions from family, roommates or pets, we recommend that you close yourself inside a room, perhaps with a sign on the door about how you are in the midst of a telephone interview and appreciate silence.
- Turn off the ringers on your cell phone or home phone. You may want to close any windows to avoid outdoor noises.
- As is the case with phone interviews, dress professionally. It will get you in the “interviewing” mindset, and will help you feel more professional during the interview. Avoid wearing patterns unless you’re sure how they’ll look (dots look worse than stripes).
- Keep good posture, and avoid fidgeting or looking around the room—act as you would if you were in the person’s office.
- Close all other computer windows prior to the interview and make sure any instant messaging functions are turned off. You don’t want to be distracted during the interview.
- Make sure to look at the camera during the interview and not the interviewer’s face, which would cause you to look down.

Interview Preparation

Preparing for an interview involves four steps: (1) self-assessment, (2) thorough research, (3) preparing responses and questions, and (4) practice.

1. Self-Assessment
This is a process that helps you identify the skills you want to use in a job while also categorizing the interests and values you want reflected in your work. A thoughtful self-assessment enables you to target job opportunities that you are genuinely excited about and present yourself to the interviewer as a well-directed, self-confident individual who understands his or her own abilities and how they can be used.
2. Thorough Research
The more you know about the employer, the more the interviewer will be convinced of your interest in the organization and position. Carefully read the job description and make sure you understand the responsibilities. Know all you can about the company, e.g. its correct name, holding companies, divisions/units. For non-profits, know where its major sources of funding come from, its partner organizations, and who sits on their board. Find out about the goods and services produced or provided by the company/organization. Who are the customers, clients or target audience? Who are the competitors, and how does this organization differentiate themselves? What were the last quarter’s earnings, and/or special projects, or new initiatives? Learn as much as you can about the recent past, current state, and future direction of the company or organization. Talk to people you know with connections to the industry. Some useful resources include websites, recruiting literature, and trade publications. You should also research the people who will be interviewing you.

Ideally you will have done some informational interviews and networking before getting to this stage, which can equip you with insight on how best to showcase your knowledge and experience.

3. Preparing Responses and Questions
The last part of preparation is strategy development. Using what you know about yourself and about the job, develop a plan to present yourself. What are the crucial facts about yourself that you want to be sure the interviewer knows? What characteristics do you think the employer is most interested in? How do your prior experiences and current skills relate to this job? What are your greatest strengths for the job? What are your weaknesses? What do you most need to know about the job and organization to enable you to decide whether to accept or reject an offer?

The STAR Method.

Interview responses are essentially mini-stories that you tell about yourself to convey to the employer that you can do the job. As you prepare your responses to likely interview questions, think about how your prior experiences may have prepared you for this job. Think broadly, especially if you are breaking into a new field or changing career paths.

No formula can tell you how to answer all questions, but the STAR method can help you craft your mini-story.

Present a SITUATION that you encountered in your prior experience, describe the TASKS and ACTIONS you carried out to address that situation, and then summarize the RESULTS that you achieved.

Each mini-story you tell should highlight skills, knowledge, and ability that are relevant to the job you seek. Be sure to make an explicit connection between your prior experiences and the responsibilities of the job you want.

The interviewer will likely give you a chance to ask questions as well. You should have some prepared that demonstrate you’ve “done your homework” and have a genuine interest in the position. Questions should go beyond information you could find on the website. Interviews are not an appropriate time to ask about salary, benefits, or perks. You discuss these matters during negotiation.
4. Practice, Practice, Practice

Presenting yourself effectively in an interview is a skill that you develop over time. Practice as much as you can before doing an actual interview.

Why should I hire you? Why would you be good for my company or organization?

The employer’s goal in the interview is to discover the answers to these two questions. Any other questions the interviewer asks you is directly related to those two basic issues. Everything about you--your answers to questions, the questions you ask, your manner and dress--should address these concerns.

General Advice

Don’t ever be late, so plan to arrive at least fifteen minutes early. You’ll need this time to find your way to the interview location, visit the restroom, and mentally prepare for the interview.

• Give a firm handshake and make eye contact.
• Be professional and polite at all times. Focus on the positive and never speak badly of former bosses, co-workers, etc.
• Show your interest in the interviewer, the job, and the employer; enthusiasm is important.
• Be candid and relaxed. Remember to maintain eye contact.
• Present yourself positively and honestly, highlighting your past achievements. Give examples of when and how you have successfully used your skills and abilities.
• Answer the specific question asked, fully and with an example, and then stop talking. Don’t be afraid of silence. Careful listening is as important as articulate answering.
• Express yourself clearly and concisely. Make your point and don’t ramble.

The Interviewer’s Questions

The interviewer will ask questions about your school and work experience, your strengths and weaknesses, and your long and short-term goals. Behind these questions are the two main concerns highlighted above: what do you bring to the job and how will you fit in at the organization? A good interviewer will often follow up your answer with a question based on information you have just given. Respond thoughtfully as the interviewer probes more deeply into a topic, even if it may seem irrelevant to the job you are seeking. Know your resume and be prepared to answer detailed questions about the information on it.

Listen carefully to the interviewer and watch his/her responses, so that you can determine the concerns that motivate his/her questions. Is the interviewer worried that you’ll quit and go back to school after a year or two? Does he/she think your experience might not relate to this job? Try to answer the hidden questions, as well as those that are spoken.

Questions may be oriented toward behavior, case studies, and/or reaction to stress. They help the interviewer evaluate how you have reacted in comparable situations, how you solve problems, and how you deal with pressure. Here are some typical questions.
Common Questions:

- Tell me about yourself.
- Why did you choose your field of study or major?
- Do you think your grades are a good indication of your academic achievement?
- Describe your most rewarding college experience.
- In what prior jobs have you been most interested? Why?
- In what ways do you think you have grown most in the past two to three years?
- Describe a time you failed.
- What things frustrate you the most? How do you usually cope with them?
- Tell me how you deal with pressure.
- What accomplishments have given you the most satisfaction? Why?
- In what ways do you think you can make a contribution to this company or organization?
- How do you determine or evaluate success?
- What two or three things are most important to you in your job?
- What are your long-range goals?
- What motivates you?
- Why are you interested in this job/company?
- Describe the significance of your extracurricular, volunteer, or academic activities.

Behavioral Questions:

- Describe a time when you made a difficult decision.
- Tell me about a time when you resolved a crisis.
- Have you ever changed someone’s mind? How?
- How would you prepare for a confrontation?
- Have you ever given feedback? How did you do it?
- Describe a time when you defended a position.
- Tell me about your usual roles in team activities.
- Tell me about a time you had to be assertive.
- Describe a problem listening skills helped solve.
- When were you most proud of your work? Why?
- Have you ever communicated bad news? How?

Your Questions

The questions you ask can be as important as the ones you answer. Not only can they help you obtain information you need; they demonstrate your sincere interest in the job. Don’t miss this opportunity to use questions to present your abilities. Avoid asking questions that could be answered on their website, by annual reports or other easily available materials; you will appear unprepared. Avoid asking questions simply to flaunt your preparation for the interview or to impress the interviewer with the question itself. Questions should arise from a genuine interest in the topic.
Questions for a HR manager:

- What is the departmental structure?
- What type of orientation or training do new employees receive?
- Questions for a prospective supervisor:
- What would I be expected to accomplish in the first six months on the job? In the first year?
- What would be my primary responsibilities?
- How much contact or exposure does the department/staff have with management?
- What are the company’s/organization’s plans for future growth?
- What is a typical career path?
- What are the characteristics of a successful person at your company or organization?

Questions for co-workers:

- What are the most challenging facets of the job?
- How would you describe your company’s/organization’s culture?
- Why do you enjoy working for your company/organization?
- What opportunities for professional growth does your organization offer?
- Can you describe a typical day?
- Do you feel free to express your ideas and concerns?

Remember to think about how you intend to close the interview. It is your last chance to give the interviewer a positive impression. Make sure the employer knows you still want the job. Don’t forget to ask for a business card, and make sure you get the names of all the people interviewing you.

Following Up on Your Interview

Evaluate the interview. Write down the questions you found most difficult to answer. How could you have improved the interview? Are you satisfied with your answers to difficult questions, or can you think of better ways to respond to them? Do you need to do more research? Use this interview to improve your next one.

Be sure to send the interviewer(s) a short thank-you letter or email (do not send a thank you letter via text). In addition to showing that you appreciate the interviewer’s time, this is a chance to reiterate your interest in and qualifications for the job. It will also help the interviewer remember you. Be sure to send letters to everyone who interviewed you during a site visit or on-campus interview. Thank you letters should be sent within forty-eight hours of the interview or meeting. Even if you are no longer interested in the position you discussed, you should still send a thank-you letter.
Second Interviews and Beyond

During second-round interviews employers are trying to evaluate your abilities as well as how you fit with the company culture. You can expect this round to include multiple individual interviews, group interviews, social events or all three. When meeting with people individually you will most likely be asked similar questions by each person. Keep your answers consistent but when possible tailor the response to the interviewee as they may have slightly different objectives. For example, if asked “why should we hire you?” your response to a co-worker may stress your ability to be a team player but for an immediate supervisor you may stress how you possess all of the desired qualifications. If you meet with a group be sure to make eye contact with the person asking the questions as well as the entire group. Try to get an agenda prior to the interview with a list of people you will be interviewing with so that you can prepare. If you know who you will be interviewing with research their role in the organization so that you can ask questions that show your knowledge of the person.

Second round interviews are generally on site, so you may have to make travel arrangements. Be sure you know how and what expenses will be paid for by the employer and save all your receipts if you are being reimbursed. You will be watched and evaluated throughout your visit, even during meals. It is also a good opportunity for you to evaluate the employer. Pay attention to how your possible future co-workers interact with each other. Do you think you could spend the greater part of your day in this environment? Do the people seem happy? Do you like the facilities? If a company tour is not scheduled be sure to request one. Do you feel welcome?

Employers may discuss salary issues at the second interview. Wait for the employer to initiate the discussion. Some employers may wait to discuss salary until an offer is extended, so do not be discouraged if the topic does not come up before an offer is made. If asked about your salary preference, avoid stating a precise amount or figure. If pressed for a number, make sure you’ve done your research ahead of time and suggest a range or state that you are seeking the market standard. You want to make sure you do not request something unrealistic or give the impression you would take much less than they plan to offer.

Remember to write thank you letters to all of the people who meet with you for second round interviews.