

Ace the Interview



WICHITA STATE
UNIVERSITY

Career Services

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Preparing for the Interview

Research the position

Review the job description and list the skills and experiences that are being sought. Review your background and match your own skills and experiences with the organization's needs.

Self evaluation

- Identify your strengths and weaknesses. Be ready to highlight skills, experiences, personal qualities and accomplishments you would bring to the organization.
- Be familiar with everything on your resume.

Research the organization

Helpful things to know about the organization before interviewing:

- Size of the organization within industry
- Organization's overall mission
- Annual sales growth for past five years
- Complete product line or services
- Potential new products or services
- Competition
- Geographic locations
- Location of corporate headquarters
- Type of training program
- Recent developments via news stories
- Name and correct spellings of contacts and interviewers
- History of organization
- Specific requirements of the job or program to which you are applying

Possible resources to help in your research include the following:

- Internet/organization web page
- Annual reports
- Employment brochures or in-house organization newsletters
- Business periodicals and newspapers
- Trade publications
- Finance and business sections of local newspapers
- Business directories
- Employees of the organization
- Alumni
- Career Services

Preparing Questions to Ask Employers

So, you think the interviewer holds all the cards. She asks all the questions and generally makes you uncomfortable for an hour or so. Right? Wrong! Interviews are two-way conversations. You are an active participant in the interview, and you can demonstrate this by asking questions. After all, would you make a major life decision, such as buying a home, without asking questions?

Preparing questions serves several purposes:

- You may get information that will help you provide better responses to employer questions.
- Asking questions demonstrates your interest in the position.
- The employer learns you have done your homework concerning the organization.
- The employer learns that you have expectations about working for his organization.
- Asking good questions will provide you with valuable information for making an intelligent decision.
- How will you know if this is the job for you, if you don't do some interviewing of your own?

Questions to consider:

- What qualifications will the successful candidate possess?
- If hired, would I be filling a newly created position, or replacing someone?
- Why did the previous employee leave the job?
- Would you describe a typical workday and my responsibilities?
- To whom would I report?
- How would I be trained or introduced to this job?
- What are the challenging facets of the job?
- How would you describe the management style of the organization?
- What are your expectations for new hires?
- Will I have the opportunity to work on special projects?
- What makes your organization different from the competitors?
- How will I be evaluated if hired?
- What do you consider to be my weaknesses and strengths for this position?
- How does your department fit into the scope of the overall organization?
- What are the department's goals? How do they relate to the organization's objectives as a whole?
- What are some of the challenges this department/organization faces?

Don't leave the interview without answers to the following questions:

- What is your timeline for filling this position?
- May I call you to follow-up?
- How will I hear back from you?

It is never appropriate for you to bring up the issue of salary. Wait for the interviewer to bring up the subjects of salary, benefits, vacation time and sick leave. See page 6 for tips on salary issues.

Dressing for Success

First impressions count. Your appearance tells an interviewer quite a bit about your character. You want the interviewer to see you as a professional in every way. Dressing for the occasion will also help you to feel comfortable during the interview. After all, what employer could resist a skilled, self-assured candidate?

This is definitely the time to be meticulous about personal hygiene and wardrobe selection. Don't forget the basics such as showering, shaving, and brushing your teeth, but there's more to consider. Most professional organizations frown on body piercing, tattoos, and long hair for men. If you want to be asked back for a second interview you'll need to get a good haircut, apply appropriate make-up and tone down the body art and jewelry.

An expensive outfit is not necessary; however, your clothing should fit well, be clean and pressed. If your tastes run to the more casual or trendy, you might make a trip to your favorite department store. Find a salesperson to help you coordinate a flattering and professional look.

- Men should select a tailored two-piece suit. Navy blue, charcoal or light grays are the best colors. A clean, pressed white or light blue long-sleeved shirt and a coordinating tie will help to make a good impression. Keep cologne to a minimum. The shoes should coordinate with the suit and be shined. Always wear dark socks.
- Women should dress professionally. Avoid plunging necklines, sheer blouses and miniskirts. A business suit with a knee length skirt is always appropriate. Keep perfume to a minimum. Remember some people are allergic to fragrances. Jewelry should accentuate, not overwhelm, the outfit. Closed-toe shoes and nylons will complete a professional look.
- Business casual may be appropriate for some interviews such as information sessions or cooperative education or internship interviews.

Be conservative in your appearance. Dressing in a professional manner is a statement to the interviewer that you have the right attitude to contribute to the organization.

What Are Employers Looking For?

Employers want an individual with the skills and training to do a great job. That's a no-brainer. What you might not realize is that employers sometimes choose a candidate with fewer skills in order to get a person with the right personality traits.

"You mean I have to have a likeable personality?" No one mentioned that in College Algebra, did they?

Employers want to hire people who will 'fit' into their organization. Boasting a 3.7 GPA won't get you hired if you don't come across as a team player.

For many employers the choice between one candidate and another comes down to:

- Someone who is likeable
- Someone who is a team player
- Someone who will work hard to pursue the goals of the organization
- Someone with goals that match those of the organization
- Someone who will stay with the organization
- Someone with a grasp of their personal goals, strengths, skills and weaknesses

Salary

Now for that pesky salary issue. The best advice is to do your homework before you begin to interview so that you know what you're *really* worth. OK, maybe not what you're *really* worth, but a fair wage that gets you out of bed every morning with a smile on your face.

Range

To become an informed salary guru all you need to do is find out the range for your job position and industry, not the exact dollar amount. That's no small feat, but one that is well worth the extra research time.

Do your homework

Consult books, the internet, people in the field, or a career counselor to learn more about salaries in your field. There is a wealth of information out there for the taking. Make sure you're getting information from a reputable source. Good places to start: *The National Association of Colleges and Employers Salary Survey*, *The American Almanac of Jobs and Salaries*, and *Salary.com*.

Be realistic

Remember that your mother might think you're the best thing since sliced bread, but an employer may see you as just another mere mortal. Take into account that salaries vary according to geographic region, size of the organization and your qualifications. Also, believe it or not, salary may not be the most important consideration. You also need to ask yourself if you will be happy working in the organization, doing the work they want you to do.

Don't undersell yourself

While employers most likely won't take advantage of you, if you don't know what you're worth you can seem unprepared. Asking for too little can hurt your chances as much as asking for too much.

What about benefits?

You thought this was going to be simple, didn't you? Now we have to go and add benefits into the mix. You can't compare two offers unless you know what benefits will be thrown in to sweeten the pot. Remember, salary is the complete package. Insurance, including disability, life and medical, along with 401(k) or 401(b) with matches from your employer must be kept in mind. These extras can make a huge difference in your total compensation package. Take this into account when you are considering employment with any organization.

When to bring up salary

The general rule is that if an employer does not bring up the subject of salary, don't ask about it until you have the job offer.

1. Until you have the job offer, the salary doesn't matter. After the job is offered to you, salary becomes an important factor in making a decision about whether to accept the position, and asking becomes appropriate.
2. Once you have the offer, you know the employer is interested in you and you can negotiate from a position of greater power.

Types of Interviews

Operation managers, department heads and executives normally conduct the hiring or selection interviews. They have a working knowledge of the qualifications for the position to be filled and an understanding of the team chemistry that keeps the department working smoothly.

It helps to know what type of interview you will be participating in so that you may prepare yourself in advance. There are three types of interviews. These include:

Telephone interviews

Telephone interviews are often used for the purpose of screening candidates. Employers may complete preliminary evaluations by phone in order to increase the pool of qualified candidates or sometimes to narrow the field of applicants. Treat this kind of interview like any other. Be prepared by having a copy of the job description, your resume and cover letter near the phone in case an employer calls and wants to conduct a phone interview without advance notice. Your manner should be professional and self-confident, yet friendly. Feel free to ask questions, but never bring up salary or benefits. An on-site interview is the appropriate time to discuss money issues. Keep in mind that some employers will discuss salary over the phone just to gauge your level of interest in the position.

One-on-one interview

This is a traditional interview where a candidate speaks face-to-face with one interviewer. Questions focus on skills and abilities relating to the position. This type of interview is really a conversation, but you never want to forget you are being interviewed. Never become too friendly. It is best to maintain a professional demeanor at all times, even if the interviewer does not.

Panel or group interview

Panel or group interviews put you in the spotlight in front of a number of people. This type of interview often allows co-workers from the department where you will work to ask questions. Your interpersonal skills will be tested, as well as your ability to think on your feet. Employees are also interpreting your behavior in a group setting, so you'll want to make eye contact with each member of the panel. While panel interviews can feel a bit like a group discussion, never get so relaxed you forget you are in a job interview. You want to be friendly, yet show that you take your work seriously. In other words, be on your best behavior while letting your personality shine through!

Questions to Ponder Before the Interview

Skills and qualifications questions:

What do you consider to be your greatest strengths and weaknesses?

How has college prepared you for this career?

What qualifications do you have that make you think you will be successful?

In what ways do you think you can make a contribution to our organization?

What two or three accomplishments have given you the most satisfaction?

Do you think your grades are a good indication of your capabilities?

What do you think it takes to be a successful _____?

What college subject did you like most? Least?

What did you like most about your most recent job? What would you have changed?

What has been your favorite job? Why?

Why should I hire you?

What would your colleagues tell me about your attention to detail?

Describe a work-related skill you've developed in your most recent job.

What was the most creative project you've worked on and what was your role?

Describe a time you had to alter your leadership style.

Give me an example of your problem-solving process.

Personal qualities questions:

Tell me about yourself.

How do you think a friend or professor who knows you well would describe you?

What motivates you to put forth your greatest effort?

How do you determine or evaluate success?

How would you describe yourself?

In what kind of work environment are you most comfortable?

Give me an example of how you work under pressure.

What major problem have you encountered and how have you dealt with it?

If you could relive your college years, what, if anything, would you do differently?

What have you learned from the jobs you've held?

What would your last supervisor say about your initiative, work habits, ethics?

What is the most difficult situation you've ever faced?

How do you handle criticism of your work?

What was your greatest failure?

Give me an example of your determination.

Why have you changed jobs so frequently?

What work habit have you struggled to improve?

Describe a leader you admire.

Tell me about a situation that frustrated you at work and how you handled it.

Common Interview Questions

Goals and values questions:

What are your long-range and short-range goals and objectives? When and why did you establish these goals and how are you preparing yourself to achieve them?
What do you see yourself doing five years from now?
How would you describe the ideal job for you?
What are the most important rewards you expect in your career?
What do you hope to be earning in two/five/ten years?
Why did you choose _____ as a major?
Why did you decide to seek a position with our organization?
What two or three things are most important to you in your job?
Are you willing to relocate? Travel?
Do you plan to continue your education?
What interests you most about this job? What interests you least?
What is your most productive or ideal work setting?

Interpersonal skills questions:

What kind of people do you find it difficult to work with?
Do you prefer working alone or with others?
What are your expectations of a supervisor?
What type of supervisor do you work best with?
What are your expectations of co-workers?
Tell me about a time when you disagreed with your boss. How did you handle that?
Would you rather be in charge of a project or work as part of the team? Why?
When have your skills in diplomacy been put to the test?
What are some of the things you did that your supervisor disliked?
How do you handle tension with your boss? Coworkers?

Miscellaneous questions:

What do you know about our organization?
Have you ever been fired from a job? Why?
Do you have any questions for me?
What salary would you expect for this job?

The purpose of these questions is to give a general idea of what to expect in an interview. Additional questions will be asked about your technical abilities and your specific skills and knowledge as they relate to your occupation/major.

Behavior-Based Interviews

Behavior-based interviewing is a trend followed by many human resource personnel. The premise is this: past behavior and performance are the best predictors for future behavior and performance in similar situations.

During this type of interview you can expect job-related, open-ended questions. Respond with an example from real life experience because the interviewer is discerning how your particular skills relate to the job you're seeking. Hypothetical responses about what you might do or should do in a given situation will not garner points in an interview of this type.

You'll want to draw from work experience, cooperative education positions or internships, classes, activities, team involvement, or volunteer service when answering.

Job skills

The employer designs questions that will help to assess behaviors and skills necessary for satisfactory performance on the job. A candidate's **technical** or **performance** skills may be evaluated.

Technical skills are **what** you do on the job. Often learned in an educational environment, examples are accounting techniques, computer programming, electrical engineering, or word processing capabilities.

Performance skills are **how** you do the job. Acquired and learned through life experience, these skills include leadership, goal setting, adaptability, and initiative.

How to prepare

Learn about the organization and its core values. The organization web site is a good place to start. Read the mission statement and organization history sections. If the organization doesn't have a web site, you may be able to pick up brochures, annual reports or pamphlets at the main office.

If you know someone who works for the organization, find out which technical or performance skills might help to make you a successful candidate for employment. Your resume will help to recall past experience and achievements that could demonstrate skills sought by the organization.

Behavior-Based Interviews

In behavior-based interviews, employers are looking for **STAR** answers. A **STAR** answer will include three parts:

1. The **S**ituation you were in or the **T**ask for which you were responsible
2. The specific **A**ction you took
3. The **R**esult of that action

STAR answers

When responding to questions, draw from personal experience. Give examples you are proud of, such as winning a school office, running a marathon, or exhibiting your work in an art show.

The emphasis is not on the situation itself, but on **your behavior** when handling the situation. Be sure to address how your behavior led to an outcome. Employers are interested in the results you can produce.

Examples of behavior-based interview questions

Technical knowledge

Tell me about a time when you applied what you learned in a previous class to another class or project.

Leadership

Give me a brief summary of the leadership roles you have held and tell me of your most important success in one of those roles.

Goal setting

Relate an important goal you set in the past and how you went about achieving that goal.

Adaptability

Our organization is going through many changes. Tell me about a time when you had to adjust quickly to changes over which you had no control.

Organizational skills/time-management skills

Describe a time when you had many assignments due at the same time. What were the steps you took to make sure you got them all done by the deadlines?

Examples of behaviors to be evaluated

| | | | |
|---------------------|--------------|------------------------|---------------------|
| adaptability | flexibility | leadership | presentation skills |
| attention to detail | goal setting | listening | sensitivity |
| communication | independence | motivation | stress management |
| coping | initiative | organizing | teamwork |
| creativity | influence | planning | technical knowledge |
| customer service | integrity | policies and processes | |
| decision making | judgment | procedures | |

Behavior-Based Interview Questions

Examples of behavior-based questions include the following:

Tell me about a time when you ...

1. worked effectively under pressure.
2. handled a difficult situation with a co-worker.
3. were creative in solving a problem.
4. missed an obvious solution to a problem.
5. were unable to complete a project on time.
6. persuaded team members to do things your way.
7. wrote a report that was well-received.
8. anticipated potential problems and developed preventive measures.
9. had to make an important decision with limited facts.
10. were forced to make an unpopular decision.
11. had to adapt to a difficult situation.
12. were tolerant of an opinion that was different from yours.
13. were disappointed in your behavior.
14. used your political savvy to push a program through that you really believed in.
15. had to deal with an irate customer.
16. delegated a project effectively.
17. surmounted a major obstacle.
18. set your sights too high (or too low).
19. prioritized the elements of a complicated project.
20. got bogged down in the details of a project.
21. made a bad decision.
22. stood up to make sure someone was treated fairly, even though it could have been costly for you to do so.
23. helped out your coworkers or classmates with a problem without being asked to do so.
24. had difficulty juggling a number of competing priorities.

Fielding Illegal Questions

Familiarize yourself with the types of questions that are considered illegal. By law an interviewer is not allowed to ask certain questions that deal with race, religion, age, marital status, number of children, etc. A quick reference of some of these laws include:

Title VII of the Civil Rights Acts (1964)

This law forbids employers from discriminating against any person on the basis of sex, race, age, national origin or religion.

Title I of the American with Disabilities Act (1991)

This law protects people with disabilities from discrimination in any aspect of employment, including application procedures, hiring, training, compensation, fringe benefits or promotion.

The Age Discrimination in Employment Act (1967)

This act promotes employment for older workers while prohibiting discrimination in employment against workers age 40 or older.

Here are some examples of illegal questions:

| <i>Inquiry area</i> | <i>Illegal question</i> | <i>Legal question</i> |
|-------------------------------|--------------------------------|--|
| National origin / citizenship | Are you a U.S. citizen? | Are you authorized to work in the U.S.? |
| Marital/family status | Do you have children? | Travel is an important part of the job. Would you be able and willing to travel as needed by the job? (As long as all applicants are asked this question, it's OK.) |
| Age | How old are you? | Are you over the age of 18? |

Options for answering illegal questions:

1. You can politely refuse to answer the question.
2. You can answer the question, but keep in mind you will be giving the employer information that is not job related.
3. Examine the *intent* behind the question and then try to respond with an answer as it might relate to the job. For instance, if an interviewer asks, about your marital status, the employer may be wondering if you would be available to work overtime. An appropriate response would be something to the effect that you are or are not available for overtime. No explanation needed about your personal circumstance.

Our best advice is to answer the questions asked of you. Remember to answer the underlying question or the intent of the question. Sometimes employers ask questions without thinking them through. However, if an employer is asking one illegal question after another, you need to ask yourself if you want to work for this organization.

Interview Conduct

Almost no one looks forward to an interview. Most people feel awkward and sometimes tongue-tied during a time when it's really important to shine. So how can you learn to be comfortable during an interview? First of all, present yourself as a professional, capable candidate. Put your best foot forward by brushing up on your etiquette. To have a successful interview you must:

1. **Be on time.** There is *never* a reason to be late for an interview. You should know the location for the interview, arriving 10 to 15 minutes early. Plan on additional drive time to allow for traffic, trains, weather, etc.
2. **Be friendly.** The minute you step through the front door, the interview starts. You should have a smile for everyone from the receptionist to the president of the organization. Be prepared to return a handshake.
3. **Be positive.** Keep your words friendly. Never put others down to make yourself look good. Don't criticize former employers, teachers or co-workers. This only serves to give the interviewer a negative impression. Express your thoughts in a professional manner. Eliminate slang and curse words from your interview vocabulary.
4. **Be a good listener.** Take notice of non-verbal clues indicating when you should start or stop talking. Remember it's always impolite to interrupt. Keep your answers concise.
5. **Be enthusiastic.** Show your interest in the organization and the position by asking appropriate questions.
6. **Be aware.** Tone of voice and body language give clues to feelings and attitudes. Be sensitive to these signals in yourself and others. Face the interviewer in a relaxed, open manner. Maintain eye contact and speak clearly.
7. **Be confident.** Now is not the time to be shy about your abilities, skills and accomplishments, but don't exaggerate either.
8. **Be yourself.** Give the interviewer a chance to find out who you are and what skills you possess.
9. **Be polite.** Thank the interviewer for taking the time to meet with you. Whether you want the position or not, it's always proper to send a thank you letter.
10. **Be professional.** Focus on work or volunteer experiences. Avoid personal issues such as family finances or health issues.

Follow-Up After the Interview

See, that wasn't so bad. You prepared, you asked questions of the interviewer, you presented your skills and abilities and you came off looking professional. Congratulations! But wait, there's more to do.

- Analyze your performance. Are there things you should have done differently? Are there questions you should have asked? Did you do a good job of describing your skills and abilities without sounding too verbose? Ask yourself if you emphasized your strengths sufficiently. Answering these questions will make your next interview even better.
- Stay positive even if you aren't hired. Rejection is part of the job search. The key is to learn from the process.
- Say thank you. A formal letter puts your name in front of the hiring manager one more time, conveys your interest in the position, and allows you to articulate one more time the qualifications you would bring to the organization. Plus it's the courteous thing to do. Compose and mail the letter immediately after the interview. While you can never go wrong with a typed letter, sometimes e-mail thank-yous are appropriate. If you choose to email a thank you letter, keep the letter formal and well-composed.

Sample Thank-You Letter

4567 N. Main Street
Wichita, KS 67590

May 20, 20XX

Jane Smith
Manager, Corporate Relations
Innovative Technologies
13467 N. Harry
Wichita, KS 67888

Dear Ms. Smith:

Thank you for taking the time to talk with me yesterday about the Publicity Specialist position at Innovative Technologies. I was very impressed with the communications group. It was clear that they are a professional, enthusiastic group who enjoys working together as a team.

I was especially excited about the upcoming TechComm project that you described. My marketing internship, along with my writing, public relations and computer skills, match well with the tasks you described as necessary to get the project up and running.

I understand that you will be getting back with me sometime within the next two weeks. If I can provide any additional information in the meantime, please do not hesitate to contact me at 316.978.1234. I look forward to the possibility of working with you.

Sincerely,

Mike Bailey

Mike Bailey



WICHITA STATE
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CAREER SERVICES

Decision-making and information gathering

- Individual career counseling
- Interests, skills and personality assessments
- Career library
- Career Connections network

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Implementation of career plans

- *Hire-a-Shocker* job postings
 - Part-time, full-time, one-time, seasonal and temporary listings
 - On and off campus positions
- Career library
- Career Connections network
- Career fairs

Job search assistance

- *Hire-a-Shocker*
 - Online position listings
 - Resume referral system
 - On-campus interviewing opportunities
- Resume and cover letter critiques
- Mock interviews
- Career library
- Career fairs
- Career Connections network
- Individual job search assistance

