Guide to the Job Interview
**Introduction**

The interview phase is one of the final steps in your career search process. It is a two-way communication between yourself and an organization to determine mutual fit. Most importantly, it is the *organization's opportunity* to find out why you are interested in that specific *position*, in that specific *company* and in that particular *industry*. In other words:

1. Why you? (Know yourself)
2. Why this position? (Know the position)
3. Why this company? (Know the company and industry)

Unconsciously however, the interview is also about the rapport and 'likability' between yourself and the interviewer. Are you someone with whom they could work?

The following guide will take you step by step through the interview preparation process to ensure your success.

1. Interview Basics: An Overview
2. Preparation and Practice
3. First Impressions, Etiquette and Dress

**Interview Basics: An Overview**

Most interviews follow a similar structure:

**Warm-up**

This is generally the first few minutes and involves a greeting and a brief ice-breaking chat. Never underestimate the intangible factors during this stage (and throughout the interview). *Please see First Impressions, Etiquette and Dress* in this guide for a more detailed discussion on how to manage these factors. The interviewer then proceeds to give a brief account of the position and the organization, as well a brief outline of what the rest of the interview will look like.

**Case or Technical Questions**

Certain industries such as business management consulting may involve case questions, while others such as engineering or IT involve specific technical questions. Be prepared to validate any technical skills you have mentioned on your resumé. Take the time to prepare and practice case or technical questions well in advance through studying and verbalizing your answers with friends and mentors. Resources available for such preparation include books (ex: Case in Point- M. P. Cosentino), online forums, industry magazines and speaking to fellow alumni within the industry (see *The Alumni Association Guide to Networking*). The Alumni Association’s *InterviewStream* can also be used to practice answering questions. Remember that the interviewer is evaluating your thinking process and delivery. That is, he or she wants to see how you systematically approach tasks under time pressure, so practice is essential.

**Background and Fit Questions**

The majority of interviews belong in this broad category, that is, one in which questions geared toward finding out how your background, skills, experience, and career goals ‘fit’ with the position and organization for which you are interviewing. Getting ready for these interviews involves being able to illustrate your background, career goals and characteristics through examples. Importantly, these examples should confirm how your background and characteristics validate your current career goals. Any assertions you have made in your cover letter or resumé will also need to be explained.
Questions for the Interviewer

Typically most interviews conclude with the interviewer asking whether you have any questions, an opportunity to impress, that is often overlooked during interview preparation. In fact, many recruiters claim that more is learned about the candidate by their questions than the rest of the interview combined. Being prepared through company and industry research with intelligent questions indicates genuine interest and commitment to the position and company and shows knowledge and understanding of the industry.

Conclusion

Interviewers will usually conclude the interview by telling you what will happen next: whether there will be further interviews or assessments or when you will hear results. This is an excellent opportunity to thank the interviewer again for his/her time and reiterate your interest in the company and the position. Conclude the interview with a positive tone by giving the interviewer a firm handshake, and smile and make eye contact.

Thank You Note

Interview etiquette recommends sending interviewers thank you emails or notes within 24 hours following your interview. If a group interview, take the time to email each interviewer separately, rather than as a group. This is an excellent opportunity to express your gratitude for their time and reiterate your interest in the position and the company.

Preparation and Practice

Research and Positioning

Research will enable you to position yourself in terms of your future employer’s needs. Many candidates are so intent on what they want in a job, rather than what they can do for their prospective employer. In other words, do not spend the majority of the interview talking about how the job will benefit you. Take the time to research and understand the employer’s needs and position and craft your responses accordingly. The way you prepare and research is indicative of the way you will do the job. Thus, if you indicate that you are thorough in your resumé and in your work, you need to be thorough in how you research and prepare for the interview.

Research

Industry: Make sure you can articulate at least two to three major trends affecting the industry. To find this information as a UM alumni member you have access to library resources.

Company: If a paying Alumni Member, utilize access to the UM library, including the “Ask a Librarian Function”. If you do not have access to the UM library, your local librarians are an excellent resource with access to databases such as LexisNexis or ValueLine. In addition, make sure you study company websites and read in detail the “About Us” tabs. If the company is publically traded, their annual financial reports are also available (usually online) and can provide excellent information concerning overall goals of the company, business philosophy etc. Try to find out about any new programs, initiatives or challenges facing the organization and utilize this information to position yourself in how you craft interview answers. Finally, you can also take the time to connect with possible alumni who work at the company utilizing the Alumni Association’s networking tools: LinkedIn, Facebook or Twitter. Reach out to alumni via email and ask them politely for an informational interview on the phone. That is, a brief ten to fifteen minute conversation between an information seeker (a job hunter) and an information keeper (an employee at a target company) in which the seeker then leads the conversation to collect relevant information about the information keeper’s career and his/her path to their current employer. To ensure no conflict of interest, be transparent by ensuring the alumni you are speaking to understand that you are interviewing with the organization. Insights from alumni may provide valuable information as to company culture, the hiring process and their career paths.

News: News websites (Economist, Wall Street Journal etc.) also provide interesting and helpful insights into both company and industry specific information.

Other: Finally, make sure you look up the Linkedin profiles of your interviewers. This information will not only help you remember names, but will give you great insight into your interviewers background.

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1 The Job Search Solution, Beshara, T. 2012. p135
2 What Color is Your Parachute, Bolles, R. 2012. p90
Answering Questions

How long should I speak?
Listen for fifty percent of the time and speak for fifty percent of time. In addition, stick to your time when answering questions. Interviewers may get frustrated with long rambling answers. Take no more than two to three minutes to answer each question.

Fit Questions
Fit questions typically happen at the outset of an interview with a goal to giving the interviewer a better understanding of a candidate’s background and how it fits with their current career goals, company and position. The interviewer will be assessing whether the candidate can substantiate with solid reasons their why they have chosen a particular career path and industry.

Sample questions include:
1. Tell me about yourself.
2. Run me through your resumé.
3. Why are you interested in this position?
4. Why do you want to work at _________?
5. What do you see yourself doing in five years?
6. What are your strengths? What are your weaknesses?

Preparing for the Big Three
1. Your Background: “Tell me about yourself?” Or “Run me through your Resumé”.
By asking this, the recruiter’s goal is to forge a connection with you and also to assess why your interest in the position and organization makes sense. You should take no longer than three minutes to tell ‘your story’. Experts suggest that by focusing on transitions in your life (the part that recruiters care about), you can tell your story in the allotted time of two to three minutes. Dalton’s framework is helpful in this regard:

“First, I pursued hypothesis A. What I liked about that decision was B. What I wanted to change was C, leading me to pursue new hypothesis D.”

Consider the following example:

“I chose to start my career in global public health research so I could apply my attention to detail and quantitative statistical skills with my interest in public health issues. I loved working on large data driven projects for NGO’s to affect positive change. However, I missed having any policy making influence- as that was always up to federal and government bodies, as well as large well-funded lobbies and foundations. Thus, I thought health policy would be a great next step- I could maintain my interest in research backed change, but would be able to apply the change through policy proposals. That is why I joined my current employer two years ago.”

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4 13 Job interview Mistakes to avoid http://www.worktree.com/tb/in_mistakes.cfm
2. Why are you interested in this industry? Assertion-Proof-Tieback Method

Example:
“Why do you want to work in healthcare operations improvement?”

“There are three reasons I’m drawn to working in the operations improvement healthcare field: my love for process improvement, my interest in providing health services that change lives and current policy changes (Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act) that are having a major impact on the medical services industry.

Assertion: I have been interested in operations improvement and healthcare ever since I was a child.

Proof: I still remember trying to speed up patient intake processes as I watched my mom volunteer as a nurse at a major church conference. I love figuring out the best and most efficient way to do things, and provide the best service. My Lean Six Sigma Black Belt certification project at University of Michigan Mott Children’s Hospital was a highlight for me that combined my analytical strength and my values in seeing how improved medical services actually changed children’s lives and health for the better.

Tieback: Finally, I understand that the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act, as well as the aging US population, are affecting major change in the healthcare industry- in response to this, I understand UMHS has some new operations initiatives in the works (including your Emergency Room Initiative and Grand Rounds) and I would be very excited to contribute to their success through my Lean Six Sigma expertise.”

3. “Why are you interested in this company or organization?” Or “Why are you interested in this position?”

This is where you illustrate that you have read and understand the job description and company needs in detail. It is the most important part of your story as companies want to know that you really are interested in working for them. Your research is of utmost importance as it gives you information to position you in terms of your prospective employer’s needs.

**Behavioral Questions**

The main goal of behavioral questions is to assess a candidate’s skills or traits as they relate to the role or position in question. Examples include traits such as integrity, or skills such as analytical ability.

Questions may include:

1. Tell me more about this bullet in your resumé.
2. Tell me about a time when you had to persuade a team member to adopt your point of view.
3. What is your greatest weakness? What is your greatest strength?
4. What makes you different from other candidates we are interviewing?
5. Tell me about a time when you had to deal with conflict on a team. How did you handle it?
6. Are you a team player?
7. Tell me about a time when you made a mistake at work. How did you handle it?

Your answers to behavioral questions should be based on stories and examples. Stories are much more likely to be remembered, and are an excellent way to substantiate claims that would otherwise just be vague assertions (Ex: I think I am really good at being creative and thinking outside the box). An excellent format for structuring responses is:

1. Claim: answer the question. For example: “My top strength is my analytical ability.”

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2. **Substantiate** your claim with an example that follows Context- Action- Result framework (See The Alumni Association’s Guide to the Résumé page 12 for further examples of ACR). For example:

“The order entry processes at a large autoparts manufacturing company where I worked as a consultant was up to ten days late in shipment dates (Context). Through assessing large amounts of data and conducting advanced root cause analysis (hypothesis testing, graphical and regression analysis, pivot tables) and solution generation techniques (FMEA, structured innovation, designed experiments, trials) I was able to uncover a complex sub-optimization flaw that reengineered sales and order entry (Action), saving the company $678,000 per year (Result).

3. **Apply** the example and skill to your prospective employer. For example: “I would bring the same analytical approach to tackling complex operational challenges facing X (company name)’”

**First Impressions, Etiquette and Dress**

Research indicates that interviewers form conclusions within the first 30 seconds of meeting interviewees and then spend the rest of the interview validating that assumption. To ensure a favorable first impression, consider the following:

**Timely Arrival**

Know the exact time and place of the interview. Plan to arrive 10-15 minutes early to allow room for error. Bring copies of your résumé, pen and a notepad in a professional padfolio. If you are expecting case or technical questions bring loose blank sheets of paper.

**Arrival & Small Talk**

Strike a positive tone at the outset of your interview. Always treat every staff member you meet with courtesy and respect- the receptionist may have more power in the decision making process than you realize. Remember to stand when the interviewer enters the room, to reach out and offer a firm handshake, and to smile. If greeted: “How are you?” never forget to answer and reciprocate the question, “Well thank you, how are you?”. While seemingly a small detail, many interviewees may forget to ask “how are you?” in return. All the intangible indicators add up to the overall impression the interviewer is making of your character and personality.

**Dress and Grooming**

Being neat, clean and well groomed is imperative. Always err on the side of caution and wear professional business attire on the day of your interview- business suits in conservative tones such as navy blue, dark grey or black are appropriate with plain shirts or blouses. Avoid excessive jewelry, make-up, cologne or anything that would attract unfavorable attention. Men should appear clean-shaven with a clean, neat haircut. Women should have hair combed and out of the face and eyes.

**Body Language**

Build rapport with the interviewer through positive body language. Do not slouch or lean back in your chair, rather have your feet planted flat on the floor, your arms open (at your side or on the arms of the chair) and lean forward just enough to make eye contact with the interviewing authority. Try to be relaxed yet serious and remember to smile.

**Be Positive**

Always maintain a positive tone throughout the interview. *Never speak negatively about previous employers or supervisors.* Remember that employers identify with employers and by speaking negatively concerning them, you send the message that you may do it with them. This is one of the most commonly repeated errors in interviews and should be avoided at all costs. By blaming a previous employer or speaking negatively of them, you send a message that questions your character and values.

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7 University of Michigan Ross School of Business: The OCD Guide to Interview Preparation. p. 9
8 Confirming first impressions in the employment interview: A field study of interviewer behavior; The Employment Interview: A review of recent research and recommendations for future research
9 The Job Search Solution, Beshara, T. 2012. p. 136
Be Polite and Remember to Send Thank You Notes
Any persons within prospective companies must be treated with dignity and respect. Always send thank you notes- after first round screening interviews, final round and informational interviews. Thank the interviewer for their time and reiterate your interest in the position, reference a key exchange in the interview and reiterate why you are a good fit.

Feedback
It is not advisable to ask for feedback during the interview itself. Should you really want to ask for feedback, keep in mind that many companies had a 'no feedback' policy due to legal implications. Should you approach the interviewer for feedback, don't put the interviewer on the spot by asking why you weren't offered the job. Accept you weren't successful, and ask constructive questions, such as how you could improve, what your weak areas were or if the interviewer has any specific interviewing advice for you. There should be no hint of you wanting to argue a point about your candidancy or that you feel defensive 16.

References


The Interview Kit. 1995. Beatty, Richard H.


