

# THE INTERVIEW

## HOW TO IMPROVE YOUR PERFORMANCE AT INTERVIEWS

The short time you spend in a job interview could have a dramatic effect on your career prospects. It is therefore important that you perform well because no matter how good your career record is, the employment interview remains an important step toward fulfillment of your ambitions. These hints will equip you with valuable information on how to conduct yourself during interviews with prospective employers.

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### BE PREPARED TO ANSWER QUESTIONS LIKE:

- Why did you choose this particular role? What do you really want to do in your next career move?
- Why would you like to work for our organization?
- What do you want to be doing in your career five years from now? Why?
- What was the size of your last salary review/bonus?
- What style of management gets the best from you?
- What interests you about our products or services?
- Can you get recommendations from previous employers? What would they say about you?
- What have you learned from some of the jobs you have held? Which did you enjoy most? Why?
- What have you done that shows initiative in your career?

- What is your major weakness? What have you done about it?
- What do you think determines a person's progress in a good company?
- Are you willing to relocate?
- How do you spend your spare time? What are your hobbies?
- What does "teamwork" mean to you?
- What type of books do you read? What was the last one?

## NEGATIVE FACTORS TO WATCH

During the course of an interview, the employer will be evaluating your negative factors as well as your positive attributes. Listed below are negative factors frequently evaluated during the course of an interview and those that most often lead to rejection.

- Poor personal appearance.
- Overbearing or overly aggressive; a conceited "superiority complex" and "know-it-all" attitude.
- Inability to express thoughts clearly, poor diction or grammar.
- Lack of planning for career - no purpose or goals.
- Lack of interest and enthusiasm - passive and indifferent.
- Lack of confidence - nervousness.
- Over-emphasis on money.

- Evasive - makes excuses for unfavorable factors in record.
- Lack of tact, maturity, or courtesy.
- Condemnation of past employers.
- Failure to look the interviewer in the eye.
- Limp, fishy handshake. (Tip: If you're nervous, use antiperspirant on the palm of your hand!)
- Lack of appreciation of the value of experience.
- Failure to ask good questions about the job and the company. This is most important.
- Persistent attitude of "What can you do for me?"

## PREPARATION FOR THE INTERVIEW

You are being interviewed because the interviewer wants to hire somebody -- not because they want to trip you up or embarrass you. Through the interaction that will take place during the interview, they will be searching out your strong and weak points, evaluating you on your qualifications, skills, and intellectual qualities, and they will probably probe deeply to determine your attitudes, aptitudes, stability, motivation, and maturity.

Preparation is the first essential step towards a successful interview. Company interviewers are continually amazed at the number of applicants who drift into their offices without any apparent preparation and only a vague idea of what they are going to say.

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IT IS IMPORTANT TO:

- Know the exact place and time of the interview, the interviewer's full name (including correct pronunciation), and their title.
- Find out specific facts about the company; where its plants, offices, or stores are located; what its products and services are; what its growth has been; and what its growth potential is for the future. There are a number of online resources providing this kind of information. Refresh your memory on the facts and figures of your former (or present) employer. While you will be expected to know a lot about a company that you have previously worked for, privacy is important, so be careful about the kind and amount of information you reveal.

Prepare the questions you will ask during the interview. Remember that an interview is a two-way street. The employer will try to determine through questioning if you have the qualifications necessary to do the job. In turn, you must determine, through questioning, whether the company will give you the opportunity for the growth and development you seek.

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#### TOPICS YOU MIGHT DISCUSS:

- Detailed description of the position
- Reason the position is available
- Culture of the company
- The type of person that has done well
- Advanced training programs available for those who demonstrate outstanding ability
- Company growth plans and best-selling products or services
- The next step in the hiring process

Dress conservatively and preferably in darker colors. Pay attention to all facets of your dress and grooming.

Take several good copies of your resume to leave with the hiring authority.

Compose a thank-you letter after the interview and mail it that day. Make reference to something discussed in the interview to personalize your letter.

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#### CLOSING THE INTERVIEW AND SOME "DOS" AND "DON'TS" CONCERNING THE INTERVIEW:

- If you are interested in the position, ask for it. Ask for the next interview if the situation demands. If they offer the position to you (and you want it), we suggest you accept on the spot. However, if you need some time to think it over, be courteous and tactful in asking for that time. Set a definite date when you can provide an answer.
- Don't be too discouraged if no definite offer is made or specific salary discussed. The interviewer will probably want to communicate with their office first or interview more applicants before making a decision.
- If you get the impression that the interview is not going well and that you have already been rejected, don't let your discouragement show. Once in a while an interviewer who is genuinely interested in your possibilities may seem to discourage you in order to test your reaction.
- Thank the interviewer for their time and consideration of you. If you have answered the two questions uppermost in their mind:
  - o Why are you interested in the job and the company?
  - o What can you offer and can you do the job?

Then you have done all you can.

- After the Interview, make sure you follow up but do not over do it.

- Last and most important, if working with a recruiter, call the consultant at the recruiting agency who referred you to the position immediately after the interview and explain what happened. They will want to talk with you before the interviewer calls them back. If you are interested in progressing further it will assist if your feelings toward the position are known, together with your perception of what the client's reaction is likely to be.

## TOP TEN INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

### 1. Tell me about yourself

Keep your answer brief, just a couple minutes. Use your resume as a starting point. Use some action verbs that relate your experience to the position.

### 2. What do you know about our company?

This is one of the most important questions in an interview. It shows if you are serious about the opportunity or not. Do your homework before the interview and spend some time online or at the library researching the company. Find out as much as you can, including products, size, income, reputation, image, management talent, people, skills, history, and philosophy. You want the interviewer to be confident that you know about the company but let the interviewer tell you about the company.

### 3. Why do you want to work for us?

This question can be a rough one if you are not prepared. Try and focus on what you can do for the company and how you can contribute to a certain team/project or the company as a whole.

### 4. What would you do for us? What can you do for us that someone else can't?

Give examples of past experience that shows you've had success in solving a past employer's problem(s) that may be similar to those of the prospective employer. Keep everything positive and do not say anything negative about your previous employer.

5. What about this job offered do you find the MOST attractive and the LEAST attractive?

List three or more attractive factors and only one minor unattractive factor.

6. Why should we hire you?

The company should hire you because of your knowledge, abilities, experience and skills.

7. What do you look for in a job?

An opportunity to utilize your skills, contribute to the team/project and to be recognized.

8. Give me your definition of the position for which you are being interviewed.

Keep it brief. Use a definition that lists actions and expected results.

9. How long would it take you to make a meaningful contribution to our company?

Not very long -- you expect only a brief grace period of adjustment to the learning curve and then you are off and running.

10. How long do you plan to stay in your next job?

As long as we both feel I'm contributing, achieving, and growing.

## TEN QUESTIONS YOU MIGHT NOT EXPECT IN AN INTERVIEW

1. Why haven't you found a new position before now?

Finding a job is the easy part but finding the right job is much more difficult. You are trying to be "selective."

2. Have you ever thought of leaving your present position before? If yes, what do you think kept you there?

Challenge is what kept you in your current position but it is not there anymore. Any other time you considered leaving it was due to lack of challenge and growth.

3. What do you think of your boss?

This is a question that can make or break an interview every time. The person talking to you might be your boss either today or in the future and does not want to hear you trash your current or past boss/employer. NEVER talk negatively about this and always try and stay as positive as possible.

4. Describe a situation in which your work was criticized.

Make sure the example you give is a positive one, meaning that even though there might have been a problem with a certain task or project you were involved in, you came away from it and learned something. Always be positive.

5. What other types of jobs or companies are you considering?

If you are going to talk about this subject then make sure that you mention ONLY jobs related to this field or industry. Interviewers do NOT want to hear that you are thinking of becoming an accountant when you are applying for a Web designer position. It tells them that you might not be as serious about staying a web designer. Nobody wants to hire someone that is already interested in changing careers before the position is even accepted.

6. Where would you like to be 5 years or 10 years from now?

This is a tough question unless you have otherworldly powers. Your answer should reflect what you want the interviewer to know about you. Example: "I see myself continuing to learn and grow and take on new challenges." This tells the interviewer that you are interested in moving forward in your career and want to build upon previous success.

#### 7. What are your weaknesses?

This is a very common question. If you say you have no weaknesses then you come off looking arrogant. If you try and use humor then you may appear too dismissive. This is a difficult question and the interviewer wants to see how you handle it. Use a weakness that can otherwise be seen as a strength. Never fall into the trap of seeing the interviewer as other/father/confessor and offer up something that is important to the job. A good example can be, "One of my weaknesses is that I can sometimes take on too much work and it can get me into trouble meeting deadlines but luckily I have learned to manage my time and commitments much better by utilizing a task manager and budgeting my time more accurately."

#### 8. If I spoke with your previous boss, what would they say is your greatest strength and weakness?

Emphasize your strong job related skills and turn your weakness into a positive. Example: "My boss would say my strengths are my ability to problem solve and manage a project through to completion. He would then tell you that my weaknesses are that I have had trouble budgeting my time and saying 'No' to coworkers but that I learned to better manage my time once he pointed this out to me."

#### 9. How much are you looking for?

This is when your pre-interview research comes in handy. Take a look at salary guides for the particular position in your region. These should provide accurate ranges for you to go by. Do not name a specific number but do state that, "The research I have done shows that a person with my experience is usually paid in the X range for a job such as this one." If you are unsure of what the range is then

an answer of "I care much more about getting myself the right opportunity than a certain dollar amount" should get you through this question.

10. What important trends do you see in our industry?

Keep your answer to just a few examples. Do not go into any longwinded explanations about why you think that something is inevitable in the industry. Since you do not know what the interviewer believes to be the trends or what direction the company believes the trends will go keep all answers in a positive tone.

## THE FIRST INTERVIEW QUESTION

Chances are that the first question you'll be asked in an interview is "Tell me a little about yourself", or something similar. It is a great icebreaker and a positive way to get the interview out of the gate. How you answer it can "make it or break" the interview. If you are unaccustomed to interviewing, this question may seem harmless enough. However to an experienced interviewee, you know that answering this question succinctly and thoroughly will create a positive interview result. Although it is meant to "break the ice" instead of starting right off "grilling you" on your technical skills or ambitions, It is also a great opportunity for you to "seed" the interview with some accomplishments you might want the interviewer to know, but wouldn't be aware of by reading your resume alone.

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### SOME THINGS NOT TO DO WHEN ANSWERING THIS QUESTION:

Do not take longer than 2 minutes maximum to answer this question. It is easy to go on and on, starting at childbirth and ending at walking into the interview. What may be incredibly interesting to you may be excruciating boring to the interviewer.

This is not a "confessional". There is no need to describe your personal living style, marital difficulties, problems with an old boss, etc, etc during this question.

Lose train of thought. Keep focused on "introducing yourself" to the interviewer by answering this question, so that they begin to feel comfortable with you. Heck, its even okay if they start to LIKE you, so make the time spent enjoyable for both of you.

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HERE ARE SOME THINGS YOU'LL WANT TO DO WHEN ANSWERING THIS QUESTION:

Hit the Headlines. There are undoubtedly several "highpoints" in your life, these are great anchor points for this question and create a positive impression to the interviewer about you.

Peel the onion, don't bite into it! By hitting only the highpoints, if the interviewer finds something relevant in your background, they will stop you and ask about it. There is no need to "drill down" into excruciating detail with every point you make. Gloss over the details in answering this question, with just "the facts".

Try to bring out the highpoints in your life that show relevance to the type of position you seek. It is DESTINY that brought you to this point, all your life you've been unknowingly preparing for this very moment!

Stay positive. It is easy to start talking about a failed marriage or a missed opportunity at education, etc, etc. but use this limited time to impress your interviewer instead with the positive things you've accomplished.

Limit yourself to 2 minutes. Remember most interviews only run a total of about 30 minutes; don't take up half the time answering this single question.

An example of a good way to answer this question might be:

"I was born the first of 3 boys in my family, my dad was in the military so we moved around a lot. It was tough, but it allowed me to learn how to make friends quickly. Since money was tight in my family growing up, I worked part time at a gas station, It is there where I began my interest in maintenance and "fixing things". I decided to follow my father's footsteps into the Army, as it was a great way to get some additional training, and get some needed money for college. My intentions were to only do an initial tour of duty of 3 years in the military and then go to college, but I found that I really enjoyed the challenges, and responsibilities that I was given and decided to re-enlist for another two tours. During this time, I attended night school and obtained a degree in automotive mechanics. My experience working in the motor pool helped me gain additional insight and knowledge, which allowed me to graduate at the top of my class. Although I was busy with work and school, I still made time for extracurricular activities and I enjoy team sports like softball and soccer. I was selected to be my unit's team captain, which was a great honor for me. I advanced quickly in the military, being promoted ahead of my peers and if I chose to, I would continue to have an excellent career in the military. However, I think I've accomplished what I set out to and I'm anxious to explore an opportunity within the civilian world. Being involved in two conflicts back to back has been a tremendous hardship for my family, I'm proud to have served my country, and now confident that my technical skills and ambition will be appreciated as well outside of the military."

Now, use this example to find your own "headlines" and make your interviewer stand up and say "WOW" with your two minute answer.

## CLOSING THE INTERVIEW

Typically an interview closes at the whim of the interviewer thanking the applicant for coming in and answering a few questions, but a savvy interviewee will take the opportunity to close the interview instead, leaving a positive impression with the interviewer.

There are many ways to close an interview, but the important thing is to not close the interview too early accidentally, watch for clues from your interviewer, both

verbally as well as non-verbal. Standing up and walking towards the door is usually a good clue that the interview is over. At that time, it's advisable to spin up your own close to let the interviewer know where you stand. There's nothing wrong with leaving a clear impression with your interviewer as long as it you do so positively. Even if there is absolutely no chance that you are interested in the position, you never know where this 'meeting' could lead, possibly you may be referred to another division of the company, or for a more senior role, or maybe you struck such a rapport with the interviewer, that he'll mention you to a personal friend as someone that impressed him in an interview. You should never burn a bridge with an interviewer; you never know when or where your paths may cross again.

If you were absolutely convinced that the position you just interviewed for bears no interest at all for you, simply thank the interviewer for his time and show your appreciation for having them consider you for the position. A firm handshake and a smile are always appropriate regardless if the position is one that you are interested in or not. Don't make the mistake on the guidance of a third party recruiter to overwhelm the interviewer with your enthusiasm for a position if there is no chance that you would take it. The recruiter is setting you up to try and get an offer so that they could 'hammer' you in it to collect a fee. Simply be polite and thank the interviewer for their time. It's always best to be honest and sincere. Don't ruin an entire interview by a lousy insincere close.

Alternatively, if you would just die if you don't get the position, a much stronger close would be appropriate. A favorite of mine is, "Thank you very much [interviewer's first name] for the time you have taken to interview me for this position, I am very interested in your organization and hope you are considering me as your strongest candidate. I look forward to taking the next step." Again, a firm handshake and a smile are always appropriate. By using this close, you are not giving away any negotiation strength, but rather gaining power by letting the interviewer know 'I like you! -Make me an offer!' but a bit more subtlety.

Regardless of the type of close you wish to give your interviewer, don't feel like you have to rush out of the office with your hair on fire. If your first contact before the interview was with an administrative assistant, make sure to thank them too on the way out for their hospitality. You might be surprised, but a lot of executives count on their assistants to give them an added opinion, and it's best

to not only try to impress the interviewer but everyone you come in contact with; after all, you may just end up working there someday!

## AFTER THE INTERVIEW - THE FOLLOW UP

Great interview! The countless hours you spent researching potential jobs, agonizing over your resume until it's just right and dressing for success paid off - you just got home from interviewing for your dream job....now, sit back and wait for the call, right? Wrong. Interview follow-up may determine what kind of offer you'll receive (or whether you'll be offered the job at all). A professionally written, positive follow-up letter or email is another opportunity to further distinguish you and make a favorable impression on the mind(s) of interviewers. A well crafted follow up letter shows that you have follow-through skills, ensures that interviewers have your contact information, and keeps your name in the front of their mind when deciding which candidate to hire.

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### HERE ARE SOME INTERVIEW FOLLOW-UP TIPS TO REMEMBER:

- It's not unusual for interviewers to present a business card by way of introduction - these are invaluable because they contain the correct name, title and email (or snail mail) address of the interviewer. If the interviewer doesn't have a card, ask for this information at the end of the interview.
- After the last interview, ask the interview host/coordinator (usually the company recruiter or staffing coordinator) when a hiring decision will be made.
- Within 24 hours, write individual thank you notes or letters to each interviewer and the staffing representative. The basic content and tone of the each letter can be similar, but tailor each to the each recipient (e.g., based on role, anecdotes from the interview, etc.).

- Don't forget this is a thank you letter - show your appreciation for the addressees taking an interest in you and for sharing a part of their day with you. This is a perfect time to do some self marketing, and plainly state why you are the perfect candidate to hire for this role.
- Make sure your letter is perfect - there shouldn't be any typos, misspelling or grammatical errors. Most word processing applications have spell check/grammar check tools - use them! If you're not sure it's perfect, ask someone you trust to proofread it before sending.
- Phone call follow up - It's OK to do a telephone follow-up call 5-7 business days after sending a thank you letter. Like the letter, the follow up call is another opportunity to put your best face forward and make a positive impression. Pay attention to the tone and language of the interviewer - while follow up calls are a great tool, you don't want to over-do it and become an annoyance - this can actually damage your chances of getting an offer.
- If you don't get an offer - don't get discouraged! Thank the employer even if you don't get hired-you never know when your paths may cross again, and you want to leave them with a positive impression. Bottom line - you've worked hard to make a positive first impression; use the follow-up letter and telephone calls to reinforce the notion that you're right for the job and are ready to step up to the challenge and make a difference.

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Bill Gaul (bgaul@destinygrp.com ) With 15+ years experience of helping veterans transitioning to the civilian workplace, after himself graduating from West Point and serving in the Army as a helicopter pilot, Bill Gaul is an Author, speaker and President/CEO of The Destiny Group, given the Weddles Users Choice Award for 2005 and chosen as one of the TOP 50 Career Websites by CareerXRoads, the only veteran specific job board to win this honor for the past 3 straight years. The Destiny Group operates the career centers for more than 50+ Veteran Service Organizations/Associations and has a reach of nearly 3 million veterans through its network. Bill's articles are Copyright 1997-2005, The Destiny Group.

## GENERAL INTERVIEWING TIPS

- Be on time.
- Do not get lost. Call for directions, print directions online at [www.Mapquest.com](http://www.Mapquest.com), and leave early.
- Make contingency plans if you have children (so that a responsible adult can watch them during your interview) and plan for possible car trouble with backup transportation.
- Check [www.Salary.com](http://www.Salary.com) for salary information in your industry and your region.
- Dress the part – dress appropriately while expressing your style within the company’s culture.
- If you have little education, highlight your transferable skills and unique abilities that make up for traditional credentials. Highlight learning opportunities that you have taken advantage of, outside of traditional schooling.
- The nose knows – try not to wear distracting perfumes, or smell of smoke. Use breath mints, groom your hair and nails, and shower before your interview.
- Practice your responses to the common interview questions included in this guide.
- Use appropriate waiting room behavior.

- Check your appearance and your teeth before the interview.
- Do not drink coffee on the way to the interview, as it may spill on you or give you unpleasant breath.
- Bring a work-related magazine to pass the time, in case the interviewer is late. If you have to wait more than 25 minutes, ask to reschedule. Initially, if you are asked to wait more than 15 minutes, tell them you have another appointment to keep, and will it be much longer? You do not want the interviewer to feel rushed, so you would prefer to reschedule.
- Be calm and relax before your interview.
- Bring several copies of your resume. What recruiters do not tell you is that they hardly look at your resume before they interview, so use the interview as an opportunity to stand out. Do not be afraid to reference unique skill sets mentioned in your resume.
- Bring samples of your work or a portfolio, if appropriate.
- Bring a list of references.
- Bring a notebook and a pen. Take notes during your interview to show interest, but do not sacrifice good eye contact to do so.
- Have list of questions ready for your interviewers. The most common closing interview question is, “Do you have any questions for us?”

## FIRST IMPRESSIONS

First impressions are priceless. Be sure to have a firm handshake. Be courteous, use good manners, and address you interviewer respectfully. Stand up straight and confidently. Do not use slang. Have a positive attitude. Finally, sell yourself and be professional.

## ILLEGAL QUESTIONS AND WORKPLACE DISCRIMINATION

Be aware of illegal interview questions. Illegal questions include questions about Race, Color, Gender, Religion, Birthplace, Age, National origin, Disability, Marital/family status, and Pregnancy. If they come up, try to bring the conversation back to appropriate topics.

If you are unable to diffuse the uncomfortable situation, identify the intent of the question and respond indirectly by asking how it relates to the position. You can also upstage and ignore the question by blatantly redirecting the conversation. Mention the error diplomatically and politely refuse to answer the question. Finally, if all else fails, hit the road graciously. Professionally excuse yourself. If you feel you have been discriminated against, contact the proper authority.

There are many organizations that deal with Job Search and Workplace Discrimination. File formal complaints with Equal Opportunity Employment offices, unions, or other company authorities.

If your immigration status is uncertain or in process, do not be afraid to file a formal complaint. You will not need to reveal your legal status. All you need is the name and address of the employer, the number of employees at the company, the dates and time of the discriminatory action, the name of the supervisor and persons involved, and comparison examples of how others were treated differently.

Keep good notes, and file complaints within the time limits for each specific agency!

## INTERVIEW TESTS

Ask, beforehand, if there will be a test so you can prepare if possible. Anticipate possible related tests – like a typing test if you are interviewing for a secretarial position. Practice your skills.

There are a number of Types of interviews:

The Case interview requires analysis and critical thinking skills.

The Stress interview deliberately puts a person in unexpected situations. This is not used frequently.

Then, there is the Direct-indirect patterned interview, which consists of specific questions, and indirect questions like "tell me about yourself."

Finally, there is the Performance interview, which requires you to perform actions that may be required on the job.

If possible, learn which type of interviewing style will be used, so that you can prepare mentally for the experience.

#### OVERALL INTERVIEW GOALS

Make sure the interviewer knows you before the interview. Introduce yourself by phone or email, prior to your in-person meeting.

Have a firm handshake and use good eye contact. Act interested, lean forward, keep your head up, and look directly at the interviewer. Try to eliminate annoying behaviors like ahh, umm, and playing with your hair. Pay attention to your voice, vary your tone, be confident, and project your voice.

Ask some opening questions because one of your goals is to gather as much information about the employer, as possible.

Before the interview is over, make sure you communicate the following:

1. What sort of job you want.
2. What skills are needed for the job.
3. Demonstrate, with specific examples, that you have those skills.

If the interview topics get off track, use control questions to establish a roadmap, by asking, “How did you get into this type of career,” and “Would you mind telling me more about the organization?”

Before answering questions, make sure you understand what is really being asked. Then, answer briefly and in a non-damaging way. Answer the real question by presenting your related skills. Present concrete examples. Quantify when possible. Emphasize results and link up the results and example with doing the job well.

Your overall goal is to impress the interviewer with your communication skills and cultural fit, and ultimately to be offered the job. Before the interview is over, ask for the job.