



Successful Interviewing

QuickGuide

A guide to interviewing that includes quick advise for:

- **Interview Tips**
 - **Before**
 - **During**
 - **After the Interview**

- **Special Interview Situations**

- **Tough & Tricky Questions**



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I. INTERVIEW TIPS

GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS

Interviewing is all about first impressions. Your overall appearance, demeanor and attitude are the keys to success. Bottom line: people hire others they'd enjoy working with, and who share their values and work ethic. With proper research, practice, a polished personal presentation, and a positive attitude, your chances for success are greatly increased. Here's how to prepare:

Before the Interview

- Thoroughly research the organization and position. Research current issues affecting the organization/industry to uncover trends and current events.
- Prepare situational examples detailing major behaviors (leadership, pressure, failure, etc). Be prepared to discuss both successes and challenges, focusing on results. Tailor all responses to the specific organization/industry (very important for career changers).
- Prepare for the 'tell me about yourself' question. A good strategy: Think in terms of 'why should we hire you' and prepare your answer accordingly.
- Prepare relevant/thoughtful questions to ask that subtly highlight your research.
- In advance, prepare a strategy to get to the interview at least 20 minutes early.
- Practice, practice, practice. If English is not your first language, practice speaking clearly. Practice your answers out loud.
- Make sure your interview attire and your personal presentation are perfect. Err on the conservative/business side. The assumption is this is the best you ever look.

During the Interview

- Put yourself in a friendly, self-marketing frame of mind. Smile and be confident.
- Always let the interviewer guide the conversation. Any humor or small talk should be introduced and controlled by the interviewer.
- Listen very carefully to each question and answer exactly what was asked. Cover all the relevant points in your response. Do not interrupt the interviewer.
- Say only positive things about previous jobs and coworkers. For responses on negative issues, emphasize how you turned it into a positive/what you learned.
- You must convince the interviewer you can add value to the organization. Proactively sell your skills and experiences, emphasizing how you can add value.
- If you can't think of an immediate answer ask for clarification of the question. This gives you time to formulate a proper response.
- Give concise, 2-minute-or-less answers, using real-life examples, for all questions. If the interviewer looks distracted or bored, shorten your answers.
- Ask several thoughtful questions about the organization and job when invited to do so. Your questions regarding salary/benefits and vacation are inappropriate until 2nd or 3rd interview. As always, take your cues from the interviewer.
- Your final question should address the decision-making timeline and interview process for the position. Get business cards/contact info for all parties involved.
- Thank the interviewer and if interested in the position, say so. Be enthusiastic.

After the Interview

- **IMMEDIATELY** send a thank you note, whether you think you want the position or not. Depending on the organization/interviewer, either a handwritten or typed thank you note or e-mail may be appropriate. The longer you wait, the less effective it
- will be. Reaffirm your interest in the position and re-emphasize why you'd be the perfect candidate. Re-address any answers if appropriate. Keep it short but powerful.
- A well-timed phone call or e-mail is appropriate if you haven't heard anything by the pre-determined "deadline", but only contact once or twice. Hounding doesn't work.
- Be aware that other business is often prioritized over hiring decisions. Be prepared for delays and respectful of staff, such as receptionists (who may have hiring input!)
- Get all offers in writing. Don't quit searching until you've accepted a *written* offer.

II. SPECIAL INTERVIEW SITUATIONS

GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS

Increasingly, organizations are using special interview situations and techniques to better assess how candidates will perform in the job. This includes panel, group and case interviews, as well as telephone, meal and videoconference situations. It is always important to prepare for the interview situation in addition to the content of the interview.

Panel Interviews

To save time and gain a group consensus, many organizations use panel interviews. Normally, panels are made up of 3-6 people from various divisions, but panel size and makeup can vary greatly.

Threats:

- You will need to persuade each panelist that you're the ideal candidate
- Some panelists may be skilled interviewers, others not, so questions can vary widely
- Questions are asked quickly and may be in a seemingly random order

Opportunities:

- You have a greater chance of eliminating personal bias/personality conflicts due to multiple opinions
- You will not have to interview with each candidate individually and repeat yourself/inadvertently change your answers
- Slow down the discussion (if needed) by asking for question clarification, but be respectful of pre-determined time constraints

Strategy:

- In advance, formulate answers that touch on how this position affects many aspects of the organization. Make sure your answers speak to each panelist's individual role. Give each panelist attention, as this will ultimately be a group decision. Close the interview by asking if you fully addressed each panelist's concerns and make yourself available to follow-up questions.

Group/Team Interviews

In some industries, group interviews are popular in the on-site screening process. These interviews can be set up in myriad ways. Some consist of teams of candidates discussing an issue or case or solving a problem while being observed by organization staff. Others consist of a panel of interviewers asking questions of the entire group and having candidates speak out if they know the answer. In either case, interviewers are determining how candidates fare in a team, social or group setting.

Threats:

- It's often hard to tell specifically how a successful candidate is defined, or exactly what behavior the organization is looking for
- The pressure is high to stand out "in a good way" within the group
- If you are reserved or soft-spoken, you may get lost in the crowd
- You may be at the mercy of your particular group's consensus or actions

Opportunities:

- You can utilize the interaction with other candidates to showcase your talents, in effect providing a 'living work sample'
- With any group of interviewers, the chance for individual interviewer bias is lessened

Strategy:

- Speak up and pay close attention to the task at hand. Be subtly aware of interviewer's non-verbal cues to help determine proper conduct. Do not try to 'outshine' your team members by dominating the conversation. Speak up when appropriate and be respectful when dissenting with other group member opinions. Use constructive criticism and don't be afraid to praise others. Use excellent manners.

Meal Interviews and The Pre-Interview Cocktail Party

These types of interviews are used to observe you in a relatively relaxed, social setting. The interviewers are determining if you fit well with the organization's culture and your co-workers and if you would represent the organization well. This is a very important component of the interview process.

Threats:

- Candidates often get too relaxed and begin letting their guard down, especially when alcohol or excessive humor is involved
- Conversation topics (including politics, religion, etc), sense of humor, manners, your personal habits and presentation

Opportunities:

- You get to observe the interview team in a relaxed social setting. This may help you determine if you really want to work for this organization
- Questions are not being thrown at you constantly so you can somewhat relax and show your 'real' self.

Strategy:

- In any interaction with the interviewer, you're being judged. Don't talk about matters that are too personal, or ask personal questions. Your manners must be impeccable. Choose food that is relatively easy to eat, and don't gorge yourself or just pick at your food. Do not drink (if the interviewer insists, keep it to a minimum), smoke or use profanity. Have a pleasant and open attitude, and never discuss your dietary preferences/restrictions. If you're a vegetarian, have food allergies, etc. try to address these in advance of the interview. Good recruiting coordinator's will usually take care of that question themselves/ be friendly with servers and don't try to pick up the check.

Telephone Interviews

Telephone interviews are primarily used for first-round or screening interviews. The organization is determining if you are a viable candidate they would like to talk with further. Your interview may be with one person or with a group via speakerphone.

Threats:

- There is no non-verbal communication to help determine interviewer reactions
- If English is not your first language, language barriers may be heightened
- Environmental distractions can be an issue

Opportunities:

- You can generally be more relaxed in your own home or office
- You can refer to a copy of your resume and prepared answers and make interview notes

Strategy:

- Schedule the time and place so you can be alone with no distractions. Make sure it's not when your driving/in transit. Have a copy of your resume/cover letter and job description available. If the interview is with a group, jot down each person's name and title when they introduce themselves. With no non-verbal cues, silences tend to be awkward, but when you've wrapped up your answer to each question, simply stop talking. Smile and be pleasant - your attitude will definitely come through over the phone. Speak clearly and stay seated during the call – do not multitask. Thank each person interviewing you, and be sure to ask what the next interview step will be. Be sure to get contact information so you can follow up immediately with a thank you note.

Stress Interviews

Although all interviews are inherently stressful, some organizations deliberately add stressful elements to the interview process. This can take a variety of forms ranging from purposely scheduling interview interruptions to asking obviously illegal questions to making the interview deliberately confrontational. Organizations may do this for jobs that are inherently stressful. The position may require an individual who must deal well with stressful situations.

Threats:

- You may overreact to the situation or take it personally.

Opportunities:

- If you do not appreciate or 'enjoy' the stress, this organization or position may not be for you. Consider it a positive when you find that a job is not right for you before you accept the position.
- Assume that stressful elements are simply part of the interview process.
- You can showcase your ability to deal with stressful situations, increasing your attractiveness to the recruiter

Strategy:

- Relax and 'go with the flow'. Keep in mind that the worst the interviewer can do to you is say no. Do not take the bait and return the confrontational attitude. If you're relaxed and play the game, you should be fine.

Illegal Questions

It is likely in the interview process that you'll be asked illegal questions. This is especially true at smaller organizations, in educational fields and when interviewing with potential colleagues. An Illegal question is defined as any question that isn't related to your ability to do the job. Questions concerning race, nationality, marital status, family issues or background, sexual orientation, religion, social status, etc. are illegal. However, it is important to determine the context in which the question is being asked before crying foul. If the HR rep is asking illegal questions, you may want to think twice before joining the organization, because he/she is not acting professionally (HR should know better). If you're interviewing with a department manager or potential colleague, he/she may not be well versed in the law and may not realize the questions/topics are illegal.

Threats:

- You may overreact to the question and hurt your chances for the position

Opportunities:

- Your answer to the question can be framed in a way that really sells you and showcases your skill in dealing with this type of situation

Strategy:

- Determine why the question is being asked, and answer accordingly. If a potential co-worker asks if you have children, he/she may just be trying to be friendly/getting to know you. If you're comfortable that there's no harm in answering, do so if you wish. If a potential boss is asking about children or family, he/she may really be asking about your commitment to the organization, work hours, etc. The best strategy is to deflect by answering the real question. Once you leave the interview, determine if you truly want to work in that organization. Never say: "that is an illegal question and I refuse to answer". Your candidacy will be ruined and you won't get the chance to think it over later.