

A job interview is one of the most important components of your individual job search. You may have scores of contacts... an honest and dynamic resume... great writing skills... but the interview is when the decision of whether or not to hire you is initially made.

Clearly, this puts some pressure on you. It's therefore important to realize what an interview is not. An interview is not a test. It does not work in the way a quiz or an essay exam works. There are no "right" and "wrong" answers. There are strategies, which you can learn, but you can't study for an interview in exactly the same way you study for a test. An interview is a conversation with a purpose. The purpose is for the employer to get to know you (and for you to get to know the employer) well enough to be able to tell if you would be a good "match" for the organization and the position for which they're hiring. So there are only two things you need to do:* Help the interviewer get to know you

GET TO KNOW THE ORGANIZATION BY ASKING THE INTERVIEWER SOME QUESTIONS

In other words, an interview is in some ways like any other conversation. You will give information, and you will get information. But don't rely on what you may think are your "people skills." Since an interview is such an important conversation, it takes some thought and planning, and every person on a job search (whether they're a "people person" or not) needs to learn how to think and practice for this special conversation called an interview. One last thought before we give you some tips. You may think that you'll be nervous during an interview. You will be. So go ahead: be nervous. Don't worry about it (There are ways to relax, such as concentrating on your breathing, and making sure you're in clothes in which you feel comfortable and look great.). But nervous or not, just make sure that you:* Help the interviewer get to know you.

GET TO KNOW THE ORGANIZATION BY ASKING THE INTERVIEWER SOME QUESTIONS.

Organize your thoughts. Interviewers will be interested in four main areas of discussion:

- *Your skills*
- *Your motivations (what interests you, what you think is important in a job)*
- *Your personality (what you are "like")*
- *Your knowledge base*

You need to be able to discuss each aspect of your background. Prior to the interview, it would be a good idea to think about these a little – even make some notes to yourself. Let's examine each of these four areas in turn.

Your Skills

Skills are, simply, what you do well. These can be grouped into a few major areas: skills with things, skills with information or data, and skills with people. You could be good at setting things up, like in a lab or shop. You might be good at researching – using the internet or the library to find new information on a subject. Again, you might be "good with people," but how? Can you motivate people on a committee or team? Can you delegate tasks, or interview well?

Your Motivations

These are the interests or values that "drive" you at work – that make you want to do the work required by a specific organization. Some of these might be broad, like independence — maybe you value being trusted enough to work on your own, and then doing it. Or, conversely, maybe being part of a team is more important to you – does the job for which you're interviewing offer an opportunity to work with a team? Maybe you think service to the public is important, or helping women with small children, or maybe you think that medical devices are really interesting (which interests would be good matches for an insurance company, a non-profit organization, or a biotech firm, for instance).

Employers will also be interested in why you selected their particular career field to pursue, and why you're interested in their particular company. What they make, what they sell, or what services they provide will have to interest you or motivate you in some way, in order for you to work well there – and in order for them to consider you as an employee. We'll talk more about how to research an organization in a little while.

Your Personality

Your personal characteristics are not the same as your skills. For instance, you may be an organized person (and also be able to use Excel, which would be a kind of organizational skill). Maybe one of your real qualities is patience (like with children, or difficult customers). You could be serious, and or have a sense of humor. Are you confident? Do you have stamina, or focus, as an athlete or musician, for instance? Are you thoughtful? And how have these qualities helped you in the past?

Your Knowledge Base

You may have gotten A's on all your Sociology projects, but that won't mean much unless you can talk about them – talk about what you know. What did you learn in college? Did you learn how new State legislation impacts the welfare system, and then schools? Have you studied what marketing strategies work, and for what businesses? Do you have the language to describe graphic design programs? These are all examples of knowledge you may have gained in school. You probably also know some things as a result of your family background, as well as from the pursuit of your own interests.

Organizing your thoughts according to the categories above takes a little time, but it can be very exciting and illuminating as you discover what you really have to offer. **A very important tip:** always be prepared to give actual behavioral examples of when you demonstrated a skill, or an interest (motivation), or a personal characteristic, or when you utilized your knowledge. For an employer, the best predictor of future behavior in the organization is your recent past behavior. So, know your resume. Tell the truth about what you know your assets to be, and give examples of how those assets have come in handy in the past.

GETTING TO KNOW YOUR EMPLOYER

Prior to the interview, you should research the organization as thoroughly as you can. This takes time, and if you're a senior in college, time is what you lack. But you need to do your best. If you don't know anything about the organization, when you go into the interview, the employer will think you don't care – that you are only after them for money. This is not a good way to begin a relationship.

So – with whatever time you have – try to discover what the organization's products, services, clientele, location(s), previous and projected growth and future prospects are. You may also uncover problems within the organization – areas in which you could assist, or that might make you reconsider your desire to work for them. Prior to the interview, try to find out something about:

- The type of organization it is – your most basic question
- The products and/or services the organization provides, and to whom
- The structures and divisions within the organization
- The size of the organization and number of employees
- The typical entry-level positions, and typical career paths within the organization
- The organization's profit/revenue/sales performance, and/or past history or growth
- The organization's competitors within the industry, or (in the case of a non-profit), those organizations doing the same kind of work
- The organization's plans or projections for the future
- The organization's relationship with its employees, and its reputation for integrity
- Career and professional development within the organization, and training provided
- The organization's affiliates and subsidiaries, if it is a larger corporate entity
- AND... try to know as much about the job you're applying for as possible

This may seem like a lot of information to obtain, but there are various sources that will at least give you a start:

- The Pathways website. Check under "Weblinks to career resources" (NEC page > Student Development > Career and Life Planning > Weblinks to career resources.) Any number of links there will lead to information on specific companies.
- Company literature – annual reports, if they are a publicly held company; descriptive brochures on products and services; and so forth. Usually a quick phone call will get you these.
- Current magazines such as Fortune and Business Week, and articles in The Wall Street Journal. Go to Danforth Library and use the Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature, checking in the index by company name or industry.
- It's possible to get information on the job you're applying for simply by asking the employer for the job description prior to the interview.
- The NEC Career Advisory Network (CAN). This is a network of over 80 graduates of NEC, in a variety of career fields, who have volunteered to provide career information to you. Ask CLP how to access CAN, or look into NEC alumni networks on facebook or LinkedIn.

Again, prior to the interview, making some notes wouldn't be a bad idea.

PRIOR TO THE INTERVIEW

Organize your thoughts, and get to know the employer

As we discussed above.

Practice!

With a friend, parent, roommate, or with a career advisor at Pathways. Professionals at Career and Life Planning will conduct mock interviews upon request, allowing you to encounter a "real" interview situation. They will provide constructive feedback and suggest possible areas of improvement for you to consider. To facilitate the evaluation of the mock interview, a videotape of the interview could be made for the two of you to review. This provides you the opportunity to critique and evaluate your interview performance.

Get the Details

Where the interview is to take place, the phone number in case you get lost, and the exact time the interview will take place. Plan to arrive early.

Dress Appropriately

You can find good, short articles on how to dress (as well as on other aspects of the interviewing process) in the magazine *Planning Job Choices*, available for free at Pathways. Dressing for an interview will depend somewhat on the type of job you're interviewing for. A non-profit agency or a school will have a more relaxed dress code than a business. For instance, in a corporate environment, a suit for men is always appropriate; in a non-profit agency, a tie and jacket (not the same as a suit) will perhaps be more appropriate. Likewise for women, a business interview will require a suit (pants suit or matching blouse, blazer and skirt), whereas an interview in a school may just require a well-coordinated combination of clothing that reflects professionalism.

When in doubt, err on the side of "over-dressing." But always, for men: well-trimmed hair, mustaches and beards. For women: use make-up moderately (if you use it at all). And for all: don't overdo use of jewelry, and no body-jewelry other than the traditional earrings for women; don't forget to shine shoes and clean your fingernails (hey, dirty fingernails have been done, unfortunately), and no strong perfumes, colognes or aftershaves.

TYPES OF INTERVIEWS

Every interview you have will be different, but interviews can also be categorized into some broad types. The following types of interviews are best viewed as "phases" of the overall process rather than separate interviews. A phone interview and screening interview may be combined or, in a small organization, the president or manager may combine all phases of the interview from screening to selection into one interview.

Screening Interview

This is usually the first meeting you have with a prospective employer. It is usually general in format and relatively short, lasting 30-45 minutes, or even less. On-campus interviews and recruiting fairs are examples. The purpose of this interview is to reduce the number of candidates to a manageable number.

Follow-up or Second Interview

The number of candidates has been reduced to a manageable number, but the final two or three candidates have not been selected. The purpose of this interview is to identify the finalist for the position. This interview is usually on-site at the employer's location and often several people will interview the candidate. Additional information about the organization and the position will be received.

Selection Interview

With the final candidate pool, the position's supervisor or Corporate Manager for that branch will usually be the primary interviewer, however others may be involved as well. During this interview, you will want to have all your questions answered so that you can make a decision if you would like to accept the position if offered. Salary, benefits, professional development and additional areas should be discussed at this time (not earlier). The decision to offer the job to an individual is made at this stage after a review of the finalists' interviews.

These phases of the interview process may take on different formats, rather than just an individual, face-to-face exchange of information. Interview phases will vary widely, depending on the type of organization (private, government or non-profit), the size and culture of the organization, and the personalities of the people involved. Interviews may also occur over the phone, in a group with many interviewers present at once, or during a meal at a restaurant.

Regardless of the type of interview, you will be presenting yourself and your qualifications, but you will also be evaluating the organization. You will need to decide if you would consider working there based on information and impressions acquired in the interview. Simultaneously, the interviewer is judging your potential as an employee, as well as presenting her/his organization in an informative and attractive manner. With careful preparation, you can interview confidently and effectively with each employer. See a Pathways career advisor for assistance.

STYLES OF INTERVIEWS

Each interview will also have a style of its own, depending again upon the type and culture of the organization, and the individual interviewer. Here are a few interviewer styles to be aware of:

Directive Interview

Following a set agenda, the interviewer will gather information, providing direction to you by the questions asked or answers she/he provides. You may feel as if questions are being "fired" at you constantly. Pause before answering and take a few moments to compose yourself and your answers. Silence is not a bad thing; it shows you are taking the questions seriously. This interview can allow for your own questions, if you have prepared adequately.

Stress Interview

A confrontational style is used through which the interviewer will attempt to unsettle you. You are purposely placed in a pressure situation to see how you respond. The interviewer may begin the interview with "I'd like to begin the Interview by asking you what you would like to discuss during the next 30 minutes?" This style of interview is rare, except in the case of high-pressure sales positions.

Non-directive Interview

Some interviewers take a fairly informal approach to interviewing and therefore, they fail to provide direction to you. A casually posed question within a casual atmosphere often promotes a casual response on your behalf. If this continues, you need to provide direction in the interview. In order to do so, be tactful and change the direction in a positive way. Your ultimate goal is to convey to the interviewer what she/he needs to know about you and your interest in working for the organization.

STAGES OF THE INTERVIEW

There is usually a logical ordering of events in an interview and knowing the order in which things typically happen can help you feel more confident. This is not to say that things will always happen in this order, but the following is the format of a standard interview.

Breaking the ice

Always shake hands and introduce yourself. Relax! Most likely the opening of the interview will include small talk. Be friendly and responsive. Feel free to initiate a discussion of some very general topic of conversation such as weather, travel or comment on an object in the office. The interviewer will likely review your interviewing agenda with you and confirm your interest.

Company Information Sharing

The interviewer will usually begin the conversation with a general description of his or her organization, and the position for which they're hiring. Listening carefully is the best strategy here, although questions are very much appropriate. Make a "mental note" of questions and responses to the information you may have, so that you can respond appropriately during the next phase of the interview.

Questions from the Interviewer

After describing his or her organization, the interviewer will begin asking you questions in earnest. You will be asked questions about your education and training, your work experience, and the skills that you have attained from work and interests. Remember how you organized your thoughts about your skills, motivations, and personal characteristics, refer to your resume when answering, and always give examples of when you used your best qualities to advantage.

Solicit Questions

An interview is not an interrogation! It's a two-way process in which both interviewer and interviewee gather information and form impressions. It's generally a good idea to wait on your questions until you are invited to ask them, but always have questions to ask! A lack of questions infers that you are not interested enough or alert enough to be inquisitive. Remember what you learned from "researching" the organizations, and don't ask a question concerning things that you could have learned had you done your homework. Do not ask about salary in the initial interview. If the interviewer brings it up, however, then you are free to discuss it openly. If you are not invited to ask questions, politely ask if you may.

Tying It Together and Closing

It is during these final few minutes that any loose ends are addressed and any other questions that either the interviewer or interviewee need answered in order to make a decision are asked.

Follow-up

Here is yet another opportunity to make a good impression. Write a thank you letter right after the interview. So many people forget this step that if you don't forget you'll stand out! If you haven't heard anything, wait at least one week and then call. Inquire as to the progress of the candidate search and ask about your current status as a candidate. If you don't get the job, ask for some feedback. This is perfectly appropriate. Suggestions from past interviewers can help you strengthen weak areas and polish up for future interviews.