

Campus Academic Resource Program

Practical Interview Skills

Handout Objectives:

- Discuss ways to prepare for your interview
- Provide pointers for presenting a positive image upon arrival to your interview
- Suggest ways to present a positive first impression at your interview
- Offer advice to help you succeed during the interview
- Advise you on how to follow up with potential employers after your interview

Preparing for the Interview

The time you devote to preparing for an interview is crucial to your success during the interview process. Here are some steps you should take when preparing for a job interview:

- *Research your interviewer/potential employer/company:* Researching essential aspects of the company you are interviewing with, and being ready to incorporate that information into your interview responses, are vital to your success. Knowing the company's structure and leadership, goals and mission statement, products and services, and their latest press shows your potential employer that you are committed to the success of the company.
 - Not only does knowing the company's information help you express to a potential employer why you are an asset to their company, a familiarity with the company will also help you decide whether or not the company culture is right for you.
- *Be ready to discuss your resume:* Know what is on your resume and what is not on it. Whether it is a time gap in-between jobs or a specific experience you have had, interviewers will often ask you to expand on certain aspects of your resume. If you have other experiences related to the job position that you have not mentioned yet in your resume, this may also be your opportunity to discuss those experiences.
- *Clean up and utilize your social media accounts.* Your social media accounts should reflect the same level of professionalism that you would present during a job interview. Even though you are not obligated to "friend" your employer, employers can often still see aspects of your profile. Avoid posting comments and photos that are questionable and that you would not wish your employer to have access to. Rather, use social media to your advantage. Follow leaders of your industry and network on Twitter. This shows your interest and commitment for growth within the field. Connect with professionals and groups in your field on Linked-In.
- *Practice the type of interview you will participate in:* Although the one-on-one interview is the most common method for interviewing candidates, you may experience other types of interviews depending on the industry that you are applying for. It is important to practice the type of interview you will participate in to prepare yourself for the possible environment. The following are the five main types of interviews you may see:
 - *One-on-one Interview*
 - *Panel Interview: an interview between two or more interviewers and a candidate*
 - *Group Interview: an interview involving multiple candidates at the same time*

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- *Skype Interview*
- *Phone Interview*
- *Practice interview questions:* The ability to communicate clearly and concisely is one of the most important skills that employers look for. That is why it is important to practice before an interview.

The Elevator Pitch:

The elevator pitch is a one-minute pitch to a potential employer expressing who you are and why you are the perfect candidate for the job position. Practicing the elevator pitch helps you to formulate how you will describe some essential facts about yourself. It answers the following questions:

- Who are you?
- What do you do?
- What are you looking for?
- Why are you the perfect candidate for this position?

Exercise 1: The Elevator Pitch

Scenario: You step into the elevator on the ground floor on the way to your interview on the 17th floor. By chance, the hiring manager for the company you are applying to, whom you met when you submitted your resume, walks into the elevator with you. You introduce yourself and explain that you are here for the interview.

- *The hiring manager asks:* Who are you? Why should I hire you? What can our company gain from you as an employee?

In this exercise, you will create a 1-minute elevator pitch describing who you are and why you are qualified for the position that you are applying to. You have two minutes to brainstorm your response. When the two minutes are finished find a partner and take turns presenting your elevator pitches to one another. Also take time to provide each other with constructive feedback once you have both had a chance to present your elevator pitches.

Arriving at the Interview

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First impressions are a major deciding factor as to whether or not you will be offered the position you apply for. The way you dress, act, walk, and speak when you arrive at your interview will have the greatest impact on your potential employer. Below are general guidelines to help you project a positive first impression:

- Look polished, confident, and professional. Keep hair, facial hair, and nails neat, and do not show too much skin. All of this depends on the job you are applying for.
- Dress for the job you want or whatever makes you feel most confident.
- Dress formally for the interview, even if employees typically wear casual attire. Business formal or business casual is recommended.
- Arrive 5-10 minutes early. Factor in traffic, commute time, and parking.
- Try to relax and get comfortable. Stay in the moment.
- Greet everyone at the interview. Give a firm handshake.
- Have a small notebook with you to write down any important information.
- Be professional and polite. Be sincere and be confident.

Discussion: How do you manage nervousness?

Take a moment to reflect on the ways you remain calm before a job interview, oral presentation, or any other situation that requires you to speak in front of people. Try to answer the following questions in the space provided as best as possible. During the brief discussion with other members of this workshop, take notes on the techniques that other students use to help defeat nervousness that you would like to try in the future.

- What techniques do you use to diffuse nervous energy?
- How do you overcome pre-interview anxiety?
- Do you think nervousness before a job interview or oral presentation is only a bad thing? If so, why do you think this? If you think some degree of nervousness is a good thing, then state why you feel this is the case.

Specific Tips for Phone and Skype Interviews:

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In addition to the general guidelines in the previous page, be sure to do the following before the start of your phone or Skype interview.

- *Make sure your surroundings are professional.* Avoid background noise and distractions. Even if a potential employer cannot see your surroundings during a phone interview, the atmosphere of a room will affect the way you act.
- *Test your technology.* Use an Ethernet cable to avoid connection issues. Before a Skype interview, check the lighting of the room and how it will affect your appearance on camera. Remember that first impressions matter. Fluorescent lighting can make you appear washed out on screen.
- *Have hard copies of the company's information, job posting, your resume and cover letter ready to use as a reference.* However, if you will be using notes during the interview, make sure you are not constantly looking away from the camera, as this will project an unprofessional image.

During the Interview

During an interview, your verbal and non-verbal communication are equally important. When responding to your interviewer, keep the following in mind:

- Think before you speak.
- Be positive, sincere, clear, and concise.
- Do not focus solely on your career goals. Show enthusiasm for the company and how you can currently be an asset.
- Use examples to illustrate your points.
- Engage your interviewers by asking questions.

Pay attention to your body language:

- Maintain eye contact.
- Smile. It brings enthusiasm to your voice.
- Do not cross your arms over your chest. Do not fidget.
- Maintain good posture.

Strategies for Responding to Some Common Interview Questions:

- *What are your strengths and weaknesses?* Frame your strengths to the job's requirements. Discuss how you are addressing your weaknesses. Employers want to see how you plan to overcome those weaknesses if you were to be hired for the job position.
- *Why are you leaving your current job?* Never disparage your former employer. Focus on the positive aspects of your experience in your current job.
- *Where do you want to be five years from now?* Research the normal progression of your career and position yourself in the career ladder. Show that you are committed to the company and hope to take on more responsibilities and move up the ladder. Never talk about leaving the company.

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- *What kind of salary are you looking for?* Avoid answering this question by focusing on the job position you are interviewing for. If you are pressed to answer, provide a range that you are comfortable with rather than an exact number.

Strategies for Responding to Some Tough Interview Questions:

- *How would you describe yourself?* Focus on your qualifications and why you are interested in the position.
- *“Please give me an example of a time when you had a problem with a supervisor and how you approached the problem.”* Provide the situation, followed by the actions taken, and the results. Be sure to focus on the positive aspects.
- *Why should I hire you?* Show that you are qualified for the job and that you are willing to challenge yourself. Show your excitement to work at their company.
- *Your resume states that you do not have experience in this position. What qualifies you for this position?* Describe how your skills and previous experiences (professional or otherwise) have prepared you for the position’s environment, pace, and/or responsibilities.

List of Other Common and Tough Interview Questions:

These questions were compiled from the Forbes.com article “How to Ace the 50 Most Common Interview Questions,” written by Jacqueline Smith.

- Why are you interested in working for [*insert company name here*]?
- Why was there a gap in your employment between [*insert date*] and [*insert date*]?
- Tell me about an accomplishment you are most proud of.
- Tell me about a time you made a mistake.
- What would you look to accomplish in the first 30 days/60 days/90 days on the job?
- Discuss your resume. Discuss your educational background.
- Give a time when you went above and beyond the requirements for a project.
- Who are our competitors?
- What was your biggest failure?
- What motivates you?
- Who is your mentor?

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- How do you handle pressure? Criticism?
- What is the name of our CEO?
- What are your career goals?
- What were your bosses' strengths/weaknesses?
- What makes you uncomfortable?
- What are some of your leadership experiences?
- How would you fire someone?
- What do you like the most and least about working in this industry?

Exercise 2: Practice Interview Questions

- In this exercise, you will practice responding to popular interview questions posed by employers. With a partner take 3-5 minutes to ask each other three of the following questions:
 - How would you describe yourself?
 - What are your strengths and weaknesses?
 - Why are you leaving your current job?
 - Where do you want to be five years from now?
 - Why should I hire you?

Asking Follow-up Questions:

At the end of every interview, you will be asked if you have any questions. This is an important time to not only clear up any confusion you may have about the job or the company, but to also figure out whether or not the company is the right fit for you. Remember that during an interview, your interviewer is not the only person assessing your fit in the company. You should also be considering whether you would want to work for this particular employer. In addition to this, asking follow-up questions will also help you stand out among the candidates.

- Some examples of follow-up questions include the following:
 - What are the qualities of someone who excels in this role?
 - What does a typical day look like in this role?
 - What is the growth opportunity within the company?
 - What are some challenges that this role will face?
 - What are the key goals that this role should focus on?
 - What kind of achievements would equate to success in this role?

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- What are the next steps?

Specific Tips for Group Interviews:

Keep the following in mind when interviewing with a group of candidates:

- *Focus on why you are the best fit for the company, not how you are better than everyone else in the room.* Being over competitive can present a negative image.
- *Listen to the answers from other candidates, and think about how you can build on what they have said.* Teamwork and being open to others' ideas are crucial skills that employers look for.
- *Show eagerness when answering questions.* This helps you stand out from others while not appearing too competitive.

Specific Tips for Phone and Skype Interviews:

As a general guideline, wait 1-2 seconds before responding to make sure that the interviewer has finished speaking. Doing so will also avoid interrupting your interviewer if there is a lag.

- Skype Interviews:
 - Address technical problems as soon as possible so that there are no interruptions during the interview.
 - Look at the camera, not the screen. Eye contact is very important.
 - Be sure that your upper body and hands are visible on the screen. Remember that body language matters.
- Phone Interviews:
 - Answer the phone with your name to avoid awkward beginnings.
 - Standing up while responding to questions can help you sound more confident. However, do not talk and walk at the same time, as doing so will make you sound breathless. Remember that during a phone interview, the employer will only have your voice and your responses to rely on when making a decision whether or not to hire you.

After the Interview

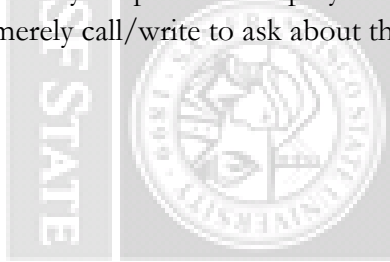
Not following up with your potential employer after an interview is one of the top mistakes among job seekers. The steps you take after the interview serve to reinforce your professional image and remind your interviewer who you are. Remember, they might be in the process of interviewing numerous candidates. Therefore, it is critical that you do the following:

- *Send a thank you card/e-mail.* Thanking your interviewer for taking the time to consider you as an applicant is important in creating a positive and lasting impression. It is also recommended to mention something that stood out during the interview, such as an interaction with the interviewer, to help him/her remember you.

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- *Follow-up with an employer:* Check in with your potential employer about a job decision one week after the interview. Do not merely call/write to ask about the job.



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