

# INTERVIEWING

## Interviewing

The interview is one of the most important steps in the job search process, and thorough preparation is essential. To interview effectively you need to know what you have to offer, what the employer is like, and the kind of position you want. Being able to answer questions with relevant details and in a conversational manner is very important.

### First Impressions

It is always important to make a good impression on the interviewer. Arrive at least 10 minutes early for the interview. Look polished: dress professionally, avoid perfume or cologne, and wear only simple jewelry. Most importantly, look confident: Give a firm handshake, make good eye contact, and smile!

### The Purpose of an Interview

Employers are trying to get enough information about your background, strengths, and level of interest to determine if you meet their needs. As a prospective employee, you need to be learning as much as you can about the position and workplace so you can decide if they are what you want.

Interviewers have three major criteria in mind when interviewing candidates:

- 1) Can you do the job? (skills)
- 2) Will you do the job? (interest/motivation)
- 3) Are you a good fit with the organization? (personal qualities)

As such, they will be asking a variety of questions to determine if you match their needs. There are many types of interview styles or formats. Described below are some of the most common. You may encounter any or all of these, sometimes in the same interview.

### Traditional Interview Questions

Traditionally employers have asked questions designed to help them gain a feel for who you are and what makes you unique: your motivation level, your background and strong points, your interest in the position, and the aspects of your personality that may affect how you perform on the job, such as organization, interpersonal skills, decision making, teamwork, etc. The questions asked might be seeking expansion of information presented on your resume, or focus on the qualities and skills that you can bring to the table.

#### Sample Questions:

- Tell me about yourself.
  - Keep your answer to one or two minutes, don't ramble.
  - Give a short version of your resume—general goals, skills and background.
- Why are you interested in our organization? What interests you about this job?
  - Project an informed interest: know products, size, income, reputation, people, history, etc.
  - Talk about their needs, how you can make a contribution to the company goals.

#### More Questions:

- What areas of your study have excited you the most? How have you explored them beyond your course work?
- Describe your most rewarding academic experience.
- What is your GPA? How do you feel about it? Does it reflect your abilities?
- Since attending college, what is the toughest decision that you have had to make?

- What previous work experience has been the most valuable to you and why?
- What are your biggest strengths? Your biggest weaknesses?
- What accomplishments are you most proud of?
- How do you evaluate success?
- How do you deal with pressure?
- If I asked the people who know you well to describe you, what three words would they use?
- What do you really want to do in life? How do you plan to achieve your career goals?
- What things are most important to you in a job?
- What type of work environment appeals to you most?
- What criteria are you using to evaluate the company for which you hope to work for?
- In what ways do you think you can contribute to our organization?
- Why are you the best candidate for this position?

### Behavioral Interview Questions

Based on the premise that the best way to predict future behavior is to examine past behavior, behavioral interviewing is now widespread among recruiters. The technique involves asking a series of questions designed to get the candidate to talk about how he or she handled certain situations in the past. Interviewers feel that they can make more accurate hiring decisions by focusing on an applicant's past actions and behaviors, rather than subjective impressions of a candidate's self-proclaimed qualities.

Here's how it goes: Typically, the interviewer will have determined several behavioral characteristics that would be most important for on-the-job success

**INTERVIEW ADVICE**

Career Services offers a variety of services to help students and alumni prepare for interviews.

**Interview Workshops**

These workshops are offered on many Tuesdays throughout each semester. No sign-up is required. See the schedule on the insert pages.

**Mock Interview Program**

Career Services provides scheduled, one-hour appointments during which you can practice interviews. The purpose of this practice session is to help you learn what to expect from real interviews and improve the way you present yourself. The videotaped interview is replayed for visual feedback. In addition, the interviewer will provide you with a constructive verbal evaluation. Call or stop by to schedule an appointment.

**Drop-In Counselor Advice**

Discuss your questions about interviewing with a drop-in counselor. Counselors are available Monday through Friday from 8:30 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. and until 7:00 p.m. on Tuesdays in the Bank of America Career Services Center. If other students arrive ahead of you, you may need to wait from 15-30 minutes.

**Interview DVDs**

View DVDs discussing proper interview techniques. The tapes are available between 8:00 a.m. and 5:00 p.m. Monday through Friday in the Career Library.

and will base questions on the characteristics identified. You will be asked to share situations in which you may or may not have exhibited these behaviors. You won't be able to theorize or generalize about events, rather, you will be asked to provide details. The interview will be a more structured process that will concentrate on areas identified by the interviewer, rather than on areas that you may feel are important.

**Sample Questions:**

- Give me an example of a time at work when you had to deal with unreasonable expectations.
- How have you handled a situation in which the information presented to you was conflicting or there was no clear right or wrong answer?
- Tell me about a time when an unexpected event interrupted your work

plans. How did you handle the situation? What was the outcome?

- How have you handled the challenge of developing your skills in a situation where feedback and/or coaching was delayed or limited?
- Give me an example of a time when you were asked to do something you had never done before.
- Give me an example of a situation in which you were especially skillful in making a decision quickly.
- Tell me about a time when your ability to reward and encourage others created positive motivation.
- Give me an example of a time when you actively defined and evaluated several alternative solutions to identify a way to resolve a problem you encountered.
- Tell me about the most important time in your work history when you successfully prioritized your goals and objectives.
- Tell me about how you used realistic schedules and timetables to generate a plan leading to a specific goal.
- Creativity often means stepping back from regimented ways of thinking. When have you been able to break out of a structured mind set and intuitively play with concepts and ideas?
- Tell me about a time when you felt it necessary to compromise your own immediate interests in order to be flexible and tolerant of another person's needs.
- Give me an example of a time when your timing, political awareness, and knowledge of how groups work enhanced your ability to generate a change.
- Tell me about a time when your understanding of issues associated with a problem provided you with a foundation for generating a good solution.
- Give me an example of a success you have had in the use of delegation.
- Describe a complex problem you faced at school or at work that required you to carefully analyze the situation, information, or other details.

Follow-up questions will test for consistency and determine if you exhibited the desired behavior in that situation: Can you give me an example? What did you do? What did you say? What were you thinking? How did you feel? What was your role? What was the result? You will notice an absence of such inquiries as, Tell me about your strengths and weaknesses.

**How to Prepare for Behavioral Interview Questions:**

- Think of recent situations that demonstrate some of the most commonly sought after behaviors, especially leadership, teamwork, initiative, planning, and customer service.
- Prepare short descriptions of each situation; remember **STAR**
  - **S**—Describe the Situation.
  - **T**—What Task(s) did you identify that had to be completed?
  - **A**—What Action did you take?
  - **R**—What was the Result of your actions?
- Be honest. Don't exaggerate or omit any part of the story.
- Be specific. Don't generalize about several events; give a detailed accounting of one event.

One of the supposed benefits of this technique for employers is that candidates cannot prepare for these questions in advance. However, you can help yourself by anticipating the types of questions you might receive and dredging your memory for examples of past behavior. You may be able to guess at some of the questions by analyzing the job requirements beforehand.

**Case Interview Questions**

Another common interview format, especially for consulting firms, is the case interview. It is also probably one of the most difficult and feared formats around. In it, you'll be asked to analyze a hypothetical business problem and come up with solutions on the spot. Case interview questions are designed to test your ability to think analytically under stress, with incomplete information. Every case interview problem presented is trying to judge all or some of the following:

- Your ability to identify key concepts, process thoughts in an orderly manner, and separate important facts from irrelevant facts.
- Your insight and knowledge of relevant issues in a business problem scenario. Some examples: competitive threats, barriers to entry, competitive advantages, target marketing, pricing strategies, etc. Your goal is to recognize which type of business analysis is appropriate for the specific case(s) presented.
- Your ability to come up with a new approach to a problem, find a hurdle that nobody else had noticed, offer an insightful remark.

### Sample Case Interview Questions

- You are consulting for a major personal care products manufacturer that mainly produces and distributes products such as soaps, shampoos, conditioners, etc. Every year their profits are shrinking. What could be the cause of this?
- You are in marketing with one of the largest and fastest growing supermarket chains in the country. This chain is considering opening its own bank branches in its supermarket locations. What is your advice?
- Your client is a small regional bank in the U.S. They are considering closing branch locations, and diverting their resources to telephone and Internet banking facilities. Should they implement this strategy? What are some of the basic areas they need to research this strategy is recommended?

### Some Helpful Hints:

- Listen carefully to the material presented. Take notes if you want to, and be sure to ask questions if you are unsure about details.
- Take your time. If you need a minute or two to collect your thoughts and work through your answer, say so.
- Offer a general statement or framework up front to serve as an outline for your answer. As you proceed with your answer, draw on the outline of your framework.
- Focus on key, broad issues first.
- Orient your answer toward action. Suggest specific steps that can be taken to solve a problem, not just theory.
- Be conscious of resources. If it relates to the problem, ask your interviewer about the budget, capital, and other resources that the client can allocate to the solution.

To do well, you need to enjoy the intellectual challenge of analyzing tough problems and coming up with reasonable solutions.

### How Can I Best Prepare for Interviews?

**Know yourself, first.** Know what kind of job you want and what makes you feel qualified. Think about what information you want to include in your responses. Don't go in "cold" and expect to do well, but don't memorize, either.

**Research the employer.** First get the basics, including the company's size, location(s), product(s), or service(s). Then look for details relevant to the position you seek: job description, training, advancement paths, etc. You may need to look several places to get this information, including:

1. **The company's information session, if they are holding one.** You can find a list of information sessions under "Events" in Nittany Lion Career Network.
2. The Employment Resources section of the Career Library in the Bank of America Career Services Center.
3. Company home pages on the Internet, many of which can be found from links in Nittany Lion Career Network.
4. The Business Library on-line at [www.libraries.psu.edu/business](http://www.libraries.psu.edu/business). You can link to Hoover's Online, Factiva, Standard and Poor's Net Advantage, and more.
5. Contacting the local chamber of commerce or the company's public relations or personnel department.
6. Talking with someone in the company or agency in the type of position of interest to you.

**Use Career Services.** Take advantage of the variety of free services:

1. Interview skills workshops are repeated often during much of the semester. No sign-up is required. The location and times are printed in this Guide and posted at Career Services.
2. You can also practice, using Career Services Mock Interview Program. Through this program you can participate in a videotaped, simulated interview which is replayed so you can receive feedback from a trained interviewer. To make an appointment, see the staff assistant in the Bank of America Career Services Center anytime between 8:00 a.m. and 5:00 p.m. on weekdays.
3. Meet with a career counselor to discuss your fears, experiences, and questions.

### What Is the Best Approach to Answering Questions?

Recruiters are surprisingly accurate in sensing "canned" answers. These canned responses don't give interesting

or reliable information about you. When you answer, remember these guidelines:

1. There is no single right answer. It's often how you answer that is more important than the exact content.
2. Be honest. Don't pretend, for example, that you were sure about your major from the very start if, in fact, you weren't. The details about how you chose your major may be much more interesting and communicate some very positive things about how you make decisions.
3. Don't look for ulterior motives. Some questions are asked purely out of curiosity or to help you relax. Recruiters are not going to conclude that you lack sufficient interest in the field if your favorite course was not related to your major. A genuine answer is almost always more interesting.
4. Give details and examples. General responses become boring and don't help the recruiter get to know you. You need to be specific. Details illustrate your points and make answers more vivid and memorable. Therefore, when discussing one of your strengths, give an example or two illustrating that strong point. When mentioning the course you liked most, give some details to illustrate what you liked and why.
5. Stay focused and don't ramble. Give details that are relevant but don't start telling long stories that include unnecessary details. Some candidates make the mistake of repeating themselves when they haven't thought of how to wrap up the answer, too. Respond directly and succinctly.
6. Keep the position in mind. What details can you give that are relevant to the type of job you are interested in? When you think of some, try to remember to include them. For example, if you worked at a summer camp and are now looking for a sales position, you can mention how you were successful at persuading the participants to enjoy your programs.

### How Can I Best Respond to a Question About Salary?

Fortunately, it is seldom asked during the initial interview. When asked, you need to answer carefully. It is usually best to give a salary range and to have an idea what the range for your field is. Salary information for some occupations

is available in the Career Library in the Bank of America Career Services Center.

### What Types of Questions Should I Ask?

You make the best impression if you ask questions about what you are seriously interested in concerning the company and job. What do you want to know more about? Don't be afraid to be specific, because specific questions convey genuine interest.

If many of your questions have been answered by good company literature, tell the recruiter, mentioning some of the more important questions and perhaps even a brief summary of what you have learned.

Initially you should stay away from questions about benefits and salary. This is usually discussed during the second or site interview. Above all, do not ask for the same information that is in any company literature you received.

### Questions to Ask Employers

- Can you describe a typical first year assignment?
- What are the most challenging aspects of the job?
- How would you describe your organization's culture?
- Why do you enjoy working for your organization?
- What initial training will I receive?
- What opportunities for professional growth does the organization offer?
- How will I be evaluated and promoted?
- What are the characteristics of a successful person at your company?
- What are the organization's plans for future growth?
- What is a typical career path at your organization?
- What are the biggest challenges facing the organization/department?
- What is the management style of the organization? Of the department?
- What are the goals of the department? Of the organization?
- How much decision-making authority is given to new employees?
- In what ways is a career with your company better than one with your competitors?

### Points to Remember

1. The recruiter saw something in your resume that was impressive. Go into your interview remembering that this person already likes what he/she saw.
2. The interview is a two-way conversation. Try to relax and enjoy the opportunity.
3. Be specific, not vague. You'll be much more interesting.
4. Think about your answers ahead of time. Don't memorize, but have a focus and don't ramble.
5. Be prepared to describe why you are interested in that employer and give specific characteristics about the kind of position that you want.
6. Sell yourself. If you don't state what your strengths, skills, and accomplishments are, the recruiter will be unable to see you as a good candidate.
7. Genuine self-confidence and confidence in your ability to perform well at the job are your best assets in any interview. This attitude of confidence is one of the best indicators to the employer that you are the person needed for the position.
8. Don't forget to assess the company to see if you would like to work for them.

### WHAT EMPLOYERS WANT YOU TO KNOW ABOUT INTERVIEWING:

#### (Comments from recruiters who conducted on-campus interviews at Penn State)

- Attending information sessions is an important tool for both recruiter and student. They provide an opportunity for both to meet and for the student to show interest in the company. Come to the interview prepared to talk about past experiences. Remain calm and relaxed.
- Understand your skills and abilities accurately. Know as thoroughly as possible the job you are interviewing for. Be prepared to answer why the position is a match for your skill, abilities and education.
- Practice to become comfortable in an interview setting so your personality comes out. Participate in mock interviews.
- Know why you would be a good fit for the job and sell yourself.
- Take the time to do some research on the company and about the position you are interviewing for.
- Be prepared to answer "Why this company?" and "Why this position?"
- Do your homework...research the companies you are interviewing with to have a good dialogue during your interview. It is clear to the recruiter if you are not prepared for the interview. Be able to cite specific examples and articulate your answers.
- Be energetic and look to develop a rapport with the interviewer. Sell yourself.
- Be sincere and outgoing; treat the interview like you would any important business interaction.
- Come to the interview prepared to discuss details from your academic or work experience. Articulate specific examples. In addition, develop detailed questions about the company you are interviewing with in advance.
- Ask questions that will engage the recruiter in conversation as well. Develop good conversation skills.
- Try not to be nervous. Slow down, think before you speak, be prepared to talk about your experiences and accentuate your successes, especially in the context of a behavioral interview technique.
- Practice eliminating words such as "like" and "you know" from your communication.
- Key elements: Positive attitude, good career direction, thorough company research and attend info sessions.
- Be honest and give good assessment of marketable skills. Be excited about the field and the position for which you are interviewing for. Have enthusiasm for what we are doing.
- Be curious. Ask a lot of questions.
- Be confident of what you have learned, your accomplishments and your skill set.

## The Site Interview: What to Expect

The site visit or interview is the make or break point for job offers. If you are offered an interview at the employer's facility, you can consider yourself in a strong position. But don't think that an offer is a "sure thing." Rather, think of this phase of the interview process as the way for both you and the employer to get a more in-depth assessment of each other.

An employer is offering you the opportunity to convince all of the principal players that you are the right candidate. After a site interview you can make a more informed decision about the position, the people, the environment, long-term career opportunities, and the community.

- **Learn as much as you can about the company** by reading the company's literature, looking at their web page, and reviewing industry and business publications. You can also talk to employees who are Penn State alumni to learn more about the company through LionLink [www.psualumcareer.com/career](http://www.psualumcareer.com/career).
- If you receive an offer for a site interview, **respond promptly and professionally**. If you are not interested in that company, decline politely. Never go on a site interview for "practice." Don't schedule back-to-back site interviews.
- If you accept the offer for a site interview, you should ask the person coordinating the trip who will be responsible for making the arrangements for the trip and if you should **keep track of your expenses**. Most medium- and large-sized companies (as well as many smaller ones) will pay your expenses, but some will not.
- **Request a schedule and directions to the hotel and the facility before traveling**. Maintain a phone number for your contact person.
- You should plan to **bring several extra copies of your resume**; copies of paperwork (e.g., applications) that you may have forwarded to the employer; names and contact information of your references; an up-to-date transcript; the names and addresses of past employers; and a notebook and black or blue pen.
- Travel lightly to **avoid checking luggage**, if you can. When you arrive, make a trial run to the office location. At the hotel inquire about any messages or packages that may have been left for you. Note: You should verify prepayment, but be prepared for a credit card imprint.
- Many times you can **expect a full day of interviews** including a lunch meeting. During your site interview, you may meet potential co-workers, department managers, and potential supervisors, all the way up to the president of the company. The interviews may be one-on-one or panel and could range from 1/2 hour to 2 hours in length. You may also participate in a tour.
- If you attend a lunch or dinner meeting, remember to **remain professional**. Although the atmosphere may seem more relaxed, the employer is still evaluating you. Abide by the following: Do not order alcohol, Do not talk or chew with your mouth open, Do not swear.
- You should **be prepared to discuss salary**, understanding what the going rates are for people in your field and how certain geographic areas affect salaries. For more information on salaries, talk to a drop-in counselor in the Bank of America Career Services Center. Remember: Your best bet is to let them bring up the discussion of salary.
- Often the final meeting of the day is with your contact person or employment manager. During this session they often offer answers to any final questions you may have, explain follow-up procedures, and discuss reimbursement of your expenses. **Make sure all of your questions are answered**.
- Most companies only offer site interviews to candidates they are seriously considering, so you may find yourself with an offer at the end of the day or very soon afterwards. **Do not feel compelled to accept an offer on-site**. You should take time to consider the offer in terms of your needs and in comparison to other offers you may have.
- After your interview, you should **manage expenses according to the company's policies**.

- **Send out thank-you letter(s)** to the person(s) who will be making the hiring decisions. You may also want to write thank-you letters to people with whom you want to continue to network.
- Feel free to **contact the company if you have not received a response** in the agreed upon timeframe. Also contact any of the interviewers for whom you have additional questions.

If you decide that the job and the employer are right for you, don't feel shy about telling the employer that you are eager to join their team. But, never be afraid to decline an offer if it is not right for you. Remember that long-term career satisfaction is the goal of the whole process.

### MISSING A SITE INTERVIEW

When you accept an invitation for a site interview you are making a commitment to that company. Employers have reported students not showing up for site interviews, after extensive arrangements have been made. This is not acceptable behavior.

If you are no longer interested in an opportunity or cannot make an interview, it is professional courtesy to contact the employer and let them know of your situation. Employers generally understand about situations changing. But, simply not attending a scheduled interview will ensure that you will not be considered for a position with that company in the future. Your actions can also jeopardize Penn State's relationship with the company, making interviews difficult for future students.

Career Services expects that students using our Nittany Lion Career Network services maintain professional behavior. In fact, when you register to use the Nittany Lion Career Network system, you must agree to maintain professional conduct throughout the recruiting process. Because our expectations are as such, if we receive a report from an employer of a missed site interview, we will block your Nittany Lion Career Network account until you contact the company to explain your situation and apologize for your behavior, copying Career Services on any correspondence with the company regarding the situation.