

Job Interviews 101

Your resume and cover letter have secured you that all important phone call inviting you to come in and talk about your qualifications for the job, but don't think you're in the clear yet. The interview is the last and sometimes highest hurdle standing between you and the job you want. All the lesser competitors have been weeded out and you're up against the best of the other applicants. And, unlike your resume and cover letter, a live interview doesn't give you any chances to start over or set it aside for an hour if you're not happy with it. Which doesn't mean you can't still knock the hiring committee's socks off. The keys to this are knowledge and preparation.

What to Bring

1. In a crisp, clean folder you should have:

- Several copies of your resume and cover letter, 5 is usually a good number
- A copy of the job posting
- A list of questions you'd like to ask the hiring committee
 - Good Question: What do career paths within the company typically look like?
 - Why: This tells the company you're interested in sticking around for a while, even after you've outgrown the current position, and are probably a good investment for them.
 - Bad Question: What do you do here?
 - Why: This tells the company you didn't even care about them enough to visit their website and do a little basic research. Next?
- A notepad or fresh paper to take notes as needed.
 - Note the interviewers' names. You'll want them later.
- A few working pens that won't leak, test them beforehand
- A list of references, even if you don't expect to be asked for them. But don't offer them unless asked.
- Any other documentation you were asked to bring when you were contacted for the interview
 - Make sure to ask the person scheduling your interview this if they don't bring it up themselves.

2. Knowledge of the interview structure. Don't be afraid to ask questions about what you'll be facing when you receive the call for an interview. Does the company prefer to ask case questions or do they stick to a more typical list of skill and informational questions? You might even be able to find out ahead of time who will be interviewing you.

3. Understanding of how your skills and qualifications relate to the position. Review your past achievements, challenges and, yes, even your past mistakes. Be prepared to talk about a few of them in detail. Employers like to hear actual examples of how you've put your skills to work; it gives them a better idea of how you get things done. Think about how you:

- Deal with difficult customers or co-workers
- Handle decisions when there is no one to ask or back you up
- Handle errors and problems
- Deal with surprises and sudden changes
- Work in groups
- Teach other people how to do things
- Things you're not good at, but are working to improve
- How you handle leadership roles
- What makes you reach above and beyond the call of duty for a job

4. Knowledge of the company. All that research you did for your cover letter can help you out some more. Take particular note of the types of attitudes and personalities shown by successful members of the company. Employee blog or twitter accounts can help you do this.
5. Knowledge of the industry. Even if this isn't the field you plan on working in for the next 20 odd years you should have a general knowledge of what its standards are and what advances are currently being made. Being able to name some specific issues, resources, or relevant technologies when answering questions about your skills and knowledge, and what you do to keep them sharp, is important.
6. Knowledge of who you're here to see and where you can find them. You should have the name of your main contact and what floor and room you're supposed to meet him/her at written down.
7. A small bottle of water and a packet of tissues. Just in case.
8. Proof of your identity.

Presentation

1. Choose your interview outfit carefully and well ahead of time. Keep in mind the image and attitude you want to project when picking the color and style of your outfit. Modern, but conservative? Authoritative? Bold and creative? If you want some guidelines, swing by their location to see what employees typically wear.
 - Blues are classic, respectable colors. Trustworthy and reliable.
 - Black helps convey leadership and authority.
 - Red is a bold color that suggests power and ambition.
 - Grey and white are colors associated with logic and attention to detail.
 - Greens give an impression of calm, growth, and prosperity.
 - Yellows and purples are unique, lively colors. Playful and creative.
 - Lighter or muted versions of colors make you seem more friendly and approachable.
 - Darker versions or sharp contrasts (I.E. Navy and white) make you seem more formal and serious.
 - Bright colors are usually seen as a symbol of confidence.
2. Take extra care to be sure your appearance is clean and neat. (Shine your shoes, check clothing for loose seams, get your hair cut, trim your nails, etc.)
3. Avoid wearing a lot of cologne, make-up, or jewelry. This is work, not a night out on the town.
4. Give yourself plenty of time to get there, but don't go in more than 10-15 minutes early. Being late can make you seem rude or disorganized, but arriving too early can be nearly as bad. It gives your interviewers the choice of rushing through things to get to you faster or feeling guilty/uncomfortable for leaving you waiting so long.
 - If traffic is unexpectedly good and you arrive well before your interview, take the time to review your notes one last time and make sure you're mentally ready.
 - If you are unavoidably detained (stuck in traffic behind a three car pileup, etc.) call and let the interviewers know. This is basic courtesy and shows you value their time.
5. Be enthusiastic. Try to convey a sense of genuine interest in the job and in the company as well.
6. Be confident. You are not here to beg for a job. You are here because you have a lot to offer your next employer. Remember that.
7. Make sure your cell phone is turned off or silenced!

Interview Questions Types

There are many different angles companies can use to assess your skills and attitudes during the interview. You may be asked to take skill tests or provide samples of your previous work, but by far the most common form of assessment is the interview question. There's more to interview questions than just the classic 'Why should we hire you?' though. They come in a variety of different types.

1. Informational Questions – This type is usually fairly straightforward and fact oriented. The interviewer is looking for specific points, qualifications or values in your answer.

- Can you tell us a little about yourself?
- Why are you a good fit for this position?
- How many years of experience do you have in customer service?

2. Behavioral Questions – Most employers find past actions a useful measuring stick for future behavior. They want detailed examples of how you've handled certain types of issues and opportunities.

- Tell me about a time you handled an angry customer?
- Tell me about a time you went the extra mile on a project?
- Tell me about a mistake you made and how you handled it?

3. Case or Situational Questions – Related to the behavioral question, but less focused on past behavior. These are about how you will assess and work through a new situation you are presented with.

- You're in the store alone and it is ten minutes to closing. A customer comes in with a long list of questions. How do you respond?
- The project you're working on is only three days away from its completion deadline, but you know you'll have just enough time to finish it. Suddenly your boss comes in and tells you he needs you to give a last minute presentation at the board meeting tomorrow. How do you handle this?
- A customer in your line is taking forever to dig out their coupons and pay for their items, chatting away at you the whole time. People behind them in line are starting to look really annoyed and impatient. What do you do?

4. Technical or Skill Questions – These are often used to help gauge your familiarity with skills, software or equipment that relates to the job.

- If we asked you to build a website from the ground up, what is the first step you would take?
- Which of these three programs would you use to create a testable model of our newest car design and why?
- Walk us through the steps of your pre-flight check?

5. Critical Thinking or Brainteaser Questions – You are not necessarily expected to know the answers to many of these off the top of your head, what the interviewer is usually looking for is how you would go about finding the answer. These are questions where you definitely want to lay out your thinking process for the interviewer and show your work. That paper you brought might come in handy.

- How many used cars were sold in the U.S. last year?
- How many basketballs would it take to fill an Olympic sized swimming pool?
- Which is worth more, a pound of dimes or ten pounds of pennies?

6. Trap or Honesty Questions – The interviewer is going to ask you about some unfavorable things to see if you'll be up-front and honest with them. These can also be used to test your awareness of your own limits and flaws. Beware negativity. This is an area where discretion and caution are most definitely needed.

- What is your biggest weakness?
- What was your least favorite job and why?
- What are some things that annoy you about your co-workers?

7. Unscripted Questions – Questions that seem to be completely random or irrelevant. They are designed to see how well you respond to surprises and think on your feet. The employer wants to see what you do with a question you had no way to prepare for.

- Who was your favorite 80s rock band?
- If you could drive any vehicle in the world, what kind would you like?
- What animal best represents your personality?

Tips and Question Examples

1. This is not a speed test. It's okay to take a moment and think through your answer.
2. It is good to be thorough, but don't spend fifteen minutes on one question. Try to give a short summary that addresses the main points of the question, then ask if there is any part they'd like you to expand on.
3. Never say anything you wouldn't want your sweet, old grandmother to hear.
4. You need to be honest in your answers, but you should also use discretion. There are some things your interviewers don't need or want to know.
5. Stay on track. A five minute detour into a related topic will not hide the fact that you still haven't answered the question.
6. Don't be afraid to ask for clarification or more details.
7. At the end of the interview, ask about the next step. It never hurts to have an idea about the timetable they expect to make their hiring decision on.

Example Informational Question: Are you a team player?

Bad Answer: No (Or even yes, if you stop right there. Support your answer with examples.)

Good Answer: Yes. In my last job, I was part of a four person team responsible for redesigning and improving the company's primary website. We only had 2 months to get all the coding and content built, tested, and ready for public release. Doing such a large job in that timeframe requires good, consistent communication to ensure everyone knows what has been completed and what still needs more work. It also needs the team members to be able to trust each other to come through with their contributions in a timely, professional manner and not sacrifice quality in favor of convenience. We not only finished the site by the deadline, we got a note from the head of our department praising our work.

Example Behavioral Question: Tell me about a time you dealt with a difficult situation?

Bad Answer: A few months ago we had a lot of people call in sick. I had to do a ton of extra work because of that.

Good Answer: We had flu season hit extra hard one year, over a quarter of the company was out sick. Including both the senior members of the project I was involved in. Fortunately I was able to use my contacts to get the notes from their last planning session with the department head. With this new information in hand I rallied the remainder of the group and made sure that all the changes and suggestions that had been approved were implemented. We all put in more than a few hours of overtime that month, but we got the project completed on schedule and to specifications.

Example Case Question: Your children have opened a lemonade stand as a way to invest their allowance money. Yesterday, a Wednesday, they had the stand open from 4pm to 7pm and only sold 3 cups. What should they try differently?

Bad Answer: Sell something else. (While there may be some truth in this possibility it is only one possible consideration and has no supporting details.)

Good Answer: Well, there are actually a number of factors that could be contributing to their poor sales. Weather, traffic flow for both that time and location. Price and product quality should all be considered when planning their next attempt. The kids should check the forecast, bright warm days are likely to get more people out of the house and thirsty. They should also spend some time looking at what the busiest times are for foot traffic in the neighborhood. Are there early morning joggers? Late afternoon strollers? They need to choose a spot for their stand that is close to at least of the more heavily traveled routes. Each batch they should be sampled to make sure it isn't too sweet or too sour. They might even consider giving small samples out to customers on certain days. Lastly, they should examine their price. They should calculate the total cost of materials for one batch and how many cups it will give them. Portion sizes should be limited to standard 8oz cups. Charging twice the cost of materials is a good starting point to both make money and avoid deterring customers. So a batch that cost \$5 in materials and makes 10 cups could be reasonably sold for \$1 a cup.

Example Technical Question: You'll be driving the company van regularly as part of this position. How would you rate your driving skills?

Bad Answer: Okay.

Good Answer: I'm a very conscientious driver. I make sure to use my signals, stay aware of the other drivers around me, and take weather conditions into account. I've never gotten a ticket. I have been in one minor accident, but it was due to another driver running a red light and clipping my front fender.

Example Critical Thinking Question: Given 25 swimmers and a pool with five lanes, what is the minimum number of heats needed to determine the three fastest swimmers in the group? - CKM Advisors
Data Scientist job candidate

Bad Answer: 6 (Or any single number with no explanation of how you arrived at it.)

Good Answer: Are the swimmers in each heat being timed? If they are, then you will only need 5 heats to determine the 3 fastest. Once all 25 swimmers have raced you can simply compare all 25 times and pick the top three. This gives both the fastest and most accurate result.

If the swimmers are not being timed it will take at least 6 heats. The winners of the first 5 heats would compete against each other in the 6th heat and the first 3 to finish would be counted as the fastest. This does sacrifice accuracy though, by not allowing an across the board comparison. Just because a swimmer was first in one group does not guarantee they were faster than non-winning swimmers in the other groups.

Example Honesty Question: Why is there a gap in your work history?

Bad Answer: I was just between jobs. (Avoid any answer that might make you look lazy or like you were avoiding work. Generally any positive or constructive use of the time is acceptable. Having kids, looking after family, volunteer work, travel to broaden your horizons, etc.)

Good Answer: After getting laid off when the company downsized I wasn't feeling all that great. So I took some time to volunteer at the local food pantry. It was really rewarding to give back to the community like that and I think the positive boost it gave my attitude helped me land my next job a few months later.

Following Up

When the interview is over, remember to follow up! All your contacts/interviewers should get a brief thank you note or email. Preferably the same day as the interview, but no later than the day after. Most thank you notes don't give you much room, so keep it simple. Make each note a little personal by mentioning some positive point you and the person exchanged during the interview. Thank them again for the chance to talk in person and reinforce your interest in the job and company. If you haven't heard anything by the end of the expected hiring timetable a gentle inquiry by phone or email on how the process is progressing isn't at all put of place.

Dear Shelly,

Thanks for the opportunity to talk about new web design trends and the growing demand for interactive online marketing. It was exciting meeting you, Pat and Dan. I look forward to continuing that talk and finding out more about what Computrend has in store for the online world.

*Have a great week,
John Doe*

Reference Material and Question Lists

Why Were You Fired - Interview Question Responses

<http://jobsearch.about.com/od/interviewquestionsanswers/a/interviewfired.htm>

Where Do You See Yourself X Years from Now – Interview Question Responses

<http://jobsearch.about.com/od/interview-you/qt/in-five-years.htm>

50 Most Common Interview Questions

<http://www.glassdoor.com/blog/common-interview-questions/>

20 Job Interview Questions and Answers

<http://jobsearch.about.com/od/interviewquestionsanswers/a/top-20-interview-questions.htm>

Worst Interview Answers

<http://jobsearch.about.com/od/interviewquestionsanswers/a/worst-interview-answers.htm>

Top 10 Oddball Interview Questions for 2015

http://www.glassdoor.com/Oddball-Interview-Questions-LST_KQ0,27.htm