

Interview Preparation

“Bring several copies of your resume and three references,” the hiring manager said when she called the candidate. He called back an hour before the scheduled interview time and requested to reschedule, saying his references couldn’t come with him to the interview.

This is a true story. It is one of the infinite numbers of ways to destroy the single chance that you get to leave a stunning impression on your prospective employer.

Starting your career means walking the fine line between monotony and bizarreness: originality. While there are many ways to screw up, there are also several things you can do to improve your chances of leaving a positive impression during the interview.

Know the Company

When you’re not pacing in your home feverishly worrying about the interview, you should be learning everything you can about the company or person you want to work for. Look up their Web site as well as their competitor’s Web sites. Search magazines, newspapers, and journals. Learn everything they’ve been up to lately, particularly in your area of expertise. (*See Company Research Handout*)

Know the Job

Understand what you are getting yourself into. Know the job description inside and out. Take this one step further and picture yourself doing the daily tasks that the job requires. This will help you to match your skills, experience, and interests with the job. It is also highly recommended that you talk to others who have worked in similar positions. They can tell you things that you would never learn from searching the company Web site.

Know Yourself

This requires serious self-reflection. It means understanding who you are, and what you can and can’t do. This will help you to be as straightforward with your interviewer as possible and make for a much more striking presentation.

- Analyze your strengths and weaknesses.
- Make decisions about your career goals; what you want to do, why you want to do it, and where you want to do it.
- Prepare yourself to discuss any work experiences that relate to the position.
- Determine the work environment that is important to you.
- Be ready with specific examples that show how your positive traits will be an asset to the company.
- Demonstrate your ability to get along with others, leadership skills, and group interaction skills by discussing involvement with clubs, fraternities, sororities, intramural, sports, etc.

The Importance of Practicing

- Write out answers to typical interview questions (*a list can be found on page 2 of this handout*).
- Use a friend, or tape-record yourself answering questions. Practicing out loud is important!
- Meet with your program coordinator in the Office of Cooperative Education and Career Services to either review your answers or conduct a mock interview.

Types of Interviews

The Initial Interview

For an employer, this is a way to quickly narrow the candidate pool and screen out individuals, such as those who can’t bring their references along. It may take place on-campus, at the company (on-site), or over the telephone. It usually lasts about a half hour or less. Remember what they say about first impressions? It hasn’t changed. Some employers make a hiring decision based on this interview only.

On-Site Interviews

This interview is used to assess your “fit” with the organization. Interviews are offered to the most promising candidates and usually involve a good portion of the day. During such a visit, you may meet

with one person or many people from a variety of departments. You will have the opportunity to discuss job responsibilities, your qualifications and interest, salary, and benefits. This is an excellent opportunity for you to evaluate the job, atmosphere, and people with whom you would be working. Some organizations also administer tests of various types at this time.

You may have to travel in order to attend an on-site interview. Make sure you understand the circumstances before accepting the invitation. Here's how travel arrangements for second interviews may be handled:

- The employer representative will take care of everything, including expenses.
- You will be expected to make all or part of the arrangements, and the employer will reimburse you for all or part of the expenses later.
- You will be expected to take care of everything, including expenses.

Telephone Interviews

“What do you want?!”

Bad day or not, this is not a good way to answer the phone when you're involved in the job search process. Companies often screen applicants over the phone, and it's essential to not only answer politely, but to be prepared:

- Any telephone calls during your job search could be an employer. Answer the phone appropriately every time; first impressions are important.
- Be sure to inform roommates and parents of the importance of taking careful telephone messages for you.
- Your greeting on your answering machine should be businesslike.
- Keep the following items next to your telephone: paper, pen, copy of your resume, date book, a log of companies you have contacted, your own course schedule including major exams/projects, and a copy of the job description.
- Express your pleasure at receiving the call, but do not act like you have won the lottery.
- Ask for a minute to turn down the stereo, close the door and set the stage for privacy and quiet.
- Your voice is your only means to express energy and enthusiasm.
- Use pauses effectively -- think about what you will answer or ask next.
- Do not hang up before you know the next step and thank the interviewer for calling.
- Get the interviewer's full name, title and phone number.

Behavioral Based Interviewing

If your past haunts you, beware. Those who use this method of interviewing operate on the premise that the best predictor of future behavior is past behavior in similar circumstances. The interviewer will ask how you *did* behave rather than how you *would* behave. To prepare:

- Recall recent situations that show favorable behaviors or action (example: course work, work experience, leadership, teamwork, initiative, planning, and customer service).
- Be ready to describe the situation, your action, and the outcome or result.
- Be sure the outcome or result reflects positively on you even if the result itself was not favorable.
- Be honest. Do not embellish or omit any part of the story.

Examples of Behavioral Interviewing Questions

Decision making/problem solving: How did you make the decision to come to RIT and major in __?

Leadership: Have you ever been a member of a group where two members did not work well together? How did you handle this?

Motivation: Give me an example of when you went above and beyond the call of duty.

Communication: Have you ever had to "sell" an idea to a group? How did you do it? Did they buy it?

Interpersonal Skills: Tell me about the most difficult or frustrating individual that you have ever had to work with, and how you managed to work with that person.

Planning /Organization: What do you do when your schedule is suddenly interrupted? Give a specific example.

Interview Questions

Asked By Employers

There are standard areas of questioning by interviewers. Review the following examples so you are prepared to answer the most common questions.

Personal

- Tell me about yourself.
- Why did you choose to interview with our organization?
- What do you consider to be your strengths? Weaknesses?
- Have you ever had any failures? What did you learn from them?
- Of which three accomplishments are you most proud?
- What motivates you most in a job?
- Have you had difficulty getting along with a former professor/supervisor/co-worker? How did you handle it?
- Have you ever spoken before a group of people? How large?
- Why should we hire you rather than another candidate?
- What do you know about our organization (products or services)?
- How do you think a friend, professor, or former supervisor would describe you?
- How do you think you can make a contribution to our company?
- How do you solve difficult problems?
- Give me an example of your experience working as part of a team.
- What are your career goals?
- Do you prefer to work under supervision or on your own?
- Do you prefer large or small organizations? Why?
- Describe how you are able to work on several assignments at once?
- How do you feel about working overtime?
- How do you feel about travel?
- How do you feel about the possibility of relocating?
- Describe your ideal job.

Education

- Why did you choose your major? This university?
- Do you think you received a good education? In what ways?
- In which campus activities did you participate? What did you learn from them?
- Which classes did you like best? Least? Why?
- Do your grades accurately reflect your ability? Why or why not?
- Do you plan to return to school for further education?

Experience

- What job-related skills have you developed?
- What did you learn from your work experiences?
- What did you enjoy most about your last employment? Least?
- Have you ever quit a job? Why?
- Give an example of a situation in which you provided a solution to an employer.
- Give an example of a time in which you worked under deadline pressure.
- What kind of boss do you prefer?

Responding To Common Interview Questions

Tell me about yourself.

“Well, my favorite color is blue...”

Wrong.

This is a job interview, not *Trading Spaces*. Word your responses in a business context. The best way to answer this question is to discuss your skills and personal qualities, leading to the ultimate conclusion that you should work for them.

What are your strengths?

This is where knowing the job description backwards and forwards comes in handy. Answer by describing your strengths relative to the position you're applying for.

What are your weaknesses?

Many a job applicant has wavered before this trick question. There is a good way to answer this: present your weaknesses, but as strengths in disguise. You might tell the hiring manager that you obsess over details constantly, but then point out how much you've gotten done. You can also highlight a minor weakness and describe what you are doing to overcome it.

What are your career goals?

There is one guideline to follow here: be realistic. Ambition is an admirable trait to an employer, but only in moderation. In five years, chances are you'll be "employed in a packaging environment and working part-time towards a Master's Degree" rather than "making \$250,000 a year." An overambitious goal can paint you as young and inexperienced to the employer.

Questions You Can Ask During an Interview

Go to the interview prepared with some of the following questions:

The Job

- Can you tell me what a typical day is like for someone in this position?
- Will this position be assisting one of your staff or working on a special project?
- Will I move around during my co-op assignment to work in different positions or departments?
- What type of training is given to a new employee – on the job, classroom, and individual?
- Are employees ever transferred to other geographical locations or other fields?
- Who will be my manager and how much contact will I have with him/her?
- Is any travel expected?
- Why is this position open? (Fired, resigned, new...) Tell me more about this?
- What are the best aspects of this job? And the worst?

The Company

- What are your most important product lines? (Be sure you have done your homework before you ask this question – do not ask the obvious)
- What positive changes have you seen company wide and what do you see for the future?
- What type of turnover do you see company wide?
- What is the company culture?
- Do you have co-op students working for you?
- How long have you employed students?
- Do you re-hire your co-op students for subsequent co-op work periods?
- What other jobs have you held within the company?
- What do you like most about the company and your job?

The Geographic Area

- What is the housing market like in this area?
- What are the best features about the city/area? The worst?
- Is public transportation adequate?

For more information about interviewing see the "Day of the Interview" handout.

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