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10 Steps to a Successful Interview

- Arrive on time.
- Introduce yourself in a courteous manner.
- Read company materials while you wait.
- Have a firm handshake.
- Listen.
- Use body language to show interest.
- Smile, nod, and give nonverbal feedback to the interviewer.
- Ask about the next step in the process.
- Thank the interviewer.
- Write a thank-you letter to anyone you have spoken to
- *Do not answer any question only with yes or no prepare to expand a little on your answers.*
Sound positive and enthusiastic over the interview

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Appropriate Attire Is a Must

The clothing you wear to your interview should make you look like you will fit in at your prospective employer. When in doubt, err on the side of conservatism, suggest the experts. Even if the company has a "business casual" dress policy, you're better off dressing a bit on the stuffy side than in taking a gamble only to find that your idea of casual doesn't match that of your prospective employer.

For Men

Traditional business attire means a dark, conservative suit and a white, long-sleeved (even in summer), pressed dress shirt.

Ties should be silk and coordinate well with the suit. Avoid flashy patterns on ties-the job interview isn't the time to prove how much of an individualist you are.

If you wear an earring (or several), remove it before the interview.

For Women

Traditional business attire is a conservative suit or dress-those thigh-high skirt lengths ala Melrose Place won't cut it in the real business world.

Avoid wearing jewelry and makeup that are showy or distracting.

Forget the excessively long fingernails-they, too, are distracting. If you wear nail polish, make sure it's a subtle color and neatly done.

For Everyone

Avoid wearing too much cologne or perfume.

Your hair should be clean and well-groomed.

Shoes should be polished and coordinate with your suit or dress.

An interview isn't a beauty contest, but how you dress and your overall appearance almost always get noticed by the interviewer. Don't give the interviewer a chance to rule you out because you didn't feel like ironing your shirt or polishing your shoes. Dress in a business-like, professional manner, and you'll be sure to fit in wherever you interview.

Art of Interviewing Well

When Lisa Portis first lays eyes on a candidate for a job at Enterprise Rent-A-Car, she makes sure that the person has clean, neatly groomed hair and fingernails and is wearing an unwrinkled, professional-looking suit and carefully polished, unscuffed shoes. She does not look kindly on tattoos or body piercing.

When Christie Kallenbach chats for the first time with a candidate for a job at Intel Corp., she intentionally overlooks attire and immediately begins looking for a reason to hire the person for one of the firm's many technical positions.

Portis, a regional recruiting supervisor at Enterprise's Oak Park, Illinois, offices, and Kallenbach, an Intel campus recruiting manager based in Chandler, Arizona, both regularly interview students who want to work for their firms. Both seek candidates who will perform well on the job and fit into their corporate culture. Both ask questions that focus on how a candidate has behaved in the past to help them predict his or her future performance. But it's the differences in their techniques that can sometimes confuse students who are trying to figure out how to make the best impression on interviewers and secure the best possible position, pay, and benefits.

"If you don't dress seriously, we can't really take you seriously," says Portis, who meets with students from a variety of majors and hires them primarily for management trainee positions that require strong customer-service skills and high visibility. "If you come in not dressed well, you've taken away 50 percent of your chance to be hired."

[Learn how to convince employers you're right for the job.](#)

Portis says she follows a carefully structured 30-minute behavioral interview format that's followed by most other Enterprise recruiters as well.

Kallenbach is much more laid-back about appearance—and about the interview itself. But, like Portis, she uses behavioral questions to identify the best people for the positions she needs to fill. It's just that those positions are different—she needs to find engineering and computer science majors who have strong technical skills and experience, and who don't need to interact much with the public.

Getting ready

How can you know what your interviewer will be looking for? How can you prepare to speak, act, and appear as professional as possible in that brief and urgently important meeting?

"Do advance work," advises Eleanor Sanchez, associate dean of career services at Columbia University. "Learn everything you can about a company."

Sanchez says that means reading about the company, going to the company's on-campus information session, and asking as many questions as possible of any company employees or interns you know—or who your friends or family know. She adds that savvy researchers focus not only on a company's statistics—its profit margin; products; and number of divisions, locations, and employees—but also on its culture and values.

"Make sure you know what is expected of you in that interview before you go in," Sanchez says. "There is no excuse for not knowing about a company's culture."

Once you've done your homework, Sanchez says, you're ready to start practicing.

"Think about the worst question you can face in an interview—the one you most dread," she says.

"Practice answering that. Do role playing. You must be prepared for that question. If you can answer it, the rest will be much easier."

Sanchez says that once you've crossed that hurdle, you can practice for the rest of the interview.

"Be prepared to articulate your strengths and skills and what you can bring to the organization," she says. "Even if you're asked off-the-wall questions like 'What is your favorite pet?' or 'What is your favorite color?' be prepared to answer them in a way that focuses on what you can do for the company."

Sanchez says one good way to practice is by doing a mock interview with a career counselor, family member, or friend—or in front of the mirror.

She adds that it's good to practice both answering and asking questions.

"Applicants are finding that they can be much more assertive and honest about their values than in the past," she says. "Students are feeling much more at liberty to say something like 'I want to know about your policy on sweatshops,' or, 'Are you an environmentally concerned company?'"

But remember, Sanchez warns, that questions like those must be asked in a tactful, nonconfrontational way. And different recruiters will react differently.

Art of Interviewing Well

Asking questions and giving answers

Dean Fechner, national college relations manager for the consulting firm of Cap Gemini Ernst & Young in New York City, says he welcomes educated questions.

"I like to hear questions like, 'What is the future of Cap Gemini from your perspective?' or 'Describe the corporate values of Cap Gemini,'" he says.

Fechner says he's especially impressed when students ask questions that are based on something they read about the firm, such as an impending merger or acquisition.

"I also like when a student describes the evolution of why they want to get into this industry," he says. "That tells me a lot."

Fechner adds that he's put off by students who can't elaborate on a topic or give specific examples of how they completed a project or report.

"It's very frustrating when someone gives me a textbook or generic answer," he says.

Julie Cunningham, global college relations manager at Tellabs Inc. in Bolingbrook, Illinois, says interviewers at her firm seek candidates who have both strong technical skills and good communication skills—and they ask questions designed to elicit responses that show those skills—or the lack of them.

"We're looking for people who display a lot of enthusiasm," she says. "We want good team players."

Cunningham says that while it's good for students to ask questions assertively, Tellabs recruiters would rather not listen to demands for stock options or unreasonably high salaries and signing bonuses.

Jeffrey Vargas, a recruiter and program analyst with the federal Department of Energy, says that students shouldn't be shy about describing their accomplishments—or about asking about benefits other than high starting salaries.

"You're hurting yourself and your possibility of advancement if you don't," he says.

Vargas, who conducts short, on-the-spot preliminary interviews at career fairs, says students should also be prepared to do a "60-second commercial about themselves."

"Touch on your background, your current activities, your future goals, and your availability," he says.

Portis says she most likes to hear students ask questions about what a typical day is like or about what kinds of benefits the firm offers.

"I like for them to form their questions around research they've done about the company," she says.

Kallenbach says she's more interested in finding out how practiced interviewees are in the skills they've listed on their resumes.

"We try to find out how deep their knowledge is," she says. "We want to know if they can solve problems and be flexible."

Interview Questions

Following are some typical behavior-based questions that interviewers often ask. The job competencies they're designed to measure are in parentheses:

- Describe a situation in which you had to use reference materials to write a research paper. What was the topic? What journals did you read? (research)

- Give me a specific example of a time when a co-worker or classmate criticized your work in front of others. How did you respond? How has that event shaped the way you communicate with others? (communication)
- Describe a situation in which you recognized a potential problem as an opportunity. What did you do? (initiative)
- Give me a specific example of a time when you sold your supervisor or professor on an idea or concept. How did you proceed? What was the result (assertiveness)
- Describe the system you use for keeping track of multiple projects. How do you track your progress so that you can meet deadlines? (commitment to task)
- Tell me about a time when you came up with an innovative solution to a challenge your company or class was facing. What was the challenge? What roles did others play? (creativity and imagination)
- What, in your opinion, are the key ingredients in building and maintaining successful business relationships? Give me examples of how you've made these work for you. (relationship building)
- Describe a time when you got co-workers or classmates who dislike each other to work together. How did you accomplish this? What was the outcome? (teamwork)
- Tell me about a time when you failed to meet a deadline. What things did you fail to do? What were the repercussions? What did you learn? (time management)
- Describe a specific problem you solved for your employer or professor. How did you approach the problem? What role did others play? What was the outcome? (decision making)

Art of Interviewing Well

Going to the interview

Once you've done your research, figured out what you're likely to be asked and what you're planning to ask, and practiced it all endlessly, you'll need to make sure you look presentable and know how to get to the interview site.

"Wear the standard suit attire" unless the employer has specifically said not to, Sanchez advises. "Just be prepared for a recruiter who is dressed in a polo shirt and slacks."

Sanchez says that if you run into that kind of situation, ask a question like, "I notice that you're in casual dress. Is that what I can expect on the job?" to show that you've noticed the difference in attire, are comfortable with it, and want to learn from it.

Sanchez also advises driving to the interview site a day or two before the interview to make sure you know how to get there or, if it's far away, getting specific directions from someone who's driven there or through one of the Internet map sites that provide directions.

On the day of the interview, Sanchez says, try to relax.

"It's all about attitude," she says. "Learn how to psyche yourself up if you've had a bad morning. Make yourself a list of things that you know make you feel good. Call someone who is a strong supporter of yours. Listen to music, exercise, or do yoga. Do anything that will help calm you down."

Then, Sanchez says, make sure you leave early and arrive at least 10 minutes before the interview is scheduled to begin.

And finally, Fechner says, don't pretend to be someone you're not, and don't agree with statements that fly in the face of your values, because a savvy recruiter will spot it instantly.

"I see too many people who try to step out of their own values," he says. "Be yourself."

Interviewing Tips

- Learn as much as you can about the company beforehand—know its products and services, its profit margin, its management, its culture, its dress code, and anything else you can think of. Good sources are your career services center, a college or public library, and the Internet.

- Do practice interviews with a career counselor, friends, and family members—or with yourself, in front of a mirror. Many career services centers offer workshops, mock interviews, or one-on-one coaching. Some even make videotapes of mock interviews.
- Think about how your experience in work, classes, and activities can relate to the job you're seeking.
- Allow plenty of time to get to the interview and, if possible, visit the site in advance and time how long it takes to get there.
- Plan your interview attire in advance and make sure your clothing is pressed, your shoes are shined, and your hair and nails are well groomed.
- Bring extra copies of your resume and a list of references.
- Speak slowly and clearly and don't be afraid to pause for a moment to collect your thoughts.
- Be honest. Don't try to cover up mistakes. Instead, focus on how you learned from them.
- Be assertive. Remember that the interview is a way for you to learn if the job is right for you.
- Ask the interviewer for a business card and send a thank-you note or e-mail as soon as possible.

How Do You Handle a Salary History Request?

When an employer requests a salary history to be submitted with a resume, many job seekers find themselves at a loss. If you're a student and your employment "history" is primarily part-time, co-op, internship or volunteer positions, the problem is compounded—obviously, you want to make considerably more in your full-time job! No job seeker wants to price him- or herself out of a job, but most do not want to give the employer the opening to offer less than the going rate for the position. Your response to a request for a salary history is best handled in your cover letter. Respond to the question well toward the end of the letter, after you've highlighted your skills, experience, and interest in the position, which are far more important to your consideration as a candidate.

Here are some tips.

Do...

- Respond to the question positively without stating specific amounts. (Examples: "I'm earning in the low 30s." "As a student, my jobs to this point have been geared toward gaining experience and making money to cover my educational costs.")
- Mention your desired salary, either saying that salary is negotiable depending upon the position or giving a \$3-5,000 range (if you know the market value for the position and for someone with your skills and background). You may also use terms like "competitive" or "open" if you are responding to this question on an application form.
- Know your salary requirements as well as what you hope to make. You shouldn't mention these in your response to the salary history question, but you need to give this some thought for when you get to the negotiating stage.
- Be prepared to respond to a request for previous salaries in an interview. It can be handled by responding without stating specific amounts (see tip #1). Avoid specific amounts if at all possible.
- Prepare a list of your positions (in reverse chronological order) for your own reference and just in case an employer in which you are very interested is absolutely adamant. (This will not happen often!) The list should include name of each company or organization, your position title, your compensation, and a brief synopsis of your position.

Don't...

- Include your salary history on your resume. What you did in a job is much more important than what you were paid.
- Lie about your previous pay rate. Employers can often verify your salary history through your reference checks.

If it is any consolation, this is a difficult question for all job searchers to handle, not just new college grads! The key is to shift the focus, politely but firmly, from what you made in the past to what you expect to make in the future.