

EFFECTIVE INTERVIEWING

The interview is an expected part of the selection process for employment, internships, and many graduate and professional programs. It explores a candidate's interests and qualifications beyond what is provided in a resume, application, vitae, or cover letter. But, the interview is a two-way process. While the interviewer's goal is to find the best candidate, the interview is also an opportunity for the candidate to gain insight into the position and organization to determine if it is, in fact, a good fit. Both parties *give* and *receive* information during an interview. Approach your interviews as a two-way conversation rather than an interrogation and you will be more successful.

Process

The interviewing process can be intimidating if you don't know what to expect. Even though interviews range from 30 minutes to several hours, most interviews fit general patterns that share common characteristics: the beginning, middle, and conclusion. The beginning of the interview usually consists of small talk, but don't be fooled, you are being evaluated. First impressions count in an interview situation! Don't be afraid to extend your hand first upon being introduced; it shows assertiveness and confidence.

The middle of the interview focuses on the organization, position, and your qualifications. This is the longest part of the interview. The interviewer will most likely describe the organization and position, ask questions, and then it is usually your turn to ask questions. Need help with that? Keep reading.

The close of the interview is just as important as the other two parts. The interview isn't over until you have left the room, so it is important to remain courteous and enthusiastic. You want to leave the interviewer with a good impression and sense of who you are.

Follow up! One of the most important things you can do after the interview is to send a thank-you letter within 24-48 hours of the interview! The letter should be brief, but communicate your appreciation for the interview, highlight aspects of the conversation you found helpful, restate your interest, and provide any additional information requested. It's best to be safe and type a formal thank-you letter rather than sending a note or email. For sample thank you letters see the guide on Cover Letters, or check out our numerous resources in the Career Resource Area.

Making a Positive Impression

Interviewers expect candidates to make a positive impression which includes paying attention to personal grooming, dress, eye contact, nonverbal behavior, and even your tone of voice. Dress in a manner consistent with how you want to be perceived. Keep in mind some of these basic tips:

- When unsure of style of dress (business casual versus full business attire), always choose a conservative, tailored look, usually indicated by wearing a suit (pant or skirt suit for women).
- Be prepared for a phone interview. All of the same rules of interviewing apply. If you are caught off guard and it is not a good time for an interview when you receive a call, state your interest in the position and ask to reschedule.
- Check the message on your answering machine. Is it professional? What does it reflect about you? Would you want an employer or graduate school representative to hear it?
- Don't forget to smile, make eye contact, and listen! Your tone of voice and nonverbal behaviors can make or break an interview!
- Have a confident handshake! The wimpy "dead fish" handshake does not communicate confidence!

Personal Hygiene

Personal presentation for a job interview is about more than just clothes. Nobody likes to talk about it, but personal hygiene can leave more of a lasting impression than your interview performance. **No matter how professional your interview attire, personal hygiene can make or break a good first impression.** Here are some tips to keep in mind:

- Bathe and make sure your hair is clean - get it cut well in advance of the interview, so you're comfortable with the style.
- Use deodorant but avoid deodorants, perfumes or aftershaves with overpowering scents; people may have negative reactions to them. If in doubt, ask a trusted friend. Remember, the interviewer should remember you, not your scent!
- Clean, manicured finger nails - this doesn't mean a full manicure, it just means feeling confident shaking hands with the interviewer.
- Polished shoes - many a great suit is let down by scuffed shoes.
- Fresh breath - brush your teeth before an interview; be mindful of what you eat or drink before the interview. Take breath mints with you; use them before you enter your interview (not during).

You only get one chance to make a first impression and you will feel more relaxed if you know you are looking (and smelling!) your best.

Preparing for the Interview

Interviewers have expectations of candidates and look for particular qualities when they interview. Identify these qualities through preparation. It will help you feel more confident and relaxed during the interview. Preparation includes these steps:

Research

Learn about the internship, scholarship, graduate program, or job for which you are interviewing. Make every effort to familiarize yourself with issues in the field and know something about the organization with which you are interviewing. Know what skills, abilities, and attributes are expected of candidates, most of which are outlined in the position listing. Many employers have websites describing their organization and career opportunities and the most updated information about an organization can most likely be found there. Taking the time to conduct this research demonstrates your sincere interest in the position.

Know Why You're a Good Candidate

Interviewers expect candidates to know what they have to offer. Studies have shown that approximately 90% of people cannot adequately define their skills. If you take the time to identify your skills, abilities, and personal qualities, you are ahead of the competition. Whatever strengths you plan to present, be prepared to offer examples of where you acquired or demonstrated them. Follow these tips:

- Make an inventory of experiences, skills, and adjectives that describe you;
- For the adjectives, identify experiences where they worked to your advantage;
- For experiences, identify the skills, knowledge, and personal qualities you demonstrated or acquired;
- For knowledge and skills that you claim, identify examples where you demonstrated or acquired them.

When preparing for a specific interview, compare the job announcement to your inventory and note the skills, abilities, and attributes that support your candidacy. Identify three or four important points you want to make and the strategy you will use to make them. By doing so, you will be prepared if the interviewer begins with "tell me about yourself". Remember; always keep your answers in the context of the position for which you are interviewing. Where you were born isn't what the interviewer wants to hear.

Behavioral Interviewing

Behavioral interviewing is widely used by employers and is based on the premise that past behavior predicts future performance. Behavioral questions will be phrased in ways such as "Describe a situation when . . ." The interviewer expects you to do just that - tell him/her about a specific situation. Be prepared to tell short (1-2 minute) "stories" that provide evidence from the past to document your skills or qualities. Providing a generic answer beginning with "Generally I . . ." does not describe a specific situation and therefore does not answer the question. One strategy to use when answering behavior-based questions is to use the STAR process by answering the following:

S: the situation you were in,

T: the task you faced,

A: what action you took, and

R: the positive results.

Interview Questions

Interview questions involve both questions you will be asked and questions you will ask. Although each interview and interviewer is different, the following is a sample of typical questions that may be asked:

- Why did you choose Binghamton University?
- Why did you choose to major in ... ?
- Tell me about two strengths and one weakness.
- Tell me about a time when you recognized a potential problem as an opportunity. What did you do?
- Tell me about 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?
- What do you look for in a supervisor?
- Tell me about a time that you failed to meet a deadline. What things did you fail to do? What were the repercussions? What did you learn?
- Where do you plan to be in five years? Ten years?
- What motivates you to succeed?
- Tell me about 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?
- How do you define success?
- What accomplishment has given you the most satisfaction? Why?
- What would you like to develop or improve in yourself? Have you thought about how you will do this?

While it is good to prepare for these basic types of questions, interviewers can ask one question in many different ways, so it is important to understand the themes behind most interview questions:

1. Why are you here?
2. Can you be an asset to the organization?
3. What kind of person are you?
4. What distinguishes you from other people who can do the same tasks as you?

If you can address these basic four themes with specific examples you will be well prepared.

Questions to Ask

Interviewers **expect** questions from candidates and if you're not prepared with intelligent, planned questions, it may communicate lack of interest. What are some good questions to ask? They vary, but here are some basics:

- Ask specific questions about the position, especially duties although not ones that basic research should have provided an answer for
- What are the major challenges and priorities in the position?
- Is there an orientation? What type of on-the-job training is available?
- What might be a typical first assignment/project?
- What is the culture of the organization?
- How are performance evaluations conducted? How often?
- Questions about location and travel
- What do people like best and least about working for the organization?
- Questions concerning advancement and promotion paths
- What can I expect next? What is your timeline for making hiring decisions?

Questions Not to Ask

Just as there are good questions to ask, there are questions you should not ask during the initial interview:

- Salary/benefits information. Do not discuss this issue until the interviewer brings it up. Research the salary range for the position prior to the interview. If asked about your salary requirements, give a range that reflects your understanding of typical salaries for the position and your experience. Check out books and internet resources on salary negotiation, salary surveys, or speak to a career counselor about this issue.
- Questions about the interviewer's personal background including education, marital status, etc.
- Questions that have already been answered during the interview. If your "planned" questions have already been answered, focus on clarification of those issues, but do not repeat the question.

Lawful Employment Interviewing

Various federal, state, and local laws regulate the questions a potential employer can ask a job candidate. If asked an illegal question, there are three things you can do:

1. Answer the question, keeping in mind that your answer may actually hurt your candidacy in some way.
2. Refuse to answer the question, which is well within your rights. Depending on how you phrase your refusal you run the chance of coming across as defensive.
3. You can examine the question for its *intent* and answer it in a way that applied to the position. For example: If you're asked, "Are you a U.S. citizen?" you can respond by saying, "I am authorized to work in the United States." Or, with the question, "Do you have children?" you can respond by saying, "I can meet the travel and hour requirements."

Interviewing Advice from Employers

- Research organizations in advance of interviews
- Be enthusiastic and sincere during your interviews
- Be honest and realistic
- Do practice interviews
- Think about how your experience in work, classes, and activities can relate to the job you're seeking
- Allow plenty of travel time and visit the site in advance to make sure you know how to get there
- Make sure your interview attire is pressed, your shoes are shined, and you are well groomed
- Bring extra copies of your résumé and a list of references
- Speak slowly and clearly; don't be afraid to pause to collect your thoughts before answering questions
- Be assertive (not to be confused with aggressive)
- Send a thank-you letter as soon as possible after the interview

Interviewing Advice from Binghamton Graduates

- Be prepared to elaborate on information from your resume without having to re-read your resume during the interview
- Identify your skills and experiences; be prepared to discuss how they relate
- Be ready to explain what you offer and why the organization interests you
- Listen carefully and don't interrupt
- Be prepared to ask questions
- Know what type of work (with this employer) interests you and why
- Be prepared to "Describe yourself and your interests"
- Be prepared to talk about your goals and how they relate to the position
- Make your interest in the position and organization clear
- Be concise, yet specific in your answers
- Be genuine

Additional Help from Binghamton Graduates

Over three thousand Binghamton graduates have volunteered through the Alumni Career Network (ACN) to speak about their work with students. Through the ACN it is easy to identify volunteers by major, profession, employer, education and location and Alumni Career Network volunteers tell us they would like to hear from more students. What a great way to find out about interviewing in your field of interest! Talk to people who have been through exactly what you have! Access the ACN through the BUSI Web Center. Alumni access is through the online alumni community, BConnected.

Practice Interviews

Utilize **Optimal Interview**, available on the CDC's website. Interview Prep through Optimal Interview helps prepare you for the toughest interviews with real-to-life interview scenarios. See and hear questions that you could be asked as well as receive virtual coaching on how to answer the questions. CDC and Campus Life have collaborated to offer mock interviews throughout the fall and spring semester through the XCEL Center. For more information, visit CDC in LSG 500 or the XCEL Center.

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