

## What is a Job Interview?

The **job interview** is a strategic conversation with a purpose. Your **goal** is to persuade the employer that you have the skills, background and ability to do the job and that you can comfortably fit into the organization while gathering information about the job, future career opportunities and the organization to determine if the job and work environment are right for you. You can strongly influence the interview outcome if you realize that an interview is not an objective process in which the employer offers the job to the best candidate based on merit alone, but is a highly subjective encounter in which the interviewer offers the job to the qualified person whom he likes best. Personality, confidence, enthusiasm, a positive outlook and excellent interpersonal and communication skills count heavily.

### What Are Some Important Steps to Prepare for Interviewing?

#### 1<sup>st</sup> Step—KNOW EVERYTHING

- ❑ **Know everything about yourself—You need to be ready to answer any questions they may ask about you.**
  - Evaluate your skills, interests, values, goals.
  - Know what specifically interests you about the organization: “How come you want to work for organization “xyz” over any other organization?”
  - Determine how your strengths and weaknesses fit in with what this organization is looking for.
  - Know and be prepared to describe your best selling points for this job.
  
- ❑ **Know everything about the organization—Many hiring managers ask questions about their organization to see how interested you are.**
  - Think about what questions you have about the organization/position.
    - Make sure that these questions will help you determine whether or not this will be a good match for you.
  - Why does the organization exist: mission, products, services?
    - Strategic Plan
    - Web page
    - Brochures
  - Who are the organization’s internal and external customers?
  - Is the organization stable? Will services be contracted out?
  - What are some of the organization’s recent success stories?
  - What problems is the organization trying to solve?
  - What is the organizational culture?
  - How big is the organization? Has it grown or declined over the past five years?
  - Is the employee turnover rate high, average or low? What factors contribute to that turnover rate?
  - What is the typical interviewing and hiring process in the organization?
  
- ❑ **Know everything about the position**
  - Talk to people who are familiar with the organization (find someone!)
  - Research the position and similar positions.
  - View similar job vacancy announcements on job vacancy websites.
  - Occupational Outlook Handbook ([www.dol.gov](http://www.dol.gov)) and ONET ([www.onetonline.org](http://www.onetonline.org)).
  - Department of Labor publications and website ([www.dol.gov](http://www.dol.gov))

## 2<sup>nd</sup> Step--PREPARE YOUR QUALIFICATIONS

### ❑ Identify your accomplishments

- Make a list!

### ❑ Identify your skills.

- Make categories of broad skill areas.
- Brainstorm the specific skills you have in each area.
- Rank your skills from novice to expert.
- Spend most of your interviewing time highlighting your “expert” skills.

### ❑ Identify your strengths and weaknesses.

- We all have weaknesses. This question identifies how you see yourself. Pick a weakness that is low on the employer’s list of required skills and that you’ve identified steps to take to correct.

### ❑ Write down behavioral examples.

- The interviewer wants to hear about how you are able to use your skills to succeed on the job.
- Question: “Tell me about your last job.”

*Poor Response:* “I’ve been a Recruiter here at Kaiser Permanente for the last two years.”

*Good Response:* “For the past two years, I’ve been a Recruiter at Kaiser Permanente. During that time I’ve accomplished a number of things that should help me succeed in your organization. For example, from what you’ve told me, the Lead Recruiter will be responsible for staffing hundreds of positions for the company. I served on a special project to help fill 14 Accounts Payable openings within a two-month period deadline. With my help, all positions were filled within the two-month deadline and I received an award for this outstanding achievement.

### ❑ Anticipate objections

- Objection: “You don’t have experience working with our word-processing software.”  
*Good Response:* “That’s true; however, I have worked with other software packages such as \_\_\_\_\_ and taught myself \_\_\_\_\_. I’m quick in learning and adapting technical knowledge. On my last job, I was able to make the transition to a new word processing program in just two weeks.”

## 3rd Step--PREPARE YOUR RESPONSES

- ❑ Practice your interview by writing out a script of commonly asked questions and having a friend or family member interview you. If you can’t find a volunteer, *you* do it by using a mirror. This is very important for interview success! The following are some types of interview questions and guidelines for answering them:

- ❑ **Behavioral** questions are used more and more in the Federal sector. Examples and response techniques:

- To get the essential points from your experience across clearly and succinctly, a structured response is best. Two essentially similar types exist: namely the **STAR** (Situation Task Action Result) technique or the **PAR** (Problem Action Result) technique.
- The **STAR** technique provides a structured response to a behavioral interview question by first stating the Situation you were in and then the Task you were assigned to handle. Then you should

state the Action you took in order to resolve the problem. The Action section is of the most importance, since it will illustrate how you're past performance will predict your future behavior in the desired position. Don't forget to emphasize the Results, the outcome of your Action.

○ **Example of the STAR technique:**

**Question:** "Tell me about a time when you wrote a report that was well received."

**(Situation:)** I was a Human Resources Specialist at Verizon Wireless.

**(Task:)** My assignment was to develop in-depth, descriptive web pages for the main styles of interviewing.

**(Action:)** By first researching each interview type thoroughly, I condensed the information on each to create a series of guidelines to follow and examples to prepare for each type of interview. These guidelines are now available for all Verizon employees on its Career Services web page.

**(Result:)** My supervisors were exceedingly impressed with my work. The Director even said she learned about analytical interviews through my research, and visits to the Career Services web site increased by 200%.

- The **PAR** technique, as described by Arlene Hirsch in her article "Tricky Questions Reign in Behavioral Interviews," starts with stating the Problem, then the Action you took to solve the problem, and finally ending with emphasizing the Results that were achieved by solving the problem.
  - Both the STAR and the PAR technique provide a useful, structured response to a behavioral question that is both direct and to the point.

**Examples of Behavioral Interview Questions:**

- Summarize a situation where you took the initiative to get others going on an important issue, and played a leading role to achieve the results you wanted.
- What steps do you follow to study a problem before making a decision?
- Describe an instance when you had to think on your feet to extricate yourself from a difficult situation.
- What was the most complex assignment you have had? What was your role?
- Describe a creative/innovative idea that you produced which led to a significant contribution to the success of an activity or project.
- Give me a specific example of a time when you used good judgment and logic in solving a problem.
- Describe a situation that required a number of things to be done at the same time. How did you handle it? What was the result?
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## SOME GUIDELINES FOR ANSWERING QUESTIONS

- ❑ Lead with your strengths. Be positive about your abilities and experience.
- ❑ Use examples of accomplishments that demonstrate your ability to do the job and how you would add value to employer's operations.
- ❑ Make every answer relate to the job for which you are applying.
- ❑ Think before you answer, be brief, be truthful.
- ❑ Follow up answers with examples of how you have accomplished similar tasks in the past.
- ❑ Be prepared with your 30-second commercial (e.g., Tell Me About Yourself): an integration of your skills, values, interests and goals and a brief summary of your career progression and strengths. Avoid personal info such as age, place of birth.
- ❑ Be prepared to demonstrate your knowledge about the organization ("Why are you interested in working for us?").
- ❑ Be prepared to explain how your strengths, goals and/or background relate to the job in question (e.g., Why are you interested in this position?).
- ❑ **Why should we hire you?** "I believe in and support the work you are doing and would like to be a part of it. I am a hard worker, and I have work experience that is directly related to the job and demonstrates my abilities to be successful in it." OR, "This job represents the type of challenge I am seeking at this stage of my career and therefore, I would be motivated to make a commitments and produce results."
- ❑ **Difficult Questions:** Take responsibility for the past while focusing on the future.
- ❑ **Weaknesses:** (a) discuss weakness unrelated to the job, (b) rephrase "weakness" as an area for "improvement" and describe steps you are taking to improve in that area (c) describe a weakness that is obvious from your resume, or (d) describe a project or incident that did not go as planned and what you learned.
  - Example: If education is limited, "I have strong experience in this area, but I would like to further my education. If experience is limited, "I have strong educational credentials, and I am taking steps to gain additional experience through (e.g., volunteer project).
- ❑ **Reason for leaving past position:** Indicate how your experience was good, what you learned and contributed, and how this organization's mission is in line with your goals and values. Be truthful without volunteering negative info about yourself or former/present employer.
  - Example: If left under less than ideal circumstances: "The job did not fully utilize my strengths and I felt it was time for a change."
- ❑ **Frequent job changes:** changed jobs to gain breadth of experience.
- ❑ **Illegal questions:** Response could run along a continuum from answering all questions without objecting to confronting the employer. Between these extremes, respond to the intent of the question without volunteering potentially damaging info. Example: Do you have children? Response: I gain a great deal of satisfaction from being with my family and in my current position, I have demonstrated reliability in completing my work on time and accomplishing my objectives while making a positive contribution to the organization. I anticipate being able to do the same if hired here.

## 4th Step—THE INTERVIEW

- ❑ **Make a positive first impression** by arriving on time, better yet, be early; dressing appropriately and displaying confidence but not arrogance. Smile☺
  - For some employers, arriving on time is a measure of how well a person will perform on the job. They assume that your actions during your interview are you at your best.

- Receptionists and Secretaries are often asked for their first impression of a job seeker. Be friendly and courteous to everyone you meet at the interview. You never know who has a deciding vote on extending the offer.
- **Appropriate dress:** conservative colored (black, navy or gray) suit for both men and women, solid color shirt, subdued tie for men and neutral colored hose for women.
  - Look like you belong in the position for which you are interviewing. Key is to find out what people wear who do the job you want. Casual Fridays don't count!
- **Establishing rapport:** greet with a firm handshake, establish eye contact, take a seat wherever indicated and show ability to be sociable.
- **Display confidence** in body language (head forward, sitting up straight, etc.)
- **The way you answer questions** can be as important as what you say. Look directly into the person's eyes and give short, concise answers that don't sound memorized. Don't talk too much—50% is a good rule of thumb. Modify your verbal style and actions to match those of the interviewer.
- **Have a positive attitude.** Always say positive things about your former supervisors, previous organizations and working conditions. Find ways to let them know you are a team player and good problem solver. Employers want to hire people who have a "can do" attitude. A positive attitude is critical!

## SAMPLE QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS FOR INTERVIEWS

### *Tell me about yourself.*

This question is sometimes called your “thirty-second summary”. It should contain your most positive points in relation to the job for which you are interviewing. Think of four main strengths you would want to cover and incorporate them to the target position. Ex: I have over eight years experience in (target field)...I’ve worked in all areas of (target field) including leading project teams...I love working with (some aspect of the target position) ...My experience and skills are a direct match to this position.” They are trying to see if they like you and can you fit into the organization.

### *How much do you know about this organization? This position?*

This question is an opportunity for you to expound on all the relevant information you have gathered about the organization and/or position from various sources, including information on current and upcoming projects or programs.

### *Why do you want to work here?*

Demonstrate what you know about the organization and how your values and goals are in line with the organization’s mission/services and how you’re KSA’s can enhance the organization’s operations. Do not say, “Because it is close to home” or “Because a friend works here.”

### *How does this position relate to your goals?*

This question reveals the importance of having clearly defined goals; again, demonstrate how your goals relate to the position and organization.

### *Why do you want to change jobs?*

Be careful – could be a trick question. Respond by saying that you feel as though this position is in line with your goals and would provide you with an opportunity to utilize your skills to their utmost capacity in helping the company achieve its goals. Do not mention how the position would benefit you, such as being a promotion or close to your residence.

### *Do you work better alone or with others?*

Another potentially trick question. “I work equally well alone and as part of a team.”

### *What kinds of things have you been criticized for in previous jobs?*

Respond with a positive statement. Examples: May say that others have commented you work too hard, don’t take enough time for lunch (but be sure your response is true!).

### *What have you learned from some of the positions you have held?*

Example: How to work well as part of a team, how to prioritize my work. Relate your answer to the requirements of the position.

*What type of supervisor do you prefer?*

May respond by saying, "Someone who allows me to work independently but is available for support when necessary."

*What are your strengths?*

Relate your skills that you have previously assessed to the position.

*What are your weaknesses?*

Everyone has weaknesses, but state your weakness in a positive framework, but avoid canned responses such as "I am a perfectionist." Options: (a) discuss weakness unrelated to the job, (b) rephrase "weakness" as an area for "improvement" and describe steps you are taking to improve in that area or how you have improved, or (c) describe a weakness that is obvious from your resume. Example: If experience is limited, "I have strong educational credentials, and I am taking steps to gain additional experience through (e.g., volunteer project).

*How long do you think it would take before you can make a contribution to this office?*

Be careful that you do not come across like a gangbuster that would try to change everything. Respond by stating that you are a quick learner and would make every effort to learn the operations as soon as possible.

*What types of people tend to rub you the wrong way?*

Trick question. Respond that in your experience you have learned to interact and work with different types of people at all levels.

*How would you describe your career progress thus far?*

Respond positively and describe how each of your previous positions allowed you to grow professionally.

*What determines an individual's progress on the job?*

This question may be aimed at discovering how you progressed in previous positions. Respond with such characteristics as hard work, giving 110%, accepting and handling challenging assignments, always being open to learning new methods and technologies.

*What would previous employers say about your work?*

Use positive comments from performance appraisals written by current and former supervisors and feedback you have received from co-workers, peers, and teachers.

*What do you expect to gain from this position?*

Relate your short and long-term goals to this position and the organization's mission/services.

*Which of your positions did you like best and least and why?*

Best: Provide information on positions that were similar to the one you are being interviewed for and where the same types of duties and skills were required.

Least: Describe a position that is unrelated to the one you are being interviewed for.

*What personal characteristics do you think are needed for this position?*

Focus on characteristics named in the KSA's and in the job requirements section of the position description.

*Why are you interested in this position?*

Always relate your strengths, values, and goals to the position in question.

*How long can you commit to staying in this position if you are offered the job?*

Most employers expect new hires to stay for at least one year. Instead of giving a time estimate, indicate that you will stay as long as you are needed and can continue to make a contribution to the organization.

*What types of situations cause you to lose your temper?*

Indicate that you are able to maintain your composure in a variety of stressful situations and back up your answer with examples.

*How do your skills relate to the needs of my organization?*

This question demonstrates the need to research the position and company. Give examples of past projects you have performed successfully or commendations you have received and tie them into the organization's needs.

*What interests you most about this line of work?*

Cite your knowledge of the field gained through your experience and course work and the characteristics that you possess that are necessary for success in this line of work. Let your passion for the subject matter show.

*What are some of your most outstanding achievements?*

Focus on achievements related to the position in question. If none of your achievements is directly related, discuss *characteristics* of some of your achievements that are related to the job.

*Why should I hire you?*

If the interviewer has not provided you with the opportunity to verbalize your strengths, expound on your top 3-5 strengths and accomplishments that you believe set you apart from others.



### **POSSIBLE QUESTIONS TO ASK THE EMPLOYER**

How would you describe the responsibilities of this position?

How would you describe a typical day/week in this position? Is overtime expected?

Is this a new position? If not, what did the previous employee go on to do?

To whom does this position report?

How many people work in this office/department?

What are the primary results you want to see out of this position in the next year?

What is the most urgent or difficult part of the job?

What freedom would I have in getting the job done?

How and when will my performance be evaluated?

How would you describe your organization's work environment and management style?

What characteristics does a successful person have in your organization?

Do you have a written job description I could see?

What kind of orientation would I undergo for this position?

What are the prospects for growth and advancement?

What are the organization's plans for future growth?

What is the single largest problem facing the staff now?

When will you be making your decision to fill this job?