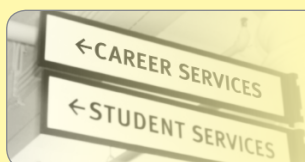




Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service

THE INTERVIEW →



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»» INTRODUCTION

WHAT IS AN INTERVIEW?

For the purposes of this guide, an interview is the process by which an employer and an applicant engage in a discussion (or series of discussions) in order to determine if the applicant is appropriate for a position of employment.

WHAT AN INTERVIEW IS NOT

An interview is not meant to be a one sided question and answer session, with the employer asking (and the applicant answering) questions about the applicant's qualifications. Instead, an interview is an opportunity for both parties to get to know each other better within a professional context. It should be an interactive process, and a means for the applicant to convey what she/he can contribute to the organization while learning about the position's most and least appealing characteristics.

THE POWER OF AN INTERVIEW

Great networking skills, a flawless resume, and a compelling cover letter will help you land an interview with almost any employer. However, the way that you manage the interview process ultimately determines whether or not you are offered a position. Many qualified applicants are passed over for promising job opportunities because they fail to convey their relevant experience, commitment, and interpersonal skills in the interview. Similarly, applicants who interview well are often selected for positions over more experienced candidates with poor (or even moderate) interviewing skills. With so much at stake, it is important to develop and refine your interviewing skills so that you can clearly articulate your value to a prospective employer. The following guide will aid you in this process.

»» IDENTIFYING THE EMPLOYER'S HIRING NEEDS

Every employer has a unique set of hiring needs that determines what she/he looks for in an employee. Begin preparing for each interview by developing a thorough understanding of your prospective employer's needs. This will help you to effectively market your relevant skills and experiences in the interview.

Identify the employer's hiring needs by researching these elements:

1. **THE EMPLOYER'S FIELD OF PRACTICE**—*the issue areas, target populations, and/or sectors in which the organization operates (e.g. healthcare, homelessness, local government, or economic development).*

Information about the employer's field of practice can be found on the organization's website and in published research, media coverage, and marketing materials. Through your research, identify:

- The way the organization describes its mission, vision, and work
- How the organization differentiates itself from others in the field
- The organization's peers and industry partners
- How the department to which you are applying fits into the organization
- How the organization is impacted by recent legislation
- The organization's funders and accrediting/regulatory bodies

2. **THE EMPLOYER'S POSITION REQUIREMENTS**—*the responsibilities, tasks, and core competencies associated with the position to which you are applying (e.g. program development, policy analysis, or grant writing).*

Information about the employer's position requirements can be found in the job description and in job descriptions for similar positions in peer organizations. Through your research, identify:

- The specific responsibilities and tasks listed in the job description
- The skills and experiences needed to perform key job functions
- Technical/computer and language proficiency requirements
- Licensure and training requirements
- Personal characteristics required to thrive in the work environment (e.g. time management skills, communication skills, leadership skills, etc.)

»» CONDUCTING A SELF-ASSESSMENT

Once you have identified the employer’s hiring needs, you can pinpoint the aspects of your education, experience, skills, and qualifications that are directly related to the employer’s field of practice and position requirements. Begin this process by considering:

- Previous and current jobs, internships, and volunteer experiences
- Capstone projects
- Academic degrees, coursework, and research
- Membership in groups and professional associations
- Technical and language skills
- Licensure and certifications
- Marketable personal characteristics (e.g. ambition, cooperativeness, creativity, etc.)

Then determine what information is most relevant by reflecting on the three criteria that all employers use to make hiring decisions:

1. **CAN YOU DO THE JOB?**—*Employers want to know if you possess the requisite experience and skills to successfully perform the job functions.*

The most relevant aspects of your academic and professional background will provide clear evidence of your ability to meet or exceed the employer’s position’s requirements. For example, if the position requires budget management skills, your most relevant jobs, internships, Capstones, and other experiences will have involved comparable budget management responsibilities.

2. **WILL YOU DO THE JOB?**—*Employers want to know if you are committed to the issues and populations that drive the organization’s work.*

Here, the most relevant aspects of your academic and professional background should demonstrate your level of commitment to the employer’s field of practice. For example, if the organization’s mission is to raise awareness about domestic violence, your most relevant experience, education, and research should involve domestic violence and related fields such as women’s rights and advocacy. Similarly, your most marketable personality traits should show a passion for these issues and an understanding of their importance.

3. **DO YOU FIT IN?**—*Employers want to know if your personality and work style match the culture of their organization.*

Here the most relevant aspects of your academic and professional background will reflect your ability to thrive in the organization's work environment. For example, if the organization's staff typically works in teams, your most relevant experiences will have required you to work in (or even lead) similarly structured groups to complete comparable tasks.

In addition, you can convey your ability to fit into an organization by using industry specific language or jargon to frame your relevant experience. This will let the employer know that you speak her/his language and can effectively communicate within the organization.

MANAGING LIMITATIONS

As you conduct a self assessment, note any areas where you lack the education, experience, skills, and qualifications to meet the employer's hiring needs. In the interview, you will need to demonstrate how quickly you can develop expertise in these areas. Do so by highlighting your relevant transferable experience while citing previous instances when you quickly learned new skills.

»» ANSWERING INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Now that you've identified the most relevant aspects of your professional and academic background, practice highlighting these positive attributes in your responses to common interview questions.

COMMON INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

The following is a list of questions that come up in most interviews:

1. **TELL ME ABOUT YOURSELF**—*Usually asked at the start of the interview, this question is your opportunity to introduce yourself and set the tone of the discussion.*

Prepare to answer this question by crafting a **one-minute pitch**, a brief summary of your relevant professional background and your interest in the position. See page 8 for more information about crafting a one-minute pitch.

2. **WHY DID YOU APPLY FOR THIS POSITION?**—*This question is usually asked as a follow-up to your introduction. It is a great opportunity to convey your commitment and passion for the work of the organization.*

Prepare to answer this question by reflecting on the organization's field of practice. Craft a response that highlights specific aspects of the organization's mission, work, and target populations that appeal to you. Let the employer know that you are knowledgeable about the organization and that the position fits into your career trajectory.

3. **TELL ME ABOUT YOUR PAST/CURRENT EXPERIENCE**—*This question will be asked in different forms throughout the course of the interview and in reference to specific positions on your resume. Your answers must clearly demonstrate your ability to meet the employer's hiring needs.*

Prepare to answer these questions by reflecting on your self assessment. Formulate responses that highlight the most relevant aspects of your experience, including your education, jobs, internships, research, Capstone, and volunteer positions. Use the **PAR** technique (described on p. 6) to provide details about instances when you performed tasks that are directly related to the employer's position requirements and field of practice.

PAR stands for:

- Problem:** Think of a problem that you solved in a previous job, internship, or professionally oriented academic project. The problem should relate to the types of problems or assignments that you would have to work on in the position for which you are applying. Describe what needed to be done, under what circumstances, and with what potential consequences?
- Action:** Describe your role in the effort to solve the problem. What actions did you take? What did you accomplish? If it was a group effort, focus on the part you played.
- Results:** Describe the results. If possible, quantify the impact of your accomplishments even if it is an estimate. Highlight what you learned and demonstrate the value you would bring to the employer.

4. **WHAT ARE YOUR STRENGTHS?**—*Similar to question three, employers may have different ways of asking about your professional strengths. These questions allow you to emphasize your most marketable skills.*

Prepare to discuss your strengths by identifying your technical skills (i.e. research and analysis) and personal characteristics (i.e. leadership skills and ability to work well teams) that are most relevant to the employer’s hiring needs. In your response, summarize these strengths and indicate how they would help you succeed in the new position.

5. **WHAT ARE YOUR WEAKNESSES?**—*This question is the interviewer’s attempt to find out what you’ve learned from previous professional challenges. More importantly, it is your opportunity to demonstrate how you would apply those lessons if you were selected for the position.*

Be prepared to give an honest answer to this question, but **do not** discuss a weakness in any area that is critical to the position; the employer should have the best possible impression of you. Always end with a positive note about the relevant skills you developed in the process of overcoming this weakness. You can also position one of your strengths as a weakness (e.g. I often get so involved in my work that I neglect other outside activities).

LIMIT RESPONSES TO TWO MINUTES IN LENGTH

If you find yourself speaking for more than two uninterrupted minutes, it is very likely that you’ve begun to lose your interviewer’s focus. Demonstrate your communication skills by giving clear and concise responses that, though rehearsed, do not sound mechanical or memorized.

OTHER FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

The following is a list of other questions that are likely to come up in an interview. They also require advance preparation.

- What are your career goals? Where do you expect to be in five years?
- What are your salary requirements? (See the Salary Negotiation Guide)
- What is your current salary? (See the Salary Negotiation Guide)
- What are you looking for in a job?
- Why do you want to change careers?
- Why have you held so many jobs in the past few years?
- How are your writing skills?
- How are your analytical skills?
- Tell me about your supervision or administrative experience?
- What is your management style?
- How are your interpersonal skills?
- How do you manage stressful situations?
- What would your supervisors/supervisees/colleagues say about you?
- Do you have any questions for me? (Always be prepared to ask questions)

BEHAVIORAL-BASED QUESTIONS

Behavioral-based interviewing is a popular recruitment technique. It is based on the premise that one can predict how a candidate will perform on a new job by understanding her/his past professional behaviors. To this end, behavioral based interview questions will require you to discuss recent professional assignments and challenges that you are also likely to encounter in your new position. Common behavioral based interview questions include:

- Tell me about a time when you had to conform to a policy with which you did not agree.
- Tell me about an important written document you were required to complete.
- Tell me about a time when you had too many things to do and you were required to prioritize.
- Tell me about a time when you failed to accomplish something?
- Describe an instance when you used fact-finding skills to solve a problem.
- Have you ever been forced to make an unpopular decision? What was that like?
- Tell us about a politically complex professional situation in which you worked.
- Tell us about a situation in which you had to adjust to changes over which you had no control.
- It is very important to build good relationships at work but sometimes it doesn't always work. If you can, tell about a time when you were not able to build a successful relationship with a difficult person.

Assume that all employers will ask at least a few behavioral-based questions throughout the course of the interview. Again, the **PAR Technique** (see pp. 5-6) provides the best framework for delivering a clear and concise response to these types of questions. Remember:

- Reflecting on the employer’s hiring needs will help you to predict the types of behavioral based questions an employer could ask.
- Employers only want to hear about situations, challenges, and projects that are relevant to the position for which you are applying.
- Focus on experiences that occurred in past **jobs and internships**.
- If you need to discuss academic experiences, focus on those that are most relevant to the position and likely to occur in a professional setting.
- Limit your examples to situations that occurred in the past 2-3 years.

CRAFTING YOUR ONE-MINUTE PITCH

Imagine that you only have one minute to speak with an employer. What can you say that would make her or him want to hire you? This information should come across in the brief introduction—a **one-minute pitch**—that you will help you set a positive tone in every interview.

1. Begin crafting your one minute pitch by reflecting on the employer’s hiring needs and your self assessment. Ask yourself:
 - What does this employer want in an employee?
 - What are the most relevant and important qualities that I bring to the table? How do they benefit the employer?
 - What relevant qualities can I offer the employer that other candidates cannot?
2. Identify one or two key points (in response to these questions) that you want the employer to know. These might include:
 - A brief overview of your relevant professional and educational background
 - How you became interested in this field and organization
 - How the position fits into your short term and long term career goals
3. Incorporate this information into a brief introduction that answers the question “Tell me about yourself?”

See the example on the following page of a one-minute pitch for an interview with a transportation planning organization:

Interviewer: "Why don't you start by telling me a little bit about yourself?"

Candidate: "Certainly. In May, I will be graduating from NYU Wagner with a Masters of Urban Planning with a specialization in transportation and land use planning. In addition to my studies, I've spent the past year interning with the New York Metropolitan Transportation Council where I was able to hone my skills in travel forecasting and regional transportation planning. I also had the opportunity to work in partnership with industry leaders (including your organization) that are developing innovative and environmentally friendly transportation systems. Not only am I extremely passionate about the work that you are doing, I'm also very confident that I would be a great candidate for this position; I really appreciate you giving me the opportunity to come in for an interview."

ADDITIONAL TIPS FOR YOUR ONE-MINUTE PITCH

Do Not Tell Your Entire Life's Story. Instead, focus on information that is relevant to the employer. This means that you have to know your audience. For each topic you discuss, ask yourself, "What's in it for them?"

Be Mindful of Your Tone. Your one-minute pitch should feel like a natural—albeit succinct—conversation. Do not rattle off a rehearsed list of your professional experiences for 60 consecutive seconds. Instead, use your pitch as a conversational framework to help ensure that you are briefly touching on key points about your relevant knowledge, experience, and professional interests.

Be Direct. The employer should not have to extrapolate, infer, or interpret any information from your pitch. If you want them to know that you are passionate about improving treatment quality for medically under-served children in New York City, say, "I am passionate about improving treatment quality for medically under-served children in New York City."

»» PREPARING TO ASK QUESTIONS

In the interview, the types of questions you ask can be just as important as those you answer. Use your background research to develop at least three informed questions about the organization. Remember, savvy interviewees ask sophisticated questions that lead to further discussion on how they can be of value to the employer and a good fit for the job. These include:

- What is the first problem that would need the attention of the person you hire?
- What priority issues would need to be addressed in the first 6 months?
- What challenges do you see the organization facing in the next year?
- In a year from now, what would you like to say about the person who takes this position?
- How is this position funded?
- How would you evaluate the successful candidate's performance?
- How long have you been here? What keeps you here?
- How would you characterize your management style?
- Who do you see as your main counterparts (competitors)? How do they compare to your organization?
- Where are you in the hiring process; what are your next steps?
- **Do not ask about benefits or salary until the employer has made you an offer!**
(See the "Salary Negotiation" guide.)

Be sure to write down the answers to your questions so that you do not forget any important information. Feel free to ask if it is okay to take notes during this portion of the interview. Make sure your note-taking does not distract you from the interview.

»» FOLLOWING UP

Sending a thank you note is not an option; it is a necessity. In fact, a thank you note can show enough thoughtfulness and attention to detail to make an employer select one candidate over another. Send a thank you note to all of the interviewers **within 24 hours of the interview**. See the sample outline below:

1. Paragraph # 1: Express Your Appreciation for the Interview
 - Thank the employer for meeting with you
 - Re-emphasize your interest in the position and organization

2. Paragraph # 2: Briefly Remind the Employer Why You are a Good Candidate
 - Write about your relevant skills and strengths; or
 - Refer to a specific problem or issue that the employer mentioned during the interview, and broadly reiterate how you may be able to meet the employer's needs in this area; or
 - Mention any additional important points that you did not address in the interview, or any points that you would like to re-emphasize

3. Paragraph # 3: Reiterate Your Enthusiasm
 - Thank the interviewer again
 - State that you look forward to hearing from them

ADDITIONAL FOLLOW-UP POINTERS

- In most industries, email is the standard form for sending a thank you note; always email your thank you note within 24 hours of the interview.
- Avoid handwritten notes; poor handwriting or unprofessional language can suggest that you have poor communication skills.
- If you send a typed thank you letter, be sure to mail it out as soon as possible. Most employers are accustomed to corresponding via email, and may assume that you simply failed to follow up if they have not received the letter within 24-48 hours of the interview.
- Limit your thank you notes to **three concise paragraphs**.
- Proofread carefully and triple check the spelling of contact names and titles!
- **Typically, employers will not contact you if they have decided to move forward with another candidate.** If you have not heard from an employer within ten business days of the interview, you can send a follow-up note expressing your continued interest in the position and that you look forward to hearing from them. After this point, you should only conduct additional follow-up if the employer has responded and explicitly requested it.

»» PRESENTATION

Employers pay close attention to the nonverbal messages that you emit. Regardless of your qualifications, your body language, grooming, clothing, and even the tone of your voice help signify how appropriate you are for a position

Be Punctual. Always arrive 5-10 minutes early for an interview and have the receptionist inform the employer of your arrival. Take the extra time to visit the restroom, check on your appearance, and compose yourself. Turn off your cell phone!

Dress and Groom Conservatively. Dressing conservatively helps to ensure that the interviewers will focus on what you say and do, rather than their interpretation of what you're appearance says about you. Typically, it is best to wear a suit to an interview. If you do not own a suit, dress slacks, a sport coat, a long sleeve shirt, and a conservative tie are safe alternatives for men. Women who do not own a suit can wear a blouse and dress slacks/skirt or a business-like dress. Remember, if you get the job and find that the office's culture is less conservative, you always have the option to adjust your appearance accordingly.

Maintain Professional Body Language and Tone. Greet the employer(s) with a smile and firm but comfortable handshake. Make eye contact and speak clearly. Your tone of voice should be even and indicative of your self confidence. All of these behaviors let the employer know that you have the requisite interpersonal skills to function well in a professional environment.

Ask Questions and Listen. An interview is meant to be an active conversation, with all parties fully engaged in the discussion. Listen closely to the employer's questions and ensure that your responses are accurate and to the point. When you ask questions, listen to the answers before responding. If you are speaking with a group, be sure to direct your questions and answers to everyone in the room.

»» TOP 10 INTERVIEWING DO'S & DON'TS

DO...

- Conduct extensive background research on the position and organization prior to the interview
- Practice your one-minute pitch (a brief introduction that answers the question, “Tell me about yourself”)
- Practice giving clear and concise answers to other common interview questions
- Dress conservatively
- Arrive 5-10 minutes early for every interview; take a moment to compose yourself and turn off your cell phone
- Know how to pronounce the interviewer’s name
- Greet the interviewer with a firm handshake, eye contact, and a smile
- Be sure to ask informed questions about the organization and the position
- Give the interviewer an opportunity to ask and respond to questions
- Always send a thank you note to all of the interviewers within 24 hours of your meeting

DON'T...

- Assume you know enough about an organization to skip the background research
- Give broad or vague answers to interview questions with the assumption that the interviewer will see your qualifications as clearly as you do
- Discuss salary, benefits, or vacation time before you have been offered the position
- Speak derogatorily about former or current employers
- Talk about how badly you need a job
- Look at your watch during the interview or appear to be in a rush to leave; don’t schedule another appointment for immediately after the interview
- Dress or behave too casually
- Talk excessively without allowing the interviewer enough time to ask or respond to questions
- Fail to ask questions when given the opportunity to do so
- Wear too much perfume or cologne

>> WORKSHEETS

ACCOMPLISHMENTS WORKSHEET

This worksheet will assist you in identifying and discussing your relevant accomplishments. An accomplishment may be any contribution that helped an organization operate more efficiently and/or caused you to feel a sense of satisfaction and professional growth.

ACCOMPLISHMENT # _____

1. Describe the situation or issue addressed.

2. How did I get involved?

3. What exactly did I do?

4. How did I do it?

5. What was the outcome? How can I state this in quantifiable terms?

6. What challenges did I face?

7. What did I learn?

8. What did I especially enjoy about doing it?

INTERVIEW PREPARATION WORKSHEET

This exercise will help you organize your thoughts in preparation for a successful interview. Respond to these questions as they relate to the position for which you are interviewing.

1. What do I know about this agency? What would I like to know, and how can I find this information?

2. How is my education relevant to the job? What specific classes, degrees, projects are most relevant?

3. How is my professional experience relevant to this job? What relevant skills did I use in previous positions? What did I accomplish in past organizations?

4. How are my career goals related to this organization and this position?

5. What are my skills and abilities? What can I bring to this employer? What are some specific examples of how I used these skills?

6. What led me to seek out this job/organization?

7. What are my strengths? What relevant skills do I have that I like using. How have I used these strengths to make a difference in other organizations?

8. What are my weaknesses? What projects and tasks pose a challenge to me, and how am I overcoming these challenges?

9. What additional information would I want the interviewer to be aware of? Imagine you've just left the interview and you wished you had told them something else – what is it?

10. What questions might I want to ask the interviewer?

Putting theory into practice.



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