INTERVIEWING
GUIDE

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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.

Interviews can take many forms, including traditional behavioral interviews, group interviews, case interviews, technical or task-based interviews, and more. This guide focuses primarily on preparing for behavioral interviews, although many of these strategies are applicable to other interview types as well.

For further guidance in preparing for different types of interviews, see the Additional Resources section at the end of this guide.

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 they can contribute to the organization while learning about the position.

THE POWER OF AN INTERVIEW

Great networking skills, a polished 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 very specific, 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 they look for in an employee. Begin preparing for each interview by developing a thorough understanding of this very specific 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:

THE EMPLOYER'S FIELD OF PRACTICE— the issue areas, target populations, and/or sectors in which the organization operates (e.g. healthcare, housing, 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 accreditation or regulatory bodies.

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.
- Educational, licensure, and training requirements.
- Personal characteristics required to thrive in the work environment (e.g. time management, communication, and leadership skills).

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, including student groups, and professional associations
- Technical and language skills
- Licensure and certifications
- Marketable personal characteristics (e.g. ambition, cooperativeness, creativity)

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, education, and skills to successfully perform the job functions. The most relevant aspects of your academic, education, and professional background will provide clear evidence of your ability to meet or exceed the position's requirements. For example, if the position requires budget management skills, your most relevant jobs, internships, coursework, 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. IS THERE ORGANIZATIONAL FIT?— 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 their language and can effectively communicate within the organization.

MANAGING LIMITATIONS

As you conduct a self-assessment, note any areas where there may be gaps between your education, experience, skills, and qualifications and 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 AND PREPARING FOR 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 7 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 how 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 below) 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 (e.g. research and analysis) and personal characteristics (e.g. 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 how self-aware you are and 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. You can discuss a past weakness, how you have worked to strengthen the weakness, and provide examples. Always end with a positive note about the relevant skills you developed in the process of overcoming this weakness.

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. Your responses should sound polished, but not over-rehearsed.

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 a candidate's 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 me 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 p. 4) 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 may 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.

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 you looking for in a job?
- Why do you want to change careers?
- How do you use data to drive your work?
- Tell me about your supervision or administrative experience.
- What is your management style?
- Tell me about your experience working on diverse teams.
- How do you manage stressful situations?
- What would your supervisors and colleagues say about you?
- What are your salary requirements? (See the *Negotiation Guide*)
- What is your current salary? (See the *Negotiation Guide*)
- Do you have any questions for me?

QUESTIONS TO ASK EMPLOYERS

The interview should be a conversation with give and take between you and the interviewer. Most interviewers expect you to have questions for them and you should have at least 3 questions prepared. Be aware that some of the things you want to find out may be covered during the interview – don't ask a question that's already been answered. Sample questions include:

- What are the priority issues you want this person to address in their first 6 months?
- What are the most important qualities in an ideal candidate for this role?

- How would my performance be measured here?
- What are the opportunities for growth in this position?
- How long have you been here? What keeps you here?
- How would you characterize the culture of the organization?
- What is your organization's approach to Diversity, Equity, Inclusion and Belonging (DEIB)?
- Where are you in the hiring process and what are your next steps?

Do not ask about benefits, salary, or vacation time until they have made you an offer.

CRAFTING YOUR ONE-MINUTE PITCH

Imagine that you only have one minute to speak with an employer. What can you say that would make them want to hire you? This information should come across in the brief introduction—a one-minute pitch—that 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 below 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?"

Sample Response 1: "Certainly. In May, I will be graduating from NYU Wagner with a Master of Urban Planning degree, focusing on transportation. 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. I am extremely passionate about the work that you are doing and I really appreciate you giving me the opportunity to come in for an interview."

Sample Response 2: "I'm passionate about promoting civic engagement, especially in underserved communities, and I've spent the past year and a half studying at NYU Wagner. I'm in my final year of the MPA program now and will be graduating in December. My courses in strategic management and program evaluation have taught me how to effectively expand and measure the impact of nonprofit programs. I'm also currently working on a capstone project in partnership with Common Cause NY and Community Votes, where my team is working to improve the reach and effectiveness of voter engagement efforts. Your organization aligns closely with my academic background and professional interests, and I'm really excited about the possibility of leveraging my experience to contribute to your work."

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 recite 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."

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

As you prepare for your interviews, you have access to a wide range of resources across NYU.

The NYU Wagner Office of Career Services (OCS) provides direct support to students and alumni of Wagner via:

- [Career Advisement](): Schedule a 30-minute appointment with a Career Services advisor via the Career Directory. Career advisors can review your resume and cover letter with you and discuss ways to best highlight your unique skills and experiences

- [Wagner Career Directory](): Wagner's online job database – Use it to search and apply for jobs, internships, and fellowships, and to RSVP for career events.

- [Career Guides](): Comprehensive guides for all areas of career development, including resumes, networking, interviewing, salary negotiation, and more!

- [Professional Development Resources](): A collection of job boards, professional associations, and other helpful industry resources to assist in your career exploration. Learning more about your chosen field will help you tailor your resume for specific opportunities.

Additionally, all NYU students and alumni can access these campus-wide resources:

- [NYU Wasserman Center for Career Development](): NYU's central campus career office provides advising, professional resources, and events available to all NYU students and alumni.

- [NYU Handshake](): Handshake is the NYU Wasserman Center's online job and event database. Use it to search and apply for jobs, internships, and fellowships, and to RSVP for career events.

- [Firsthand Guides](): Rankings, ratings, reviews, and background information on over 120 industries, over 5,000 employers, and over 840 professions.

- [Big Interview](): Interactive tool providing video interviewing lessons and skills practice, as well as coaching to improve technical elements including eye contact, filler words, pace, tone, and more.

- [CaseCoach](): Comprehensive guide to case interviews, including video lectures, sample recorded interviews and feedback, rubrics, and practice cases and tasks.

CHECKLIST: IDENTIFYING THE EMPLOYER'S HIRING NEEDS

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