

Interview Success Handbook

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Mount Vernon, IA (Revised 6/2018)*

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The Interview: Your Opportunity to Win an Offer

Whether you're looking for a summer job, internship or full-time position, the basics of interviewing are much the same. In this booklet we'll discuss the various interviewing situations you may encounter, provide you with some of the most frequently asked interview questions and guidelines for formulating your answers, address the subject of interviewing attire and review some basic do's and don'ts.

Types of Interviews

What will your interview be like? Interviews are as varied as the organizations that conduct them. Some are highly structured with specific questions that were developed well in advance. Others are free flowing conversations and may feel unorganized. You may be interviewed alone or with a group of candidates. There may be one interviewer or a committee. The following are some of the basic types of interviews you may experience. Keep in mind that employers often combine these types of interviews. For example, you might be asked behavioral based questions during a telephone interview.

Telephone Interviews:

Many employers are replacing initial face-to-face interviews with telephone interviews. Therefore, it is vitally important that every jobseeker be prepared to present him or herself over the phone. The telephone interview is similar to the face-to-face interview in that presenting your skills and abilities as they relate to the position is still the basic agenda. There are, however, some special considerations to keep in mind:

- If possible, remove all distractions – TV, music, roommate, etc.
- Speak at a comfortable pace and speak directly into the phone.
- Don't be alarmed if there are occasional long pauses. The interviewer may be collecting his thoughts or taking notes before moving on to the next question.
- Because you can't pick up on any visual cues from the interviewer, it may difficult to know when you've answered the question completely. Be aware of this and don't ramble.
- Do not drink, eat or smoke while on the phone.
- Ignore call waiting.

Behavioral Interviews:

Behavioral interviewing is becoming more popular among recruiters. Some recruiters may sprinkle in a few behavioral based questions among the more traditional ones, while others may make the interview "behavioral only". The idea behind this type of interview is the belief that past performance indicates future behavior. Questions about previous experiences are asked in an open-ended format, often with several more questions asked to clarify or dig deeper into the situation. Typical behavioral questions can be found on page 15.

Prepare for the behavioral interview by:

- Recalling recent situations that show favorable behaviors or actions, especially those involving coursework, work experience, leadership, teamwork, initiative, planning or customer service.
- Preparing short, specific descriptions of each situation.
- Constructing a story that has a beginning, middle and end. What was the situation? What action did you take? What was the result?

Site Visits:

The site visit can range from a short interview to an elaborate all-day event. This interview does not mean that you're guaranteed a job offer; rather it is a chance to see whether or not you will be a good fit for the job and the organization. If you are really interested in the job be sure to respond promptly when invited for a site visit. If you are not interested, then politely decline. When planning your site visit, keep the following points in mind:

- Verify who is paying for your expenses and ask how they are being handled. Some employers will pay for all of your expenses related to the interview, while others may not pay for any of them.
- Bring a change of clothes and extra money with you. Also have the names and phone numbers of those you'll be meeting with in case your plans change – for example, you miss a connecting flight or encounter bad weather.
- The site visit is a two-way street. Observe and evaluate – does this employer meet your expectations

regarding job content, company culture and organizational structure? Note how employees interact and assess the physical work environment.

- Find out about the community at large – cost of living, housing, schools, cultural and leisure activities, etc.

Panel Interview:

In the panel or team interview you may meet several people from the organization at one time. The panel might consist of a human resources representative and the hiring manager. It could be representatives from several different departments that you would have contact with or you could be interviewed by a group of potential co-workers. This type of interview allows the employer to expose you to as many people as possible in a short amount of time. The panel interview can be intimidating. There are a lot of them and only one of you; you may feel as if you are in the hot seat or in front of a firing squad. Relax and regroup. In this interview situation your goals are the same as with the one-on-one interview – presenting your skills and abilities as they relate to the job. Each member of the panel may have a different agenda, but how you present yourself as a potential employee needs to remain consistent. Keeping in mind that the interview is always a two-way street, the panel interview gives you an excellent opportunity to learn much more about the organization and the people you might be interacting with.

Is This a Test or an Interview?

Testing might be a part of the interviewing process. You may encounter skills tests, personality tests, aptitude tests, integrity tests, as well as personnel selection tests. Remember when taking these tests to separate the professional you from the personal you. How would you respond to this situation or these questions if you were at work? How would you respond to a co-worker or supervisor?

Skills Tests:

This type of interview represents a “try before you buy” attitude on the part of the employer. They want a demonstration of your skills that goes beyond verbal examples or a portfolio. In this type of interview you may be presented with a case study and questions or a series of “what if’s” as a way to test your knowledge. This test could be oral or written.

Personality Tests:

This type of test is used because the employer thinks that certain personality traits are needed to succeed in this specific job. The personality test might be projective (asking you to tell a story, finish a sentence or describe a blot of ink). With the projective personality test the employer is trying to understand how you deal with tough issues. Objective personality tests are verbal or paper/pencil tests that ask dozens (or hundreds) of questions and use some sort of rating scale such as strongly agree to strongly disagree. While these tests usually have high reliability, they are not intended to be used in the employee screening process, although they often are.

Aptitude Tests:

Perhaps you don’t have the skills to do the job, but the employer wants to know if you have the aptitude to learn them. As technological changes bring changes to the workplace, and as organizations become structured around constantly shifting project teams, your ability to learn new skills is of increasing interest to employers. The employer may be looking at your ability to develop skills in general or at your ability to learn a specific set of skills.

Integrity Tests:

These tests are becoming increasingly popular. Companies who want to screen out dishonest individuals, but who are leery of personality tests may administer an integrity test. When taking this type of test, honesty is the best policy, however, remember to keep the focus on the professional you rather than the personal you.

Personnel Selection Tests:

Unlike personality and integrity tests that are intended for use in therapeutic or healthcare settings, these tests are designed specifically to screen job applicants. They can measure trustworthiness and reliability as well as your potential for drug or alcohol abuse. Some employers have all applicants take a selection test before deciding whether or not to interview them.

Drug Tests:

More and more employers are telling candidates that “employment is contingent upon a negative drug test.” The topic probably won’t come up again until an offer has been extended. You may be saying to yourself, “I don’t take drugs, so I don’t even need to think about this.” Think again. Inaccurate readings, or false positives, are fairly

common and could have a significant impact on your career. Therefore, it is in your best interest to learn all you can about an employer's drug testing process.

Preparation

Preparation is critical in conveying a positive, polished and professional image. It is one of the keys to having a productive and successful interview. Preparing can also reduce the pre-interview jitters and allow the real you to shine through. Below are some things to think about as you prepare for your interview.

Know yourself:

Before going into an interview, know what you have to offer an employer so you can promote and sell yourself. Be prepared to talk about your skills, experiences, and knowledge. What are your personal attributes, interests, and strengths? You also might be asked about weaknesses, so be prepared to present them in a positive way. For instance, think about what changes you have made toward improvements. Think about accomplishments, decisions you have made and maybe things you would have done differently. Be able to articulate your interest in the field as well as your specific interest in this employer.

Do some research:

Read up on the company, the position, the industry and the field. Find the company website and ask for company literature, an annual report, and a mission statement if these have not already been provided. Know what the company does, who their competitors are, and the people they serve. Remember that periodicals and trade magazines can provide valuable information about current trends in your field.

Practice, practice, practice:

Go through the sample questions in this booklet. Practice answering questions out loud, in front of a mirror. Schedule a mock interview with Career Services and practice answering questions with a friend.

Proper Interviewing Attire

Although the content of your answers and the skills you will bring to the job are of primary importance, appearances do count. "The respect you receive at the interview is in direct proportion to the respect your visual image earns for you before you have the chance to say a word. If you wear clothes that are generally associated with leisure activities, you may be telling those who see you that you do not take your career seriously, and therefore are not committed to your work." (Martin Yate, *Knock 'Em Dead*). Campus may be the perfect place to exhibit your individuality and fashion sense, however, the interview is not the place to do so. If you don't look the part, you most likely will not get an offer regardless of your interviewing skills.

In spite of the fact that many organizations have relaxed dress expectations for employees, clothing expectations for interviewees have not changed much and still follow a conservative trend. Listed below are some general guidelines but, if you are unsure about what to wear, call the personnel department and ask – "I have an interview with _____ in the _____ department for a position as a _____. Could you please tell me what would be appropriate dress for this interview?" or "Does your organization have a dress code? Could you please tell me what it is?" If clothing expectations are still unclear, it is better to be overdressed than underdressed for the interview – you can always relax your style after you land the job.

Basic guidelines:

- Conservative clothes that are cleaned, pressed and fit well
- Classic rather than trendy styles
- Clothing in natural fibers such as wool, silk or cotton – 100% synthetic fibers tend to get shiny and hold on to odors regardless of washing
- Chose colors that fit in the work place. Neutral colors are best; choose a suit in a dark color that is not too trendy
- Shoes that are polished with mid-size heels, black or another conservative color that matches your suit
- Manicured nails, keep polish clear or light in color
- Minimal and discreet jewelry. Men: watches and wedding rings only; no necklaces, earrings, or ID bracelets. Women: no dangling earrings or clanking bracelets; limit rings to one per hand
- Subtle perfume or aftershave, or none at all
- Keep your hair under control and out of your face
- Makeup should be low-key

Handling Unethical or Illegal Interview Questions

Despite all attempts to limit illegal and unethical questioning and discriminatory behavior, you may still encounter an interviewer who will ask inappropriate questions. Discriminatory questions can be intentional or purely unintended. Either way, certain questions are inappropriate and should be approached with caution. A good general rule is if the question does not relate to your ability to do the job, be careful. A few of the topics that are off limits include:

<i>Religion</i>	<i>Political affiliation</i>	<i>Race</i>
<i>Number of dependents</i>	<i>Birthplace</i>	<i>Age</i>
<i>National origin</i>	<i>Marital status</i>	<i>Ages of children</i>
<i>Spouse's occupation</i>	<i>Sexual orientation</i>	

When confronted with an improper question, you have three choices:

- 1) **You can refuse to answer**, and tell the employer you think the question is inappropriate. You may feel better, but you may also decrease your chances of getting an offer.
- 2) **You can answer the question** and surrender some of your privacy.
- 3) **You can answer the legitimate concern** that probably lies behind the improper question while ignoring the exact question. For example:

Question: Do you plan to have children?

Underlying concern: How long will this potential employee be on the job? Will they require extended periods of leave?

Possible answers: I plan to pursue a career whether or not I decide to raise a family. OR I have that taken care of and I don't anticipate any absences from the job.

Question: What country are you from?

Underlying concern: Can you legally work in the United States in a permanent position?

Answer: I am authorized to work in the United States.

Question: Are you aware that we generally hire a more athletic type of person for this job because of the high level of stress and travel involved?

Underlying concern: Do you understand the physical demands of the job? The job description may not be complete.

Answer: There's no task in the job description that I can't handle.

Preparing to answer the unethical or illegal question:

Before you start interviewing it is important that you decide how sensitive you are to some prohibited topics. You must decide now how you intend to handle these topics and whether or not you will answer questions that may be illegal. The interview is not the place to make this decision. The following tips may help you prepare:

- Make a list of sensitive questions you may be asked.
- Determine ahead of time which of the three approaches discussed above you will use.
- Rehearse different ways of answering so that your reply will come out smoothly and naturally.

Additional Do's and Don'ts

Trying to remember all of the do's and don'ts, shoulds and shouldn'ts is an impossible task. Reviewing this list before each interview will remind you of the most important things on which to focus.

DO:

- Research the position, company or field.
- Practice interviewing with a friend or counselor from Career Services as a way to relieve anxiety - also have them point out any nervous habits or negative body language you might have.
- Ask for directions and for information about where to park.

- Try to schedule the interview for a time when you don't have to worry about getting somewhere else – you want to leave ample time.
- Confirm your appointment ahead of time.
- Arrive alone – don't bring anyone with you, especially your parents!
- Have your reference sheet available.
- If your interviewing clothes and shoes are new, try them on and wear them for a bit to make sure that you're comfortable in them.
- Ask a friend or roommate to look you over to make sure that you don't have any hems coming down or dry cleaning tags, spots or snags on your clothes.
- Arrive 10-15 minutes early – this will give you time to get your coat hung up, your materials together and take a few deep breathes.
- Be polite to everyone you meet – secretaries and receptionists included.
- Give a firm handshake – one shake will do.
- Make eye contact and smile.
- Have an idea of the salary range for this position.

DON'T:

- Use first names unless asked to do so.
- Smoke, even if invited.
- Sit down until invited.
- Show anxiety or boredom.
- Look at your watch.
- Ask about salary or benefits.
- Behave unprofessionally.
- Lack enthusiasm.
- Lie to employers.

After the Interview

As soon as possible, write a brief summary of what happened. Note any follow-up action you should take and put it in your calendar. Include your thoughts about your attitude and how you answered questions. Did you ask questions to get the information you needed? What might you do differently next time?

Write and send the employer a thank you letter within 24 hours of the interview. Be sure that names and titles are spelled correctly. Send a thank you letter even if you aren't interested in the position – you may end up applying to the same organization in the future or be referred to another opening. Most job seekers skip this important step and thus miss an opportunity to communicate with the employer. See a sample thank you letter on page 17.

Answering Interview Questions

It's impossible to know exactly what questions you'll be asked during the interview. You can, however, prepare answers to some of the most frequently asked questions. Prepare but don't go so far as to have a memorized response – you want your answers to sound genuine. The following are some general things to keep in mind when formulating your answers:

- Keep your answers brief and concise – limit your answers to two to three minutes in length unless asked to provide more details.
- Include specific, concrete information – avoid generalities; include measurable information and specific accomplishments.
- Comfortably and confidently articulate your strengths – demonstrate how your strengths will benefit the employer and how they relate to the employer's goals
- Prepare at least 5 success stories that demonstrate your strengths and skills.
- Put yourself on their team – use the employer's name and product/services in your answers; show that you are already picturing yourself in their existing environment.

- Pay attention to nonverbal communication – 65% of your conveyed message is nonverbal; watch gestures as well as posture.

How to Approach Some Common Interview Questions:

Listed below are some questions that are often asked of candidates and suggestions for ways to answer them. Remember, these are only a few of the questions that may be asked. A more complete list of frequently asked questions can be found on pages 13-14.

Tell me about yourself:

Do not be tricked by this question into sharing your life story. Interviewers usually do not want to discuss personal issues when they ask this question. They want to know things about you that are related to the position and/or organization. Think of the qualities that the employer is looking for. Do you have an example of how you demonstrated some of these qualities? If you do, then share that. If that doesn't work for you, then you can qualify the question. Ask, "What area of my background would be most relevant to you?" and take it from there.

What is your greatest weakness?:

This question is a challenge to many interviewees. If you don't have any to report, you may appear to lack introspection or seem arrogant. At the same time, you want to continue to put forth a positive image. The best approach is to design your answer so that your weakness is ultimately a positive. For example, "Some people may say that I get too bogged down in the details, but others would say that my work is thorough and accurate." Another good approach is to mention a weakness that you once had or are currently working to overcome. Explain how you overcame your weakness as well as how you continue to improve.

What is your greatest strength?:

Think of the qualities that the employer is looking for. Share concrete, specific examples that demonstrate those qualities and highlight your strengths. It is not enough to say, "I have good communication skills." Back up that statement with an example.

Why did you choose to attend Cornell College?:

Be sure to describe the practical reasons you had for choosing Cornell. The employer is looking for an example of your decision-making skills.

Where do you want to be in 5 years?:

Keep in mind that this employer will not be calling you in 5 years to see if you followed through. Rather, they want to hear that you are thinking about your future and how you intend to progress. Relate your future plans as they apply to that career or organization.

What do you know about our organization?:

This is one place where your research will pay off. Explain what you have learned through company literature, their website and your personal contacts.

Why do you want to work here?:

This is another question where your research will help. Explain the positive aspects of the organization - products, services, mission or other factors – and why those make this organization one where you would like to work.

What qualifications do you have that will make you successful?:

Go back to those key strengths and qualities that you have already focused on. Draw on academic as well as workplace experiences. Think of leadership roles you have held, student organizations you have assisted, and related part-time or summer jobs.

Why should I hire you?:

This is your open invitation to really sell yourself. Highlight areas from your background that relate to the organization's needs. Recap the interviewer's description of the job, matching it with your skills. Mention any strong points that you haven't had the opportunity to address.

Do you have any questions?: Employers like to be asked questions – it shows your interest -See page 11

FREQUENTLY ASKED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS:

- Tell me about yourself.
- What college did you attend and why?
- What are your long-range (short-range) goals and objectives?
- When and why did you establish these goals? How are you preparing yourself to achieve your goals?
- What do you see yourself doing five years from now?
- How do you plan to achieve your career goals?
- What are the most important rewards you expect in your career?
- What do you consider your greatest strength?
- What do you consider your greatest weakness?
- How would you describe yourself?
- How do you think a friend or professor who knows you well would describe you?
- What motivates you to put forth your greatest efforts?
- How has your college education prepared you for this position?
- Why should I hire you?
- Why do you want to work here?
- What qualifications do you have that make you think you will be successful?
- How do you determine or evaluate success?
- What do you think it takes to be successful in an organization like ours?
- In what ways do you think you can make a contribution to our organization?
- What two or three accomplishments have given you the most satisfaction? Why?
- What led you to choose your major field of study?
- Do you think your grades are a good indication of your academic capabilities?
- What have you learned from participation in extra-curricular activities?
- In what kind of a work environment are you most comfortable?
- How do you work under pressure?
- In what part-time jobs (summer) have you been most interested? Why?
- What do you know about our organization?
- What two or three things are most important to you in your job?
- What criteria will you use to evaluate the organization for which you hope to work?
- Are you willing to travel?
- Are you willing to relocate?
- Are you willing to spend at least six months as a trainee?
- Why do you think you might like to live in the community in which our organization is located?
- What is the biggest challenge you were ever faced with and how did you handle it?
- What have you learned from your mistakes?
- What is your leadership style? Give me an example of your leadership skills.
- Could you give me an example of where you took extraordinary efforts to achieve a deadline?
- What attracted you to this organization?
- Give me an example your creativity.
- Describe a recent project in which you were in charge.
- What kinds of work situations irritate you?
- Give me specific examples of things you have done in previous jobs or in your education which demonstrate that you would perform effectively and enjoy this position.
- What does confidentiality mean to you?
- Give me an example of a time that you worked in a group and faced a conflict with that group. How did you deal with the conflict?
- What sets you apart from other candidates?
- Do you have any questions for me?

BEHAVIORAL BASED QUESTIONS:

Following is a list of typical behavioral based questions, courtesy of Tom Lombardi from Kulicke & Soffe Industries, Inc. and *The Ultimate Job Search Kit* by Damir Joseph Stimac. The competencies sought by the interviewer are listed 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/written communication)
- 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? (oral communication)
- 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? How do you stay focused? (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 role did others play? (creativity and imagination)
- 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)
- Describe a time when you got co-workers or classmates who disliked 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 time when you put your needs aside to help a co-worker or classmate understand a task. How did you assist them? What was the result? (flexibility)
- Describe two specific goals you set for yourself and how successful you were in meeting them. What factors led to your success in meeting your goals? (goal setting)

QUESTIONS YOU CAN ASK IN THE INTERVIEW:

- How would you describe the corporate culture?
- What do you like best about the company/organization environment? Why?
- What types of people seem to do well in this department/organization?
- What is a typical day like in this position?
- Is there anything else I should know that would help me understand the position?
- Where is the person who had this position before? (If the person was promoted ask where the person is now; if the person was fired, ask why.)
- How many people have held this position in the last three years? (If it seems like there has been high turnover, ask for an explanation.)
- Do you promote internally or externally?
- Does this organization encourage personal and professional growth? How?
- What are the opportunities you see for this department/organization in the next year?
- What are the challenges that need to be faced? What types of challenges does this particular position offer?
- How did you start with the company/organization?
- What do you like about working for this organization? How would you compare it to others you have worked for?
- What are the greatest strengths of this company?
- Do you see growth opportunity for yourself?
- What would you change about this organization if you could?
- How well do departments interact with each other?
- Will the company continue to be competitive? How?
- Is the organization quick or slow to adopt new technology?
- What type of growth do you foresee in the next few years? Why?
- Where in the company do you hope to be in five years? (A good way to sense potential growth.)

SAMPLE THANK YOU LETTER

January 6, 20xx

Mr. Henry Stager
Human Resources Supervisor
The Morgan Group
444 Sunny Drive
St. Paul, MN 55555

Dear Mr. Stager:

Thank you for the opportunity to interview with you on Tuesday, January 4 for the position of Sales Representative. The experience reaffirmed my interest in your company and my confidence that my background will be beneficial to the goals of The Morgan Group.

As we discussed, my summer experiences in sales and customer service are directly relevant to the skills and qualities that you seek in your sales representatives. Specifically, as you strive to diversify your market, my contact with customers of varying ages and backgrounds will position me to implement sales strategies quickly and effectively. I am also excited about your training program and the specifics we discussed on Tuesday. As my past successes have indicated, I learn quickly and am adaptable to any situation.

I look forward to seeing you again and meeting others within The Morgan Group as well as visiting your new facilities. If you have any further questions or need additional information, please let me know. Thanks again for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Thomas C. Moore