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# All About Interviewing



## Office of Career Development

Vassar College

You've put together an impressive resume, contacted various employers, and along comes the request for an interview. Help! In order to feel more comfortable with the process, you should understand the three P's of interviewing--Purpose, Preparation, and Presentation.

### 1. Purpose

The interview is an exchange of information, or a directed conversation, between you and an employer. The basic purpose is simple: to determine how well you and the organization will be able to meet each other's needs. The interviewer will evaluate such things as your qualifications, motivation, personality style, and ability to communicate. It is your job to assess the organization as well by listening closely to the interviewer's comments and descriptions and asking directed questions of your own. Although it is easy to view the interviewer as an authority figure or adversary, you can increase your confidence--and have more productive interviews--if you see yourself as an equal partner in the venture.

### Are all interviews the same?

Most interviews fit into one of three categories: screening, telephone, or on-site.

*Screening interviews* may take place on campus, at recruiting fairs and conferences, on the phone, or at the employer's office. Often the people

who conduct screening interviews are from human resources or personnel departments. Their job is to weed out candidates and recommend promising ones. A typical screening interview lasts about 30 minutes, although you may have 15 minutes or less at a recruiting fair. Many of these interviews follow a structured format, usually beginning with a few minutes of pleasantries to put you at ease, followed by questions about your academic/work background, skills, and future goals. The interviewer may tell you more about the organization or position, and will probably give you a chance to ask some questions. If you are not told what comes next in the application/hiring process, feel free to ask.

*Telephone interviews* can be an intermediate step, especially if the organization has limited travel funds. They are commonly used by smaller organizations, where you are likely to speak with someone who has direct hiring power rather than with a human resources representative. Expect to ask and be asked similar questions over the telephone as you would in person, but remember that appearance and nonverbals can't help you out--your words and vocal inflections will make the impact.

The *on-site interview* may be the second step after a screening interview, or it can be the first

contact you have with an employer. Large employers usually funnel you through a series of interviews, which culminate in one or more on-site visits, while smaller organizations often make hiring decisions after one interview at the office. Learn what to expect in your industry before you begin interviewing.

On-site interviews for full-time employment can last anywhere from a couple of hours to two days, and will consist of a series of half-hour to hour-long interviews with several individuals. Dining or other social interaction with your interviewers is typically part of the package, and you may be reimbursed for travel, lodging, and meal expenses incurred on your way to and from the interview. (Always verify this in advance, when you make your initial interview arrangements.) An itinerary is usually given to you ahead of time.

### How will I know what to expect?

Within any of the three interview categories, there are a variety of formats. One-on-one meetings are the most common, but you also may talk with a group of interviewers at once (either in person or over the telephone). The interviewing styles you encounter can range from highly structured to free flowing, depending on the personalities and experience of those involved. Some employers, frequently those hiring for training

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programs, interview several candidates at the same time so that they can observe your interaction with peers. You may be asked to analyze a case study, give a presentation, take a written test, or participate in an exercise such as "in-box" (designed to see how you would prioritize typical work tasks). You might be asked behavioral questions to elicit clues about your future based on how you have handled past challenges. Occasionally you may face a stress interview, especially in a high-pressure industry. In this situation, the interviewer appears hostile or asks intimidating questions for the purpose of testing your reactions.

Just the fact that you were invited to an on-site interview indicates that the employer thinks highly of you. Whatever format you encounter, the interview is a chance for you and the employer to get better acquainted. This process will require energy, concentration, and flexibility on your part.

### **2. Preparation**

There are three key elements to interview preparation: knowing your skills, interests, values, and goals; understanding how they relate to the industry, the employer, and the specific job you seek; and being able to clearly articulate that message to the interviewer. Memorizing answers to every conceivable question isn't the point; rather, you should be in tune with yourself and familiar enough with the job that you can comfortably field a variety of questions.

#### **What should I plan to talk about?**

Think ahead about the points you want to stress and the image you want to present. Experts in behavioral interviewing suggest the S.T.A.R. approach to answering

questions: State the Situation and your Task, describe the Action you took, and then sum up the Result. You might also develop various anecdotes that could give the interviewer an idea of who you are. Does the job require good organizational and managerial skills? Discuss the planning, coordinating, and delegating you did for a campus committee. Does the employer need someone who's a stickler for details? Maybe you could talk about how the office secretary at your campus job always gave you letters to proofread. By using experiential anecdotes rather than flat descriptions and yes-no answers, you will create an accurate and believable picture of yourself.

If you learn about the industry, organization and specific job ahead of time, you'll be able to ask more intelligent questions during the interview, and also indicate your thoroughness and sincerity. There are various ways to gather information. You might start on the organization's website, or an industry guide such as vault.com. Additionally, there are various guides in the Career Development Library. A staff member or Peer Advisor can give you suggestions on where to look.

Newspapers and trade magazines, many of which are available in the CDO and college libraries, are the best means for keeping abreast of current industry trends. Finally, you may want to talk informally with people who know the organization. Check the V-NET database for alumnae/i to contact.

As you do your research, think about issues you would like to talk about with your interviewers. This is your time as well as theirs, so make sure to address pertinent

questions. If you are preparing for a group or on-site interview, you will want to formulate different types of questions depending on whom you are talking with. A senior-level staff member might be the most appropriate person to ask about long-term trends or organizational policy, whereas you could ask a peer about day-to-day responsibilities, office social life, or the boss's supervisory style.

#### **Is there anything I shouldn't discuss?**

Usually, the employer brings up salary and benefits at the on-site interview or when a job offer is presented. If you feel you must know the salary at an earlier point, you might ask for a salary range rather than a specific figure.

Formally presenting yourself to an employer can be a challenge, especially if you are harboring doubts in your own mind about where your career niche might be. Maybe you are interested in paralegal work because it could help you make a decision about law school. Or the nine-month schedule of a teaching job is appealing because it would give you time to travel in the summer. These are legitimate reasons for choosing one type of work over another, but they both focus on what a job or employer can offer you. In an interview, you should stress what you can do for the employer. It is fine to mention the non job-related factors that led to your interest in a position but keep the emphasis on your potential benefit to the employer: the abilities, experiences, and personal attributes that could enhance your performance on the job.

There are a number of topics which are irrelevant and illegal for an interviewer to question you about.

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These include, among others, marital/parental status, cultural/ethnic background, and religious affiliation. Some employers will pose illegal questions; therefore, it is a good idea to think ahead about how you might handle such inquiries. For instance, if asked: "Do you have any disabilities?" you might respond by asking if there were disabilities which would prevent someone from performing the job. Recognize that your interviewer may be trying to get at a legitimate job-related concern, and by addressing that concern, you eliminate the need to divulge unnecessary information. Of course, you may always choose to bring up a topic such as ethnic background or relationship status if you feel it could clarify your situation or enhance your qualifications.

It is illegal to ask about your citizenship; however, an employer can legally ask whether you have the right to work in the U.S. If you are a visa-holder, make sure you understand and can explain your work restrictions if an employer asks.

### 3. Presentation

First impressions do count, especially in an interview. The way you conduct yourself should reinforce your qualifications for the job, rather than calling them into question. Your interviewers will ask themselves, "Is this a person I want representing my organization eight hours a day? Is this someone I'd like to work with?" To make your best impression, let courtesy, professionalism, and common sense be your guides.

No discussion of interviewing could be complete without also mentioning ethics. Ethical issues in

the interview process usually center around honesty, and they aren't always clear-cut. Refer to the Career Brief "*Ethics and The Job Search*" for more help in this area.

Plan to arrive five to ten minutes early for your interview, and bring along these items: extra copies of your resume, a sheet with names and contact information for your references, and if appropriate, a portfolio of written or artistic work. You also should have a pad of paper and pen for notes.

### What should I wear?

Appearance is a very important aspect of how you present yourself. Your clothing should be similar to that of others in the organization, sending the message that you could easily fit in. Research ahead of time what type of clothing is appropriate, and remember that it is usually better to err on the side of conservatism. Although you may feel uncomfortable wearing a suit, remember that suits are standard attire in many industries, and you may be perceived naive or unprofessional if you wear something less. To keep the interviewer's attention focused on your conversation, avoid distracting jewelry and heavy cologne or make-up. (It should go without saying that your clothing is clean and pressed, shoes are shined, hair is arranged neatly, and personal hygiene is immaculate.) For more information, see the Career Brief "*Dressing for Success.*"

### Are there guidelines for interview etiquette?

It is only natural that you feel somewhat nervous during an interview, but try not to let your anxiety produce distracting behaviors that can get in the way of your effectiveness. Remember to

focus on the questions at hand and avoid rambling and run-on sentences. (It is OK to pause and collect your thoughts every now and then.) If you tend to tap your feet, say "uhmm", overuse hand gestures, or similar, be aware of these habits before the interview so you can make the effort to control them. Appropriate interview behavior includes maintaining consistent eye contact, offering a firm handshake, speaking clearly and distinctly, listening carefully, and, above all, showing good humor and enthusiasm.

At the close of your interview, be sure to indicate your interest in the position (assuming, of course, that you still want it), and thank the people you spoke with for their time and hospitality. In addition, collect business cards for thank you letters and mail/email thank-you notes within a day after the interview.

Practice is the key to making yourself comfortable and effective in the interview process. There are a variety of techniques you can use to organize your thoughts and become aware of trouble spots. Try developing answers for the sample questions on this handout. Focus especially on those which might give you problems and think of examples to illustrate key points. You might ask friends for suggestions and feedback, schedule a mock interview, or talk out loud to a mirror or tape recorder. Finally, our professional staff have interviewing workshops on a regular basis and are available for mock interview sessions.

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### **Possible interview questions**

Preparing for some common questions can improve your performance and help you to be less nervous about the interview. Think about why the interviewer is asking the question when considering your response.

- Tell me about yourself.
- Why did you choose Vassar College?
- How did you select your academic major?
- Give me an example of a recent typical school day, for example, last Monday, and tell me how you planned for it.
- What do you consider your greatest accomplishment and why?
- Where do you see yourself in the next five / ten years?
- Tell me about your college activities.
- How did your approach to completing an assignment differ from the approach used by others in your class?
- What is your GPA?
- What motivates you to do a good job?
- How have you spent your summers for the past four years? What did you learn from these experiences?
- Describe how you handled a difficult situation with another person.
- What skills can you contribute to this position?

- What do you know about this organization?
- Tell me about a time when you motivated someone else to do a good job.
- How would a friend or professor describe you?
- How would you describe your ideal supervisor?
- Why should I hire a liberal arts graduate?
- What criteria are you using to evaluate the organizations you interview with?
- Tell me about the role you usually play in a group.
- What are you looking for in an employer?
- What did you learn from your travel experiences?
- Give me a specific example of a situation that you found high-stress and why.
- How would you describe your personality?
- What tasks did you like and dislike most at your last job?
- What other types of jobs or organizations are you considering?
- Do you have plans for graduate school?
- What can you offer me?
- Tell me about an idea or proposal you sold to your classmates or professor and how you did it.
- What salary do you expect?
- How do you feel about relocation/travel?

- What questions do you have about our organization?

### **Questions you could ask an interviewer**

- What type of training would I receive?
- Who would I be working with most closely?
- What type of person are you looking for?
- How would I be evaluated?
- Where is the person who last held this position?
- What is the typical career path for someone with my background?
- What would my daily responsibilities consist of?
- How much flexibility would I have in defining my responsibilities?
- How important would a graduate degree be in terms of advancement?
- What are the most pressing concerns at your organization right now?
- How much contact is there between your department and others in the organization?
- What is the next step in the application process?
- When can I expect to hear from you?