

The Job Search

Initial Interviews

ment, especially if one could be in a supervisory or decision-making position over the other.

Other justifications that legitimately may be used are: grades and class work, previous salary, reasons for leaving previous jobs. If you don't want to say that you were fired, say "will discuss at interview," where you have a letter in hand to explain the situation.

INITIAL INTERVIEWS

Your initial interview with an organization, on campus or at the company personnel office, is intended only to establish the parameters of what you and the firm might have to offer each other. Further interviews will take place between you and the various department heads who have the openings and the hiring authority.

Students frequently complain that campus interviews leave them unclear about the nature and activities of specific jobs, where they might be placed, and whether they will be favorably recommended. Unfortunately, that is unavoidable. A large company that plans to hire 100 new technical graduates yearly must start interviewing six months in advance of the starting work date. Company representatives often do not know what positions will be available or have the time to describe them all. And, until interviewers pool their assessments of applicants, they have no way of knowing who will be considered further. Unless there is a clear mismatch, you will seldom be rejected on the spot.

Interviews for a specific opening are more focused. The employer can describe the job's requirements and responsibilities, the skills it will require, and its geographic location. The applicant, in turn, can direct his or her energies to appear as the ideal candidate for that specific position.

A successful interview, from the applicant's point of view, is one that results in a job offer or at least a chance to stay in the running. From the interviewer's standpoint, a successful interview results in referring an applicant who turns out to be an asset to the company. But since that outcome cannot be predicted in advance, the average interviewer tends to be conservative: to prefer the safe to the erratic, to certify previous success rather than underwrite the untried.

Interviewers are a varied lot; it is impossible to predict the position or the personality of the individual you will encounter. Most frequently encountered on campus is a member of a company's college relations department whose immediate responsibility is to screen applicants from colleges and universities. Often, this campus recruiter has a technical background and previous work experience with the company. If not, a member of the technical staff may accompany him or her. Doctoral candidates are usually interviewed by a member of the company's research staff who has expertise in the same specialty that is being sought. Most large companies train their campus representatives in interviewing techniques. However, be prepared for the interviewer who just happened to be free and is sent in as a last-minute replacement.

What Will Happen?

A successful interview can be helped along if the candidate understands the interviewing process. In a half-hour's time (sometimes an hour at company headquarters or for doctoral candidates), the interviewer must establish a relaxed but businesslike atmosphere, ascertain certain information to transmit to other decision makers, and create a favorable company image both to interest a likely candidate and to retain the goodwill of a rejected one.

Interviews usually follow a set pattern of questions, although the style of the interview may vary greatly from company to company and from interviewer to interviewer. They may seem casual and informal, with open-ended questions that allow you to choose what to emphasize, or they may be structured according to a preplanned format. The "stress" interview, deliberately designed to arouse feelings of discomfort or defensiveness ("Why do you think we'd be interested in someone with your lack of experience?"), is rare at the entry level. Whatever the style, the typical interview will follow the same stages and cover the same topics to ascertain the presence of those qualities that all employers value. The chart on the following page outlines the stages, topics, and interests covered in the interview; the list of most commonly asked questions should also help in-interview preparation.

Do not be misled into thinking that the employer always takes the initiative and that you are in a passive role. You are expected to explain, discuss, and elaborate on your answers, not just give "yes" or "no" replies. Some interviewers may start the interview by saying "Tell me about yourself" instead of going methodically through a sequence of questions. Another opener is often "Why are you interested in working for us?"

You Must Prepare

Students who rely on their gift of gab to carry them through their first interview are usually sufficiently unnerved by the experience to prepare properly for the next. Preparation involves acquiring some knowledge of the company or specific job beforehand. If the company is not listed in this guide, look it up in your placement office's collection of recruitment brochures and annual reports or consult a business reference source at the library. If, after exhausting these sources, you still do not feel adequately informed, ask the interviewer to tell you about the company and the nature of the job(s) available. If you already know basic information, it is still a good idea to ask some intelligent questions about the company's future and your possible role in it.

Preparation also involves learning to talk about yourself, your past experiences, and your career goals in a thoughtful way. What are you good at? What do you like and dislike? What is important to you? What can you offer an employer? These questions, in one form or other, will come up time and again. Think carefully about your answers; talking to a friend or counselor can help you articulate them. Then, if you can re-

STAGES AND TOPICS COVERED DURING THE INITIAL INTERVIEW

(The screened area highlights the most important parts of the interview.)

STAGES	INTERVIEWER TOPICS	INTERVIEWER LOOKS FOR
1. FIRST IMPRESSIONS	Introduction and greeting Small talk about traffic conditions, the weather, the record of the basketball team	Firm handshake, eye contact Appearance and dress appropriate to the business, not campus, setting Ease in social situations, good manners, poise
2. YOUR RECORD	<p>EDUCATION Reasons for choice of school and major Grades; effort required for them Special areas of interest Courses enjoyed most and least; reasons Special achievements, toughest problems Value of education as career preparation Reaction to teachers High school record, SAT scores</p> <p>WORK EXPERIENCE Nature of jobs held Why undertaken Level of responsibility reached Duties liked most and least Supervisory experience Relations with others</p> <p>ACTIVITIES AND INTERESTS Role in extracurricular, athletic, community, and social service activities Personal interests—hobbies, cultural interests, sports</p>	<p>Intellectual abilities Breadth and depth of knowledge Relevance of course work to career interests Special or general interest Value placed on achievement Willingness to work hard Relation between ability and achievement Reaction to authority Ability to cope with problems Sensible use of resources (time, energy, money) High energy level, vitality, enthusiasm Leadership ability; interest in responsibility Willingness to follow directions Ability to get along with others Seriousness of purpose Ability to motivate oneself, to make things happen Positive "can do" attitude Diversity of interests Awareness of world outside the lab Social conscience; good citizenship</p>
3. YOUR CAREER GOALS	<p>Type of work desired Immediate objectives Long-term objectives Interest in this company Other companies being considered Desire for further education/training Geographical preferences and limitations Attitude toward relocation Health factors that might affect job performance</p>	<p>Realistic knowledge of strengths and weaknesses Preparation for employment Knowledge of opportunities Seriousness of purpose; career-oriented rather than job-oriented Knowledge of the company Real interest in the company Work interests in line with talents Company's chance to get and keep you</p>
4. THE COMPANY	<p>Company opportunities Where you might fit Current and future projects Major divisions and departments Training programs, educational and other benefits</p>	<p>Informed and relevant questions Indications of interest in answers Appropriate but not undue interest in salary or benefits</p>
5. CONCLUSION	<p>Further steps you should take (application form, transcript, references) Further steps company will take, outline how application handled, to which departments it will be sent, time of notification of decision Cordial farewell</p>	<p>Candidate's attention to information as a sign of continued interest</p>

50 QUESTIONS MOST COMMONLY ASKED AT INTERVIEWS

The Endicott Survey, published by the Placement Center of Northwestern University, periodically updates its original list of questions most commonly asked of college graduates at interviews. Variations of that list have appeared in many publications.

1. What are your long-range and short-range goals and objectives, when and why did you establish these goals, and how are you preparing yourself to achieve them?
2. What specific goals, other than those related to your occupation, have you established for yourself for the next 10 years?
3. What do you see yourself doing five years from now?
4. What do you really want to do in life?
5. What are your long-range career objectives?
6. How do you plan to achieve your career goals?
7. What are the most important rewards you expect in your career?
8. What do you expect to be earning in five years?
9. Why did you choose the career for which you are preparing?
10. Which is more important to you, the money or the type of job?
11. What do you consider to be your greatest strengths and weaknesses?
12. How would you describe yourself?
13. How do you think a friend or a professor who knows you well would describe you?
14. What motivates you to put forth your greatest effort?
15. How has your education prepared you for a career?
16. Why should I hire you?
17. What qualifications do you have that make you think that you will be successful?
18. How do you determine or evaluate success?
19. What do you think it takes to be successful in a company like ours?
20. In what ways do you think you can make a contribution to our company?
21. What qualities should a successful manager possess?
22. Describe the relationship that should exist between a supervisor and subordinates.
23. What two or three accomplishments have given you the most satisfaction? Why?
24. Describe your most rewarding college experience.
25. If you were hiring a graduate for this position, what qualities would you look for?
26. Why did you select your college or university?
27. What led you to choose your field of major study?
28. What academic subjects did you like best? Least?
29. Do you enjoy doing independent research?
30. If you could do so, would you plan your academic study differently?
31. What changes would you make in your college or university?
32. Do you think that your grades are a good indication of your academic achievement?
33. What have you learned from participation in extracurricular activities?
34. Do you have plans for continued study? (Graduate students may be asked: Why did you decide to pursue an advanced degree?)
35. In what kind of a work environment are you most comfortable?
36. How do you work under pressure?
37. In what part-time or summer jobs have you been most interested? Why?
38. How would you describe the ideal job for you following graduation?
39. Why did you decide to seek a position with this company?
40. What do you know about our company?
41. What two or three things are most important to you in your job?
42. Are you seeking employment in a company of a certain size? Why?
43. What criteria are you using to evaluate the company for which you hope to work?
44. Do you have a geographical preference? Why?
45. Will you relocate? Does relocation bother you?
46. Are you willing to travel?
47. Are you willing to spend at least six months as a trainee?
48. Why do you think you might like to live in the community in which our company is located?
49. What major problem have you encountered and how did you deal with it?
50. What have you learned from your mistakes?

late these to what you know about the specific needs and activities of the employer you are talking to, you can be relaxed, self-confident, and flexible in the interview itself.

The following details may also be helpful.

Dress. The proper interview outfit for men is a business suit; women may wear coordinated sportswear or a tailored suit or dress. The best guide for both sexes is to dress simply and conservatively.

Business manners. A firm handshake, eye contact when speaking, and calling a person by name all make a good first impression. Women should extend their hand; many men have been taught to wait for it before extending their own. Treat men and women interviewers alike; women in the business world do not expect chivalry. The good manners you would show to anyone in a position of authority are appropriate. A thank-you note after the interview is a nice gesture, especially if some special circumstances warrant it.

Follow-through. During the interview, maintain interest even if the opportunities are not in line with your expectations. You may think better of them at a later point. Follow through on any things you must do, such as releasing your transcript, providing references, filling out an application blank. Note the name of the person you were interviewed by in case you must follow up on your status. The interviewer should indicate what the next steps in the process will be and when you may expect a response from the company. If you do not hear by the specified period, or within six to eight weeks, you may want to call.

Handling questions about your further education. Employers are aware that many students are thinking about graduate study immediately or after a few years' work experience. In fact, they expect that bright and ambitious students will pursue an advanced degree. However, they also calculate that a three- to five-year stay is the minimum necessary for a return on their investment in your training. Many will subsidize your graduate study provided it is related to the company's activities and that you study part-time while working. (Many will allow full time off for thesis work.) If you are willing to be flexible in your plans to accommodate the employer's needs, you do not hinder your chances by admitting your interest in further education. If, however, you are certain that you will leave after a year or two to return to academia, it is better to be honest about your plans and ask for an assignment where you can be immediately productive rather than be assigned to a training program where your productivity will be delayed.

EQUAL OPPORTUNITY GUIDELINES

As a result of past government initiative, there is a steadily growing body of legislation, judicial decisions, and administrative regulations at the federal and state levels relating to equal employment opportunity, much of it still in a state of flux and confusing to job seekers.

It is useful to be aware of two aspects of the issue: equal opportunity (or nondiscrimination) and affirmative action. All U.S. employers and employment agencies are required to be equal opportunity employers; they are prohibited from basing an employment decision solely on the basis of race, color, sex, national origin, religion, or age between 40 and 70. Employment policies must apply equally to both sexes. For an example, an employer cannot refuse to hire the mother of young children unless that policy also applies to fathers. In addition, government contractors must, and other employers may, initiate affirmative action plans to diversify their work force by actively seeking to employ and promote certain groups of U.S. citizens. Those for whom affirmative action plans are designed include women, minorities (black, Spanish-surnamed, Orientals, and American Indians), the handicapped, and disabled and Vietnam-war veterans.

Most employers have revised their application forms and interview questions to eliminate any information that might be considered discriminatory. They even go as far as to forbid you to list the names of organizations or activities that might indicate race, sex, religion, and so on. For example, you should say, "Community athletic organization" rather than "Hungarian-American Athletic League" on the application. However, in your résumé, you can volunteer whatever information you like, as discussed in the last section.

Employers have a right to ask whether you have a work visa if you are not a U.S. citizen. They can also ask about physical handicaps that would affect work performance. If you are unclear about the requirements of a job, it is best to state briefly the nature of your handicap on an application blank and that you will discuss it further in an interview. There you can clarify what the demands are and even suggest alternative arrangements to accommodate your situation, if it should be necessary.

Answering Personal Questions

In general, it is wise to be sensitive to questions that pertain to your personal life or background and to consider how the information may be interpreted. If the application blank is a relic of pre-EEO days, you may write NA for any item that arouses your suspicion. However, when raised in an interview, most job hunters find it awkward to refuse to answer. A response such as "Could you tell me why this information is of interest to you, or how it will be used in considering my candidacy?" should warn the interviewer that you consider this unfair ground. If that doesn't work, you may simply say "I'd prefer not to answer personal questions."

Employers who are meticulous about avoiding impermissible areas of inquiry find themselves in a difficult position when they want to identify certain groups for affirmative action purposes. Women are, of course, easiest to identify if they don't replace their first name with initials. Blacks are not identifiable unless they attended the traditional black colleges, and a handicap is

not evident in the résumé of a college graduate who has coped with it successfully.

Affirmative action "targets" must make their own decision about whether to identify themselves on their résumé. Some maintain self-respect if they feel they were hired only on their own merits; others prefer to be quite open and not perform a cost-benefit analysis on the subject; still others welcome all the help they can get. In dealing with employers who state that they have affirmative action plans, it should be to your advantage to identify yourself on your résumé or covering letter. For the others, a realistic assessment of whether or not it will help your case is the wisest course.

ON-SITE VISITS

During the period of your initial contacts, you will undoubtedly decide that there are some opportunities in which you have no further interest. Employers will also make some screening decisions and identify those candidates they want to consider further. The second stage of your job search, where both you and the employer begin to narrow down possibilities, requires more serious evaluation on both sides of the suitability of the match between you and the organization. Although actual figures vary greatly depending on your field, the industry, the company, and the state of the economy, your chances of a positive response from initial résumé screening may be 1 out of 100; from an initial interview, 1 out of 10-20; after a second, or hiring, interview, 1 out of 3 or 4.

If your initial contact was through a résumé, a screening interview may be subsequently arranged to get a more complete picture of you, not just how you look on paper. If you pass that test, or if you are invited for a follow-up visit to a company with whom you interviewed on campus, the next contact will be the hiring interview, the one that will lead to a hiring decision. At this point, your application is under serious consideration. Although your chances for success are considerably increased, an offer is by no means a certainty. It is extremely important not to relax your efforts until you have an offer in hand.

The hiring interview will be longer, more intense, and more informative than the screening interview. You will surely have an hour, possibly a full day, to acquire more specific information about the organization's operations, the specific job or jobs available, and the demands and responsibilities you will face. This interview, however, should not be a one-way street; it also presents you with the opportunity to evaluate the company. Employment practices, salary and benefits, training, and educational assistance are appropriate subjects for discussion at this time. Be attentive to the physical surroundings, to the pace of work, to the attitude and behavior of the people with whom you will be working, and to the geographical location as a place to live. Work hard to get the offer, but store up enough information and impressions so that you can later decide whether you want to accept it.

If a full day is planned, the personnel department will coordinate your travel arrangements and appointment schedule. In addition to having an interview with the department head(s) who will make the final decision, you may talk with managers in related areas who will provide input for that decision, especially if your first placement would be in a training program rather than a specific job assignment. You may also have a chance to talk with some junior-level people a step or two ahead of you in their careers.

If travel expenses are reimbursable, keep a record, with receipts, of expenses legitimately incurred. As a rule, however, government agencies and smaller companies do not pay for travel expenses.

It is recommended that you schedule your company visits within a concentrated time period rather than spread them out over many months, and that you schedule them after you have completed your initial explorations. After exposure to a variety of opportunities, you will be better prepared to evaluate the finalists, and scheduling them close together keeps them fresh in your mind. Also, by scheduling them together, the resultant offers will be made at approximately the same time, an advantage when you have to make a final decision.

SALARY AND EMPLOYMENT OFFERS

Until an offer is forthcoming, there is really no point in serious salary discussion, because the company will only start calculating a salary figure when it decides it wants you. The proper attitude until then is to concentrate on getting the offer by convincing the employer that you can benefit the organization.

What Amount Should You Expect?

Not only the salary but also the total compensation package should be examined and compared with that offered by other companies. This package may include benefits totaling between 20% and 40% added to the salary figure itself. Hospitalization; life insurance; medical, dental, and retirement plans; tuition assistance; sick leave; and vacations are the most common benefits offered by large companies. In evaluating a company whose benefits are minimal, deduct 20% from the salary offered to see if it is still competitive with others.

To get an idea of the going rate at the entry level, use the average figures supplied in the Profiles section of this guide or those published by the College Placement Council. Your career planning and placement office may also compile salary figures offered to the graduates of your institution and your department. Average salary figures for experienced people are available through the appropriate professional or trade association.

If you are at the entry level, you have little scope for real negotiating because you do not have a unique or specialized skill. Large companies and government agencies have a fixed salary schedule; they arrive at a salary offer by establishing a base figure for each discipline or group of disciplines. (Engineering disciplines

usually command higher salaries than the physical sciences or computer sciences.) Additional amounts are added to the base salary for a high GPA, relevant work experience including the military, an advanced degree, and general "sparkle"—that undefinable but attractive element a company may be willing to pay for. Smaller companies will take the same factors into account in a less formal way. It always pays to ask on what criteria a salary figure is based and to point out factors that may apply favorably to you.

The best position from which to negotiate a higher salary offer is to have in hand a higher offer from someone else. Ask if it can be matched if you really want that job. The company may match it or may point out compensating factors, such as a lower-cost-of-living location or a better training program. Don't press further. Think it over and decide which is the better opportunity regardless of salary. The difference will probably not be enough to cause hardship except, temporarily, to your ego.

Handling Offers

No matter how well the hiring interview seems to have gone, it is highly unlikely that you will be hired on the spot or even told that an offer will be forthcoming. If an offer should be extended then, *always* ask for a chance to think it over. Accepting immediately is poor policy because you lose your opportunity to negotiate salary, job assignment, or job location. Even if you think the offer is exactly right, the company's enthusiasm and your own at the time may cloud your objectivity. Sometimes an offer may be made through a telephone call; again, ask for time.

When an offer is made verbally, try to get the details in writing. An offer should specify your position or job title, salary, and the name of the department and supervisor to which you will be assigned. The offer may be contingent upon your passing a physical examination. It will usually have a deadline by which you must accept in writing, ranging from two to eight weeks, depending on the time of year. The actual starting date may be specified then or after your acceptance. Starting dates may be inflexible due to the start of a training program, or they may be arranged according to your preference.

After an offer has been extended, both you and the employer are walking a tightrope. You may need time in order to hear from others; employers want to know

your decision quickly so that they can contact back-up candidates. Therefore, the deadline is usually taken seriously; after it has passed, the offer may be withdrawn. If you know that you will not be able to meet it, respond immediately to request an extension. Try to give a specific date that you hope to meet rather than just ask for "more time." Don't be afraid to say that you are considering or expecting other offers; no one expects you to hang your future on just one peg.

You now have leverage to put some pressure on other employers from whom you are expecting an offer. It is perfectly appropriate to call, explain that you must make a decision by a certain date, and request information on your status, hoping for their decision at their earliest convenience. Try to get from each a specific date when you may expect to hear one way or the other. When those dates arrive, you should know where you stand and be able to meet your commitment to the employer who made the original offer.

Sometimes students inquire about the consequences of accepting an offer while at the same time hoping that a better one will come along. If you accept an offer in writing, you are at least morally bound to keep it. (Most employers will not, however, bother to spend the money necessary to hold you to it legally.) Accepting, and then changing your mind, brings discredit on you, your college, and any references or contacts who may have helped you to that point. It may ruin your chances for ever working for that company. However, breaking an engagement is better than marching honorably into a bad marriage. If you are convinced that you have made the wrong decision, immediately notify the employer. You won't get a Scout badge, but that is still better than not showing up without any previous warning.

"Yes," "No," and "Thank You"

Once you have made the decision to accept or reject an offer, respond in writing immediately. If you accept, notify other employers who are still considering you. Your college placement office should be next to hear the good news; they depend on this information for helping next year's class and for their placement and salary statistics. Within the next few weeks, everyone who has helped you—professors, recommenders, contacts—should be advised of the outcome of your search and thanked for their assistance.

SOURCE: Peterson's Business and Management
12.65 1987