



MORaine VALLEY COMMUNITY COLLEGE
Job Resource Center S202 - Phone: 708.974.5737
www.morainevalley.edu/jrc

INTERVIEWING STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESS

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THE JOB INTERVIEW

A job interview is simply an exchange of information between an employer and an applicant concerning the needs and expectations of both parties to determine whether there is a mutually satisfactory match. The job interview can occur in a variety of settings, with a variety of participants. Usually, an interview involves one applicant and one interviewer, but the number of applicants and interviewers can differ by company. Sometimes a group of applicants are brought in together for an introduction to the position/company and/or for pre-employment testing. Only after an applicant successfully completes this group process will he or she be brought in for an individual interview. Sometimes a group of interviewers will meet with an individual candidate. When scheduling an interview, an applicant should ask with whom the interview will be conducted, allowing him/her to better prepare for the interview.

Interviewers meet candidates in a variety of locations (the company, a restaurant, etc.) as long as the environment is conducive to exchanging information. It is also possible that an initial, pre-screening interview will be conducted by telephone. An applicant should always be prepared to discuss his/her qualifications when an employer calls. The Human Resources office often does pre-screening interviews; while the individual who will directly supervise the candidate usually conducts second interviews.

PREPARATION BEFORE AN INTERVIEW

In order to present yourself well in an interview, it is important to prepare by doing some research. In addition to researching the job, the industry and the employer, be sure to know your skills. What skills do you have that are needed for this job? Most employers want you to be able to quickly tell them what you can do. To do this, take the time to complete a self-assessment. The Job Resource Center at Moraine Valley Community College has a self-assessment guide you can complete in a short amount of time.

Once you know your skills, try to develop “a sixty-second commercial.” This is a technique that allows you to tell an employer in sixty seconds or less four things:

- ❑ The kind of work you do
- ❑ Your education/training
- ❑ Strongest skills and accomplishments
- ❑ Type of position you are seeking

Having this short summary prepared in advance is a big help for pre-screening calls from the Human Resource recruiter or actual telephone interviews from the Hiring Manager. Your confidence and comfort level are greatly increased by this technique!

When preparing for job interviews, having insight about the company or person with whom you'll be meeting helps you to succeed. If you have a description of the job for which you're applying, the task of outlining your related skills, abilities and experience is significantly easier. Sometimes, the job advertisement includes this information. If not, when scheduling an interview, try to obtain pertinent information about duties and responsibilities. Study it carefully so you understand the tasks you'll be expected to perform. When reviewing the job description, ask yourself the following questions:

❑ **Terminology -**

Do you understand it?

❑ **Qualifications -**

Do you have the qualifications stated in the job description?

❑ **Related skills-**

Can you relate your skills, abilities and/or work and volunteer experiences to those listed in the job description?

PREPARATION BEFORE AN INTERVIEW

Information To Have About The Industry

Hopefully through your self-assessment and job search, you have identified the type of industry you feel would be a good match for your skills. Employers are impressed when job applicants are knowledgeable about their industry. The Occupational Outlook Handbook is updated every two years by the U.S. Department of Labor. It outlines the nature of the work, working conditions, employment information, training needed and salary earnings for most occupations. In addition to this book, there are numerous other materials available through your library or the Job Resource Center at Moraine Valley Community College. This type of information becomes valuable during the interviewing process, especially during salary negotiations.

Information To Have About The Employer

This is a suggested list of items you can identify about the position for which you are applying. If you are unable to gather this information, consider asking about it in the interview. Minimally, you should know the correct company name, location, products or services, number of employees and establishment date.

- Name of interviewer
- People you know at the company
- Location of home office; Geographic locations
- Number of plants, stores or sales outlets
- Computerization - hardware, software & program language
- Industry news and changes
- Major competitors
- Typical career path in your field
- Supervisory/management style

The more information you can learn about the employer, the more interested and knowledgeable you'll appear to the interviewer!

Types of Interviews

Just as there are different styles of resumes, there are also different types of interviews. The interview process is similar, but the type of questions asked may differ as you move from the first interview to multiple interviews. Typically, there may be two or more interviews before a decision is made to hire:

- **Telephone and/or Pre-screening Interview** - usually conducted by the Human Resources Department
- **Traditional Interview** - typical interview that is used to assess skills and qualifications
- **Structured and/or Behavioral** - behavior-based interview format that is used to assess past work experience in order to predict future performance
- **Lunch/Dinner Interviews** - used by hiring personnel to assess social skills and to determine your “fit” with the company

Interview Process

Remember, you are making a first impression with everyone you meet. Be pleasant and thank the receptionist/secretary for making the appointment. Greet the interviewer with a warm smile and a firm handshake. Ideally, the interview is a 50-50 arrangement. Half of the interview should consist of the interviewer asking you questions and selling the company and the position. The other half should consist of you inquiring about the company and/or position and selling yourself to the employer. Review the following points before arriving at the interview:

- Listen for names when you are introduced. Use an employer’s name in the interview if the opportunity arises. Use the employer’s name in your follow-up letter
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Interview Process continued

- Keep in mind every employer is not a professional interviewer. If they are nervous or uncomfortable, don't let their tension affect you. Also, be aware that some interviewers may try to corner or trick you into certain answers. Prepare for this possibility and decide ahead of time how you will respond
- Speak the language of the job. Use common terminology related to the field
- Ask for clarifications on any points that are not clear to you
- Ask the interviewer for a date by which you will be contacted. You can suggest that you could contact him/her in 10 days to two weeks
- At the end of the interview, firmly shake the interviewer's hand and thank him/her for the interview

Types of Interview Questions

Being prepared to answer interview questions is of primary importance to succeeding in an interview. Most interviewers tend to ask similar questions to obtain specific information about you during the interview. Employers may word the questions differently, but essentially they all want to know the following information:

- Do you have the skills/qualifications necessary to do the job?
- Do you have the education/training required to do the job?
- What kind of employee will you be?
- What are your motivations for seeking employment with us?
- Will you fit into our company?
- Can we pay you what you want?

To help you prepare your answers to these types of questions, the most commonly asked questions are categorized according to the information the employer is seeking. Keep this in mind when you prepare your answers.

Types of Interview Questions continued

Do you have the skills/qualifications necessary to do the job?

Employers need to know if you can do the job for which they are conducting interviews. They may ask this question in a variety of ways, so it is important to familiarize yourself with some of the questions asked pertaining to your skills. These questions include:

- What are your greatest strengths?
- What are your greatest weaknesses?
- Tell me about your last job.
- What did you like best about your last job?
- What did you like least about your last job?
- What skills do you possess that qualify you for this position?
- If hired, how would you handle {a specific situation listed here}?
- How are your _____ skills?

What kind of employee will you be?

This question is comprehensive and can be asked in numerous ways.

- How would your best friend describe you?
- How would your last boss describe you?
- Give three words that best describe you.
- What kind of people do you like to work with?

Types of Interview Questions continued

- What kind of supervisor motivates you?
- Which is more important to you, the money or the type of job?
- How do you work under pressure?
- Do you prefer to work independently or with a group?
- What are your one-, five-, and ten-year goals?
- Describe a mistake you made and what you learned.
- Describe your organizational skills. Give an example.
- If you were going to hire someone, what qualities would you look for in an employee?
- Tell me about yourself.

What are your motivations for seeking employment with us?

Every company wants to know why you chose to apply for the position they posted and whether you have applied to any other companies. Additionally, they want to know why you chose the career you are seeking. These questions include:

- Why do you want to work for us?
- What criteria do you use to evaluate the company for which you hope to work?
- Describe the ideal company in relation to your current career goals.
- Describe your ideal job at this point in your career.
- Why did you choose this career?
- What do you think it takes to be successful in this field?

Types of Interview Questions continued

Will you fit into our company?

Image is an important factor when interviewing and employers may determine whether you fit the company image by how you answer all of the questions asked. Non-verbal indicators such as dress, mannerisms, and appearance may also determine whether or not you will fit. Unfortunately, preparing for the image issue is not as easy as preparing for the other employer questions discussed in this section, and you may not be able to determine this prior to the interview. The job seeker's primary concern is being aware that fitting the company image is essential for success in the interview. These questions include:

- What is your management philosophy?
- What two or three things are most important to you in your job?
- How do you feel about pursuing additional training?

Can we pay you what you want? Are you worth what we're paying?

Salary is always a big issue for both employer and job seeker and knowing how to answer questions pertaining to these issues may make or break your chances in the interview. These questions include:

- What kind of salary do you think you are worth?
- What is your desired salary?
- What are you currently making?
- What were you making in your previous positions?
- Can we contact your past employer?

Types of Interview Questions continued

Behavioral Interview Questions

Today, some employers are asking behavior-based questions. Many feel that your past performance in certain type of situations can predict your future performance with their company. These types of questions are similar to some of the questions already categorized for you, but may be phrased like:

- Give me an example of when ...
- Give me an example of how ...
- Tell me about how....
- Tell me about a time when

Some examples might be:

“Tell me about a time when you had a conflict with a co-worker.”

“Give me an example of how you increased company profits.”

“Tell me about a time when you missed a deadline.”

Negative Questions

Negative questions can be similar in wording to the behavioral interview questions. Interviewers ask these types of questions to determine how you may handle stress or stressful situations. The often asked, “Do you have a weakness?” question is an example of a negative question.

Other Examples:

“How did you handle the last time your boss was wrong and you were right?”

“Describe a time when a problem wasn’t resolved to your satisfaction.”

“How do you handle criticism from your boss or co-workers?”

Interview Questions For College Students and Recent Graduates

When employers ask questions about your education, they may be looking for how well you grasped and retained the information you were exposed to in school, as well as your interest in careers related to your education. These questions include:

- Why did you choose your college?
 - How does your training or degree prepare you for a career in _____ industry?
 - What was your grade point average?
 - Why weren't your grades better?
 - Do you feel your grades are a true reflection of your abilities?
 - Do you belong to any honor societies?
 - What was your most favorite class at college?
 - What was your least favorite class at college?
 - What other types of positions and companies are you considering right now?
 - Do you plan to continue your education?
-

Illegal Interview Questions

As you may already know, federal law forbids employers from discriminating against any person on the basis of sex, age, race, national origin or religion. If an employer asks a question relating to one of these areas, be careful how you answer their question. Sometimes, some employers don't know what's legal or illegal. You can answer the question, but remember you are giving information that is not job-related and the wrong answer may prevent you from being hired. You can also choose not to answer, but avoid being hostile and diplomatically point out that the question is illegal. The best way to answer is to try to find out why the question is being asked by saying something like "I'm not sure if I understand. How is this question relevant to the position? Please explain."

The chart on the next two pages gives some examples of illegal questions and how, if phrased differently by the employer, become legal questions that you would want to answer.

| Inquiry Area | Illegal Questions | Legal Questions |
|------------------------------------|---|--|
| National Origin/Citizenship | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Are you a U.S. citizen? ▪ Where were you/your parents born? ▪ What is your “native tongue”? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Are you authorized to work in the United States? ▪ What language do you read/speak/write fluently? (This question is okay only if this ability is relevant to the performance of the job.) |
| Age | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ How old are you? ▪ When did you graduate? ▪ What’s your birth date? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Are you over the age of 18? |
| Marital/Family Status | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ What’s your marital status? ▪ With whom do you live? ▪ Do you plan to have a family? When? ▪ How many children do you have? ▪ What are your childcare arrangements? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Would you be willing to relocate if necessary? ▪ Would you be able and willing to travel as needed for the job? (This question is okay if it is asked of all applicants for the job.) ▪ Would you be able and willing to work overtime as necessary? (Again, this is okay assuming it is asked of all applicants for the job.) |
| Affiliations | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ What clubs or social organizations do you belong to? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ List any professional or trade groups or other organizations that you consider relevant to your ability to perform this job. |
| Personal | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ How tall are you? How much do you weigh? (Questions about height and weight are not acceptable unless minimum standards are essential for the safe performance of the job.) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Are you able to lift a 50-pound weight and carry it 100 yards, as that is part of the job? |

| Inquiry Area | Illegal Questions | Legal Questions |
|----------------------|---|--|
| Disabilities | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Do you have any disabilities? ▪ Please complete the following medical history. ▪ Have you had any recent or past illness or operations? If yes, list them and give dates when these occurred. ▪ What was the date of your last physical exam? ▪ How's your family's health? ▪ When did you lose your eyesight? How? ▪ Do you need an accommodation to perform the job? (This question can only be asked after a job offer has been made.) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Are you able to perform the essential functions of this job? (This question is okay if the interviewer has thoroughly described the job.) ▪ Can you demonstrate how you would perform the following job-related functions ▪ As part of the hiring process, after a job offer has been made, you will be required to undergo a medical exam. (Exam results must be kept strictly confidential, except medical/safety personnel may be informed if emergency medical treatment is required and supervisors may be informed about necessary job accommodations, based on exam results.) |
| Arrest Record | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Have you ever been arrested? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Have you ever been convicted of _____ . (The crime named should be reasonably related to the performance of the job in question.) |
| Military | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ If you've been in the military, were you honorably discharged? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ In what branch of the Armed Forces did you serve? ▪ What type of training or education did you receive in the military? |

Source: Kaplin, Rochelle. NACE Web Publications

Answering Interview Questions

Do you have the skills/qualifications necessary to do the job?

The best way to answer any questions concerning specific skills is to be straightforward and honest. Use examples, stories and descriptions of your skills to prove to the employer you have what it takes, but do not tell an employer you have skills that you do not have. For example, if you are interviewing for a word processing position you may want to answer the question, "What did you like best about your last job?" by stating: *"When considering my last job, I enjoyed working on the computer the most. Utilizing my advanced WordPerfect skills to create tables, newsletters and do mailings was an enjoyable part of my job"*. This response tells them you have advanced word processing skills and indicates what software and which functions you know.

What kind of employee will you be?

Employers want to know if you can work independently and yet also work as a team player. They want to know if you are reliable, committed and dependable. They want to know if you are flexible, easy to supervise, and can get along with other co-workers. They also want to know what motivates and discourages you.

What are your motivations for seeking employment with us?

Any company-related question should be answered specifically, based on the research you conducted on that particular company prior to the interview. Always mention positive items about the company and refrain from being negative. Knowing labor market information related to your career choice will show that you are informed about the job you wish to seek. Vague answers, with little specific information, are easily detected.

College Students and Recent Graduates

When answering any of education/training questions, be diplomatic. If your grade point average is nothing to brag about, you may not want to mention it. However, you should emphasize the practical experiences you had during school, such as hands-on experience, internships, and extracurricular activities. You need to assure the employer that your training/education has prepared you for the job. Interest in continuing education in the same field is usually looked upon favorably because it will make you a more qualified employee. You should not discuss favorite classes that are not related to the job for which you are interviewing. An employer might become confused about whether you are interested in this employment opportunity or a different career.

Answering Interview Questions

Can we pay you what you want? Are you worth what we're paying?

Regardless of how employers ask, they really want to know your salary expectations. During the initial interview, you need not commit yourself to a specific salary range. If you are currently employed and your employer does not know you are seeking new employment, request that the current employer not be contacted until a job offer is made and accepted.

Let the employer know you want to be paid what you are worth based on your experience and education. Using the labor market information you have gathered, you can indicate that you are aware of the "going rate" for someone with your background, and you will discuss it in more detail should a job offer be made. Diplomacy is imperative. Stating specific salary requirements often eliminates you because you either want too much money or are too desperate. Flexibility works when discussing salary. In his book on interviewing and salary negotiation, J. Michael Farr suggests these tips:

- **Never talk money until after they decide they want you**
- **Know, in advance, the probable salary range for similar jobs in similar organizations**
- **Always bracket your stated salary range to begin within their probable salary range and end a bit above what you expect to settle for**
- **Never say no to a job (or salary offer) either before it is made or within 24 hours afterwards**

When you prepare your response to interview questions, keep these hints in mind:

- Your answer should include three elements: the problem you encountered at work, how you solved the problem and how did your solution to the problem benefit your employer.
- Try to always answer in a positive way by either stating the action you took to solve the problem or what you learned from the experience that will help you do things differently next time.
- Try not to be too lengthy or brief. Rambling on can be as destructive as using one word answers.
- Everything said in an interview is relevant regardless if it is only chitchat about the weather or small talk about a sporting event.

INTERVIEW PRACTICE

It is always helpful to practice your responses to questions before an interview appointment. Here are some suggestions:

- Select 1 to 3 questions from each category and prepare answers to these questions ahead of time.
- Register for *Mock Interview Day* through the Job Resource Center. The event is held every semester. See www.morainevalley.edu/jrc for upcoming dates.
- Visit www.monster.com and take their virtual job interview. You'll be asked typical interview questions online, be able to select answers and receive immediate feedback on how well you answered the questions.
- Review the various reference materials and online information available at the Job Resource Center and on College Central Network (www.collegecentral.com/morainevalley).

QUESTIONS JOB SEEKERS SHOULD ASK

Job interviews have a dual purpose. First, they allow employers to determine whether candidates meet desired qualifications and fit into their organizations and second, they allow job seekers to evaluate the job opportunity. Often, employers will invite a candidate to ask questions. Therefore, job seekers should plan to ask questions during the interview. As a job seeker, you should ask questions that are concrete, appropriate to the situation, and demonstrate your interest and ambition. Prepare questions, like those listed below, which will assist you in evaluating the job and the organization.

Quality of management at organization

- What is the philosophy of management at the XYZ Corporation?
- What do the company's managers and supervisors have in common?

The company's values and culture

- What are your expectations from the person hired for this job?
- What characteristics do the most satisfied people within the organization possess?
- Are there extracurricular company activities?
- Describe the work environment.
- Where does this position fit within the organization?
- Is this a new position?

The company's continuing education programs

- Do you allow employees to apply for internal promotions?
- Do you have any continuing education opportunities for employees?

Questions Job Seekers Should Ask continued

Your future opportunities

- Is professional development encouraged?
- How might my responsibilities differ in three to five years?

Employers want to know that you are interested in making a commitment to their organization. When you have the opportunity, add information regarding your qualifications and/or expand on strengths already mentioned. Use this portion of the interview to "wrap up" and show that you have what it takes!

Follow-Up After The Interview

Once the interview has ended, take a moment to write down your thoughts about the company, the position and any other pertinent information (expected date of contact, etc.) you want to remember. Be sure to get the name of the person or persons that interviewed you (ideally, you will have received their business cards). Send a short thank you note immediately after the interview. If you haven't heard from an employer by the specified date, call to inquire about the status of your application and/or the job position. Keep a record of all interviews and take the time to notify and thank your references for their support and cooperation.

Learn From The Experience

Each interview is a learning experience and helps prepare you for the next one. After you've been on an interview, ask yourself these questions:

- What did I say that seemed to interest the employer?
- Did I present my qualifications well?
- Did I miss opportunities to "sell" myself?

Learn From The Experience continued

- Did I learn all I needed to about the job?
- Did I forget to ask about things that are important?
- Did I talk too much? Too little?
- Was I too tense?
- Was I too aggressive? Not aggressive enough?
- How can I improve my next interview?

When you have answered these questions, make a list of specific things you can do to improve your performance during future interviews. Don't dwell on unsuccessful interviews; look forward to doing better next time.

REFERENCES

For more information on interviewing, many books are available to you through the Job Resource Center including the following:

Adams, Bob, *Job Interview Almanac*.

Adams, Bob, *The Everything Job Interview Book*.

Falcone, Paul, *96 Great Interview Questions To Ask Before You Hire*.

Fitzwater, Terry L., *Behavior-Based Interviews*.

Medley, Anthony, *Sweaty Palms: The Neglected Art of Being Interviewed*.

Porot, Daniel, *The Toughest Interview Questions and the Answers That Win the Job!*