

Interviewing techniques

Without a doubt, interviewing can be the scariest part of finding the right job. Take heart: if you're fortunate enough to have been asked to an interview, then you must be doing something right! It's okay to get nervous for an interview—most people do. There are several things you can do to prepare that will make you feel a lot less nervous when you get there.

Before the interview

1

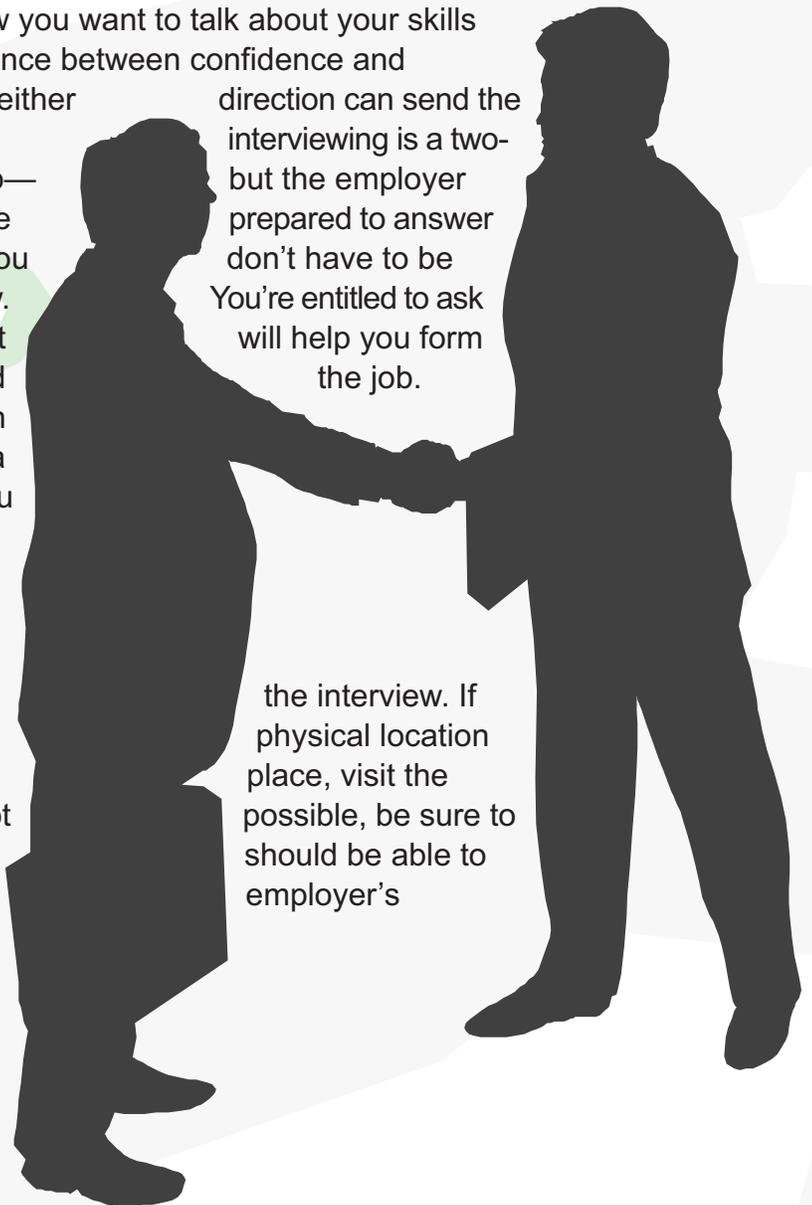
Research the company by reading any publications, articles, or brochures it publishes. Check out the company's Web site to learn as much as you can about its organization and goals. The more you know about the company, the better prepared you are to make a decision about whether or not you'd like to work there. And the employer will be impressed if you show you know something about the company.

2

Think ahead of time about how you want to talk about your skills and abilities. Try to strike a balance between confidence and respectfulness; going too far in either direction can send the wrong message. Remember, interviewing is a two-way street. Yes, you need a job—needs to fill a job. You should be prepared to answer the employer's questions, but you don't have to be passive throughout the interview. You're entitled to ask questions and bring up topics that will help you form an opinion of the organization and the job. Doing so in a respectful way can show the employer that you're a good communicator and that you can contribute to the conversation.

3

Arrive 5-10 minutes early for the interview. If you're not familiar with the physical location place, visit the building beforehand. If that's not possible, be sure to get a good set of directions. You should be able to get directions from the telephone receptionist's employer's



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Dress for success. Like it or not, first impressions are important. As a general rule, it's best to dress just slightly better for the interview than you would for the job for which you're interviewing. If you're interviewing for a professional position, wear a business suit. Avoid flashy clothes, and don't wear too much cologne—your scent shouldn't linger after you've left the room. It's also important that you feel comfortable, so if you think the work environment is very informal, call ahead and ask.

5

Consider bringing work samples with you to an interview. When employers look at your résumé, they can only read what you say you can do—they can't see for themselves. Samples of things you've written, designed, built, photographed, or created can give the employer a more concrete idea of what you have to offer. Pick out a few samples of things for which you are most proud. Some ideas include:

- A paper, story, or article that won an award
- A class project on which you did well
- A brochure, newsletter, or Web site you designed
- A letter of praise from a former employer, client, or patient
- A photograph of furniture you made or a building you helped build
- A news article that highlights one of your activities or accomplishments

Use discretion when you bring samples. Unless you know you're expected to bring samples to an interview, it's a good idea to get permission from the employer first. Try not to bring samples that are large or unwieldy. If your work samples are the property of your previous employer, or if sharing them invades someone's privacy, get permission first, or don't share them at all. Sharing potentially sensitive material might suggest to the employer that you aren't careful, or worse—that you can't be trusted.

6

The interview begins when you walk in the door. Be courteous and polite to everyone you encounter after you get to the office. Remember, people communicate with each other. If you behave one way toward a receptionist and another toward your potential employer, you may be seen as insincere.

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Come organized and prepared. When you go to an interview, always bring with you:

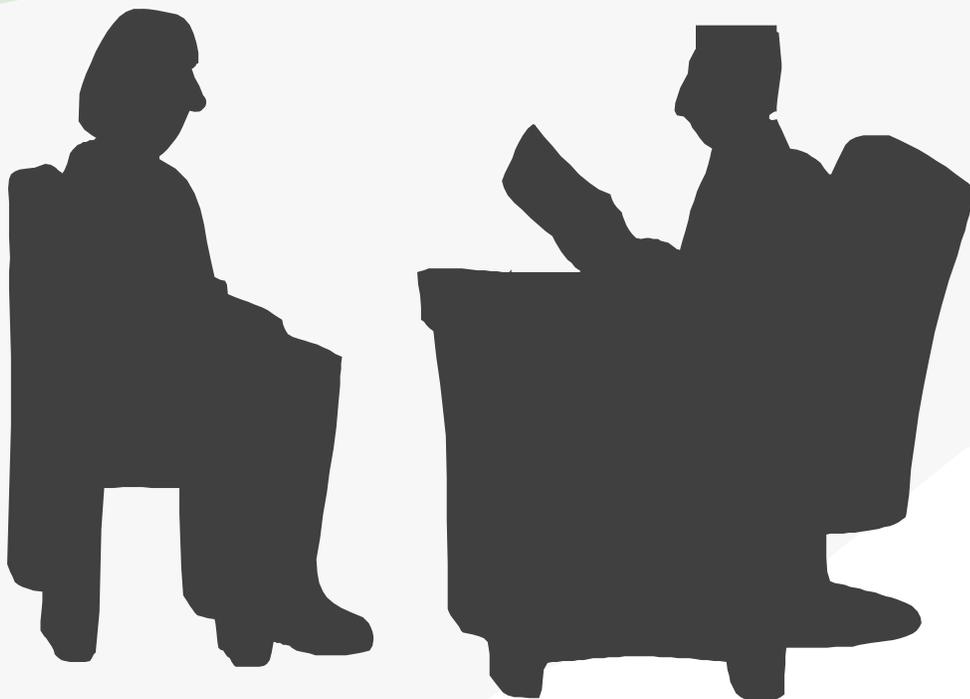
- Several extra copies of your résumé
- Contact information for your references
- Paper and pen to take notes
- Your work samples (if applicable)
- A list of questions to ask the employer

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If you're asked to wait for your interviewer in a reception area, don't read magazines or newspapers or "get too comfortable." Take note of your surroundings and look for points of interest, such as company product displays, that you could discuss with the employer.

During the interview

You may have several interviews with a single employer before receiving a job offer. You might first have a short "screening interview" during which the employer asks questions about you and describes the organization and the position. If the screening interview goes well, the employer may invite you to a second (and perhaps third or fourth) interview. The second interview generally lasts anywhere from two hours to a whole day. It could include a variety of questions, some form of testing, lunch or dinner, or a tour. You should come away from the second interview with a thorough understanding of the job responsibilities and the organization's culture and environment. At this point, you should have enough information to be able to make a decision if you receive a job offer.



The structure of an interview

The warm-Up

During the first few minutes of the interview, an employer will be forming a first—and lasting—impression of you. The way you greet the employer, your handshake, and the way you are dressed will all be a part of this initial impression. An interviewer may begin by asking common-ground questions about shared interests, the weather, or your travel to the interview. Some interviewers might start by saying, “Tell me about yourself.” This is an opening for you to briefly describe your background, skills, and interest in the position. Remember, a question like this isn’t an invitation for you to go on about yourself for 30 minutes. You’ll be able to share more about yourself as the interview goes on.

The information exchange

The information exchange is the primary part of the interview. This is when you’ll be asked most of the questions and learn most about the employer. Interview questions may range from “Why did you choose to pursue a business degree?” to “What are your strengths/weaknesses?” and “What are your long-range career plans?” If you’re prepared for the interview, you’ll be able to emphasize your qualifications effectively as you respond to each question. Below is a set of potential questions that the employer might ask you. You should consider your answer to some or all of these questions before you go to the interview.



Questions about you

- Tell me (us) about yourself.
- How do you think a friend would describe you?
- What do you think is your greatest strength?
- What do you think is your greatest weakness?
- Can you summarize the contribution you would make to our organization?
- Tell me about the greatest professional assignment you've ever handled.
- Why are you the best candidate for this position?
- Have you ever supervised anyone?

Questions about how well you fit with the job and the organization

- Why are you interested in this job?
- What do you know about us?
- In what kind of work environment are you most comfortable?
- How do you work under pressure?
- How do you handle conflict?
- What work-related problems have you encountered?
- How competitive are you?

Questions about your career and personal choices

- What are your long-range career goals?

When and why did you establish these goals, and how are you preparing yourself to achieve them?

- What are the most important rewards you expect in your business career?
- What do you do in your spare time?
- What kind of salary are you looking for?
- Are you willing to relocate?

Tough questions

- Did you ever have a boss you disliked? Why did you dislike him or her?
- What would you say are your weaknesses?
- Tell me about a time you experienced a failure and how you handled it.

- Tell me about a time when you were under pressure to meet a goal.
- Describe a situation where you had to resolve a problem at work.
- If you could have any job in the world, what would it be?
- What motivates you?
- Why do you want to work for us and not our competitor?
- Why should we hire you over someone else?

- What did you like or dislike about your last job?
- What would you like to be doing five years from now?
- Why are you leaving your current job?

Inappropriate questions

Some questions are inappropriate or even illegal for the employer to ask. Most questions about your personal life, such as your marital status, age, or racial background, are inappropriate. Questions like this put the interviewee in a tough position. You may refuse to answer such questions, but this could embarrass the employer. (He/she may not even be aware that the question is illegal.) Your best defense is simply to be prepared for how you want to handle inappropriate questions, should they arise. Some other examples of such questions include:

- Have you ever been married/divorced?
- Do you plan to take time off to raise children?
- What does your spouse think about relocating to this area?

The wrap-Up

Eventually, the employer will probably say, “Do you have any questions?” This is your cue that the interview is moving to the wrap-up stage. Always ask questions. This demonstrates your interest in the job. Some sample questions you might ask are provided, but don’t rely on those examples. Your questions should indicate that you’ve been listening to the employer. If possible, follow up on a particular subject that you talked about earlier in the interview. **Don’t ask questions about salary or benefits during your first interview unless the employer broaches the subject first.**

At the end of the interview, the employer might ask you if you have anything to add or say. Again, it’s best to have a response. You can use the opportunity to thank the employer for the interview and reiterate your interest in the position. If you want to add information or emphasize a point you made earlier, you can do that, too. This last impression is almost as important as the first impression, and it will add to the substance discussed during the information exchange.

Sample questions to ask an employer

What would a typical day in this job be like?

Could you describe a typical first assignment?

Who would I work most closely with on a day-to-day basis?

What are the most challenging aspects of the position?

Why is this position open?

How is success in this position measured?

What sorts of tasks would I be expected to accomplish within the first six months on this job?

How do employees in this organization keep current with developments in the field?



Tips for successful interviewing

Connect with the interviewer(s). There may be more than one person at the interview. When you are introduced, shake hands, smile, make direct eye contact, and say each person's name.

Listen very carefully. Listening to what the interviewer is saying is not only polite, but it will also help you to respond in the appropriate way. You can pick up certain cues about how you should behave: if the interviewer is formal, then you should be, too. If the interviewer is more casual, then you can relax a little bit. You should also listen to learn as much about the position as you can.

Take some notes. While you shouldn't write down everything the employer says, it's okay to take a few notes here and there during the interview. It shows you're attentive and that you want to remember what the employer says. It also can create a natural pause in the conversation, which helps you to think and remain poised.

Be poised. Pay attention to nonverbal behavior. Look the interviewer in the eye, sit up straight with both feet on the floor, control nervous habits, and don't giggle or play with your hair.

Don't be afraid of short pauses. You may need a few moments to formulate an answer to a question, and the interviewer may need to formulate an appropriate question. It's not necessary to fill up every second with conversation.

Be positive. Never say anything negative about a previous employer or co-worker. You may be looking for a new job because you are having trouble with your current employer, you were fired, or some other unfortunate reason. Try to put as positive a spin on this as possible during your interview. If you have had negative work experiences, emphasize what you've learned from them.

After the interview

Following up with the employer

In all cases—no matter how you feel immediately following an interview—it's important for you to follow up with the employer. Unless you receive a job offer after a first interview (which is practically unheard of), you'll probably experience some degree of post-interview letdown. Even when an interview goes well, most of us still experience this. But there's good news. If you decide to concentrate on sending a thank-you note right after an interview, your feelings of let-down will probably disappear more quickly. Why? Sending a thank-you letter will give you the chance to communicate anything you may have forgotten to say during the interview. It can also give you closure, at least for the immediate future, until you hear from the employer again. And whether or not you're offered a job, sending a thank-you letter is considerate; the employer will appreciate the gesture.

One final note on thank-you letters: although you're always safe to send a letter the old fashioned way, e-mailing a thank-you note is often appropriate, too. See the next two pages for some examples.

Tips for writing thank-you letters

If you were interviewed by more than one person, send a thank-you letter to the key hiring decision-maker and to the person who coordinated the interview process. Personalize each letter, since the recipients are likely to discuss your candidacy together. In your letter, mention the names of those you met.

Type—don't print—your letter on plain white or light-colored stationery. E-mail is often okay, too, but you must still observe rules of grammar, punctuation, and spelling!

Although this is still a business letter, it may be more personal in tone.

Mention the date you spoke with the person, and highlight a particularly useful piece of information you received or gave.

Keep your letter brief. Three short paragraphs are usually enough.

Provide any information the employer may have requested during the interview.

Be sure to give a cordial greeting, and expression of thanks for interviewing you.

Sample “thank-you for an interview” letter

May 26, 2002

Ms. Leda Frank
Manager, Database Administration
ABC Company
6987 Magnolia Avenue
Baton Rouge, LA 70805

Holly addresses the letter to Leda Frank, but also mentions her other interviewer—Mr. Lopez—by name in the letter.

Dear Ms. Frank,

I very much enjoyed meeting with you and Mr. Lopez today to discuss the possibility of my working for ABC company. I was extremely impressed with the company and very interested in your ideas for reorganizing the database administration team. As we discussed in the interview, I believe my experience with several different types of database management software would serve your needs well, particularly during the transition period.

Again, thank you for considering me. I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Sincerely,

Holly McDaniels

Holly McDaniels
567 W. Cretin Rd., #4
Baton Rouge, LA 70808
(225) 555-7869

Sample “thank-you for an interview” letter

HmcDaniels@Yahoo.com on 5/26/2002 3:36pm

To:<Lfrank@ABCcompany.com>

CC:

Date:5/26/2002

Attachments: McDaniels.dbf

Subject: Thank You

Dear Ms. Frank,

Thank you for meeting with me today to discuss the possibility of my working for ABC Company. I really enjoyed meeting you and Mr. Lopez, and was very interested to hear your ideas for reorganizing the database administration team.

As you requested, I’m attaching a copy of the database sample we discussed during the interview. It is an Access for Windows 98 file.

I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Holly McDaniels
567 W. Cretin Rd., #4
Baton Rouge, LA 70808
(225) 555-7869
HMcDaniels@Yahoo.com

Because she is using e-mail, Holly is able to attach an electronic file. She is careful to note the type of file format.

Negotiating a job offer

So, how do you respond to a job offer with anything other than excitement? In most cases, the proper response is cautious excitement, because there are usually a few loose ends to wrap up. Remember, the best time to think about your response to a job offer is before you actually receive the offer.

Is negotiating a job offer risky? Although it may appear that the conditions of employment with a company are non-negotiable, this usually isn't true. In fact, most employers will expect you to attempt to negotiate at least a few of the fine points in their job offer. When a thoughtful and fair employer offers you a job, it means that s/he sees your value and wants you on board. Most of them are willing to compromise. And it's important to keep in mind that you, the job-seeker, aren't the only one with needs. The employer may need to fill the position as badly as you need a job!

Negotiation can carry risks, of course. There are right ways and wrong ways to negotiate. But being courteous and reasonable will go a long way towards getting you what you want.

Tips for negotiating successfully

1 Be prepared for the negotiation phase before you receive the job offer. You should be able to articulate your needs and expectations, carefully listen to the employer's responses, and suggest compromises that would be agreeable to both of you. Know what your expectations are in terms of salary, and be ready to justify them to the employer.

2 Be reasonable, and look for ways to compromise while still getting some of what you want. For example, if you're looking for a starting salary of \$30,000 per year, but the employer can only offer you \$25,000, try to discuss such alternatives as (1) scheduled date and amount of your first increase; (2) bonus plans; (3) possible assistance for moving expenses; or (4) daycare assistance or other types of benefits, if applicable.

3 Remember, this isn't personal—it's business. As long as you're reasonable, cordial, and willing to compromise, you aren't going to make any enemies by negotiating. In fact, your prospective employer will likely respect you more for being able to communicate your expectations and work cooperatively to find mutually agreeable solutions.

