PREPARING FOR YOUR INTERVIEW

Always go into an interview having researched the company. Having information beforehand allows you to tailor a presentation that will relate your background and interests to what the company has to offer. Check newspapers and business magazines, review the company Web site, and conduct an internet search to learn as much about the company as possible. When you ask questions, you should not ask for information that is readily available elsewhere. Some things to research include the following:

- General information, like the location of the home office, number of plants or stores and their locations, names of parent company and subsidiaries, etc.
- Organizational structure, type of supervision, type of training program.
- Philosophy, goals, and image.
- Financial details, including sales volume, stock price, percent of annual growth in earnings per share, recent profits, etc.
- Industry competition and the company’s place in it.
- The products or services marketed by the company, including recent media coverage of them.
- The career path in your field.
- Recent news items regarding the company or the industry.
- The recruiter’s name and how to pronounce it.

You should also consider the type of interview to expect when developing a strategy. You often will not know what kind of interview to expect until you arrive, and therefore you want to anticipate how you will handle the situation.

What To Wear

Women. Wear a suit that is in good taste; it does not have to be black, just conservative (navy, deep purple, forest green). Keep trends in the closet! Wear sensible pumps that are clean and polished. Do not forget your pantyhose. Make-up should be polished, understated, and minimal. Avoid bright lipstick and nail polish, and have fingernails clean and filed. Be moderate with perfume and conservative with jewelry. Have a neat but attractive hairstyle.

Ten Preparation Exercises...

1. Describe five ideas, accomplishments, strengths, skills, or personal qualities that you think would best “sell” yourself to an employer.
2. What are your personal skills and abilities, and how do they relate to this job? Find specific examples of how you have used them.
3. What are your weaknesses, and what steps are you taking to improve them?
4. Describe your ideal work environment, which may include the kinds of companies and their philosophies, physical environment, types of people with whom you work, amount of supervision, and types of responsibilities.
5. Describe your educational background. How is it relevant to your desired job?
6. Describe what you know about the company and position. Why are you interested?
7. What is your employment background? How is your experience relevant to the job desired, and what skills have you used in previous experiences that are relevant to this job?
8. What are your career goals, and how do they relate to this organization?
9. What additional information do you want the interviewer to know about you?
10. What questions have you prepared for the interviewer?
**Men.** Wear a conservative suit that is cleaned and pressed, and make sure your shirt is clean and ironed. The tie should complement your suit and shirt. Hair should be cut and groomed, face cleanly shaven. Keep your fingernails trimmed and neat. Clean and shine your shoes, and avoid gaudy rings, chains, etc. Steer clear of trendy, oversized clothes and overwhelming aftershaves or colognes.

**DURING THE INTERVIEW**

It is crucial to arrive early. Greet the interviewer by his or her last name, and offer a firm handshake and warm smile. A good interviewer will begin with a few minutes of small talk to help you relax and to get a sense of your personality. Even though this may be a conversation about things completely unrelated to the job, it is still important. The interviewer is getting his or her first impression of you, and this is a chance for the two of you to develop a rapport. Next, the interviewer will move from a casual exchange to a more specific level of questions. The recruiter will begin to probe your background with “when, where, and why” questions. This is the time in which you will describe your academic background, extracurricular activities, or work experience. Once the employer has a good sense of your skills and interests, he or she will begin to talk with you about the company and the specific position for which you are interviewing. Larger companies often will not focus on a specific position. For these companies, the campus interview is often a general interview where the interviewer will attempt to find out what the student wants to do, assess his or her skills in that area, and then place the student appropriately in the company. There should be a few minutes at the end of the interview for you to ask questions about the company or position.

Throughout the interview, sit up straight, look alert, and speak clearly and forcefully; but stay relaxed, make good eye contact, avoid nervous mannerisms, and try to be a good listener as well as a good speaker. Give complete and descriptive answers, but keep them concise and direct. Follow the interviewer’s lead, as s/he will lead the discussion in the direction s/he feels it needs to go, at a speed which will allow him or her to get as much relevant information as possible. Be concrete, detailed, truthful, and frank in your answers - the more information you volunteer, the better the employer gets to know you. Remember, your goal is to sell yourself!

Generally, the employer’s objective is to get answers to three basic questions: Can you do the job? Will you fit into the company or department in which you will be working? And will you be a reliable and motivated employee? However, remember that the employer chose each question for a particular reason. Ask yourself why the employer chose that question so you can provide an answer that the employer is really interested in. For example, if the employer asks you about your greatest assets, it is likely that he or she wants to hear about your new car. Here are some ways to approach typical questions:

“Tell me about yourself.” Refer mentally to your resume; do not assume that the interviewer has even read it. Briefly recap those three or four skills, experiences, or qualifications that you think are most important. What do you want the employer to know about you if this were the only question you were asked in the interview? Think from the employer’s perspective: What are the parts of your background that the employer would find the most interesting?

“Why do you want this job? Why did you apply?” Refer to information about this job or this company or organization that makes it particularly appealing to you. Let your interviewer know that you have researched the organization. Think from the employer’s perspective. How will the employer know that you understand the job and the company?

“What was your most challenging class at Rice and how did you handle it?” An employer can also ask about your most challenging work experience, most challenging experience while involved in a particular club, etc. The employer is less interested in the actual experience than in how you responded. Spend most of your time talking about your behavior. Think from the employer’s perspective. Have you handled past experiences that may give the employer insight about how you will handle challenges in the new job?

Be prepared to back up your assertions with real-world examples. Frame your answers in terms of your past experiences rather than just opinions. Offer examples of work and references that document your best qualities. If you are surprised by an interview question, pause to think about an answer. It is much better to pause and organize your thoughts rather than ramble through an answer.

**Inappropriate Questions**

If the interviewer poses tricky political or social questions, try not to say more than is necessary. Certain interview questions (including those about age, marital status, religion, political beliefs, and national origin) are even illegal under the Fair Employment Practices Act, the Americans with Disabilities Act, and other governmental regulations. If you are asked an illegal question in an interview, try to anticipate the concerns a potential employer may have about hiring you and bring them up in a manner that is comfortable to you. For example:

**Employer:** I notice you are engaged. What does your fiancée do?

**Interviewee:** I guess you are wondering about whether my marital status will interfere with my ability to travel. I fully understand the travel commitments of this job, and I am quite enthusiastic about pursuing a career in consulting. I can assure you that my family responsibilities will not interfere with my ability to do this job.

Many times an employer is unaware that he or she has asked a question that is illegal and will appreciate your sensitivity to their concerns.

**Questions employers cannot ask in an interview:**
- Do you plan to have children?
- What does your spouse do?
Questions asked by employers:

- How would you describe yourself?
- How do you think a friend or professor who knows you well would describe you?
- How has your college experience prepared you for a business career?
- Why should I hire you?
- What qualifications should a successful manager possess?
- What two or three accomplishments have given you the most satisfaction, and why?
- Why did you select Rice?
- What led you to choose your major field of study?
- What courses did you like best/least, and why?
- Do you think that your grades are a good indication of your academic achievement, and why?
- What have you learned from participation in extracurricular activities?
- In what kind of work environment are you most comfortable?
- How do you work under pressure?
- In what part-time or summer jobs have you been most interested, and why?
- How would you describe the ideal job for you following graduation?
- Why did you decide to seek a position with this company?
- What do you know about our company?
- What criteria are you using to evaluate the company for which you hope to work?
- Are you willing to travel?
- Are you willing to spend at least six months as a trainee?
- Why do you think you might want to live in the community in which our company is located?
- What major challenge have you encountered and how did you deal with it?
- What have you learned from your mistakes?
- What are your long-range and short-range goals and objectives?
- When and why did you establish them and how are you preparing yourself to achieve them?
- What do you really want to do with your life?
- What are your greatest strengths and weaknesses?

Questions To Ask Interviewers

Employers expect that you will ask questions at the end of the interview. This is your chance to ask about those things that are important to you or that you were unable to learn from your research. During the initial interview, you should avoid asking questions about salary or benefits. You should also avoid questions that might indicate you are not really interested in the job, such as whether the company will pay for you to complete an MBA. Other questions to avoid include those about extremely controversial subjects (e.g., a company’s investments in a country with a repressive government) or those that you could have easily have answered from your research (e.g., the name of the parent company). Here are some ideas of good questions to ask:

- What would a normal day be like?
- Approximately how many individuals go through your program each year?
- Is it possible to move through the training program faster?
- How much contact is there with management?
- Is this position more analytical or people-oriented?
- During training, are employees transferred between functional fields?
- How soon can I expect to be advanced to the next level in my career path?
- How much travel is normally expected?
- Will I be expected to meet certain deadlines? How frequent are they?
- How often are performance reviews given?
- How much decision-making authority is given after one year?
- Does the company provide any educational benefits?
- How frequently do you relocate professional employees?

Closing The Interview

Do not be discouraged if no definite offer is made or no specific salary is discussed. If you get the impression that the interview is not going well and that you have already been rejected, do not get discouraged; stay positive. Sometimes an interviewer may be genuinely interested, but will discourage you to test your reaction. At the close of your interview ask the recruiter, “Do you need any additional information?” Make sure you are clear about the next step in the interview process and when you can expect to hear from the employer. Ask the interviewer for his or her business card, and be sure to thank him or her for taking the time to meet with you.

What Recruiters Observe...

General personality. For many employers, your personality fit with a company is as important as your skills.

Personal appearance. A neat, attractive appearance is critical for a good first impression.

Grades. Many employers use grades as a way to evaluate candidates. Make sure you can explain marked deficiencies.

Work experience. Be able to articulate the importance of past job experiences in terms of the job for which you are interviewing.

Verbal communication skills. This includes your ability to listen effectively, verbalize thoughts clearly, and express yourself confidently.

Skills to perform the job. It is important to emphasize the skills which the employer is seeking and give specific examples of how you developed them.

Goals/motivation. Employers will assess your ability to articulate your short and long-term goals.

Knowledge of the recruiter’s company and industry. Attend the company’s information session and review their website. Do not waste time asking questions for which you should already know the answer.
After The Interview
Take notes on what you feel you could improve on for your next interview. Type a brief thank-you letter or e-mail to the interviewer indicating your interest within 24 hours of the interview. If offered the position, one to two weeks is a reasonable amount of time to make a decision. All employment offers deserve a written reply whether or not you accept them.

TYPES OF INTERVIEWS

Behavioral Interviewing
Many companies use a technique called behavioral interviewing. It is an approach that assumes that your past performance predicts your future work performance. You can usually tell when a company is using a behavioral interviewing approach when you are asked questions about how you handled previous situations. For example, you might be asked, “Tell me about how you handled a particularly difficult class,” or “Give me an example of a time in which you were a leader.”

The key to answering behavioral interview questions is to use plenty of examples to support your answers. The easiest way to remember to give enough detail is to use something called the STAR Technique. STAR covers the areas you want to address in a good interview answer: Situation, Task, Action, and Result. When you use an example to answer a behavioral question, or any interview question, explain the situation or context of your example, the task or your responsibility for action, the action you took, and the result or outcome.

Here is what a good interview answer using the STAR technique would look like:

Situation: My service organization was in danger of losing its charter at the university. Membership was down and funds were quite low.
Task: As fundraising chairperson, I was charged with the responsibility of increasing donations by 30 percent.
Action: In order to accomplish my goal, I initiated a door-to-door campaign off-campus. All members were involved in the fundraising effort.
Result: Thanks to our membership’s dedication and participation, we increased donations by 37 percent.

Case Study Interviewing
If you are interviewing with management consulting firms, investment banks, or other companies that are looking for people with very strong analytical skills, expect a case study interview. In these interviews, employers will ask you a question such as “How many cell phones are in the city of Chicago?” The point is not to test your knowledge of trivia. The employer is interested in how you analyze information to deduce an answer. The employer will be listening for reasonable assumptions. Therefore it is very important to talk your way through the case study answer. Let the employer hear each step you use to logically arrive at an answer. Here is an example of how to approach a typical case study question:

Q: How many gallons of white house-paint are sold in the US every year?

The “Start Big” Approach. If you are not sure where to begin, start with the basic assumption that there are 270 million people in the US (or 25 million businesses, depending on the question). If there are 270 million people in the United States, perhaps half of them live in houses (or 135 million people). The average family size is about 3, so there would be 45 million houses in the United States. Let’s add another 10 percent to that for second houses and houses used for purposes other than residential.

If houses are painted on the average every ten years (notice how we deftly make that number easy to work with), then there are 5 million houses painted every year. Assuming that one gallon of paint covers 100 square feet of wall, and that the average house has 2,000 square feet of wall to cover, then each house needs 20 gallons of paint. So 100 million gallons of paint are sold per year (5 million houses X 20 gallons). (Note: If you want to be fancy, you can ask your interviewer whether you should include inner walls as well.) If 80 percent of all houses are white, then 80 million gallons of white house paint are sold each year. (Do not forget that last step.)

The “Start Small” Approach. You could also start small, and take a town of 27,000 (about one ten-thousandth of the population). If you use the same assumption that half the town lives in houses in groups of three, then there are 4,500 houses, plus another 10 percent, then there are really 5,000 houses to worry about. Painted every ten years, 500 houses are being painted in any given year. If each house has 2,000 square feet of wall, and each gallon of paint covers 100 square feet, then each house needs 20 gallons - and so 10,000 gallons of house paint are sold each year in our typical town. Perhaps 8,000 of those are white. Multiply by 10,000 - you have 80 million gallons.

Your interviewer may then ask you how you would actually get that number, on the job, if necessary. Use your creativity — contacting major paint producers would be smart, or even conducting a small sample of the second calculation in a few representative towns.

Second Round Interviews or Site Interviews
The second round of the interview process is generally held at the employer’s site. This may mean that you drive to Baytown for a day of interviews or you fly to San Francisco for three days. The site interview is usually an entire day, and you will interview with several different people. The company may also use this as an opportunity to show you the city in order to help you decide if you would like to live there. Always confirm travel and hotel arrangements with the employer before the interview and clearly understand who is paying for what. Generally the recruiter will make the arrangements and cover travel expenses connected with the interview. The recruiter may also suggest that you arrive early or stay a few days extra to explore the city. If the company does not offer this, it is appropriate to request to stay an extra day. You may also request to be put in contact with an apartment locator to begin looking for housing.
As you prepare for a site visit, expect longer, more in-depth interviews with many people. You will have more time to ask questions, so come prepared. Generally, the interview with your possible supervisor will be centered around job responsibilities. This is the person who is most familiar with the day to day responsibilities of your new job. The interview with the vice presidents will be more company oriented and focused on your long term career objectives. You are likely to also interview with recent graduates. This interview may be very casual, over a meal or during a happy hour, for example. Do not be fooled! This is still an interview, and what you say will be evaluated and reported back to the recruiting team. Many job offers have been lost because candidates were too relaxed with their peers.

Assume that dress for a site visit is professional, unless you are instructed by the recruiter otherwise. If you are going on a plant visit, however, business casual will be appropriate. If in doubt, ask the recruiter what is expected.

Save all your receipts and submit them to the employer promptly with your thank-you letter (if he or she agreed to pay the costs of the interview). Be prudent with your expenses (do not drink all the booze and eat all the macadamia nuts in the mini-bar in your hotel), but do not be cheap either. Employers will not hire you because you saved them $10 in cab fare by walking from the airport. Be careful, but be reasonable. You may also want to have a credit card to cover travel expenses for which you will be reimbursed.

Sometimes the second round interview is done by phone. This is especially true in a situation where the initial interview was fairly generic, and not for a specific position. The actual hiring manager will then contact the student by phone to conduct the second interview for the specific opening he or she is hiring for. In this case, a site interview would actually be the third round of interviewing.

**INTERVIEWING DO’S AND DON’TS**

**DO** pay close attention to your appearance and dress to your advantage.

**DO** bring an extra copy of your resume and references with you.

**DO** look (not stare) the interviewer in the eye, and offer a firm handshake.

**DO** remember the interviewer’s name and use it during the interview.

**DO** allow the interviewer to direct the flow of the interview.

**DO** express yourself clearly with a strong voice and good diction and grammar.

**DO** display a sense of humor and self-confidence.

**DO** take criticism gracefully!

**DO** take time to think before answering difficult or unexpected questions.

**DO** equip yourself with a strong knowledge of the company, industry, and position.

**DO** have prepared questions.

**DO** follow up with a thank-you note restating your interest in the position.

**DO** contact the employer if they do not contact you one week after the time from which the interviewer indicated you would be notified.

**DON’T** be late to the interview!

**DON’T** be overaggressive, overbearing, or conceited, but don’t show a lack of enthusiasm.

**DON’T** emphasize money as your main interest in the job.

**DON’T** expect too much too soon; be open to the idea of starting at the bottom and working your way up.

**DON’T** make excuses for unfavorable factors on your record.

**DON’T** condemn past employers or institutions of education; keep comments positive.

**DON’T** glorify your past experiences - getting into a job for which you are under-qualified is not recommended.

**DON’T** contradict yourself in responses.

**DON’T** display intolerance or prejudice.

**DON’T** assume that all employers will be thrilled to hear about your plans for graduate school.

**DON’T** state specific geographic restrictions.

**DON’T** interview unless you’re interested in the job...don’t just “shop around.”

**DON’T** forget - You control the content of the interview!