EFFECTIVE INTERVIEWING

The interview is an expected part of the selection process for employment, internships, and many graduate and professional programs. It explores a candidate’s interests and qualifications beyond what is provided in a resume, application, vitae, or cover letter. But, the interview is a two-way process. While the interviewer’s goal is to find the best candidate, the interview is also an opportunity for the candidate to gain insight into the position and organization to determine if it is, in fact, a good fit. Both parties give and receive information during an interview. Approach your interviews as a two-way conversation rather than an interrogation and you will be more successful.

Process

The interviewing process can be intimidating if you don’t know what to expect. Even though interviews range from 30 minutes to several hours, most interviews fit general patterns that share common characteristics: the beginning, middle, and conclusion. The beginning of the interview usually consists of small talk, but don’t be fooled, you are being evaluated. First impressions count in an interview situation! Don’t hesitate to extend your hand first when introduced; it shows assertiveness and confidence!

The middle of the interview focuses on the organization, position, and your qualifications. This is the longest part of the interview. The interviewer will most likely describe the organization and position, ask questions, and then it is usually your turn to ask questions. Need help with that? Keep reading.

The close of the interview is just as important as the other two parts. The interview isn’t over until you have left the room, so it is important to remain courteous and enthusiastic. You want to leave the interviewer with a good impression and sense of who you are.

Follow up! One of the most important things you can do after the interview is to send a thank-you letter within 24-48 hours of the interview! The letter should be brief, but communicate your appreciation for the interview, highlight aspects of the conversation you found helpful, restate your interest, and provide any additional information requested. It’s best to be safe and type a formal thank-you letter rather than sending a note or email. For sample thank you letters see the guide on Cover Letters, or check out our numerous resources in the Career Resource Area of the Fleishman Center in UU 133.

Making a Positive Impression

Interviewers expect candidates to make a positive impression which includes paying attention to personal grooming, dress, eye contact, nonverbal behavior, and even your tone of voice. Dress in a manner consistent with how you want to be perceived. Keep in mind some of these basic tips:

- When unsure of style of dress (business casual versus full business attire), always choose a conservative, tailored look, usually indicated by wearing a suit (pant or skirt suit for women).
- Be prepared for a phone interview. All the same rules of interviewing apply. If you are caught off guard and it is not a good time for an interview when you receive a call, state your interest in the position and ask to schedule a mutually convenient time.
- Check the message on your voice mail. Is it professional? What does it reflect about you? Would you want an employer or graduate school representative to hear it?
- Don’t forget to smile, make eye contact, and listen! Your tone of voice and nonverbal behaviors can make or break an interview!
- Have a confident handshake! The wimpy “dead fish” handshake does not communicate confidence!

Personal Hygiene

Personal presentation for a job interview is about more than just clothes. Nobody likes to talk about it, but personal hygiene can leave more of a lasting impression than your interview performance. No matter how professional your interview attire, personal hygiene can make or break a good first impression. Here are some tips to keep in mind:
• Bathe and make sure your hair is clean – get it cut well in advance of the interview, so you’re comfortable with the style.
• Use deodorant but avoid deodorants, perfumes or aftershaves with overpowering scents; people may have negative reactions to them. If in doubt, ask a trusted friend. Remember, the interviewer should remember you, not your scent!
• Clean, manicured finger nails – this doesn’t mean to have a full manicure, it just means have clean hands and nails in order to feel confident shaking hands with the interviewer.
• Polished shoes – many a great suit is let down by scuffed shoes.
• Fresh breath – brush your teeth before an interview; be mindful of what you eat or drink before the interview. Take breath mints with you; use them before you enter your interview (not during).

You only get one chance to make a first impression and you will feel more relaxed if you know you are looking (and smelling!) your best. Refer to the Presenting Yourself Professionally Quick Reference Guide for more tips on grooming to make a good first impression.

Preparing for the Interview

Interviewers have expectations of candidates and look for particular qualities when they interview. Identify these qualities through preparation; it will help you feel more confident and relaxed during the interview. Preparation includes these steps:

Research
Learn about the internship, scholarship, graduate program, or job for which you are interviewing. Make every effort to familiarize yourself with issues in the field and know something about the organization with which you are interviewing. Know what skills, abilities, and attributes are expected of candidates, most of which are outlined in the position listing. Many employers have websites describing their organization and career opportunities and the most updated information about an organization can most likely be found there. Taking the time to conduct this research demonstrates your sincere interest in the position.

Know why you’re a Good Candidate
Interviewers expect candidates to know what they have to offer. Studies have shown that approximately 90% of people cannot adequately define their skills. If you take the time to identify your skills, abilities, and personal qualities, you are ahead of the competition. Whatever strengths you plan to present, be prepared to offer examples of where you acquired or demonstrated them. Follow these tips:
• Make an inventory of experiences, skills, and adjectives that describe you;
• For the adjectives, identify experiences where they worked to your advantage;
• For experiences, identify the skills, knowledge, and personal qualities you demonstrated or acquired;
• For knowledge and skills that you claim, identify examples where you demonstrated or acquired them.

When preparing for a specific interview, compare the job announcement to your inventory and note the skills, abilities, and attributes that support your candidacy. Identify three or four important points you want to make and the strategy you will use to make them. By doing so, you will be prepared if the interviewer begins with “tell me about yourself”. Remember; always keep your answers in the context of the position for which you are interviewing. Where you were born isn’t what the interviewer wants to hear. For skills employers are looking for, refer to the Transferable Skills Quick Reference Guide (34.5 kb pdf).

Behavioral Interviewing
Behavioral interviewing is widely used by employers and is based on the premise that past behavior predicts future performance. Behavioral questions will be phrased in ways such as “Describe a situation when . . .” The interviewer expects you to do just that – tell him/her about a specific situation. Be prepared to tell short (1-2 minute) “stories” that provide evidence from the past to document your skills or qualities. Providing a generic answer beginning with “Generally I . . .” does not describe a specific situation and therefore does not answer the question. One strategy to use when answering behavior-based questions is to use the STAR process by answering the following:

S: the situation you were in,
T: the task you faced,
A: what action you took, and
R: the positive results.
Interview Questions

Interview questions involve both questions you will be asked and questions you will ask. Although each interview and interviewer is different, the following is a sample of typical questions that may be asked:

- Why did you choose Binghamton University?
- Why did you choose to major in…?
- Tell me about two strengths and one weakness.
- Tell me about a time when you recognized a potential problem as an opportunity. What did you do?
- Tell me about a time when you got co-workers or classmates who dislike each other to work together. How did you accomplish this? What was the outcome?
- What do you look for in a supervisor?
- Tell me about a time that you failed to meet a deadline. What things did you fail to do? What were the repercussions? What did you learn?
- Where do you plan to be in five years? Ten years?
- What motivates you to succeed?
- Tell me about a specific problem you solved for your employer or professor. How did you approach the problem? What role did others play? What was the outcome?
- How do you define success?
- What accomplishment has given you the most satisfaction? Why?
- What would you like to develop or improve in yourself? Have you thought about how you will do this?

While it is good to prepare for these basic types of questions, interviewers can ask one question in many different ways, so it is important to understand the themes behind most interview questions:

1. Why are you here?
2. Can you be an asset to the organization?
3. What kind of person are you?
4. What distinguishes you from other people who can do the same tasks as you?

If you can address these basic four themes with specific examples you will be well prepared.

Questions to Ask

Interviewers expect questions from candidates and if you’re not prepared with intelligent, planned questions, it may communicate lack of interest. Good questions vary, but here are some basics:

- Ask specific questions about the position, especially duties although not ones that basic research should have provided an answer for
- What are the major challenges and priorities in the position?
- Is there an orientation? What type of on-the-job training is available?
- What might be a typical first assignment/project?
- What is the culture of the organization?
- How are performance evaluations conducted? How often?
- Questions about location and travel
- What do people like best and least about working for the organization?
- Questions concerning advancement and promotion paths
- What can I expect next? What is your timeline for making hiring decisions?

Questions Not to Ask

Just as there are good questions to ask, there are questions you should not ask during the initial interview:

- Salary/benefits information. Do not discuss this issue until the interviewer brings it up. Research the salary range for the position prior to the interview. If asked about your salary requirements, give a range that reflects your understanding of typical salaries for the position and your experience. Check out books and internet resources on salary negotiation, salary surveys, or speak to a career counselor about this issue.
- Questions about the interviewer’s personal background including education, marital status, etc.
- Questions that have already been answered during the interview. If your “planned” questions have already been answered, focus on clarification of those issues, but do not repeat the question.
Lawful Employment Interviewing

Various federal, state, and local laws regulate the questions a potential employer can ask a job candidate. If asked an illegal question, there are three things you can do:

1.) Answer the question, keeping in mind that your answer may actually hurt your candidacy in some way.
2.) Refuse to answer the question, which is well within your rights. Depending on how you phrase your refusal you run the chance of coming across as defensive.
3.) You can examine the question for its intent and answer it in a way that applied to the position. For example: If you’re asked, “Are you a U.S. citizen?” you can respond by saying, “I am authorized to work in the United States.” Or, with the question, “Do you have children?” you can respond by saying, “I can meet the travel and work hour requirements.”

Interviewing Advice from Employers

- Research organizations in advance of interviews
- Be enthusiastic and sincere during your interviews
- Be honest and realistic
- Do practice interviews
- Think about how your experience in work, classes, and activities can relate to the job you’re seeking
- Allow plenty of travel time and visit the site in advance to make sure you know how to get there
- Make sure your interview attire is pressed, your shoes are shined, and you are well groomed
- Bring extra copies of your résumé and a list of references
- Speak slowly and clearly; don’t be afraid to pause to collect your thoughts before answering questions
- Be assertive (not to be confused with aggressive)
- Send a thank-you letter as soon as possible after the interview

Interviewing Advice from Binghamton Graduates

- Be prepared to elaborate on information from your resume without having to re-read your resume during the interview
- Identify your skills and experiences; be prepared to discuss how they relate
- Be ready to explain what you offer and why the organization interests you
- Listen carefully and don’t interrupt
- Be prepared to ask questions
- Know what type of work (with this employer) interests you and why
- Be prepared to “Describe yourself and your interests”
- Be prepared to talk about your goals and how they relate to the position
- Make your interest in the position and organization clear
- Be concise, yet specific in your answers
- Be genuine

Practice Interviews

The Fleishman Center periodically offers the opportunity to practice your interviewing skills with alumni, employers and/or The Fleishman Center staff. If you are doing a “practice” or “mock” interview, treat it as if it were a real interview. This will help you be more comfortable when the time comes for a real interview. Remember to ask your “mock interviewer” for feedback on possible points of improvement, and practice, practice, practice for that real interview! Check the Fleishman Center website for details about scheduling a mock interview.

Interviewing Skill Development Presentations & Workshops

Throughout the fall and spring semesters the Fleishman Center offers a number of interviewing skill development presentations and workshops. Past presentations include: Successful Interviewing; Tell Me About Yourself; What are your strengths/weaknesses? Behavioral Interviewing – Tell Me a Time When.
Interviewing Remotely

Interviewing prospective candidates for a job can be expensive and time-consuming. Because of this, many employers choose to pre-screen candidates on the phone prior to inviting them for a face-to-face interview. For the same reason, video interviews using Skype and similar technologies have been on the rise to supplement and/or replace face to face interviews. Below are some tips on conducting interviews remotely.

Why Telephone/Video Interview?

Phone/Video interviews are:
- Cost effective and efficient, for both employer and candidate;
- A way to differentiate candidates who appear similar on paper;
- Helpful for employers in determining organizational “fit” of a potential candidate;
- An easy method for the employer to check if the candidate is serious, affordable, and available;
- A convenient screening device for all applicants regardless of location

Preparing for the Telephone/Video Interview

Prepare for a phone/video interview just as you would for a traditional face-to-face encounter.

Tips for Preparing:
- Practice: use a voice recorder/video software to get an idea of how others hear or see you. Participate in Practice Interview Programs.
- Research the organization.
- Be ready 10 minutes before the phone/video interview appointment.
- Warm up your voice and practice smiling – sitting in front of a mirror can be helpful; you’ll be able to monitor your own body language.
- Prepare a short list of your accomplishments available to review.
- Prepare a short list of questions about the job and the organization.

What not to do…
- While it is good to have important points written down on paper, do not prepare a copy to read when you are on the phone/video, as it sounds like you’re reading a script, rather than having a conversation

During the Telephone/Video Interview

What to do…
- Have a spill-proof container of water nearby in case you need to sip.
- Have a pen and paper ready for taking brief notes.
- Keep your resume or CV, cover letter, job description, and career portfolio (sample work, etc.) in clear view.
- Ensure interview materials are strategically laid out and that you are familiar with them. No employer wants to hear shuffling papers. Having these documents on your computer screen may use up too much bandwidth or risk accidentally closing your video connection.
- Turn off your phone’s “call waiting” function/Skype chat functions so you are not interrupted.
- Turn off your TV and stereo (or any other devices that would make any distracting sounds, such as pop up messages on your computer).
- Ensure that the location where you are conducting the interview is free of distractions (roommates, TV/radio, children, pets, traffic, etc.).
- Have a clock nearby to monitor the time you have remaining in the interview. Respect the time parameters set by the interviewer.
- Speak slowly, clearly, and directly into the phone receiver/microphone.
- Enunciate your words, use correct grammar, and complete sentences.
- Make sure you sound interested, confident, and capable.
- Smile so your friendliness can be heard and seen.
- Address the interviewer by name (Mr. or Ms.). If more than one person is interviewing, know who asked the question and address the answer to that person.
- Ask for the question to be repeated, if necessary, to clarify your understanding of what is being asked.
- Sit up erect at a desk/table or consider standing. Your voice may sound stronger and more alert.
• Let the caller do most of the talking, without interruptions.
• Always back up general statements with specific examples.
• Avoid being too wordy or going off on tangents.
• If things sound interesting to you, say so. The interviewer may not be able to see you, so he/she can’t read your body language, such as nodding or smiling. Reaffirm your qualifications and end with a strong closing. Express your interest in the job and the organization.
• Ask the interviewer at the end of the conversation what the next step will be (time line, second phone interview, arranging an on-site interview, etc.).
• Request contact information for follow-up questions and thank you letter submission.
• Thank the interviewer(s) for the opportunity.
• As with all interviews, “ask for the job!” Restate your interest and desire to move to the next step.
• Have a calendar and/or scheduler available should you be asked to schedule another interview.

Specifically for Video Interviews
• Make sure you get your webcam ready beforehand. Do a test run of a Skype call with a friend the day before to make sure the lighting, angle, and background looks OK, your face is visible, and the webcam works. Test the microphone and the audio quality too.
• Take a look at the background that is showing in the webcam. Try your best to make the background really boring (blank wall) or a professional environment that is not distracting from you the interviewee.
• Dress (at least from the waist up!) in a business suit or appropriate business attire.
• Prepare the interviewer(s)’ name(s) and phone number just in case the audio drops, screen freezes, or other technical hiccups occur. Stay calm if this happens and act promptly to reconnect either by video or phone again to continue the interview.


What not to do…
• Don’t smoke, chew gum, eat or drink (an occasional sip of water is fine, just don’t spill it!).
• Avoid the overuse of too many filler words such as “umm” “ah” and “like”. This habit is especially noticeable on the phone/video and eliminating it takes practice.
• Avoid the simple "yes" or “no” response: add selling points at every opportunity by backing up your answers with specific examples from previous work and/or education experience.
• Do not mention compensation issues. This conversation typically comes at the end of the interviewing cycle and not during the phone (screening) interview stage.

After the Telephone/Video Interview
• Take notes about what you were asked and how you answered. This step is very helpful to prepare you for your next interview, and in writing a thank-you!
• Evaluate the conversation to improve your performance in future phone/video interviews.
• Follow-up with a thank-you note or email that reiterates your interest in the job. Write a unique thank-you to each and every interviewer.
• Send any requested material immediately.

Interviewing Resources in The Fleishman Center Career Resource Area

For further assistance with interviewing skill development and preparation, feel free to come to the Fleishman Center and check out the many available resources. Be sure to bring your Binghamton University ID when checking out books. The Fleishman Center offers an overnight checkout policy for our books.

Books related to Interviewing at The Fleishman Center
• Winning The Interview Game: Everything You Need To Know To Land The Job
• Ace Your Interview!: The Wetfeet Insider Guide To Interviewing
• Interview For Success: A Practical Guide To Increasing Job Interviews, Offers, and Salaries
• The Employment Interview American Style

…and many more that are style (behavioral, case, etc.), level (graduate school, salary negotiation, etc.) and occupation specific (accounting, nursing, legal, etc.).

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