

Interview Process

Interviews are a critical part of the hiring process. As a candidate, the interview allows you to obtain information about the job and the organization, determine whether the job is suitable for you, and impress the employer. The interviewer is working to promote his/her organization, gather information about you, and assess your qualifications.

Before the Interview

Preparing for an interview should begin early in your job search process. Preparation is broken down into the following three main components:

KNOW YOURSELF

Conduct a thorough self-assessment of your education, experiences, accomplishments, strengths, weaknesses, interests, and values. Review your résumé and think about what skills you developed and what contributions you made in each respective experience.

PRACTICE

Practice will help you become more comfortable and confident in talking about yourself and your accomplishments. We encourage you to practice your responses out loud with a friend, family member, or peer. Mock interviews can be scheduled with any UCS practitioner and are a great method of practice. Receiving feedback and constructive criticism is essential to improve your interviewing skills.

THE WRAP-UP

Toward the end of your interview, it is common for the interviewer to ask, "Do you have any questions for me?" Your questions should address topics such as details about the position and skills/qualifications the organization is seeking. Avoid asking questions related to salary, benefits, and personal topics. At the conclusion of your interview, express your appreciation for their time and restate your interest.

During the Interview

Fortunately, most interviews follow a similar pattern consisting of three stages: the introduction, the information exchange, and the wrap-up.

THE INTRODUCTION

Arriving early for an interview is a sign of respect to the interviewer. When the interviewer approaches, rise from your seat to greet him/her. As you walk to the interview room, this is your opportunity to develop rapport with the interviewer by engaging in small talk. Once seated, the interviewer may provide an overview of your time together.

THE INFORMATION EXCHANGE

This is your opportunity to prove that you are the best candidate for the job. During the information exchange, the interviewer will ask questions about your experiences, skills, and interest in the position. Remember that your non-verbal behaviors, such as how you stand, sit, and listen, also impact your interaction with the employer.

After the Interview

Analyze the interview by asking yourself how the interview went, what you learned, and what your impressions were of the organization and the interviewer(s). Keep a written record of each interview to help you remember and compare positions later. Within 48 hours, send a personalized thank-you note to each person with whom you met. If you do not hear back from the organization within the time frame discussed, contact them to express your continued interest and ask about your status.



RESEARCH

Learn everything you can about the organization (e.g., vision, location, size, structure, products and services, culture, customers, and competitors). Knowing more about the industry and the company will allow you to better respond to interview questions and will demonstrate that you are prepared and interested in the organization.

INTERVIEW ATTIRE

Present yourself in a manner that reflects a highly polished and professional image. While your interpersonal skills and your ability to formulate responses are the most important elements, appropriate attire supports your image. The way you dress can greatly enhance or detract from the impression you hope to make with a potential employer.

General Guidelines

For both men and women, the professional standard is to wear a two-piece, matched suit. A well-tailored or fitted suit will help you present yourself professionally and confidently. Appropriate size is critical not only for comfort, but also for presenting a "clean fit." Acceptable colors for business suits are darker shades and hues (e.g., gray, navy, and black). For each interview, make sure your suit is pressed so you present a sharp appearance.

GUIDELINES FOR MEN

Shirts Long-sleeved shirts are most appropriate all year round. Choose white, light blue, or conservative stripes.

Belts Select a belt with a simple buckle that matches or complements your shoes.

Socks Wear socks that complement the color of your suit and are long enough for you to cross your legs without showing bare skin or leg hair.



Hair Ensure your hair is clean and well groomed.

Ties Wear patterns that are uniform and subtle, whether stripes or small dots. Deep reds, maroons, blues, navys, grays, and blacks are colors that blend well with dark suits.

Shoes Lace-up, wing tip shoes are the most conservative choice and are almost universally acceptable. Dressing in your best attire for the interview also means having your shoes shined, if not new.



Jewelry / accessories Limit your jewelry/accessories to a maximum of five pieces. You do not want your jewelry/accessories to distract from what you are saying during the interview.

Color Women generally have more options with suit color than men. Beige, light gray, and slate blue can convey a conservative look. In building your professional wardrobe, navy blue, dark gray, and black are staples.

GUIDELINES FOR WOMEN

Shirt / sweater Wear a blouse that complements your suit in a conservative fashion. Typically, it is not recommended that you wear tops that are revealing, high around the neck, or have too many ruffles or frills. White or off-white colors usually match well with many colors. A knit shell is also appropriate underneath your suit jacket.

Skirt length A serious consideration when purchasing or choosing which suit to wear should include the length of your skirt. At minimum, your skirt should cover your thighs when you are seated. A good rule of thumb is that your skirt at least reaches the middle of your knees when standing.

Hosiery Women should always wear hosiery. Select a neutral shade or one that coordinates with your suit.

Shoes Select shoes made of leather or fabric/micro fiber. Choose close-toed pumps that allow you to walk comfortably.



Purse / handbag Carry a small, simple purse or handbag that coordinates with your shoes. It is also acceptable to bring a small briefcase or business-like tote bag.

Types of Interviews

TELEPHONE INTERVIEWS

Phone interviews are often used as a “first round” screening measure to determine who to invite for face-to-face interviews. Understanding the structure and nuances of the phone interview will help prepare you.

Before the Telephone Interview

Prepare for the telephone interview by researching the company and industry, reviewing your experiences and skills, and practicing your responses to potential questions. When you arrange the phone interview, ask who will contact you and when the interview will take place, and remember to take into consideration time zone differences. Also, ask for the names and titles of others who will participate during your interview. Finally, make arrangements to interview in a quiet space where you will not have interruptions.

During the Telephone Interview

Be ready 10–15 minutes before your interview start time. As you await the call, review your application materials, résumé, and the job description. When the phone rings, answer it in a professional manner. The interviewer will take the lead by introducing the individuals on the phone and their roles. If there are multiple interviewers on the call, it is helpful to make a list of each person’s name and position. The interviewer will usually provide you with the structure of the interview and then start the information exchange.

If your call-waiting signal beeps, do not answer the other call. In addition, avoid eating or drinking during the interview as it can distract the interviewers. Lag time and silence is very common during a telephone interview. It is probably a sign of the interviewer(s) diligently taking notes. At the conclusion of the interview, thank the interviewer(s) and reiterate your interest in the position. The interviewer(s) will likely discuss next steps.

After the Telephone Interview

Within 48 hours, send a thank-you note to each interviewer reiterating your interest in the position and thanking them for considering your application and candidacy.

THE SECOND INTERVIEW AND/OR ON-SITE VISIT

Second interviews and/or on-site visits are designed to evaluate your skills and competencies in greater depth and to determine if there is a “fit” between you and the organization. Typically, second interviews are conducted at the organization’s site, although some employers conduct them elsewhere. An interview often takes a half or full day and may include multiple successive interviews, lunch, and a tour of the office.

Reminders:

- ❖ Keep your responses to questions fresh and enthusiastic. Try not to “recycle” answers from your previous interview.
- ❖ Treat each interview as if it is your only chance to sell yourself for the position.
- ❖ Observe the organization’s culture and the interactions between staff members.
- ❖ If a company indicates they will reimburse your expenses, spend reasonably and keep receipts for all expenditures.

INTERVIEWING DURING MEALS

You may receive invitations to have a meal with your interviewer(s) or attend a reception with a group of candidates. It is not advisable to drink alcohol at any time during an interview. Choose food items from the menu that allow you to easily converse. Employ standards of etiquette during the meal and remember that you are still being assessed. Consider meetings during meals to be just as significant as other types of interviews.



Informal Phone Contacts

- During your search process, employers might contact you at any time. Your chances of being hired are potentially impacted by any communication you have with prospective employers.
- Tailor the greeting on your voicemail to reflect your professionalism.
- Inform those who have access to your phone about your application process.
- If you cannot answer the call in a professional manner, let your voicemail screen the call and return it when you are prepared.



TESTING

Completing one or more tests that are used to assess particular skills, knowledge, or qualities is common for certain industries. Tests may include case studies, math, psychological, and occasionally foreign language examinations. It is appropriate to ask, in advance, if any testing is required.

BEHAVIORAL INTERVIEWING

Behavioral interviewing is based on the idea that past behavior and performance is a good predictor of future behavior and performance. The interviewer will typically ask questions that begin with “tell me about a time when you...?” or “describe a...” or “give me an example of when...” Because this is the most common interview format used by employers, you will need to develop a strategic approach. Your goal in responding to behavioral interview questions is to share specific experiences as they relate to the position for which you are applying. Every experience can provide a potential answer to these types of questions.

Prepare for a behavioral interview by identifying the skills, knowledge, and experience required for the position. Analyze your background and identify times when you demonstrated these requirements. One way to approach this task is to create three categories labeled: (1) skills, (2) knowledge, and (3) experience. Then analyze and identify themes within the job posting. The next step is to select examples or instances from your résumé where you have shown evidence of such work within your education, experience, leadership activities, and skills sections.



The STAR Approach

The STAR approach is used to structure and organize responses to behavioral interview questions. This approach will help you succinctly communicate the important parts of your unique situation and avoid rambling or adding unnecessary information. Each letter of STAR represents a part of your dialogue in describing the event.

SITUATION

Describe the general situation

TASK

Describe the task at hand and your specific role within it

ACTION

Describe the actions you took

RESULT

Describe the outcome of your actions

Read the following example to see how the STAR approach comes together:

QUESTION: Please describe a time when you employed problem-solving skills.

ANSWER: In my internship last summer at the National Relief Fund, I was asked to devise a better system for tracking donations earmarked for hurricane disaster relief (Situation). Because the National Relief Fund is such a large organization, I needed to understand the various ways donations were being tracked (Task). By surveying regional offices I found that only 78% of these offices had database tracking systems that were upgraded to the level of those at the national office. I included this information in a report that recommended an upgrade in these databases for all regional offices (Action). As a result, the CEO made the decision to move forward with upgrading systems by August 2012 (Result).

Interview DO's

- *Research the industry and the company*
- *Prepare questions to ask the employer*
- *Practice with a UCS staff member*
- *Review your résumé*
- *Bring extra copies of your résumé, an unofficial transcript, and your list of references*
- *Convey enthusiasm for the company and the position*
- *Ask for clarification if you don't understand a question*
- *Take time to think before answering difficult questions*
- *Speak specifically about your role in any previous successes*
- *Obtain a business card from each interviewer*
- *Send a thank-you note after the interview*

Interview DON'Ts

- *Arrive late*
- *Leave your cell phone on*
- *Speak negatively about anything*
- *Act overbearing, overaggressive, or conceited*
- *Chew gum or smell like smoke/alcohol*
- *Discuss salary, holidays, or bonuses (unless interviewer raises these topics)*
- *Use acronyms or slang language*
- *Refer to the interviewer by first name (unless the interviewer indicates to do so)*
- *Interrupt the interviewer*
- *Lie or exaggerate*

CASE INTERVIEWING

Case interviewing is a tool used by consulting firms to assess your skills and potential for a consulting position. Cases are usually scenario-based, problem-solving activities designed to uncover competencies along various dimensions. This style of interviewing requires you to work through business cases similar to those you may face as a consultant. Employers seek candidates who demonstrate the following skills/competencies:

- ❑ Business insight
- ❑ Communication skills
- ❑ Creativity
- ❑ Inquisitiveness
- ❑ Logical/analytical thought process
- ❑ Practical judgment/decisiveness
- ❑ Quantitative skills
- ❑ Response to pressure/lack of information

Types of Questions

Brainteasers Logic questions that measure your creativity, quantitative, and problem-solving skills.

Market Sizing Questions that measure your quantitative skills, such as the size of a particular problem or quantity of certain products, and your ability to think quickly.

Business Cases Problem-solving activities designed to uncover competencies along various dimensions. Cases are based on either hypothetical situations or real issues faced by companies.



Frameworks

There is not a magic formula for success in case interviews, but you can develop a structured approach. When answering case interview questions, familiarity with business frameworks helps you structure your responses. While models are not appropriate for all cases, a general understanding of the following frameworks and concepts may aid in your preparation efforts for case interviews:

- ❑ Porter's 5 Forces
- ❑ Availability of Substitute Products, and Level of Competition Among Firms
- ❑ 3 C's: Cost, Customers, Competitors
- ❑ 4 P's: Product, Price, Place, Promotion
- ❑ SWOT Analysis: Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats
- ❑ Profit = Revenue – Costs

The objective of the case interview is to demonstrate your ability to solve complex problems, not necessarily to reach the correct answer. In addition, the interviewer wants to observe the process you use to approach a problem. Remember that the case interview is a dialogue with the interviewer and not a monologue. Think about a case interview as four distinct parts:

1) Information Gathering

Listen carefully and absorb all the information provided. Ask thoughtful, probing questions to clarify and acquire more relevant information. Taking notes is helpful as you engage in your case.

2) Organizing Your Analysis

Take some time to think about your responses—a little silence is fine. Consider whether using a framework will help guide your case, but do not force a framework to fit the case.

3) Addressing the Problem

Work through your answer out loud. Explain the logic behind your responses so the interviewer can understand your analytical skills and thought process. Throughout your response, make reference to the facts provided by the interviewer. Listen for hints from the interviewer as he/she will often guide you in the right direction.

4) Closing the Case

Summarize your analysis. If you have not arrived at a solution, share potential options and next steps.

Resources

- ❑ Case examples and tutorials are available on many consulting firm websites.
- ❑ Print resources are available at the UCS Career Information Center.
- ❑ The Vault Guide to the Case Interview, by Vault (available through the NU Library's electronic resources).
- ❑ Ace Your Case! Consulting Interviews, by Wet Feet Press (available through the NU Library's electronic resources).

Additional Practice

- ❑ Employers often host practice case interviewing sessions on campus. Visit the UCS calendar of events online for details.
- ❑ The Mock Case Interview Program occurs each fall and provides seniors an opportunity to participate in a mock case interview given by a consulting employer.
- ❑ The Mock Case Interview Program for internships occurs each winter.
- ❑ Gather a group of people planning to interview with consulting firms and practice approaches to sample cases.

Common Interview Questions

Typically employers will ask questions about you, your education, your career goals, and the organization/position for which you are applying. Additionally, it is common to receive questions related to skills important to the organization/position, such as decision-making, analysis/problem-solving, initiative, interpersonal attributes, teamwork, communication, and leadership development. Although you can never anticipate the exact questions you will receive during an interview, the following list will serve as a general guide as you prepare:

PERSONAL

- Tell me about yourself.
- What goals have you set for yourself?
- How are you planning to achieve them?
- Who or what has had the greatest influence on the development of your career interests?
- What two or three things are most important to you in a position?
- What two or three accomplishments have given you the most satisfaction?
- What are your strengths and weaknesses?
- What has been your greatest challenge?
- Are you willing to relocate or travel as part of your job?
- Do you feel your GPA reflects your academic ability?

EDUCATION

- Why did you choose your major?
- What is the most important lesson you have learned in school?
- How do you think you have changed personally since you started college?
- Knowing what you know now about your college experience, would you make the same decisions?

COMPANY

- What expectations do you have for your future employer?
- What are your interests in this position or the company?
- Why are you the best person for this position?
- What can you contribute to this company?
- What challenges are you looking for in a position?
- How have your educational and work experiences prepared you for this position?

EXPERIENCE

- What are your team-player qualities? Give examples.
- Describe your leadership style.
- What is your approach to handling conflict? Solving problems?
- How do you motivate others?
- Describe a leadership role of yours and tell why you've committed time to it.
- What work experience has been the most valuable to you? What did you learn?
- What was the most useful criticism you received and who provided it?
- How did you decide which extracurricular activities to join? What did you gain from these experiences?
- What contributions have you made to a group project?
- What types of situations put you under pressure? How do you deal with the pressure?
- What have you found most frustrating in your work experience?



BEHAVIORAL

- Take me through a project where you applied _____ skills.
- Describe a situation when you displayed your critical thinking skills.
- Describe the project or situation that best demonstrates your analytical skills.
- Describe a situation where you had a conflict with another individual and how you handled it.
- Give an example of a problem you solved and the process you used to arrive at the solution.
- Describe an idea that you developed and implemented that you felt was particularly creative or innovative.
- Tell me about a difficult decision you have made.
- Give an example of a situation in which you failed and how you handled it.
- Tell me about a time when you had to persuade another person to your point of view.
- Tell me about a project you initiated.
- Tell me about a team project that you are particularly proud of and what your contribution was to the project.

Student Spotlight

“A UCS staff member was very helpful in giving advice on how I should improve and polish my interviewing skills and it was great to receive feedback from an interviewer’s perspective. I’m very thankful that we have great staff at UCS to give us guidance for our success.”

JUNG H. KANG
Senior in Economics and
Communication Studies

Sample Note

Thank-You Note

The thank-you note is an important tool to include as part of your job search strategy. A thank-you note is your final chance to make yourself stand apart from other applicants. In addition to expressing your appreciation for the interviewer's time, a thank-you note gives you another opportunity to summarize your strengths, provide highlights of the interview, confirm your continued interest in the position, and cover anything you did not mention during the interview.

TIMING

Send a personalized thank-you note to each interviewer within 48 hours of your interview. This will provide you an additional contact with the employer before hiring decisions are made.

TYPES

A thank-you note can take several forms: a handwritten note, a typed letter, or an e-mail. When determining which type of thank-you note is most appropriate, consider the employer's timeline for making a hiring decision and the culture of the organization. Specifically, if the interviewer indicated that he/she would contact you within the week with their decision, it is most effective to send a thank-you note via e-mail due to time constraints. If the culture of the organization is conservative, it is probably best to send a traditional letter.

CONTENT

The content of your thank-you note is as important as the type of format used. A standard thank-you note should accomplish the following:

- ❖ Show your appreciation for the interviewer's time and information.
- ❖ Recap the conversational highlights.
- ❖ Reiterate your skills and qualifications, particularly those pertinent to the position.
- ❖ Clarify any information that was unknown or unclear during the interview.
- ❖ Highlight aspects of the organization that are especially relevant or interesting to you.
- ❖ Communicate your continued interest and enthusiasm for the opportunity.

Susan Love
1212 Weber Boulevard
Evanston, IL 60602

May 18, 2011

Ms. Rachel Wilde
Director, Financial Services
Pacific Insurance
784 N. 18th Street, Suite 330
Skokie, IL 60076

Dear Ms. Wilde,

Thank you for taking the time to interview me yesterday for the position of Financial Services Representative with Pacific Insurance. I enjoyed meeting you and learning more about this position and your organization.

After speaking with you, I am even more excited about this opportunity and I am confident that I can contribute to the initiatives of the Financial Services team. Specifically, I am eager to use the skills I have developed in my role as Vice President of Finance for Alpha Beta Gamma and the knowledge I gained from my internship at Sure Realty. My organizational and interpersonal skills will allow me to deliver the exceptional service that your clients expect and deserve.

I would like to reiterate my strong interest in the position of Financial Services Representative and joining your team. Thank you for providing me the opportunity to interview and I look forward to hearing from you soon.

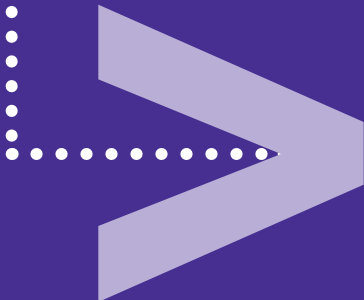
Sincerely,

Susan Love
847-555-9876
susanlove@northwestern.edu

Thank-You Note *Tips*

- Ask your interviewer for a business card so you know the exact e-mail or mailing address to send your thank-you note.
- If the note is handwritten, make sure your writing is legible.
- Write your thank-you note on good quality paper or stationery.
- Proofread your note to ensure there are no typing or grammatical errors.
- Your thank-you note should not exceed one page.

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