

Interviews: 10 Steps to Success

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Congratulations!

You've spent days, weeks, or even months looking for the right job or internship, and now you've been asked to come in for an interview. If the thought of going on an interview causes you to feel butterflies in your stomach and your heart to beat a little faster, don't worry; you are not alone. The majority of job seekers feel uneasy or slightly panicky before the interview. This packet contains suggestions to help you relax and have a great interview. You will only have a short time to demonstrate your qualifications and interest, so you want to be sure to make a great first impression. Following these steps can help make your interview less stressful and more successful.

Step One – Preparation: Research and Practice

Being well prepared for a job or internship interview will not only make a good impression on the employer; it will also boost your confidence and help lower your anxiety level. Experts recommend spending at least three hours preparing for each interview.

Research

It is important to have a good understanding of the company and the position prior to beginning an interview. Before you can convince an employer that you want to be a bank management trainee, you must know what a bank management trainee does. Additionally, you will need to know about the organization and industry. Being knowledgeable demonstrates to the employer that you are sincerely interested in the position and have made an effort to learn more. Obviously, the interviewer will know more than you about the company, so don't think you can bluff your way through your answers. Prior to the interview, you should research

- Type of organization and its function
- Mission and goals
- Reputation and market share
- History and philosophy
- Competitors
- Location, including international operations
- Products or services for sale
- Size and number of employees
- Annual sales and earnings
- Plans for growth and future outlook
- Opportunities for advancement
- Company culture

There are several methods you can use to uncover information about the employer before your interview. Begin by using the Internet to locate general information. Visit the organization's website and search for online articles or references to the company on other sites. Don't forget to visit the investor relations and stockholder sections of company websites, as these pages often contain the type of statistics and information you are seeking. Read trade publications and check with professional organizations for information on a specific field or industry. The Center for Career & Life Planning website has links to several employment databases that include company information. To access multiple online directories, visit www.rollins.edu/careercenter from the "Student" drop down menu, and select "Job Search." Specifically, Vault is a helpful resource to assist in the research process. Rollins students may also access several company and industry research tools through Olin Library's online business research guides. Visit www.rollins.edu/library/ and select "Business" from the dropdown list within "find resources by subject."

Another good way to learn about an organization is to conduct an informational interview with a current employee. You may want to check LinkedIn for Rollins alumni who are employed there (look for "Rollins Alumni Career Network Volunteer" in the "Volunteer & Causes" section of their LinkedIn profile). You may also consult your personal network for connections. An informational interview is a

great opportunity for you to ask questions and gather more information about a specific type of work or employer.

It might sound silly, but be certain you know how to get to the interview site. If you're not sure about the directions, take a test drive to the site (preferably at a time when traffic similar to what you might expect on the day and time of your interview). Make a note of the time so you can arrive about ten minutes early the day of the interview.

Practice

Practicing is essential as you prepare for your job or internship interview. You can prepare for an interview in several different ways. The Center for Career & Life Planning conducts mock interviews where you can practice answering questions and get valuable feedback to help you improve your interviewing skills. To schedule a mock interview appointment, log in to Handshake. In addition, BigInterview software is available through Handshake that allows you to conduct a mock interview independently; contact Center for Career & Life Planning for assistance with this software.

It is a good idea to jot down a list of questions that you expect to be asked, and practice answering out loud with a friend or in the mirror. Do not memorize your answers, but think through key points you want to communicate. Practicing your responses out loud will help you sound more polished and professional during the interview.

Step Two – Appearance

Your professional appearance at an interview might not win you the job, but inappropriate attire can certainly cost you the job. Your ability to dress professionally speaks to your knowledge of the industry and your interest in fitting in. Appropriate business attire will help you appear more mature and seasoned, which can aid you in competing with older individuals who have more experience. Generally, you should dress more professionally for an interview than you would if you were hired to work in that environment. Although you may have your own unique fashion sense, your appearance should always be as conservative as possible for a job interview. Attire will vary somewhat depending on your career field, but below are general recommendations for professional dress:

Men

- Two-piece business suit, navy or dark color
- Long-sleeve, button-down shirt (white or blue)
- Conservative tie (avoid cartoons or bold colors)
- High-fitting dark socks (avoid white sweat socks)
- Business-style leather shoes (lace-up or slip-ons)
- Clean-shaven or well-trimmed facial hair
- Clean and short, neatly styled hair

Women

- Business suit (approximately knee-length skirt or pants in subdued color)
 - Color-coordinated blouse (no cleavage)
 - Neutral-colored hosiery (no patterns or fishnets)
 - Closed-toe shoes with low to medium heels
 - Conservative makeup and nail polish
 - Neat, clean hair that allows the face to be seen
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- Professional wristwatch, no extra jewelry
- Minimal jewelry: no more than one pair of small earrings, one ring per hand, wristwatch

Additionally, there are some interview attire tips that apply to both men and women:

- Suits should fit well and be free of dangling threads or tags.
- Colognes and perfumes should be avoided.
- Know that cigarette smoke can linger on hair or clothing and may be offensive to some interviewers.
- Fingernails should be kept short and clean.
- Fresh breath is a must! Be sure to clean your teeth, and always have breath mints on hand.
- Avoid showing body art; cover tattoos with clothing if possible and remove all facial and tongue piercings.
- Carry a briefcase or leather portfolio if you wish, but don't bring a book bag.

Step Three – Make a Good First Impression

It sounds cliché, but the truth is you only get one chance to make a first impression. Most employers can tell within the first few minutes of the interview whether they are interested in you as a potential intern or employee. Your verbal responses to questions are certainly important, but inappropriate non-verbal responses and a bad attitude can ruin your chances before you even begin to speak.

Be sure to arrive for your interview 10-15 minutes early. This will provide you with time to check your appearance and gather your thoughts prior to the interview. Greet the receptionist in a friendly and polite manner. Front desk staff will tell the interviewer if you behaved inappropriately or disrespectfully. When the employer greets you, stand up and offer a firm handshake and a friendly smile. Make direct eye contact with the interviewer and offer a return greeting similar to, "Nice to meet you." If the employer mispronounces your name, clearly state your name correctly as you shake hands. The only things you should carry with you into the interview are a portfolio with extra copies of your resume, a list of your references, some note paper and a pen. Women may also bring a small, professional purse. If you have a coat, ask the receptionist if there is a place to hang it while you are interviewed; if not, you may have to keep it with you.

As you enter the interview room, wait for the employer to indicate where you should be seated. After the employer sits, it is your cue to take your assigned seat. During the interview, remember to practice good nonverbal skills:

- Sit up straight with your shoulders back.
 - Maintain eye contact, but don't stare.
 - Show confidence and enthusiasm in your facial expressions.
 - Speak clearly. Don't mumble.
 - Cross your legs or keep feet flat on the floor, but avoid frequent changes of position.
 - Take your time in responding and stay relaxed
 - Smile and stay upbeat and positive.
 - Avoid nail biting, playing with rings, tapping your pen, twirling your hair, or swinging in the chair.
 - Don't cross your arms in front of your body
 - Use limited hand gestures.
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Step Four – The Interview: Getting to Know You

The first few minutes of the interview usually include introductions and are a time when you and the employer can size each other up and get into the interview groove. The employer may talk for a moment or two in order to help put you at ease. He or she may briefly mention the weather, traffic, or other small-talk topics. Most likely, the first question asked of you will be “Tell me about yourself.” This is not the time to reminisce about your birthplace, old relationships, sports teams, health issues, or extended family. This is the time to share the experience, education, and skills that make you a good fit for the job. Some points you may want to include are:

- How you learned about this position
- Why you are interested in this career field or industry
- An activity, club, or pastime that you have in common with the interviewer
- College education
- Internships
- Related work experience that helped prepare you for this job
- Strengths or skills that make you a good candidate for this position

What’s important to remember when answering this question is that the employer is not looking for a life history. He or she wants to see what you decide to discuss when you reply. For example, as a candidate, you may mention that you did an internship at a company similar to this one, and that’s what motivated you to seek employment in this field.

Step Five – The Interview: Questions and Answers

Questions

The interviewer may move the conversation along by describing the organization to you and beginning to ask you some questions. He or she will want to know why you applied for the position and how you are a qualified candidate. The interviewer will use your resume to formulate questions about your education, your strengths and weaknesses, your previous work experience, and your overall ability to do the job. You will probably be asked questions such as:

- What made you choose this industry / field of work? What do you like about it?
- I see that you attended Rollins College. How or why did you decide to attend a liberal arts institution?
- How has your education prepared you to work in this field? What did you learn at Rollins that will contribute to your performance at our company?
- What did you learn in your major that might be applicable to the job here?
- What do you consider to be your greatest strength? And what are your weaknesses?
- What sort of short-term and long-term goals have you set for yourself?
- What motivates you to work hard?
- What type of supervision and work environment will help you perform your best?

One of the most common complaints heard from interviewers who work with the Center for Career & Life Planning is that Rollins students tend to lack focus and/or direction. It is perfectly normal for graduating seniors to be unsure about how they want to spend the next 20 years of their lives. Many recent college graduates do not immediately find a career field that is both interesting and motivating. Rollins students frequently interview in a number of different areas ranging from banking, to public relations, to government jobs, and environmental work. However, in an interview, you must appear to be

focused, even if you still feel lost and confused about your future. The interviewer should be convinced that you are excited about this career field, you are interested in the job, and you want to learn more about the company. Vague responses or statements that indicate you have no idea what you want to do will make you appear unprofessional and the employer may consider you a flight risk. Why would the organization hire someone who is likely to hate the job and leave after only a month?

Behavioral Interview Questions

Depending on the style of the interviewer, you may be asked a number of situational or behavioral questions, designed to provide insight into your personality. Though questioning of this type will vary widely, below is a short list of some of the most commonly asked questions.

- What three adjectives would you use to describe yourself and why?
- Can you think of a time when your job required you to work with a difficult or dissatisfied customer? How did you handle the situation?
- What type of books do you read?
- How do you usually cope with stress? Please use examples.
- Using a recent situation as an example, please describe your leadership style.
- What do you do in your free time?
- If you were stranded on a deserted island, what three things would you want to have with you?
- Can you describe a time when you solved a problem in a creative way?
- Will you give me an example of a skill or skills you learned from your extracurricular activities that would be useful to you in this position?
- Please tell me about a time when you made a bad decision.

Your answers should be complete and formulated in a logical, orderly manner. Learning and practicing the STAR method will help you prepare well-thought-out responses to anticipated questions.

Answers

Answering questions posed by the interviewer is an important part of interviewing. Your ability to clearly and concisely relate your background to the question posed will set you apart from others. The STAR method provides a logical framework for structuring your answers so that the interviewer clearly sees your past successes and how they relate to the current opportunity.

The four steps in the STAR method are:

1. S = Situation (What was the situation?)
2. T = Task (What goal were you working toward?)
3. A = Action (What specific action did you take?)
4. R = Result (What was the result of your action?)

Keep it positive!

Develop a comprehensive list of your many successes, including examples from a variety of sources, such as:

- Related work or internship experience
- Technical interests
- Leadership examples
- Team activities
- Class/group projects
- Life experience

Prepare ahead by developing short examples that illustrate your successes in the above areas.

The STAR Method: A Closer Look

Situation or Task. Describe the situation you were in or the task you needed to accomplish. You must use a specific example, not a generalized description of what you have done in the past or may tend to do. Be sure to provide enough detail to make the situation clearly understood. This situation can be from a previous job, volunteer experience, classroom project, or any relevant event.

Action. Describe the action you took and be sure to focus on your own actions, not the actions of others. Even if you are describing a group project or effort, detail what you did rather than focus on the efforts of the team. Don't tell what you might do; tell what you did.

Results. What happened? How did the event end? What did you accomplish? What did you learn? If the results of your actions were not what you had hoped to achieve, detail what you learned that will help you refine your efforts in future similar situations.

Example

Interview Question: “Tell me about your greatest accomplishment.”

Situation or Task: My greatest accomplishment is being the founding president of the student chapter of the National Education Association at my college. When I declared Education as my major in my sophomore year, I was excited to get involved in related student organizations and clubs. I was familiar with the National Education Association and excited to join the chapter at my college – until I learned that there was no chapter at my college.

Action: First, I spoke with a faculty member in the Education department; I had taken a couple of classes with her and asked if she would serve as the faculty advisor for the organization. After she agreed, I began a recruitment campaign using email, flyers, and the Education department's Facebook page. By the beginning of the second semester of my sophomore year, I had recruited 15 new members for the club. We had our first meeting that January; at subsequent meetings that semester, I led the effort to elect an Executive Board and develop a constitution for our organization. I also created and now maintain a website for the organization.

Result: A year later, our organization has tripled in size. Along with my vice-president, I secured a \$1,000 grant from NEA for outreach to a local elementary school. We used the funds to support a “makeover” day at the school where we painted classrooms and updated landscaping for the playground area. Finally, our organization was recognized this year at the NEA Annual Student Awards Program for Outstanding Local Website.

The preceding example is somewhat detailed, but generally responses should last only one or two minutes. Be sure not to interrupt yourself; finish a sentence before presenting your next thought. If you don't understand the question, ask for clarification. NEVER interrupt the interviewer and don't be afraid to take a moment or two to think before answering the question. Although you should be prepared, it's likely that at least one question will catch you off guard and you'll need several extra seconds to think about your response.

Avoiding Filler Words

“Um...Uh...Yea...Uh-huh...Well...Like...I dunno”

These are words and phrases that should be removed from your interview vocabulary. Being able to communicate intelligently is essential to a successful interview. One of the best ways to improve your speaking skills is to schedule a mock interview in the Center for Career & Life Planning. Using words

such as “uh” and “like” can not only cause you to appear unprofessional, but also distract from the content and meaning of your responses.

Step Six – The Interview: Job Specific Questions

Now is when the interview will probably start to become very specific to the field and position for which you are applying. The interviewer has already gathered basic information about you and begun to assess you and whether or how you might fit into the organization. At this time, the employer will try to determine whether you are knowledgeable about the industry and if you have the skills or the ability to do the job well. The research and preparation you did before the interview will be helpful here as you discuss the details and finer points of the position.

Be prepared to answer questions such as these:

- After reading the job description, in which areas do you feel you are most qualified and where would you require the most assistance?
- Have you read any magazines or journals published in this field recently?
- How do you think advances in technology will impact the work of our organization?
- Where do you think we are the most vulnerable as a business?
- Are you familiar with _____ (computer program) that we use daily in our office?
- The job description states that we are looking for candidates who have _____ experience, but I don’t see that on your resume. Do you actually have any experience in that area or how do you plan to compensate for that deficiency?
- What do you expect will be the biggest challenge facing this industry in the next five to ten years?

Your responses to these types of questions should be honest and positive. If, for example, you do not have experience with a type of computer program mentioned in the job description, you should admit that. However, you *can* describe how quickly you are able to learn other programs or discuss software that you *do* know which may be similar. In this way, you can put a positive spin on a potential weakness.

Step Seven – Inappropriate Questions

Hopefully you will not need the advice offered in this step, but it is a good idea to be prepared in case you are asked inappropriate questions. Federal law makes discrimination on the basis of race, color, nationality, age, disability, or religion illegal in personnel decisions. Questions that inquire into these areas (as well as height and weight) are also inappropriate, unless they directly relate to one’s ability to do the job. The following types of questions should not be used in hiring decisions:

- Are you married, divorced, separated, single?
- How old are you?
- Do you go to church?
- What political party do you support?
- Are you living with anyone?
- Have you ever been arrested?

Sometimes the interviewer may not be aware that a question is inappropriate. Perhaps the reason for asking a question about your plans to have children is related to the employer’s concern that you may not be able to travel as needed. You are not obligated to answer inappropriate questions, but it may be in your best interest to discover the meaning behind the employer’s question and attempt to respond directly to that issue. Consider the following possible answers to this inappropriate question. All are acceptable responses and you should answer in a way that is most comfortable for you.

Q: Are you married?**A1.** *No.***A2.** *Yes, I am. But I keep my family life separate from my work life so that I can put all my effort into my job. I'm flexible when it comes to travel and late hours, as my references can confirm.***A3.** *I'm not quite sure I understand what you're getting at. Would you please explain to me how this issue is relevant to the position?***A4.** *That question makes me uncomfortable. I prefer not to answer it.*

Step Eight – Your Questions and Conclusion

Your Questions

Near the end of the interview, you will probably be asked if you have any questions. The right answer is “Yes.” It is important for you to ask questions to elicit information *you* need about the position in order to know whether the job is a good fit for *you*. Usually, 2-4 questions are considered an appropriate amount. Utilize the research you gathered prior to the interview to help formulate questions. The interviewer will probably make judgments about your interests, personality, and competence based on the number and types of questions you ask. The list below contains some of the most common questions interviewees should ask in order to gather information and impress the employer.

- Where does this position fit into the organization?
- Is this a new position? (If not...have previous employees been promoted within the company?)
- What expectations do you have for this position long-term?
- Based on the financial statements I read on the website, it seems like this organization really dominates the competition in this industry. To what do you attribute that success?
- Is there a training or orientation program and what does it entail?
- How will my performance be evaluated?
- What is the most difficult challenge the person will face in this position?
- How long have you been with the company and how did you get the job?
- I know that you are soon going to merge with _____ organization, how will that affect the work of this department?

It is a good possibility that during the interview, you may be nervous and forget some of the questions you had planned to ask. That is completely normal and it is OK for you to write your questions down on a small index card or on the notepad in your portfolio before the interview. If, as the interview progresses, you remember to ask all your questions, then you won't need your notes. However, if you need a little help recalling a few of the questions, simply mention to the interviewer that you have some questions you want to be sure to ask, and then refer to your notes. Formulating questions in advance demonstrates genuine interest in the position and preparation for the interview.

DO NOT ask about salary or benefits. At an interview, rather than asking what the company can do for *you*, focus on what you can do for the *company*. It is not appropriate to discuss salary and benefits until the employer initiates the discussion or until you have received a job offer.

At the close of the interview, the employer will probably say something similar to, “Glad you could come by today. We have several other people to interview. We'll be in touch.” This is actually NOT the time for you to say goodbye. You should try to briefly summarize your strengths as they relate to the job

before leaving the interview. For example: *“I’m really glad I had the chance to talk with you. I know with what I learned when I helped redesign the public relations strategy at the Golf Channel, I could help improve your public image too.”*

Prior to leaving the interview, you should ask when the employer expects to make a hiring decision. If the response is something like, *“Friday of next week,”* then you can ask, *“If I haven’t heard from you by the following Monday, may I give you a call?”* The interviewer will likely say yes and then you won’t have to wonder when you’ll hear or what you should do next. If you have this discussion, be sure you do actually call when you indicate you will. Ask for a business card to ensure that you have accurate contact information.

Step Nine – The Second Interview

The interview went well and you are expecting a job offer any day now, right? Wrong. While some employers make job offers immediately following a first interview (or even AT the first interview if you’re very lucky), most organizations require a second meeting before making an offer. Internship sites rarely require a second interview.

Generally, a second interview will be longer (a few hours or perhaps one to two days) and will almost certainly occur at the offices of the organization. A first interview could be thirty minutes to an hour, and might be held on campus or over the telephone. If you are called back for a second interview, however, it is typically an indication that the employer is seriously considering you for the position. Keep in mind however, that this is NOT a guaranteed job offer. It is extremely likely that other candidates have been invited to interview again as well. At a second interview, you will probably take a tour of the facilities and be introduced to several other staff members. You should be provided with a schedule and/or list of names of the persons you’ll meet in advance and if not, you may ask for one. This will help you feel prepared and perhaps know a bit about each person prior to your meeting.

Step Ten – Thank You Note and Follow-Up

Thank You Note

Always send a thank you note after an interview (whether first or second, on-campus or telephone interview -- always send a thank you!). It is a thoughtful and courteous gesture that will be appreciated by most employers. In addition to expressing your gratitude for the interview, briefly restate the reasons you believe you are right for the job. Stress your value – what you will do for the employer. When you formally interview with several staff members, it is recommended that you thank each person individually. If meeting with several interviewers at one time or meeting only briefly with many members of a specific department or division, it may be acceptable to send a group thank you in addition to the individual note you send the primary interviewer.

It is recommended that you ask the employer what method of communication they prefer. Some consider an emailed thank you note most appropriate, while others value a typed or hand-written card thanking the interviewer for his or her time and consideration. Try to send a thank you note as soon as possible after the interview (within 24 hours if possible). That way, the employer will probably receive the thank you before final hiring decisions are made and your note might help the interviewer remember you fondly. If you believe the organization may be making hiring decisions very quickly, email a well-written thank you letter immediately after the interview to ensure it is received prior to the final hiring decision.

Follow-Up

If you have not heard from the organization after the date on which the employer indicated hiring decisions would be made, it is completely acceptable for you to contact the employer to inquire about the status of your application. If a decision has been made, you will be notified and if the company has not yet made an offer, you will know that you are still under consideration. Don't be too discouraged if you do not get an offer on your first, second – even your tenth job interview. The job search process can take time, but practicing your skills and preparing for each interview will significantly increase your chances of getting that offer.