Professional Interviewing 101

Did you know that, on average, only 1 in 50 applicants for a professional position receive a job offer? Achieving success in your career search is highly competitive. Although there are many elements to success in this process, by far the most important – and challenging – is interviewing.

Contrary to popular belief, interviewing is not just about answering questions. It is a series of steps and a sequence of events. Being well prepared for each of these steps is the key to success. Remember that it is not necessarily the best qualified that receives the job offer – more often than not it is the best prepared. Being prepared to conduct a successful interview takes a significant amount of time and effort. The more time you put into preparing yourself, the more likely you’ll be to succeed.

The information contained herein will guide you through almost all aspects of conducting a successful interview. We recommend that you read and study the information carefully – it can be the difference between success and failure. We also recommend that you make use of the many other tools and resources available to you through the UTSA University Career Center, including our Professional Interviewing 101 workshop and Group Mock Interview program. If you have not yet done so, schedule an appointment to meet with your Career Counselor, they can be a valuable ally in your career success as well.

Interviewing – What’s Involved?

The following are some of the important aspects of interviewing which will be covered in this guide:

- Employer Research
- Professional Dress & Appearance
- Introduction / First Impressions / Non-verbal communication skills
- Interview Methods & Settings
- Competency-based Behavioral Interviewing
- Answering Questions
- Asking Questions
- Closing & Follow-up
- Do’s and Don’ts / Common Interview Errors
- Final Tips

Employer Research

An important part of interview preparation is employer research. Employers want to know why you want to work for them and what you know about their organization. They will ask you questions probing your knowledge of their company and the job, such as, “Tell me everything you know about XYZ Company”, “Tell me everything you know about this job” and other similar questions.
If you know nothing about the organization or the job, they may think you are not serious about your career and are just looking for a paycheck. Organizations invest thousands of dollars in recruiting, hiring and training new employees, and they want to know that you are a serious and career-minded person that will give them a return on their investment in you.

Step one in conducting a successful interview is to do an extensive amount of research on both the organization and the job you are applying for. Good research is not just a matter of going to the company website and reviewing their history and background. That’s good information to have, but you need to go further. Here are some other steps to take when doing your research:

- Study the company history, milestones, where they stand in their market, and who their executives are. Also review their mission statement, and how active they are in the community.
- Conduct an informational interview with your Career Counselor.
- Visit the organization and take a tour. While there, talk to the employees, especially those that do a similar job or that work in the department you would be in.
- Talk to UTSA alumni who work for or know the organization.
- If the company is publicly traded, review their earnings reports.
- Do a Google search and review articles and other information (NOTE: Consider the source of any negative information – not everything you read on the internet is accurate).
- The University Career Center can help you with your research and has other resources that will help you find out information about potential employers. The University Career Center handout, “How to Research Employers” can be a valuable resource and provide you with additional information on conducting your research.

Having an extensive amount of knowledge of the employer and the job also helps you interview better, builds confidence and helps you better judge whether or not you want to work for the organization. Lastly, don’t wait until the last minute – most of your research should be done even before you apply for the job!

**Dress & Appearance**

Industrial psychologists and behavioral scientists say that over 50 percent of any interview is visual. Although what you say is important, how you look and carry yourself, is equally, if not more, important. Remember that in almost all interviewing situations, the interviewer sees you before they hear you – so the very first impression you make on them is visual.

Making a positive visual impression is a key element in successful interviewing, and it starts with the way you dress. The following are some specific recommendations for professional interview dress, grooming and appearance. When in doubt, err on the side of being conservative and professional – there is never a down side to dressing professionally!

**Men:**

- Dark conservative business suit
  - Navy or charcoal preferred
  - Conservative cut – two or three button jacket, no doubled breasted
- White dress shirt
  - Starched and pressed
  - Long sleeve
• Well fitted – make sure the top button can be comfortably buttoned

• Color coordinated tie
  o Not too bright, flashy or trendy
  o Tied to the proper length (the top of your tie should reach an area between the top and bottom of your belt buckle)
  o Cinched all the way up with the top shirt button buttoned

• Black, shined, conservative dress shoes
  o Lace-ups are best

• Black, conservative dress belt

• Dark socks

• Well groomed – shave and get a haircut!

The University Career Center has “loaner ties” if you need to borrow one, and Professional Development Program Manager Morris Ellington can teach you how to tie a tie if you need help.

**Women:**

• Dark, conservative business suit
  o Black, navy or charcoal preferred
  o Skirt or pants – whatever makes you feel the most comfortable and confident
  o If skirt, observe the “two-inch” rule – no more than two inches above or below the knee

• Blouse color conservative – not too bright or flashy

• Black, shined, conservative dress shoes
  o NO open-toe shoes (not even peep toes)
  o Not too high in the heel (three inches max)

• Dark or neutral hose (required)

• Minimum and conservative makeup

• Watch fingernail length and color
  o Clear nail polish only is recommended

**Everyone**

• Minimum of jewelry
  o Watch, class or wedding ring, one optional pair of small stud earrings for women (no other piercings – men or women)

• Cover any visible tattoos

• Avoid excesses of cologne or perfume

• Watch the accessories
  o Take nothing with you but a conservative leather business portfolio
  o A small conservative purse is okay for women.
  o No backpacks or book bags

**Introduction / First Impressions / Non-verbal communication skills**

One of the most important parts of any interview is when you meet the interviewer for the first time. This is the moment when you will make a first impression.
Making a strong, positive, professional first impression is a must. All your communication skills – visual, verbal and non-verbal – will contribute to the first impression. Some of the non-verbal communication skills you will need to focus on include:

- **Handshake** – Your handshake tells a lot about you to another person. Extend your hand, give the person your entire hand, web-to-web (the web of your hand is the part between the thumb and forefinger), grip firmly, shake twice and release. Shake hands exactly the same with female interviewers as with males.

- **Eye-contact** – Not looking the interviewer directly in the eye indicates nervousness or dishonesty. You must learn to make good, direct eye-contact when either of you is speaking. This is especially important during the initial introduction.

- **Posture** – Stand up straight when meeting the interviewer. During the interview, sit up straight or lean slightly forward. Never slouch!

- **Hand gestures** – It’s okay to talk with your hands, but keep them under control. A good “rule of thumb” is to keep your hands below chin level so that they don’t interfere with eye-contact or make you appear nervous.

- **SMILE!** This is the **most important** of all non-verbal communication skills! Interviewing is just another form of sales – and you can’t sell your product (you) without being friendly and building rapport with the interviewer.

There are other non-verbal communication skills, but these are the most important in an interview setting. Non-verbal communication is a learned – not natural – skill. Practice with a friend or family member, or alone in front of a mirror until you have these down and are proficient. Better yet, register for a Group Mock Interview or schedule a one-on-one mock interview with your counselor.

Remember, good non-verbal communication is not only important during the initial introduction when you are making a first impression, but throughout the interview.

Now let’s walk step-by-step through the introduction and what you need to do to make a positive first impression:

**THE INTRODUCTION**

In almost all interview settings, you will wait in a lobby area and the interviewer will come out of their office to greet you.

1. While waiting, sit up straight and be attentive, but don’t look too stiff or nervous. Browse through any company literature that is available.

2. It’s always a nice touch to make some light conversation with the receptionist if they are not too busy. Remember, everyone influences the hiring decision – you want to build allies!

3. When you see the interviewer coming:
a. **Immediately** stand up
b. **SMILE** and make direct eye-contact
c. Extend your hand for a good firm handshake
d. In a friendly and enthusiastic manner say:

   “Ms. Cisneros, I’m Mike Zucker. It’s great to meet you! I’m very excited about our interview!”

Use your own words, but convey those two points: One, I’m happy to meet you and, two, I’m excited about the interview. And remember that tone of voice and enthusiasm is every bit as important as what you say!

If you handle the introduction exactly as shown above, and are dressed in a highly professional manner, you will make a strong, positive and professional first impression and you will be off to a great start!

Practice and rehearse this initial greeting – making a great first impression is a critical part of success in any interview!

**Interview Methods & Settings (Also see the handout, “Types of Interviews”)**

There are many different ways that employers conduct interviews and you may be exposed to any or all of the following:

- **Phone Interviews** – Employers use phone interviewing for a variety of purposes, but more often than not it is when they have a large pool of applicants that they want to narrow down to a more manageable level prior to beginning face-to-face interviews. The purpose is to eliminate applicants who very obviously don’t possess the required skills or qualifications they are seeking.

  Although there are exceptions, phone interviews tend to be short (15-20 minutes) and will focus on basic qualifications. They also are rarely scheduled ahead of time, they simply pick up the phone and call you. If you are busy, or distracted in any way, tell them it is not a good time and schedule the phone interview for a later, convenient time. Don’t worry, they know you might be busy, and will be flexible with scheduling.

  Phone interviews should be conducted in a quiet, private area where you can focus without distractions. Try to conduct the interview on a land line, not a cell phone and make sure you have done your research and are prepared.

- **Panel Interviews** – Sometimes employers will have a “search committee” or for other reasons multiple people will be involved in the interview and hiring process. You might interview with all of them at once in a “panel interview” setting. This type interview will typically have 3-5 members on the panel but there could be more or less.

  Panel interviews are very efficient from the employers standpoint, because in effect it allows them to do many interviews all at once. Panel interviews tend to be longer than a one-on-one interview, and remember that you must make a good impression and build rapport with everyone on the panel. As you’re answering questions, engage everyone on the panel, not just the person that asks the question.
• **Lunch Interviews** – Sometimes the employer will take you to lunch, or even dinner, during the interview process. Lunch interviews tend to be very unstructured, and they will probably be evaluating your social skills and manners so make sure you are up to speed on your dining etiquette. If ordering off the menu, order something in the mid-range of prices that is easy to eat. And under no circumstances should you ever order an alcoholic beverage at a lunch or dinner interview.

• **One-on-one Interviews** – This is the traditional, and most common form, of interviewing. It will be just you and the interviewer together in a private area, with the interviewer asking you questions, and you responding.

Keep in mind that in professional interviewing you will probably go through multiple interviews, and you may experience some or all of the above types of interviews – or others – as you go through the different stages of the process.

**Competency-based Behavioral Interviewing (also see the handout “Behavioral Interviewing”)**

There are many different techniques for conducting interviews, but the vast majority of all employers use the technique known as **Behavioral Interviewing**. This technique is highly effective at identifying candidate’s skills, abilities and past experience. You will almost certainly be exposed to behavioral interviewing.

**Definition of Behavioral Interviewing**

Interview technique in which candidates are asked to give specific examples of how they have performed or behaved in the past in certain job-related (competency) situations.

**Theory of Behavioral Interviewing**

A person’s behavior or performance does not fundamentally change over the course of their adult life. The way they have dealt with certain job-related situations in the past is a good indicator of how they will deal with similar situations in the future. In other words, past behavior is an indicator of future performance.

The following are some examples of behavioral interviewing questions probing the competencies shown:

CUSTOMER SERVICE – “Tell me about a time you dealt with an angry customer”

SALES / PERSUASIVENESS – “Tell me about a time you sold someone on a product, service or idea”

WORK ETHIC – “Give me an example of a time you worked long hours or put in extra effort”

MULTI-TASKING – “Describe a situation in which you had to do many things all at once”

ORGANIZATIONAL – “Tell me about a time in which you had to put your organizational skills to use”
TEAMWORK – “Tell me about a time you worked closely with others to accomplish a common goal”

RESULTS-DRIVEN – “Give me an example of an ambitious goal you set for yourself”

LEADERSHIP – “Describe a situation in which you had to motivate others to accomplish a goal or task”

In behavioral interviewing, the questions asked will depend upon the “core competencies” of the particular job. Core competencies are key skills or abilities that are essential in order to successfully perform the “core” duties of the job. Core competencies will be different for every job.

If you are to be successful, you must study the job description closely. Identify the core competencies, then think of two or three examples of times you have successfully dealt with that particular competency. For example, if “customer service” is one of the core competencies, think of several examples of times you have successfully dealt with unhappy, angry, demanding or unreasonable customers or went out of your way to provide exceptional service. Then when the interviewer asks you a behavioral question about this topic, you will already have examples and will be ready to respond.

Answering Questions

Regardless of the competencies being probed and the questions asked, there are two things interviewers want to hear in your response:

1. Give specific examples. Interviewers want details, not vague generalities.
2. Give successful examples. Remember, past behavior is a good indicator of probable future performance. If you have successfully done it in the past, you probably will in the future as well. If you have failed at it in the past, ditto.

Also remember that the interviewer doesn’t care about your philosophies or how you feel about a topic – they want to know how you have done it!

The C.A.R. Method

A useful method for answering behavioral interview questions is the C.A.R. method:

C = Circumstance (Describe the specific circumstances of your example)

A = Action (Describe what action you took relevant to the circumstance)

R = Result (What was the result of your action?)

And remember, giving specific and detailed answers does not mean long and rambling! Keep your answers short and on-topic. The longer the answer, the more likely you will lose the interviewer’s attention.

At some point in the interview, you may get a question for which you don’t have an immediate response. If this should happen, it is perfectly acceptable to pause and think before responding.
Say, “that’s a great question, let me think about it for a moment”. Then pause, gather your thoughts, come up with a specific and successful example, then respond using the C.A.R. method. Interviewers know some of the questions are difficult, and they value thoughtful people who think before they answer.

Also, never “make up” an answer because you can’t come up with an example. Interviewers are highly trained professionals and are very adept at identifying dishonest answers. Better to give no example at all than a dishonest one!

**Experience Matters!**

Many students and recent graduates become frustrated in interviewing because of a perceived lack of experience. We often hear the following statement when working with students:

> “Interviewers keep asking me about my experience, but I don’t have any! I’ve been in college the past several years!”

Actually you probably have more experience than you realize. Although you may not have a lot of job-related work experience, there are many other things you do while in college to gain valuable and relevant experience. Remember that the interviewer doesn’t care if you got paid to do something – they just want to know you’ve done it, and done it well. As long as the example you give is relevant to the question, it doesn’t matter where you gained the experience.

The following are just a few areas where students gain valuable, job-related experience while still in college:

- Internships related to your major or career goals
- Student organization involvement (especially in a leadership role)
- Classroom projects (especially team projects) and other classroom activities
- Athletics participation (especially team sports)
- Volunteer work

Don’t box yourself in! You probably have more experience than you realize! Giving examples from things you’ve done outside of work is fine – so long as it is relevant and on-topic to the question being asked.

**Strengths & Weaknesses**

Many interviewers will ask you about your strengths and weaknesses. These questions will generally be phrased like this:

- “What is the biggest strength you will bring to our organization?”
- “What is a weakness you need to work on?”

Here are some suggestions for answering these two questions:

**STRENGTHS:**

1. Should be a true and honest strength
2. Should be relevant to the job you’re interviewing for
3. Give an example of how you’ve used the strength in the past:

“My greatest strength is my leadership skills. Let me tell you about a time I led others....”

By giving a specific example, you are quantifying the strength. This makes your answer much more powerful and impressive.

WEAKNESSES:

1. Should be a true and honest weakness
2. Should preferably not be related to the job you’re interviewing for
3. Give examples of what you’re doing to improve in the area:

“My weakness is my time management skills. Let me tell you some of the things I’m doing to improve in that area...”

We are all human, and we all have weaknesses. Don’t be afraid to own up to yours. What the interviewer wants to know is, a) you are aware of your weakness and, b) that you are taking proactive, positive steps to improve.

In both your strengths and weaknesses, don’t pause – immediately respond. If you have to think about either, the interviewer may think you don’t have good self awareness.

Asking Questions

At the conclusion of their questions, the interviewer will probably ask if you have any. This is an important part of the interview. The interviewer will be listening closely to your questions, as they will tell them things about you.

Remember that an interview is not a “fact finding” mission. It’s a sales presentation. You are not there to gather facts, you are there to sell yourself and get the job offer! You’ve already done the fact-finding through your research. Your questions should send positive “vibes” and messages to the interviewer about your strengths, your career goals and your knowledge of their organization. You can also use questions to continue the rapport-building process and solidify the relationship between you and the interviewer.

The following is a guide to asking questions:

1. Limit to 3-4 questions. Interviewers are on a tight timetable, and won’t have time for more.
2. Prepare your questions in advance! Don’t “wing it”.
3. Don’t focus on fact-finding but on sending positive messages to the interviewer!

Here are some examples of good and bad questions. As you read them, put yourself in the interviewer’s shoes and you’ll understand the positive and negative messages being received:

DO NOT ASK:

- What's the work schedule? Are nights, weekends or overtime involved?
• What’s your turnover rate?
• Can you tell me more about vacation and sick days?
• Have you ever fired anyone for tardiness?

DO ASK:

• With great performance, where can I be in your organization in five years?
• Can you elaborate on your long-range growth and expansion plans?
• This looks like a fun place to work. Can you tell me more about your company culture?
• Ms. Ivy, can you tell me more about your career with (organization name)?

Remember, keep it positive and upbeat – and keep selling! Your job is to build rapport and communicate positive things about yourself at all times!

Lastly, don’t bring up pay. The employer will bring it up when they are ready, generally at the final interview when the job offer is made. If you have done the proper research ahead of time you should already be aware of the pay range.

Closing & Follow-up

As the interview winds down, there are some things you should do:

• Make sure you’re clear on the next step in the process and the timetable. The interviewer will probably volunteer this information but, if not, you can, and should, ask.
• Get a business card from everyone you interacted with.
• Be enthusiastic – if you want the job, tell them! Employers value people that want to work for them.
• Close like you began – big smile, good eye contact and a firm handshake.

Afterwards, prepare a “thank you” letter or card. These can be handwritten, typed or emailed, but a personalized, handwritten thank you card is always preferred. A nice touch is to write the thank you card while you’re still there – in the lobby or your car – then give it to the receptionist and ask them to deliver it to the interviewer.

Thank you letters or cards should be brief, professional, personalized and focus on two things: Thank you for the interview and I want the job!

There is also no down side to giving thank you notes to others involved in the process – the receptionist, administrative assistant and others. Remember, everyone in the organization that you interact with influences the hiring decision – get them all on your team!

Final Tips

1. NEVER be late – Almost all interviewers have a “zero tolerance” policy for tardiness. If you show up late, you won’t get the job. Period. Get to the interview at least 15 minutes early. This applies to on-campus interviews at the Career Center as well.

2. Go out of your way to be friendly and respectful to everyone you interact with. Remember – everyone in the organization influences the hiring decision.
3. Don’t get frustrated or angry if you don’t get a job you interviewed for. You won’t win every time. Interviewing is very much a numbers game and there are far more applicants than jobs. Persistence pays off – stick with it.

4. It’s all about the preparation! The key to interviewing success is in the effort. The more time you spend preparing for the interview – researching the employer, studying the job description, identifying specific examples in the core competency areas, practicing the introduction and rehearsing your responses – the better you’ll perform.

Interviewing is just like anything in life – the more you do it, the better you’ll get. You should never do a real interview until you’ve first done either a Group Mock Interview or a one-on-one mock interview (or both) with our office.

Hopefully this gives you some good insight into the process and what you need to do to be successful. Keep in mind the competitive nature of interviewing. It’s not enough to do well, you have to do better than the others interviewing for the same job!

Stay positive, stay focused, be persistent, learn from your failures and, most of all, BE PREPARED!

The University Career Center has many other tools to help you, and your Career Counselor is a valuable resource. Contact information for the Center staff can be found at our website. Let us know if you have any questions or if we can provide any additional information.

GOOD LUCK!

www.utsa.edu/careercenter