LESSON 3

Building Interviewing Skills

"By failing to prepare you are preparing to fail."

Benjamin Franklin

Quick Write

Imagine you are an employer looking to fill an open position. Make a list of the qualities you would look for in a job applicant.

Learn About

- the interview process
- interview do's and don'ts
- types of interviews
- basic interview questions
- how employers evaluate interviewees

The Interview Process

Of all the phases of job searching, most people find the interview the most difficult and stressful. And no wonder: The impression you make during that brief period is the most critical part of your job search. It will determine whether you are hired.

What can you do to minimize the anxiety and the sweaty palms? With a job interview, as with almost any other part of life, preparation makes all the difference. Knowing how the interview process works, and understanding what to do and not to do, will make you feel more secure. Knowing how employers evaluate interviews can also help.

The interview process is not complicated. You see a job that appeals to you, decide to apply, and submit your résumé along with the company application form or any other required paperwork. Then you wait. Meanwhile, the company reviews all the résumés it has received and selects those that look most promising. This process generally takes a few weeks, but it may take longer, depending on the size of the company and the number of résumés it receives.

If your résumé is among those selected, someone from the organization will call or e-mail you to schedule an interview. In some cases, you may interview with someone in the human resources department, *the department that handles hiring, benefits, and other issues concerning employees*. In other cases, you may have an interview with the person who would be your boss or your boss's boss. Sometimes you'll talk with a combination of these people. And if the company decides after the first interview that it likes you, it may ask you to come back another day for more interviews.

Interview Do's and Don'ts

As noted in Chapter 4, Lesson 4, a successful interview takes preparation. You must do your research, dress and act appropriately, and know how to answer and ask questions well.

How to Prepare

The first step in preparation is to research the company you are seeking to join and its industry sector, or *general field in which the company provides a product or service*. If your interview is with a computer company, find out as much as you can about what is happening in the computer industry today. This will help you ask good questions.

- *Become as familiar as you can with what the company does—its history, goals, mission, and people*—Go to the organization's website. It should contain most of what you need to know. You can also enter the organization's name into a search engine and find out what people are writing about it.
- *Discover as much as you can about the people you will speak with during your interview*—Some company websites give a short biography of each of the company's top executives. Or you can ask the person who schedules your interview to send you bios of the people you'll meet.
- *Know the job requirements well*—The interviewer won't be impressed if you don't even understand the position you're applying for. Practice for the interview by role-playing. Get together with a friend or relative and have him or her pretend to be your interviewer. Tell these people to ask tough questions about your background, goals, and knowledge of the company and industry. Chances are your role-play interviewer will be harder on you than the real one. But if you practice, the questions that arise during the actual interview will be less likely to throw you off balance.

Vocabulary

- human resources department
- industry sector
- body language
- group interview
- peer
- rapport
- unstructured interview
- structured interview
- stress interview
- behavioral interview

- *Know how to get to the interview site*—If you arrive late at your interview, you'll be in big trouble. Being late to the interview tells the employer just one thing: You'll probably be late to work, too. So be sure you know how to get to the interview, where to park, and any rules for visitors, such as getting a security badge to enter the building. Conduct a dry run beforehand if you think it will help. Be sure to account for variations in traffic, especially during rush hours.
- *Try to find out the salary range*—If you can't, don't bring up salary in the interview. It will seem like you are more interested in money than the job. But do come to the interview knowing the lowest salary you can afford to accept and how much others with your background earn. You can get this information from friends, your school counselor, or on websites such as *www.salary.com*.
- *Bring along a copy of your résumé*—together with a list of your references, transcripts, or extra copies of any other material the interviewer might need.

How to Dress

First impressions count. During the interview, you want to give the message that you expect to be taken seriously. Your clothes can help convey that message. Your interviewer will notice the amount of care you take in your dress. He or she will assume you'll take the same amount of care with your work. Don't let anyone think you'll be a sloppy employee.

While there are various standards of dress for different kinds of jobs, a conservative approach is the safest route. Do a little investigating to learn what to wear to the interview so you will look as though you "fit in" with the company.

Learn what to wear by:

- Calling the human resource office where you are interviewing
- Visiting the organization's office to see if there is a dress code
- Watching people arriving and leaving work

It's a good idea to match your interview outfit to the position. If you are applying for a job working on a warehouse floor, you will look out of place wearing a formal suit. However, you will still be expected to present a professional appearance at the interview.

Here are some useful general guidelines:

- *Look neat and clean*—Other than that, the exact type of clothing you'll wear depends on the job you're seeking. If you're applying for an office job or a job in which you'll meet the public, formal dress (suit and tie for young men, suit or dress for young women) is best. If you're applying for a job in a repair shop, by contrast, you can dress more casually.
- *Dress conservatively*—Don't try to make a fashion statement. Wear a neutral color—for example, dark blue is better than black or white. If you do choose black, wear a bright scarf or tie to offset it. Studies have shown that business executives dislike greens and yellows least of all the colors.
- *Watch out for the style of your clothing as well as for color*—If you're a woman, don't wear a low-cut top or one that exposes your midsection. Men should never show up for an interview with sagging trousers; it may be fashionable, but is frowned on in the work place. Men should also avoid casual sportswear and wear socks that are the same color as their trousers. Whether you're a man or woman, don't wear sandals, flip-flops, or sneakers.
- *Be careful with the extras*—If you wear jewelry, avoid anything that dangles or glitters excessively. If you're a young man who usually wears an earring, leave it at home unless you are sure it will be appropriate. Also recognize that—especially in conservative office environments—visible piercings and tattoos will limit your chances for a successful interview. Natural hair color will also be more acceptable during an interview; avoid extreme colors or styling fads.
- *Go easy on makeup and cologne*—This is an interview, not a party!

Dressing carefully conveys the message that you want a potential employer to take you seriously.
Courtesy of grafica/Shutterstock

success TIP

Be aware that over 90 percent of the decisions on who to bring back for a second interview are made during the first two minutes after meeting a job applicant. This is why how you look is very important. There is never a second chance to make a good first impression. If you go to an interview dressed properly, you will have a sense of confidence and others will relate positively to your self-assurance.

During the Interview

Your behavior during the interview also conveys a lasting impression about you. Follow these tips to present yourself at your best:

- *Arrive early*—Get to the site at least 15 minutes ahead of time. Go to the restroom for a final check of your clothes, hair, and makeup.
- *Don't take notes unless the interviewer asks you to.*
- *Remember the interviewer's name*—Make sure you know how to pronounce it correctly and use it during the interview. Refer to the person as "Mr." or "Ms." unless the interviewer invites you to use his or her first name or another title.
- *Shake hands firmly, whether the interviewer is male or female*—If your hands tend to perspire, run them under cold water for a few minutes before the interview.
- *Do not smoke, chew gum, or drink anything during the interview*—If you are offered something to drink, politely turn it down. Even handling a cup or glass can be distracting, and spilling something could really disrupt the image you want to create.

In your interview, be clear about your career direction and goals. Sell yourself.
Courtesy of P. Winbladh/Corbis Images

- *Wait for the interviewer to offer you a chair before you sit down.*
- *Answer all questions truthfully and appropriately*—Put your best foot forward. Talk about things that put you in the best light possible, and never lie—don't even exaggerate.
- *Keep positive*—Do not badmouth your school or teachers and never criticize a past employer.
- *Be enthusiastic and confident*—But don't boast.
- *Be aware of your body language.*
- *Be clear about your career direction and goals*—Have in mind the points you want to make about how well you can do this job and be sure you make them. Sell yourself.

Body Language—The Silent Communication That Comes Through Loud and Clear

Your body language and your dress leave an immediate and lasting impression about you.

Courtesy of Digital Vision/Getty Images

Body language is *the nonverbal message that your facial expressions, physical stance, and gestures convey to a listener*. Experts estimate that as much as 65 percent of communication is nonverbal. During your interview, pay particular attention to the following:

1. *Facial expressions*—Eye contact is important. If you avert your eyes, the interviewer may interpret this as a lack of self-confidence or even dishonesty. Avoid touching your face or hair during the interview. It can indicate nervousness. Your mouth is a major silent communicator. Smiling appropriately is great. However, if you constantly smile or purse your lips, the interviewer may interpret this negatively. A good rule of thumb: If in doubt, do what your interviewer is doing.
2. *Body gestures*—Crossed arms can indicate defensiveness or dissatisfaction. Keep your hands in your lap. If you tilt your head too far up, people think you feel superior. If you tilt it too far down, you give a message of inferiority. Sitting too straight can make you seem inflexible, but slouching makes you appear lazy. Don't lean on the desk or get too close to the interviewer.
3. *Hand gestures*—Gesture naturally. Avoid clenched hands; this can reveal anxiety. Never put your hands in your pockets or point your index finger at the interviewer. Avoid straightening your clothing, because the interviewer may view this as a sign you're unsure of yourself.

- ☑ I have prepared a list of appropriate questions to ask the interviewer.
- ☑ I have brought a list of references.
- ☑ I have reviewed my benefit statements and am prepared to sell myself to get the job.
- ☑ I have done research on the company.
- ☑ I am well groomed and appropriately dressed:
  - My hair is cut, washed, and combed.
  - I have bathed and used deodorant.
  - My makeup, jewelry, and perfume or after-shave lotion are not excessive.
  - My fingernails are trimmed and clean and I have brushed my teeth.
  - My shoes are clean, neat, and unscuffed.
  - I have shaved, if needed (males).
- ☑ I will be myself, whatever the circumstances of the interview.
- ☑ I will take extra copies of my résumé, transcript, portfolio, and any other print materials that the interviewer may request.
- ☑ I have a pen or pencil to fill out the company application form, should this be necessary.
- ☑ I will smile, be positive, and present myself in the best possible light.

FIGURE 6.5

Interview Day Checklist

Reprinted from *The Job Searcher's Handbook*, edited by Carolyn R. Robbins (2006), by permission of Pearson Education

Ending the Interview

You will know the interview is ending when the interviewer asks if you have any questions. Ask your questions. Then reiterate the main points that make you a strong candidate. Ask the interviewer when he or she thinks the company will make its decision. Emphasize how much you would like the job, and thank the interviewer for spending time with you.

Follow-Up

As soon as you get home, make notes about your impressions. List any points you forgot to mention or questions you forgot to ask. Within two days of the interview, send a follow-up letter or note (by US mail preferably, but e-mail is acceptable). Mention the points or questions that have come up since the interview ended. Stress again that you want the job and explain why you are qualified. Send separate notes to everyone who interviewed you.

Types of Interviews

Interviews can take many formats, from a face-to face interview to a videotaped session to a lunch or telephone interview. Here are the most common types of interviews you will experience:

Group or Committee Interviews

In a group interview, *several people will ask you questions*. These interviewers may include a potential peer, or *coworker at your level*. In some cases, you may be one of several applicants interviewed simultaneously. In that case, you may find yourself interacting with other applicants as well as with your interviewer(s). The objective of this interview approach is to determine how well you function in a group. Another variety of the group interview is a *committee* or *panel* interview, in which several people will interview you alone at once.

In any of these situations, you should:

- Make eye contact with, and speak to, each individual
- Try to establish rapport, or *a relationship or connection*, with everyone in the group
- Never interrupt anyone
- Think before you reply to a question, but don't pause too long
- Keep your answers short and direct.

Unstructured Interviews

The unstructured interview is *an informal session during which the interviewer will expect you to do most of the talking*. He or she will ask broad questions that you could answer in any number of ways. Employers like these kinds of interviews because they yield information about a candidate's opinions and reactions.

An unstructured interview can give you a great opportunity to sell yourself. You can bring up what you want to, as long as it relates to the question. The risk is that you might talk yourself right out of the job if you stray from the subject or say anything controversial. Stay focused: Talk about your ability to fill the position, your qualifications, and what you can do for the company. Don't get sidetracked into talking about irrelevant topics or personal trivia.

Structured Interviews

The structured interview is *a set of questions that the employer asks all candidates*. The questions are usually based on the job description. The drawback to this type of interview is that it does not allow you full opportunity to exhibit your personality, communication skills, or other attributes. You must stick to the canned questions the interviewer asks.

Stress Interviews

The stress interview *deliberately creates an environment that puts you under pressure so that the employer can see how you behave in tense situations*. This kind of interview is relatively rare. If you're applying for a job that may have a lot of stress, however, the employer may use it.

If you find yourself in a stress interview, stay calm. The interviewer may deliberately and frequently interrupt you, remain silent for long periods, or ask intimidating questions. Don't take the questions personally. Answer them as well as you can, and remember that the interviewer is testing you to see if you can handle stress.

Behavioral Interviews

A behavioral interview is *an interview during which the interviewer asks you to give examples of situations in which you demonstrated particular behaviors or skills*. Employers are using behavioral interviews more and more because they find they can often predict a potential employee's future conduct based on his or her past behavior.

During a behavioral interview, someone will ask you to describe in detail a particular event, project, or experience; how you dealt with it; and what the outcome was. Some questions might be:

- Describe a time when you faced a problem that tested your coping skills. What did you do?
- Give an example of a situation in which you had to make a quick decision.
- What is one of your important goals? How are you doing in meeting it?
- Describe the most creative work-related project you have completed.
- Give me an example of when you had to show good leadership.

The key to answering these questions is to be specific and honest. Don't describe how you should have behaved; describe how you *did* behave. If you later decided you should have behaved differently, explain why. The employer will be impressed to see that you learned from the experience. In preparing for this type of interview, it's helpful to review your experience and have a few stories ready to tell. That way you don't hesitate or draw a blank when the interviewer asks you to relate one.

Other Types of Interviews

If you are applying for a job in another city, a prospective employer may ask you to do a *videotaped interview*. If you face a camera instead of a person, speak slowly and clearly and show enthusiasm. Body language is especially important on camera—the camera sees you somewhat differently than the human eye does.

A prospective employer may need to interview you by phone. Don't worry: Preparing for a *telephone interview* is just like preparing for a face-to-face interview.

In today's workplace, *live video interviews* are becoming popular, because they are as convenient as telephone interviews, but allow you and the interviewer to interact visually. In this type of interview, you should always prepare as you would for a face-to-face interview. Here are some tips for live video interviews:

- Ask if you can arrive early to take some time to become familiar with the equipment.
- Use the picture-in-picture feature so you can see how you appear to the interviewer.
- Make eye contact. If you don't, the camera will be focused on the top of your head.

During a *lunch interview*, you may be tempted to relax too much. Remember, this is still an interview. Order something that you can handle and eat easily, without too much mess. This probably isn't the time for lobster or spaghetti with tomato sauce! Also, don't order the most expensive items on the menu; doing so might indicate to the interviewer that you are not cost-conscious.

Basic Interview Questions

Some standard questions pop up during virtually any interview, regardless of type. You'll also want to have a set of questions to ask at any interview. Here are some questions you'll probably have to answer at one point or other and some questions you may want to ask.

Questions Interviewers Ask

- *Tell me about yourself*—The interviewer does not want to know about your hobbies, your boyfriend or girlfriend, or your favorite TV show. He or she wants to know what you think is important about yourself with respect to the job you've applied for. Take this opportunity to present your best qualities and to explain how much you are interested in the company. Focus on the company's needs, not yours.
- *What do you see yourself doing in five years?*—The interviewer wants to see if you plan or live day-to-day. To answer this question impressively, your career goals should relate to those of the company. This is also a good opportunity to ask about the career path for the position you are interviewing for.
- *What is your greatest weakness (or strength)?*—The question is about your work behavior. The interviewer wants to find out how well you know yourself. If you need to talk about a weakness, focus on one that you are correcting, and tell the interviewer how you are doing that. This will show that you are mature. Everyone has weaknesses, but not everyone admits them or is working to correct them.
- *Why should we hire you?*—Think about this question beforehand and have a few good reasons ready. Make your reasons specific: Match your skills with those of the job.

- *What salary do you expect?*—Many employers want to know if your salary expectations match what they are willing to pay. If possible, avoid salary negotiations until you actually have a job offer. If the interviewer presses you, give a salary range rather than a specific figure. For example, say, "I understand that positions of this type generally pay between $25,000 and $28,000. That range would be acceptable."
- *Why do you want to work for us?*—Do your research, and then give an honest answer about why you like the organization.

Questions You May Want to Ask

- What would a typical workday be like if I had this position?
- What is the expected career path in your organization for a person in this position?
- Do you have a formal training program? Can you describe it?
- How do you evaluate your employees? How often?
- From your experience, what would you say are the organization's greatest strengths?

Questions You Should Not Ask

- *What happened to the person who had this job before?*—Answering this question could make the interviewer uncomfortable. Perhaps the employee moved on to a competing company. Or maybe the company asked the employee to leave because of poor performance. Frame this question in a positive way: Ask if the position is newly created or is an existing position that has become vacant.

Being able to anticipate questions that interviewers ask will make you more confident in any type of interview.
Courtesy of Adrian Weinbrecht/Getty Images

- *Will I have to work overtime?*—This might make the interviewer think that you don't want to work too hard.
- *How much job security do you offer?*—Today's job market doesn't offer a great deal of security. Asking this question will only make you seem insecure.
- *When will I get my first raise?*—This question is inappropriate until you have been hired.
- *What benefits does the company offer?*—This question is not appropriate for the first interview, but you will want to find out the benefits of the job before you accept an offer.

How Employers Evaluate Interviewees

During and after the interview, your potential employer will be evaluating you. What is he or she looking for? There is no standard evaluation or rating form that all employers use. Each company evaluates applicants differently. How you dress and speak, your mannerisms, and the validity and content of your answers to questions will all influence the evaluation. The employer will probably evaluate you in three basic areas: *character*, *commitment*, and *competence*.

Character

Employers want to be sure you are a person with a positive personality and good habits. In evaluating your character, they will look at your:

- Attitude
- Appearance
- Ability to communicate orally and in writing
- Ability to work collaboratively
- Self-confidence and poise
- School or work attendance record
- Community or extracurricular activities
- Leadership potential

Commitment

Employers also want to be sure you really want to work for them, will show up for work, and won't leave them in a few months—after they've invested time and effort in training you for the job. When employers look for commitment, they are looking for:

- Enthusiasm for the job and the company
- Goals and self-motivation
- Willingness to do what your employer asks

Competence

Finally, potential employers need to be sure you can do the work and do it well. In evaluating your competence, they'll look at your:

- Job-related skills and ability to perform the job
- Grades on courses and tests
- Educational qualifications for the job

It's important to understand that the person who gets the job is not always the person with the best skills, education, and experience. An employer wants someone who fits with the organization and its culture. Your interpersonal skills are very important, and that's one thing the interviewer will look for. Can you take criticism? Are you a good team player? Are you flexible? Can you communicate well?

Your personality is also important—especially qualities such as creativity, warmth, diplomacy, and self-confidence. In the end, people hire people they like. After all, they have to work with you every day.

CHECKPOINTS

Lesson 3 Review

Using complete sentences, answer the following questions on a sheet of paper.

1. What are several things you should do to make sure your interview goes well?
2. Imagine that you have an interview next week at a major bank in your city. Describe what you will wear to the interview. List some types of clothing you should not wear.
3. List some body language you should avoid during an interview.
4. List and explain the different types of interviews.
5. Why are more and more employers using behavioral interviews?
6. Give one question you are afraid an employer might ask you. Decide how you would respond to the question. Write down your answer.
7. List some questions you should ask during an interview.
8. List some questions you should not ask during an interview.
9. What are the three basic areas that an employer will evaluate you on? Give examples of each area and explain its importance.

APPLYING INTERVIEWING SKILLS

10. Imagine that you've been asked to interview for a job you have your heart set on. Ask a friend or relative to do a role-play. Dress as if you were going to a real interview. Tell your interviewer to ask you the hardest questions he or she can. If you have a video camera, tape the interview. Play it back and analyze how you answered the questions. Pay attention to your body language.