

# INTERVIEW PREPARATION GUIDE

## PURPOSE OF THE INTERVIEW PROCESS

An interview is a crucial part of the job search process. During the interview you have the opportunity to communicate with the prospective employer about your skills, education and work background. The employer is assessing whether or not you will “fit” into the organization and be able to perform the job. It is also your time to decide if you think the job/organization is a good fit for you. Use this time to highlight the strong skills and experience you have that would be relevant to the position as well as gather more information to help you decide if it is the position you want.

## PREPARATION FOR THE INTERVIEW

Prepare for the interview process by thinking about what you want from a job and what you have to offer an employer. Know how your goals, experience, and skills match the goals and requirements of the company/position. Anticipate the kinds of questions that will be asked, and prepare what examples or situations you want to share. Practice with a family member, friend, recording device, in front of a mirror and/or through UCO Career Development Center individual interview appointments or employer conducted mock interview days. (*See our “Common Interview Questions” guide for some general questions you can practice.*)

### What Makes You Hireable?

Employers want to know why they should hire you instead of other candidates. Be prepared to explain your potential contributions. To prepare, ask yourself these questions:

- What are my abilities, talents, interests, motivations, and values?
- Why did I select my major/university/profession?
- What did I learn in class that will help me on the job?
- What types of work/volunteer/internship experiences have I had? What skills have I gained or improved on through these experiences?
- What type of work environment do I want? (*Think about size of company, work pace, travel requirements, co-workers, and location – basically the “corporate culture.”*)
- Review your work history, including dates of graduation. Consider how you will answer questions about why you left certain jobs (*although never share negative reasons*).

### Research the Employer

Read everything you can about a potential employer. Familiarize yourself with their product lines, core values, mission, etc., and know how you can contribute to the organization. Do the following:

- Review the employer’s website.
- Read professional journals and research professional organizations for insight into the organization.
- Be aware of developing issues in the field and/or with the company. (*Read a daily newspaper, follow social media sites like Twitter and Facebook, and check out local media sites in the company’s area.*)
- Speak to friends, family members, professors, or UCO Career Development Center professionals who may be familiar with the organization.
- If the organization is open to the public, such as a department store or restaurant, visit the location to see what the experience is like.

## DAY OF THE INTERVIEW

As you prepare to leave for your interview, follow this checklist to make sure you have everything you need:

- Dressed in professional attire (*see “First Impressions” for some quick tips on interview attire*)
- A few copies of your resume
- Questions you have prepared to ask the interviewer
- A pen and paper to take notes (*it can help to have a padfolio or folder for this purpose*)
- You’re leaving early enough to arrive 10 minutes early for the interview
- You’re not chewing gum or candy
- You’ve turned off your phone

## FIRST IMPRESSIONS

It is important to know that first impressions do count. Try to relax and present the best possible “you.” It’s expected that you will be a little nervous, but remember that you have been invited to the interview because the employer is interested in you. From your first greeting to the last good-bye, try to remain interested, upbeat and sincere. It’s also a good to learn the art of small talk since this is how most interviews will begin.

### Dress for Success

Clothing is one way that you can demonstrate professionalism and confidence during an interview. What you wear to an interview can give off assumptions about who you are as a person/employee. Even if you think the environment you will be working in is a more casual environment, dress nicer than what you would be wearing every day. Follow these tips to dress for success:

### Recommendations for Men

- Dress suit (*neutral color tones – black, blue, grey*)
- Long sleeve collared shirt (*white or color coordinated with the suit*)
- Classic and conservative tie
- Dark socks and leather shoes
- Belt (*coordinate your belt to match your shoes*)
- Minimal or no jewelry (*take out facial piercings*)
- Neat, professional hairstyle and trimmed facial hair
- No cologne
- Cover up tattoos as much as possible

### Recommendations for Women

- Pant or skirt suit (*neutral color tones – black, blue, grey*)
- The skirt should be long enough so you can sit down comfortably (*be aware of the slit*)
- Conservative matching blouse
- Low heels or flat dress shoes (*less than 3 inches*)
- Neutral hosiery
- Minimal jewelry (*take out facial piercings*)
- Neat, professional hairstyle
- Light make-up and no perfume
- Cover up tattoos as much as possible

## **Arrive Early**

Punctuality is a must. Plan to check in for your interview 5-10 minutes early. This is early enough to show that you are punctual and are taking the interview seriously, but it's not so early that you run the risk of making the interviewer uncomfortable by having you wait on them.

## **Mind Your Manners**

Once you arrive at your interview, make sure you are polite and respectful to everyone you meet. You never know who might be in the interview room or who might help with making the hiring decision. It's also a good idea to watch what information you disclose to people you meet on your way to the interview. You don't want to say something that you wouldn't say in an interview in the off chance that you will see this person again.

## **The Proper Handshake**

When shaking hands, be firm, but not too firm. Don't crush someone's hand and don't have a limp handshake. Make firm contact, palm to palm, shake two to three times and then let go. Avoid turning your hand so that yours is on top or bottom. The hands should be equal.

## **It's All About Body Language**

Body language is an important part of the interview process, just as clothing and preparation are. Interviewers can make a lot of assumptions based on how you present yourself physically. Here are some recommendations to follow regarding body language in an interview:

- When greeting your interviewer, and others who may be involved in the interview process, make sure to smile and make eye contact.
- Keep proper posture. This will help show confidence.
- When you sit down, keep feet on the floor or ankles crossed.
- Sit back in the chair. Be comfortable, but not overly relaxed.
- Avoid making large gestures. If you tend to do this, keep your hands in your lap.
- Be aware of habits, such as tapping your foot, clicking your pen, shifting in your seat, etc., and avoid doing them.

You want to avoid doing anything that can distract the employer from what you are saying. You want them to remember you by what you said and not by distracting behaviors you may have displayed.

## **DURING THE INTERVIEW**

### **What Skills/Qualities Do Employers Seek?**

In addition to experience that shows you have the background to do the job you are interviewing for, employers are also looking for specific skills/qualities. The majority of employers rate these skills as highly important:

- Communication
- Teamwork
- Decision making and problem solving
- Planning, organization, and prioritization
- Obtaining and processing information
- Analyzing quantitative data
- Technical knowledge related to the job
- Proficiency with computer software programs
- Creating and/or editing written reports
- Selling or influencing others

When preparing for an interview, make sure you can come up with examples that prove you have these skills. During the interview, stay confident and promote yourself. The employer wants to know about your accomplishments so that he or she can make an informed hiring decision.

## **The STAR Technique**

This technique is designed to be used for behavioral questions. STAR stands for Situation, Task, Action and Result. Using the STAR technique can help you keep responses organized as well as making sure you convey enough information to answer the question. This technique is simple to use by framing your responses around the four areas – explain the situation and/or task involved, what action you took, and the result of the action.

## **What to Do If You Can't Think of a Response**

It is possible that you will be asked a question for which, in the moment, you are unable to come up with a quick answer. This may occur most commonly when you are asked to come up with an example of something such as “tell me about a time when you had to assist an angry customer.” Keep in mind that your response is not the only thing that is of interest to the interviewer. It is just as important how you handle yourself in these kinds of situations.

The first thing to remember is that it is okay to take a minute or two to come up with a response. It is even preferred that you take some time to prepare your answer in your head first before saying something out loud. This shows that you are really thinking about the question.

If, after a minute or two, you can't think of anything, be honest. Let them know that at that moment you cannot come up with an example. Then answer the question hypothetically. If you were faced with that particular situation, how would you handle it? This at least gives them an idea of your thought process.

Keep in mind that this only works when it is something like an example. If you tell them that you can't come up with a weakness, don't know your biggest accomplishment, or you don't know why you want the job, then that is not going to look favorably. You should always be able to answer specific questions about yourself and your own experience.

## **Illegal Questions**

There are certain questions that interviewers should not ask during an interview. These questions are those that pertain to your age, marital status, disabilities, race, ethnicity, sex, religion, national origin or birthplace. If you are asked these questions, you have a few options for how to handle the question:

1. You can try to answer what you think the interviewer actually wants to know. For example, if an employer asks what your national origin is, they may just want to know if you are legally able to work in the United States. So instead of answering with what your origin is, you can say, “if you are asking if I am legally able to work in the United States, then yes, I am legally able.”
2. You can refuse to answer. If you choose to do this, do so in a polite and professional manner. One suggestion is to say something like “can you tell me how this is related to my ability to do the job?”
3. You can answer the question. While this is an option if you are comfortable, it is usually best to keep this information to yourself due to discrimination laws.

## **Ask Questions**

Always come to an interview prepared to ask the interviewer a few questions. This shows that you are really interested in the position. Prepare at least 3-5 questions you can ask that will provide you with information that you actually want to know about the company/position.

Do not ask questions that are clearly answered on the employer's website and/or in any literature provided by the employer to you in advance. However, it is okay to ask a clarification question if you need more information on something that you read or that was said during the interview.

## **Sample Questions You Can Ask**

- Why is this position open? How many people have held this position in the last few years?
- Why did you join the company? How long have you been here? What aspects of the company keep you here?
- To whom would I report?
- Are there any travel requirements?
- What type of training is involved? How long does it last?
- What would my first assignment be?
- What are the realistic chances of growth in this position?
- How will my responsibilities and performance be measured? By whom?
- What are the company's strengths and weaknesses compared to its competition?
- What is the organization's plan for the next five years, and how does this department fit in?
- Could you explain the organizational structure?
- Could you describe your company's management style and the type of employee who fits well with it?
- What are some of the skills and abilities necessary for someone to succeed in this job?
- What opportunities are there for professional development?
- What particular computer equipment and software do you use?
- What kind of work can I expect to be doing the first year?
- Can you describe an ideal employee?

## **AFTER THE INTERVIEW**

### **Thank You Notes**

Within 24 hours of the interview, send a personalized, handwritten thank you note to each person that interviewed you. If you know the hiring decision will be made quickly after your interview, it can be acceptable to send an emailed thank you, but it is still nice to follow-up with something handwritten. A thank you note is not going to get you the job by itself, but it can go a long way in helping the interviewer make a hiring decision when they have several qualified candidates. This could be the tie breaker. Besides adding that little something extra, it is also an opportunity for you to remind them of your interest and of something you had talked about. Maybe you want to remind them of a skill or qualification that you have that you really think would benefit the company. Maybe there was a topic you really enjoyed talking to them about and wanted to remind them of that conversation. Just make sure that each note you write is a little different. You never know when the interviewers might compare notes.

### **The Follow-Up Call**

If you are given a time frame for when a hiring decision will be made, wait until after that date has passed before contacting the employer. If the date has passed without any word, it is acceptable to call or email the employer to ask what the status of the position is. Be professional. Do not ask them whether or not you got the job. Just let them know you are still interested in the position and are just wondering if they could update you on where they are in the hiring process. If you do not hear back from them, do not continue following up. Wait a couple of weeks before contacting them again.

If you were not given a time frame for the hiring decision, it is still acceptable to follow-up on the status, but wait at least two weeks before contacting them. Again, ask once and then give them some more time before asking again.