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## Workforce Series #6 The Job Interview

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## Workforce Series #6

# The Job Interview

By Carolyn Clague, Ed.D., Associate Professor, Extension Youth Development / 4-H Specialist

### How to Get a Job Interview

Prepare your cover letter and resume carefully and submit both to the prospective employer. Approximately one week later, you should follow up with a phone call. State that you have sent your resume and explain in one minute or less why you think you are the best candidate for the position. Your one-minute pitch should be a clear, concise summary of yourself, including three important elements:

- What kind of work you do or want to do.
- What your strongest skills and accomplishments are.
- What kind of position you are seeking.

Ask if there is anything else that you can do or any additional information that you can send such as writing samples, clippings, or portfolio to help the employer make a decision. The goal is to get a positive response from the phone call. Be professional and courteous at all times.

### Preparing for the Interview

Once you have been invited to a job interview, you must prepare yourself to increase your chances that it will be successful and result in a job offer. During the interview, the employer will evaluate your skills, knowledge, abilities, and personality. You need to distinguish yourself in a positive way from the other candidates vying for the same position.

You want to be engaged, informed, and at ease. One way of accomplishing this is by preparing yourself to discuss several themes that you can refer to throughout the job interview. You want to emphasize your strongest points to leave a positive impression in the employer's mind.

### Developing Your Personal Themes and Preparing for Interview Questions

There are certain types of information that employers seek in a typical job interview. Be aware of what they are and be able to discuss readily how each point relates to you. This will make you better prepared and more in control of the interviewing process. Develop a personalized approach to each point and practice talking about it.

Practicing aloud will enable you to use words that come easily in an organized, yet comfortable, conversational way. Think of specific examples in your background that correspond to each topic.

**Passion for the work:** ask yourself, "Why am I interested in this type of work?" Give examples of aspects that excite you about the job.

**Motivation and purpose:** employers will want to know why you want to work for them. Ask yourself, "Why do I want this interview?"

**Skills and experience:** identify your key skills and how you will use them in this job. Describe yourself as objectively as possible. Think about your weaknesses and minimize them with your strengths. Avoid sounding arrogant or defensive.

**Diligence and professionalism:** describe your character, including thoroughness, diligence, and accountability. Give proof that you persevere to see important projects finished, and that you achieve desired results.

**Creativity and leadership:** give examples of your effectiveness, creativity, initiative, resourcefulness, and leadership. Focus on how you overcome problems, how you take advantage of opportunities that might be otherwise overlooked, and how you support others to accomplish goals.

**Compatibility with the job:** discuss your specific qualifications for the job. How do your qualifications fit with the requirements of the position? Focus on what you are seeking in the job.

**Personality and cultural compatibility:** consider your personality on the job. How do you fit with other types of personalities? What types of people would enjoy working with you? How would the employer's customers or clients react to you? Develop responses that make the interviewer feel confident there won't be any surprises about your personality on the job.

**Management style and interpersonal skills:** talk about how you interact with peer groups, leaders, and people you supervise. What kind of a supervisor, colleague, or employee will you be? Give personal examples that you believe are effective.

**Problem-solving ability:** offer examples of your problem-solving ability. How have you resolved difficult issues in the past? Focus on real issues, on logical value-added solutions, on practical outcomes of your work, and on realistic measures of judging these outcomes.

**Accomplishments:** give examples of your initiative and talk about accomplishments in which you have delivered more than what was expected. Focus your answer on the action you took and the positive results you obtained. What can you contribute to the organization?

**Career aspirations:** tailor your aspirations to the realities of the job and its career path. Speak about the skills and strengths that you want to develop further.

**Personal interests and hobbies:** share your personal interests and hobbies. Are you interested in community involvement? How would you reflect the employer's image?

### Research Potential Employers before Interviewing

There are two good reasons why you should set aside some time early in your job search to research employers in your field of interest. First, it is a great way to locate potential employers. Second, it is an effective way to learn more about particular employers you are considering so that you can tailor your communication about your interest and qualifications to their needs.

The first phase of research should involve gathering only basic information about many different employers, including:

- Employer name, address, phone and fax numbers
- Names and job titles of key contacts
- Whether the employer is privately or publicly held
- Products and/or services
- Year of incorporation
- Number of employees

The second phase of research involves gathering more detailed information about each employer. You need to know the employer's products, types of customer, subsidiaries, parent company, principal locations, rank in the industry, sales and profit trends, type of ownership, size, current plans, and principal competitors and their relative performance. Incorporating your knowledge in your communication will impress the employer and will distinguish you from the competition. You will be better

prepared to exchange ideas, create interesting conversation, and make a positive impression. You should set aside at least twelve hours for pre-interview research.

Use the library for access to newspapers, trade journals, directories, and CD-ROM databases. For example, *The National Jobbank* is a book that provides key information about employers. *Fortune* magazine publishes an annual list of the best companies to work for. A daily paper such as the *New York Times* or *Wall Street Journal* will give you the latest information. The Internet is another good source of information. You may want to view these websites: [www.hoovers.com], [www.vault.com], and [www.wetfeet.com].

You can also call the company and speak to the investor-relations department, sales office, or public relations office. They can answer your questions and send you product literature, annual reports, brochures, catalogs, etc.

### The Informational Interview

If you are an entry-level job seeker or a career changer, you should consider conducting at least one informational interview. An informational interview is a meeting that you arrange with someone who has several years of experience working in your field of interest. Your goal is to learn how that person got into the business, what he or she likes about it, and what kind of advice someone with experience might pass on to someone who's interested in entering the field. You will need to prepare 10-20 questions to ask.

With the help of an informational interview, you can prepare for a real job interview in several ways, including:

- Examining your compatibility with the employer by comparing the realities of the field to your own personal interests.
- Finding out how people in a particular business, industry, or job view their roles and growth opportunities.
- Becoming comfortable talking to people in the industry and learning the industry jargon.
- Building your network, which can lead to further valuable information and opportunities.

Be sure to thank the person for time spent with you and information shared. You should also send a thank-you note within one or two days of the informational interview.

### Preparing for Telephone Interviews

Telephone screening interviews are becoming more commonplace because employers want to reduce their hiring costs by avoiding travel at screening stages in the

hiring process. Recruiters may call you to schedule an interview at a later time, but more often they will call hoping to interview you at that moment. Here are some general tips for handling a phone interview:

- If you feel unprepared or uncomfortable with your phone skills, practice with a friend. Or if you have an answering machine, call when you are away from home and leave yourself a message emphasizing one of your themes. When you get home, listen to how you sound, listen to your voice patterns such as enthusiasm, highs/lows, pauses, etc. Was your message clear and direct? Keep practicing until you are comfortable with the results.
- Keep a copy of your resume by the phone, along with a list of key words representing the themes you think are relevant to the job you are pursuing.
- Pay close attention to the employer's voice pattern and use your own voice to keep the conversation interesting and easy to follow.
- Listen very carefully and maintain your highest level of concentration. Keep a pen and some paper near the phone. Take notes and use this information to help you follow up later with a letter.
- Avoid long pauses; provide quick summaries of your themes or points with clear examples of how you have made positive contributions where you have been.
- Make sure you get the name (correctly spelled), address, and phone number of the person who called.
- Reaffirm your interest in the position. Follow up with a thank-you note.

### References

Before you start interviewing, you will need to prepare a list of three to five references. Unless you are new to the workforce, at least two of these should be professional references from previous employers or close business associates. Other potential sources of references include teachers, professors, volunteer committee heads, and friends who are well respected in business. Don't list family members as references.

Be sure to ask people for their permission before you cite them as references. If they agree, be sure you have their job title, the name of the company where they work, and their work address and phone number. Then prepare a neat, typed list of your reference contacts with your name at the top of the page. Don't list your references on your resume, as this is considered inappropriate and unprofessional.

Keep your references informed of your status. A quick E-mail letting them know that a telephone call may be coming to speak on your behalf and including the job position description and your resume is efficient and

appreciative. As your references are speaking with the interviewer, they can refer to this information and quickly respond to whether your skills and character are compatible to the position.

Don't forget to send each of your references a thank you note when your job search is over. Proper etiquette aside, this practice will help keep your contacts current. You never know when you might need their help again.

### Dress for the Interview

A rule of thumb is to dress up – you should dress one position above the one you are seeking. Save trendy, individualistic, cutting-edge fashion statements for your free time. Men should wear a clean, conservative, two-piece suit, a white shirt, and a silk tie. Lace-up wing tips are your best bet for shoes. This is the basic corporate wardrobe; however, for some employers, a quality jacket, pants, shirt, and tie are fine. But if you are not sure what dress is appropriate at a certain firm, play it safe and opt for a two-piece suit. A man should always wear a jacket and tie to the interview.

For women, a professional-looking dress or suit with low-heeled shoes makes the best impression. Use your best judgment and wear whatever is both professional and comfortable for you. However, be sure to avoid excess jewelry and make-up or cosmetics.

Impeccable personal grooming is even more important than finding the perfect outfit. Be sure that your clothes are clean, pressed, and well fitting, and that your shoes are polished. Your hair should be neat and business-like and your nails should be clean and trimmed. Both men and women are advised to skip cologne or perfume.

It is advisable to take a briefcase or leather-bound folder to the interview to complete the professional, polished look you want to achieve. Women should avoid carrying a purse if they plan on carrying a briefcase—it may detract from a professional image. Remember to wear a watch! Bring to the interview unfolded copies of your resume, cover letter, list of references, and a portfolio or examples of your work such as writings, clippings, pictures, models, etc. as appropriate for the position. Have convenient a notepad and pen for taking notes.

### Body Language

The first few minutes of the interview are the most important. The employer begins decision-making the instant you walk into the room. If you make a bad impression from the start, the employer may pay little attention to your performance during the rest of the interview. An excellent initial impression will put a favorable glow on everything else you say during the rest of the interview.

To make a terrific first impression, be sure you are dressed well. When the recruiter meets you, he or she will notice your clothes and grooming first. Nothing other than impeccable grooming is acceptable. Your attire must be professional and clean. Your body language speaks volumes about you. An employer will pick up on and react to the subtle signs of body language. Here are some important actions to consider:

- Smile when meeting others.
- Make eye contact without staring.
- Walk with a self-assured and confident stride.
- Shake hands firmly.
- Organize yourself so that your briefcase or folder is in your left hand, making your right hand available to shake hands when introduced.
- When responding or speaking to the recruiter, naturally make eye contact.
- Remember the recruiter's name and say the name correctly in the conversation. People like to hear their name being spoken.
- Be prepared to make small talk easily.
- Be yourself.

### **Being Nervous**

Employers realize that you will probably be a little nervous. They will pay close attention to how you hold up under pressure. Displaying excessive nervousness can easily eliminate you from further consideration. One way to overcome pre-interview jitters is to exercise positive thinking. Imagine in detail what the experience will be like. Think about what you will say, questions you will be asked, and how you will answer them. Picture yourself responding effectively in a controlled manner. Mentally rehearsing will help you feel more optimistic and self-confident, which will enhance your final presentation.

### **Arrive Early**

Allow plenty of time to get ready and travel to your job interview. However, you should not arrive at the employer's office more than ten minutes in advance. If you have not been to the location before, visit it earlier in the day or the day before so that you know exactly how to get there, where to park, and where the entrance to the building is located. You could bring reading material to occupy yourself and keep you relaxed while waiting for your appointment.

### **The Interview**

Start the interview by thanking the employer for the opportunity to talk with him or her and explain why you are interested in the position. Be ready to answer and to

ask questions. The employer may begin by telling you about the company, the department, or perhaps the position.

Soon the employer will be asking you questions in a structured or unstructured format. In a structured interview, the employer asks a prescribed set of questions, seeking relatively brief answers. In the unstructured interview, the employer asks more open-ended questions to prod you into giving longer responses and opportunities to talk about yourself, your background, and your aspirations.

Some employers will mix both styles, typically beginning with more objective questions and asking more open-ended questions as the interview progresses. Try to determine which style the employer is using; watch for signals from the employer as to whether your responses are too short or too long.

As you interview, think about your effectiveness. Adjust your speed of speech to match that of the employer. People tend to talk at the speed at which they like to be spoken to. If you can adjust your speech rate to that of the employer without sounding unnatural, the employer will probably feel more comfortable with you.

Adapt your answers from your prepared themes to match the type of company for which you are interviewing. If applicable, draw parallels between your experience and the demands of the position. Talk about your past experiences, emphasizing results and achievements rather than merely recounting activities. Don't exaggerate. Be on the level of your abilities. Try not to be negative about anything during the interview—especially about past employers or previous jobs. Be cheerful. Everyone likes to work with someone who seems to be happy.

Don't let an unexpected question throw you off base. If you don't know the answer to the question, simply say so and don't apologize. Just smile. Nobody can answer every question. Try not to cover too much ground during the interview. Focus on your greatest strengths that are relevant to the position. Develop these points carefully and state them again briefly at the end of the interview. Keep the conversation flowing and watch the employer for signals. Try to appear relaxed, enthusiastic, and determined. Be careful not to fidget with pencil, fingernails, jewelry, clothes, eye glasses, coffee cup, etc.

The primary purpose of the interview is to determine qualities like motivation, work ethic, industry or functional skills, communication skills, and critical-thinking skills. You should communicate your interest in the job, the

industry, and the city or region of the country if relocation is part of the package. You need to demonstrate compatibility with the employer.

### **Illegal Interview Questions**

Illegal interview questions probe into your private life or personal background. Federal law forbids employers from discriminating against any person on the basis of gender, age, race, national origin, or religion. An employer cannot ask your age or date of birth, but can ask if you are over eighteen years of age for purposes of qualifications related to the work.

### **Ask the Employer Questions**

Often the interviewer will end the interview by asking if you have any questions. Always ask one or more questions and make sure they demonstrate your knowledge of the company. Have a list prepared of specific questions that are of real interest to you. When asking the interviewer your questions, follow these guidelines:

- Ask about current issues that are relevant for the company or the industry.
- Ask questions that the employer can answer. Avoid asking questions that are difficult or awkward for the employer to answer.
- Ask what position(s) the job typically leads to.
- Inquire about the skills that are considered most useful for success in the job.
- If it looks as though your skills and background do not match the position your employer was hoping to fill, ask if there is another division that perhaps could profit from your talents.
- Save your questions about salary, benefits, and related issues for later, after you have received a job offer.

### **A Second Interview**

When filling professional career positions, few employers will make a job offer after only one interview. Usually, the purpose of the first interview is to narrow the field of applicants to a small number of very promising candidates. During the first meeting, the ideal strategy is to stand out from a large field of competitors in a positive way. The best way to do this is to emphasize your one or two key strengths as much as possible throughout the interview. Focus on presenting yourself as a well-balanced choice for the position. Listen carefully to the interviewer's questions so you can determine his or her concerns and then try to dispel them.

Second interviews become much more specific and technical than the first interview. The employer must now test the depth of your knowledge of the field.

The second round of interviews can be one to two days, during which you might meet with several people over the course of the visit. Typically, interviewers will represent people with whom you'll work and executives who oversee the work group.

You may also have meetings around breakfast, lunch or dinner. Remember you are still in an interview. You may be having a dinner conversation about a recent topic of concern to the employer, so be ready with opinions, listen, and be prepared to ask good questions. You may be asked to demonstrate how you would go about performing some aspect of the job. Be ready in case you are presented with a tough problem and asked to tackle it as though you had already started your first day on the job. Be prepared to give details, examples, and ideas.

### **After the Interview**

You should write a follow-up letter immediately after each interview you have, ideally within twenty-four hours. It should be a brief, one-page document that is personalized. Be sure to express your appreciation for the opportunity to interview. Express your continued enthusiasm about the position and the employer. Recap your strengths, being careful to relate them to the requirements of the job and the company. Request to meet again.

Allow the employer five to ten business days to contact you after receiving your letter. If you still have not heard anything after that time, you should follow up with a phone call. Express your continued interest in the firm and the position, and inquire as to whether a decision has been made or when you will be notified.

### **Negotiating an Offer**

If you are considering a job offer, be confident that this is a job you really want. If you are graduating, is this job in the field you like? Are you willing to live and work in the area? Would you enjoy the work schedule? The way of life? Life is about having a good time, doing interesting things, and making a contribution. Information you should have in order to make a sound decision includes: start date, job title and associated responsibilities, salary, overtime and compensation, bonus structure, tuition reimbursement, vacation, sick and parental leave policies, insurance coverage for life, medical, and dental, pension plan, profit-sharing plan, travel requirements, etc.

### **Work Environment**

Consider the daily work environment. If you don't like the work environment before you accept the job, you probably won't like it as an employee. Is the atmosphere comfortable, challenging, and exciting? Consider specifics

including office or workstation setting, privacy, proximity to other staff, amount of space, noise level, and lighting. How much interaction occurs between coworkers?

### **Do Your Homework**

Supplement the information that the employer provides by searching journals and newspapers for articles, talking to current employees, college alumni who hold similar positions or are employed by the same employer, etc. Contact your professional association to find out salaries of jobs listed with them and read the newspaper help-wanted ads for indication of salary or wage. If asked, it is best to give the employer a salary range with your benefits included. Giving a salary range gives you a chance to hook on to a figure that is also in the range of the employer. Many employers base their offers on sliding salary scales. Your experience and qualifications also play a part.

If your starting salary is not the one you dreamed about, but the job presents the right opportunity, think about the possibility of asking for a higher salary once you have had a chance to make yourself invaluable to the employer. Do not make the mistake of accepting a position with which you are fundamentally unhappy. Trust your instincts—if you are dissatisfied with the employer before your start date, don't bet the situation will improve after you start.

### **The Interview Opportunity**

From the employer's viewpoint, the initial interview is used to determine how suitable you are for a job. From your viewpoint, the initial interview should be a screening test for you, too. Is the employer one with and for whom you want to work? Is this job the one you want to do and will it meet your needs? The best interviews and the happiest employers and employees are those that do a good job of matching different types of people with the right types of work.

### **Handling Rejection**

Rejection is inevitable and the key is to be prepared for it and not to take it personally. One way to handle rejection is to contact the interviewer. Thank them for

considering you for the position and request that he or she keep you in mind for future openings.

If you feel comfortable, you may want to ask the person for suggestions to help you improve your chances of getting a job or for the names of people who might be looking for someone with your skills. However, don't ask employers to tell you why they did not hire you. You place the employer in a very awkward position and they may not be willing to talk to you.

### **Prepare for the Next Interview**

The interview is a learning experience and you will not improve your interviewing techniques unless you evaluate how you did and where you need to improve. Direct your attention to the quality of your physical presentation, as well as your verbal responses.

In evaluating your performance, write down those questions with which you had difficulty. Then practice on a better response. Stage a mock or practice interview with a friend or family member. Ask this informal critic if your tone of voice, overall attitude, handshake, eye contact, friendliness, and accessibility are acceptable. Do you appear confident and enthusiastic about working? Do you keep a two-way conversation or monopolize the interview? These practice sessions will help you formulate answers to the difficult questions. Practice does improve performance.

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