

# Interviewing Skills

## Introduction

Few words create the mixed upwelling of emotion, excitement and fear as "Interview." Questions about skills, qualifications, and accomplishments are compounded by issues of clothing and etiquette. The good news is that CC students tend to perform very well in interviews. This can be attributed to several factors. First, CC students are intelligent, inquisitive, and motivated. Second, many classes at CC have self-reflective components built into them. While an interview is not the ultimate goal of the job search process, you should feel confident in the fact that you are a final candidate. You are one of the individuals who has made it past a series of elimination rounds.

## Why Do Employers Interview?

Interviewing is the most widely used method for selecting individual employees. In many cases an interview will be the first time an employer meets a candidate face-to-face. The employer usually has between three and five solid candidates who meet the position requirements. Now a decision must be made who to offer the position to.

An employer will make this decision based on the interview. An interview enables an employer to evaluate a candidate's personality, non-verbal communication skills, punctuality, and general appearance. An interview also enables an employer to ask specific questions and observe a candidate's responses in a high-stress situation.

## Preparation

Being prepared for an interview requires that you are knowledgeable about both yourself and the position. Interviewers are continually amazed at the large number of candidates who interview without any apparent preparation and only the vaguest understanding of themselves and the organization or field. Lack of preparation guarantees that the interview will go poorly and decreases the likelihood of receiving a job offer. Preparation should include understanding your goals and abilities and understanding the organization's services or products. The following pages will help you begin the preparation process.

### Self Knowledge

Prior to interviewing, a candidate should be able to answer each of the following questions in an articulate and concise manner. Each answer should incorporate examples illustrating and demonstrating your skills and abilities.

- How do your education and work history relate to this organization?
- How do your interests, values, skills, personality, and goals match the organization or job description?
- What are your achievements? Accomplishments?
- What are your personal strengths? Weaknesses?
- What kind of job do you want and what do you want from this job?
- What attracts you to this job? Organization? Field?
- What skills do you have and enjoy using?
- What are your short-term and long-term goals?
- What are your salary requirements?

## **“So, Tell Me About Yourself...”**

Often, the first question an interviewer will ask is “Tell me about yourself.” The purpose of this open-ended question is not to find out where you were born or went to high school, but to set the tone for the interview and allow you to promote your candidacy. The interviewer is really saying, “impress me.” If you have developed responses to the questions in the self-knowledge section above, this open-ended question becomes a great opportunity for you to determine the direction and subject matter of the interview.

## **Knowledge About The Organization**

Different types of organizations will require that you locate different types of information for an interview. For each, it is important that you find the organization’s mission statement or guiding philosophy.

### Non-Profit Organization:

- What are the objectives of the agency?
- Where does it receive funding?
- What are some of its programs?
- What services do they offer?
- What are its plans for the future?
- What is the organization's financial status?
- What is the growth record?

### For Profit Company:

- What services or products do they offer?
- What is their organizational structure?
- Where are the home offices and branches?
- How old is the organization?
- What are its plans and goals for the future?
- What is the organization's financial status?
- What is the growth record?
- What are its relocation policies?
- What is the percent of annual growth in earnings?
- What is a typical career?
- Who are the main competitors?

### Higher Education Institutions:

- What major programs and concentrations are offered?
- What is the size and nature of the student population, faculty and administration?
- What emphasis is placed on teaching, research, and public service?
- What are the funding sources (private or public)?
- What is the institution’s reputation and accreditation status?

## **Where to Locate Information**

One of the most popular places to find information is on the Internet. If an organization does not have a dedicated web site try finding information through a chamber of commerce or local newspaper web site. Other sources of information include:

- CC Career Center library
- Faculty members
- Alumni Career Referral Network/Personal contacts\*
- Professional journals and magazines
- Chamber of Commerce
- Newspaper or magazine articles
- Professional associations
- Better Business Bureau reports

For more specific information about these and other resources, please refer to the “Locating Opportunities” section of the Career Center’s Effective Job Search Strategies.

## \* The Alumni Career Referral Network

The Alumni Career Referral Network is an established resource that you can turn to for informational interviews in many different career fields in all parts of the country. The Career Referral Network consists of 4,300 alums that have volunteered to offer advice to current students and recent alums. The Network is an excellent place to locate individuals for informational interviews. Please pick up our Networking Packet for more information on how to use the ACRN.

## Practice, Practice, Practice

Once you have the necessary information about yourself and the organization it can be helpful, even critical, to practice interviewing. One way to do this is to role-play with someone who will provide honest feedback. Another way is through the Career Center's videotaped mock interview sessions. By practicing, you may be able to recognize and change distracting mannerisms, such as hair fiddling, staring at the floor or ceiling, or punctuating each remark with 'uh'.

## Types of Interviews

The type of interview and overall selection process will vary from organization to organization. The style used by the interviewer will also vary according to his or her experience and personality.

Screening Interview - A short-term interview designed basically to eliminate unqualified candidates (e.g. college recruiters use screening interviews). Based on these brief interviews, a determination is made to invite the candidate in for a second interview or selection interview.

General Interview - One-half hour to one hour in duration; a general interview allows for an exchange of enough information to enable both employer and candidate to determine if further contact is warranted. This interview may be conducted by a personnel representative or a member of a selection team or committee.

Second or Selection Interview - One hour to an entire day in duration; both employer and candidate engage in a more in-depth discussion of qualifications, responsibilities and other aspects of the position and the organization. The candidate is seriously being considered for the position and the interviewer must gain as much information as possible to make a final decision. Other members of the staff or selection committee often will participate in this interview session.

Phone - Increasingly, employers are performing general and screening interviews by phone. Phone interviews can be difficult because you receive little non-verbal feedback from the person asking questions. Matters can be made even worse if you are on a speakerphone. In this type of situation make sure that you are in a quiet area and can speak freely and loudly.

## Common Interview Situations

Preparing for an interview should include anticipating a variety of possible interview situations. A few common situations are outlined below with possible strategies for handling them. Ask yourself "what am I going to do if...?"

- The interviewer talks too much- When an interviewer does not ask questions or allow you to discuss your qualifications, use his/her statements as a springboard for tactfully breaking into the conversation.
- The interviewer hardly talks- If you sense the interviewer is hesitant, offer information about your skills and background. Be tactful and do not overwhelm him/her.
- The interview is with a panel or committee- A committee will often meet and agree upon the questions to be asked and their sequence. Each committee member may be asking a question for the entire group or out of personal interest. When answering questions, try to make eye contact with each member and include him/her in your response. This is an important skill to master and may require a lot of practice.
- The interview is during lunch, dinner or cocktails- Discussing your qualifications while eating is not an easy task. Order food that is 'bite-sized' and can be eaten quickly without fear of spilling on your clothing. Do not order alcohol even if your host has done so. They may be testing you to see how you handle certain situations. Do not become so relaxed that you disclose compromising information.

- The interviewer is unprepared- Individuals who do not conduct interviews on a regular basis can occasionally attempt to 'wing it'. They may not have spent any time examining your resume or cover letter. In fact, they may not even know all the details of the position they are filling! While this can be an uncomfortable situation, it is an opportunity to take control of the situation. Offer information about yourself and ask open-ended questions of the interviewer. Your time spent practicing and developing solid responses will pay off in this situation.
- The interview is conducted with a group of candidates- Although not common, you might be interviewed in a group with other candidates for the same position. Employers often use this type of interview to disseminate information about the position and to make initial assessments about the candidates. Listen to what is said, ask questions when appropriate, and look for opportunities to discuss your qualifications. Most of all, use your interpersonal skills. It is important to show that you are a team player and a leader.
- The interviewer is discourteous- Occasionally you will encounter an interviewer who is rude or discourteous or who is simply having a bad day. Sometimes an interviewer will be obnoxious on purpose to see how you handle a stressful situation. Try to remain calm and tactful and don't let the interviewer upset you. However, if you feel you are being harassed, verbally abused, or being subjected to illegal questions, you have the right to terminate the interview at any time. Simply let the interviewer know that you no longer wish to continue with the interview and leave. Report the interview situation to the interviewer's supervisor as soon as possible.
- The interview is with potential co-workers- As you progress through the interview process, often times you will have an opportunity to meet with future co-workers. They will be asked for their feedback regarding your candidacy. Remember you are still being interviewed and look for opportunities to sell yourself. It is important to be yourself so they can get a sense of the type of person you are and more importantly, the type of co-worker you would be.
- The interview is with top administrators/managers- Meeting with top-level administrators or managers usually occur during second or selection interviews. The organization is very interested in you and is very close to making a decision. You will meet with top level administrators who will try to determine if you are a good "fit" for their organization.
- The interview involves a presentation or response to a situational question- To determine your communication and public speaking skills, oftentimes you will be asked to give a presentation as part of your interview process. It could be an assigned topic or your thoughts about how you would handle the job if you were to get it. Usually you will be given advanced notice for such a presentation. How well you do on such a presentation will be a very important factor in the hiring process. Presentations are asked for when you are applying for a position that requires conducting workshops, sales, teaching, or training.
- The interview involves role playing- To give you an opportunity to demonstrate specific skills (e.g. counseling, advising, etc) you may be asked to take part in a role-play where one of the interviewers assumes the role of a client and you are asked to counsel or advise that individual. It is difficult to prepare for such a role-play since it is a demonstration of your abilities.

## Setting the Interview

Normally, the employer will contact you by telephone to arrange an interview. During this conversation it is important that you obtain the following information:

- The name(s) and title(s) of the interviewer(s)
- The location of the interview
- A phone number and address
- The time and date of the interview?
- Interview schedule
- Any specific items they would like you to bring (i.e. portfolio, personal documents, and transcripts)

## The Interview

Job seekers should learn as much as possible about the company's culture and how employees dress. Then, emulate the highest ranking official of their gender. It is always better to error on the side of being overly professional and conservative. Men should invest in a suit and tie; women likewise should invest in a business suit preferably a skirt and jacket although slacks are becoming increasingly acceptable.

Pay careful attention to detail. For men, that means carefully shined shoes, neatly clipped fingernails, and freshly cut hair. For women, it means shoes with a new shine and at least a small heel, manicured fingernails that aren't too long, and neatly styled hair. Women should wear no more than one ring on each finger--never on the thumb or index finger--and only one earring in each ear. Men shouldn't wear earrings at all. No one should display any other kinds of body piercing. Perfume and cologne should be subtle.

To reduce the nervousness of the interview process, it is wise to prepare your wardrobe a few days before. The Career Center staff is available for interviewing dress advice and evaluation.

Plan to arrive about ten minutes before the interview is scheduled to begin. Make sure to give yourself plenty of leeway. Sitting in the parking lot for forty minutes is much better than arriving five minutes late! If there is a receptionist, be sure to introduce yourself. This person will often be asked for his or her input about each candidate. What you do in front of the receptionist will get back to the interview.

## **Negative Interview Factors**

When asked why an interviewer disliked a particular candidate, common responses included:

- Poor personal appearance
- Late for interview
- Limp handshake
- Poor eye contact
- Discourtesy
- Tactlessness
- Immaturity
- Passive or indifferent manner
- Poor verbal communication

Observe that none of these are directly related to your skills and abilities. These are social and relationship oriented items. Remember that you already have the qualifications if you receive an interview.

Other common turn-offs include:

- Lack of initiative
- Asks no questions about the position or organization
- Lack of confidence and poise
- Lack of career focus/goals
- Failure to express thanks
- Indecisiveness
- Overbearing, conceited tone
- Narrow interests
- Strong prejudices
- Cynical attitude
- Lack of participation or interest

## **Interview Tips**

- Be energetic, full of life. In brief, be a person of interest. Never be just an applicant or just another job seeker.
- Show your self-confidence with a firm handshake.
- Do not chew gum or smoke.
- Be pleasant, friendly, courteous, and tactful.
- Always maintain good eye contact.
- Listen carefully and answer the questions.
- Keep your answers short and to the point, unless you're asked to elaborate.
- Use facial expressions and gestures to help communicate your thoughts and convey your personality.
- Be truthful and positive.
- Let your sense of humor show through.
- Create a positive feeling toward yourself.
- Restate your interest in the position at the close of an interview.

## Questions You Might Ask

An interview is a mutual exchange of information. It affords the candidate an opportunity to gain information about the organization and position, and to evaluate the match between his/her own interests and career goals. You have as much right to evaluate an employer as an employer has to evaluate you. One way to ensure that you have adequate information to make a sound judgment is to ask questions. You may do so at any point in the interview: at the beginning--to clarify the job description so that you can relate your experience and skills adequately; in the middle--to clarify a question you do not understand; at the end--to show your interest in the organization and to fill in points which are as yet unanswered. However, don't be overly curious about salary or fringe benefits after a first interview except to get a ballpark figure to ensure it is within your range of acceptability. Below are some possible questions for you to ask:

- What specific tasks does the position require?
- Where does this job fit into the organizational structure?
- How will the work be evaluated?
- What kind of supervision will there be?
- What are the goals of the organization?
- What opportunities for advancement exist?
- What kind of orientation and training are available to new employees?
- Are there long-range plans for the office or department?
- What is a typical day like?

## Closing the Interview

If you sense the interviewer is trying to close the interview and you are interested in the position, briefly highlight your relevant skills and, if you have any pertinent questions, ask them. Questions concerning benefits or information that can be found in company literature should be avoided. Before you leave, ask what the final selection process will be and what happens next.

## Follow-Up

Follow up your interview with a thank-you note. In this note you should refer to specific issues which were discussed, express your thanks, and restate your interest in the position. Also, provide whatever credentials, references, or employment applications that may have been requested by the employer. If you do not hear from the employer in the specified period of time, you may wish to contact the employer with a phone call.

Second Interview- It is also appropriate to thank the employer after a second interview. Many candidates feel that since they have already sent a thank-you note for the first interview, it isn't necessary to send a second one. It is always correct to thank someone for extending a courtesy to you. A second interview usually involves a lot of the interviewer's time and may also include expense for lunch or dinner. The letter may be simply a brief expression of your thanks for his/her time and consideration.

## Evaluating A Job Offer

**"We are ready to offer you a position..."** The offer is what all this work is about, but don't leap to accept until you have evaluated the pros and cons. The best policy is not to accept an offer right away, even if you are certain you want the job. Most organizations will give you several days to consider the offer. It should raise serious questions about the organization if they demand an on-the-spot decision.

- Do not accept a job offer with the idea that if a better job offer comes along you will back out on the first offer. It is inappropriate to give your word to an employer and then cancel at the last minute. "What goes around comes around" is often true, and this action could come back to haunt you later on down the road. Your word should be good and your reputation in the community is at stake.
- Make your acceptance or decline of the job offer by telephone conversation but ask for written confirmation. It is standard practice to formalize an acceptance of a job offer verbally. However, it is highly recommended to always get a written confirmation of the job offer that spells out job title and area of responsibilities, starting date, and salary information.

- Once you have accepted a job offer, write to those employers who are still considering your application and inform them that you are withdrawing. This action is a matter of courtesy and is a way of protecting your reputation. At a future point, you might be considering employment with these organizations. You don't want any burned bridges to get in your way.

## Illegal Questions

In general, questions, which seek information that does not relate to the candidate's ability to perform the functions of the job, are considered inappropriate and might be illegal. These include questions about race, religion, national origin, marital status, children, relatives, age, birthplace of applicant or relatives, prior record, and labor union activities. This does not mean that an employer cannot seek this information indirectly. For example, many people will look at your date of graduation to estimate your age.

Employers are required to make all employment decisions in a manner, which ensures that discrimination does not occur. It is improper to ask handicapped applicants about their disabling condition. In order to determine whether a handicap will affect a person's performance, questions should be asked in regard to the person's ability to do activities that are job related. Therefore, it would not be appropriate to ask a job applicant if he has impaired vision, but it would be permitted to ask if an applicant has a valid driver's license (if such is required on the job). Make sure you know whether a question is illegal before you question the interviewer about its appropriateness.

Employers are perfectly in bounds in asking questions about prior work experience, academic background, GPA, and how you financed your education. They can even ask about unemployment and having been fired. There are weaknesses in almost everyone's background. In job interviewing, the best thing to do is to be honest about major problems and present your case in a positive manner. For any sensitive area, you must honestly explain the circumstances and avoid blaming others (e.g., if you blame a professor for failure, an interviewer will assume you'll also blame a boss for failure).

Inappropriate or illegal questions are usually asked by inexperienced interviewers. In fact, they are often unaware that they have asked such a question. It is up to you to determine how to respond. Here are some approaches-- none is better than others, but some may be more appropriate in a given situation:

- Answer truthfully, if the truth is positive, but keep your answer concise
- Refer to the illegality of a question, and say that you'd rather not answer
- Address the issue rather than the facts: "If you're concerned about staff turnover, I can assure you..."
- Move the question on to something else quickly
- Use humor

Note: If you are interviewing at the Career Center, and you feel you have been asked an illegal question, please speak with a member of the staff so that we may follow up with the interviewer.

## COMMON INTERVIEW QUESTIONS YOU MAY BE ASKED

### Self Awareness

- How would you describe yourself?
- Tell me about yourself.
- How would a friend or a professor who knows you well describe you?
- What motivates you to put forth your greatest effort?
- How do you determine or evaluate success?
- What academic subjects did you like best? Least?
- What led you to choose the career for which you are preparing?
- What personal characteristics are necessary for success in your chosen field?
- What is your philosophy of life?
- Why have you switched career fields?

### Weaknesses/Negatives

- What major problems have you encountered and how did you deal with them?
- What have you learned from your mistakes?
- What do you consider to be your greatest weakness?
- Did you ever have problems with your supervisor?

### Skills/Abilities/Qualifications

- What do you consider to be your greatest strengths?
- Are you creative? Give an example.
- What qualifications do you have that makes you think you will be successful?
- In what ways do you think you can make a contribution to our organization?
- Why should I hire you?

- Why do you feel qualified for this job?
- What are your own special abilities?
- What is your managing style?

### **Knowledge of the Organization**

- Why do you want to work for us?
- Why did you decide to seek a position with this organization?
- What do you know about our organization?
- What job in our organization do you want to work toward?

### **Values**

- What is your attitude toward working on weekends?
- What part does your family play in your life?
- What are the most important rewards you expect in your career?
- Do you enjoy independent research?
- What kind of work environments are you most comfortable in?
- How do you work under pressure?
- How would you describe the ideal job for you?
- What two or three things are most important to you?
- What criteria are you using to evaluate the company you hope to work for?
- Do you have a geographical preference?
- How do you feel about relocating?
- Are you willing to travel?
- Are you willing to spend six months as a trainee?
- Describe an ideal job.
- Do you prefer working with others or by yourself?
- Under what conditions do you work best?
- What is the highest form of praise?

### **Experience**

- In what part-time or summer jobs have you been most interested?
- Tell me about your experience.
- What jobs have you held?
- How did your previous employer treat you?
- What have you learned from some jobs you have held?
- What jobs have you enjoyed most? Least? Why?
- What have you done that shows initiative and willingness to work?
- Describe your current job.
- What did you like most/least about your last job?

### **Goals/Objectives**

- What are your short range and long range goals and objectives?
- What specific goals, other than those related to your occupation, have you established for yourself for the next 10 years?
- What do you see yourself doing in five years?
- What do you really want to do in life?
- How do you plan to achieve your career goals?

### **Education**

- How has your education prepared you for a career?
- Describe your most rewarding college experience.
- Why did you select your college or university?
- Do you think your grades are a good indication of academic achievement?
- What have you learned from participation in extracurricular activities?
- Do you have plans for continued study?
- Why did you pick your program or concentration?
- How has your college experience prepared you for this job?
- What courses did you like best and why?

### **Salary**

- What do you expect to earn in five years?
- What are your salary requirements?
- What did you earn in your last job?

### **Interests**

- What are your interests?
- What do you do in your free time?
- What are your hobbies?
- What types of books do you read?
- How interested are you in sports?
- How did you spend your vacations in school?

### **General**

- What do you think it takes to be successful in our company?
- What qualities should a successful manager possess?
- Describe the ideal relationship between supervisors and subordinates.
- What 2 or 3 accomplishments have given you the most satisfaction?
- Define cooperation.

### **Stress Questions**

- What causes you to lose your temper?
- How often have you been absent from work, school, or training?
- Have you ever had trouble with other people on the job?

## Sample Behavioral Interview Questions

**These are often difficult questions to answer on the fly. Use this sheet to jot down examples of stories in your past that you would use to answer these questions. Careful preparation is the key to an effective behavioral interview. Setting up an appointment for a behavioral mock interview is also very helpful.**

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- Tell me about a time when you faced a challenge and how you handled it.
- Describe a situation in which you were able to use persuasion to successfully convince someone to see things your way.
- Describe an instance when you had to think on your feet to extricate yourself from a difficult situation.
- Give me a specific example of a time when you used good judgment and logic in solving a problem.
- By providing examples, convince me that you can adapt to a wide variety of people, situations and environments.
- Describe a time on any job that you held in which you were faced with problems or stresses that tested your coping skills.
- Give an example of a time in which you had to be relatively quick in coming to a decision.
- Tell me about a time in which you had to use your written communication skills in order to get an important point across.
- Give me a specific occasion in which you conformed to a policy with which you did not agree.
- Give me an example of an important goal in which you had set in the past and tell me about your success in reaching it.
- Describe the most significant or creative presentation you have had to complete.
- Tell me about a time when you had to go above and beyond the call of duty in order to get a job done.
- Give me an example of a time when you were able to successfully communicate with another person even when that individual may not have personally liked you (or vice versa).

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It's best and easiest to answer using the STAR format:

**S**ituation:

**T**ask (needed to be done):

**A**ction (you took):

**R**esult: