

Strategic Preparation for Interviewing

“...at its most basic, an interview is simply a conversation about a job.”
--Ace Your Interview! The Wetfeet Insider Guide to Interviewing

Successfully managing the interview is a critical step in getting any job. The interview provides employers with an opportunity to get to know you and determine if you have the skills, knowledge and traits to help them address a business need. A successful interview should feel like a great conversation. Unlike your typical conversation, however, there is a lot more preparation involved and a great deal more at stake in the interview conversation. Interviewing successfully involves detailed preparation, planning and practice. To get started with your interview preparation and get a step closer to that coveted job, follow these four basic steps:

1. Know yourself;
2. Know the job, company, and industry;
3. Know how your strengths, skills, interests, experience, and education fit with the job; and
4. Practice developing and delivering concise stories to highlight that you're the best candidate for the job.

Step One: Know Yourself

Knowing your interests, skills, and strengths is a key step in any career search strategy. The Office of Career Management offers a [Career Marketing Plan](#) to help you not only focus your strategy but also begin identifying how your strengths line up with your targeted position in preparation for interviewing. In the same manner that companies create a marketing plan to promote their product, here, the product is you and your career. By completing the plan you are on your way to determining how to best market yourself to a potential employer. The Career Marketing Plan will help you identify several key strengths, skills, traits and knowledge; you can then begin to think about examples from your work or education that highlight your strengths. This will help you prepare for behavioral interview questions which are discussed later in this guide.

Step 2: Know the Job, Company and Industry

“You can up your chances of acing the job interview if you can speak not only to the formal requirements in the job posting, but to the underlying "business pain" that led to the approval of the job opening in the first place.” --Liz Ryan, *Businessweek*

To present yourself as the ideal candidate, it is important to gather as much information as possible on the job, company, and industry.

Dr. Shel Leanne, author of *How to Interview Like a Top MBA*, offers the following questions to research in order to learn more about a job, company and industry prior to an interview.

Know the Job

- What are the educational requirements?
- What are the work experience requirements?
- What will be your primary tasks and functions?
- To whom will you report?
- Will you be working individually or in teams?
- Are special technical or other skills required?

Know the Company

- What are the company's main products and services?
- Who are the company's main competitors?
- What makes the company unique?
- What is the company's mission?
- How has the company been faring in terms of profitability and growth?
- What is the corporate culture of the company?
- Is the company repositioning itself or expanding its products and services in any notable way?

Know the Industry

- What are the main characteristics of this industry?
- What challenges or trends currently affect this industry?
- Where is the industry heading in the long-term?

The company's website is a great place to begin your company and industry research. Wetfeet and Vault in-depth company guides, as well as other resources available from the Office of Career Management [career resources webpage](#), will also help you learn more about a company and industry.

Step 3: Know How You Fit In

As noted earlier, is important to understand as much as possible about the competencies, strengths and skills required for the job and carefully prepare stories to illustrate how you can meet those needs.

- Based on your study of the job, company and industry, identify the key skills/competencies required for the position.
- Prepare responses for behavioral questions, described below, to show you have the desired competencies and transferable skills.
- Conduct informational interviews with alumni and contacts within the company to deepen your understanding of the job and company culture.

Crafting your Interview Stories – Behavioral Interviewing

“It’s critical to provide examples of how your strengths have benefited previous employers. You should have an anecdote ready to illustrate each of your personal strengths in action. Simply telling your interviewers that your attention to detail is impeccable without backing up that statement probably won’t convince them.”

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Most employers rely on a mix of traditional and behavioral interviewing questions to assess candidates. Traditional interview questions often focus on gathering general information on a candidate's background and can lead the candidate to rely heavily on stated skill sets without providing an example to back up a stated skill.

The behavioral interviewing technique, which involves asking questions to solicit specific examples from a job applicant's past work experience, was created to allow interviewers to better understand if a candidate has the needed competencies to do the job. The premise behind behavioral interviewing is that the results you've achieved in the past provide a fairly accurate indicator of how you'll do in a similar situation in the future. Interviewers ask questions that measure potential in certain competencies or skills that are required for the position.

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When you hear questions beginning with “Give me an example of...” or “Tell me about at time when...,” you’ll know it is a behavioral interviewing question and that you’re being asked to provide a **specific and relevant** example of a given competency or skill.

The recommended format for structuring a concise, yet thorough answer to a behavioral interview question is known as the STAR response:

Situation	Describe a specific problem, decision, or project situation from a relevant experience (<i>avoid examples from your personal life</i>).
Task	What were the major tasks involved in the situation? Give enough detail for the interviewer to understand.
Action	What did you do? For a group situation, be sure to focus on your contributions.
Results	What were the outcomes of your actions? What did you learn? How is it relevant to the position for which you are interviewing?

The [Behavioral Interview Preparation - STAR Response worksheet](#) available on our website is designed to help you prepare answers for behavioral interview questions using the STAR framework. **Be sure to complete the worksheet prior to each interview, tailoring your responses based on your research for each specific interview.**

Listed below are sample traditional and behavioral interviewing questions.

Traditional Interview Questions

- Tell me about yourself.
- Why do you want to work for our company?
- What are your career objectives? What factors did you consider in making those objectives?
- Why did you choose this field?
- What are your most significant work/non-work achievements?
- What do you feel are your strengths and how will they relate to this position?
- Where do you see yourself in five years?
- Why are you a good candidate for this position?
- What weaknesses would you want to improve? How?
- Why should I hire you?
- What separates you from other candidates?

Behavioral Interview Questions

- Give an example of a time in which you felt you were able to build motivation in your co-workers or subordinates at work.
- Describe the project or situation which best demonstrates your analytical abilities. What was your role?
- Describe a time when you made a suggestion to improve the work in your organization.
- Have you ever had to "sell" an idea to your co-workers or group? How did you do it? Did they "buy" it?
- Tell us about a time when you had to present complex information. How did you ensure that the other person understood?
- Describe a time when you took personal accountability for a conflict and initiated contact with the individual(s) involved to explain your actions.
- Describe a time when you came up with a creative solution/idea/project/report to a problem in your past work.

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Prepare Questions to Ask the Interviewer

Finally, it is important to prepare informed questions based on your research, to ask the interviewer at the appropriate time, generally at the end of the interview. The following questions and topics are provided as a starting point; be sure to customize the questions to highlight your knowledge of the company and industry. Avoid asking about topics that can be easily discovered through your own research.

- What is the management structure?
- Is there a defined career path?
- How would you describe the growth potential of the company?
- How would you personally describe the company culture?
- What are the skills and attributes you value most for someone being hired for this position?
- What are the next steps in the interview process?
- Ask a question about a specific company initiative that you find interesting.

Step 4: Practice Developing and Delivering Concise Stories

Now that you're thoroughly familiar with the job, company, and industry, you have identified how your strengths and skills match up, and you have completed your STAR response worksheet, it's time to practice – out loud, as much as possible. Enlist the help of family, friends, and classmates to rehearse your answers. Office of Career Management staff is also available to assist with conducting mock interviews; call 614-292-6024 to schedule an appointment.

The emphasis should be on practicing your answers to increase your confidence, fluency and conciseness; do not memorize your answers or you'll risk sounding robotic in the interview. It is important to be thoroughly prepared so that you can answer questions and converse with the interviewer with confidence and ease.

Additional Interview Methods

Case Interviews

Historically used by consulting firms to assess a candidate's ability to handle real-life business problems, case type interview questions are becoming increasingly common in other industries and disciplines. Case interviews involve presenting a business problem to a candidate in order to evaluate him or her on many dimensions. In a case interview, the interviewer will present you with a real or simulated problem and will expect you to use your common sense, analytical abilities, and logical thinking skills to work through the problem, identify issues and structure a logical approach to addressing the problem.

Please review our [Introduction to Case Interviews](#) for more information.

The Phone Screen

The phone screen “...is a first-round interview, and you should be prepared to make a stellar impression over the phone just as you would if you were meeting in person.”

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Many companies use phone screens to quickly narrow the candidate pool and determine those candidates they'd like to interview further. Often, you may have very little time to prepare, so do the best you can in the time allotted and consider the following tips:

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Phone Interview Tips

- Express appreciation for the call.
- If you're not in the frame of mind or physical location to be at your best, express interest and politely ask for a convenient time to call back (arrange an alternative time as soon as possible; keep in mind they may be contacting several others on a tight timeframe).
- Use a land line.
- Have your resume and STAR worksheet in front of you, but don't read directly from them.
- Smile as you speak; it helps convey a positive tone and energy.
- Be prepared for "weed-out" questions from the start:
 - Why do you want to work for us?
 - What are your greatest strengths and weaknesses?
 - Describe how you resolved a conflict in your prior work.
- Watch verbal graffiti (ums, ahs, like, you know).
- Take time to think about your answers, and state that you are doing so ("That's a great question; let me think about that for a moment...")
- Ask good questions based on your research (for example, ask how they'd describe the most pressing demands of the position, and then discuss how you could meet those demands).
- Inquire about next steps.

The Second Interview

If you've aced the first round and are invited for a second round of interviews, congratulations—the company is seriously interested in what you have to offer. Keep up the good work and heed the following advice:

- Review the agenda for the day and inquire about travel arrangements, if necessary.
- Ask for the names and titles of all individuals who will be interviewing you.
- Continue to research the company and interview internal contacts and alumni if possible to deepen your understanding of the company.
- You may be asked many of the same questions you were asked in first round interviews; brush up on your answers and continue to refine them based on your research. Be prepared for tougher questions as well, such as questions on conflict management or overcoming weaknesses.
- Since the second interview is often about how you'll fit with the team, pay particular attention to interpersonal and communication skills and be cordial to everyone you meet.
- If you neglected to mention relevant key strengths or experiences during the first round interview, you now have a second chance to do so.
- Construct insightful questions based on your in-depth research and consider whether there are any topics on which you would like more clarification.
- Second interviews are often panel interviews; make an effort to remember names as you are being introduced. Be sure to make eye contact with each person on the panel when answering questions.
- Second rounds often may also involve several individual or small group meetings; keep in mind that fit is important and those you meet with may not be experts at interviewing. Make it a conversation and focus on how you'll help solve their business needs or issues.
- Remember to send a thank you; if you met with several individuals during the day, try to send a personalized thank you to each person.

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Additional Tips

Before the Interview

- Dress in conservative business attire.
- Consider how to deal with nervous habits: focus on the task and interviewer. Positive visualization prior to the interview can help.
- Have an opening remark in mind.
- Take a pad and pen along with you and ask permission to take notes if needed.
- Bring extra copies of your resume.
- Know the time and location of the interview, and arrive ten minutes early.

During the Interview

- Stress the positive points about yourself in a confident and honest manner.
- Sixty percent of communication is nonverbal– be sensitive to your nonverbal behaviors: eye contact, posture, tone, nervous habits. Be sensitive to the interviewer’s nonverbal behavior and respond to it.
- Be aware of the tone of the interview (the interviewer may be trying to see how you react to stress).
- Convey enthusiasm about the position.
- Take time to reflect, if necessary, before answering (process your thoughts).
- Avoid putting down yourself or others.
- Politely ask for clarification of a question which you do not fully understand.
- Know and use the interviewer’s name.
- Raise questions at the appropriate time.
- Do not ask about salary and benefits until the employer has introduced these topics (typically when an offer is made).
- Before you leave, know the next step after the interview.
- Thank the interviewer for their time/consideration.

After the Interview

- Promptly write personalized thank you letters to interviewers, no later than the day after the interview. An e-mailed thank you letter will suffice if you know decisions will be made quickly.
- Reflect on and write down points of the interview that you felt good about/need improvement.
- Assess outcomes realistically.
- Be persistent in preparing for/participating in future interviews.
- Participate in a mock interview with the Office of Career Management for constructive feedback regarding your interviewing strengths/weaknesses.

Additional Resources

Office of Career Management Graduate Student Career Search Resources page (see Wetfeet, Vault, CareerBeam):

<http://fisher.osu.edu/offices/career-management/graduate-students/career-resources/>

<http://www.quintcareers.com/>

Leanne, S. (2004). *How to Interview Like a Top MBA*. New York: McGraw-Hill

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Interview Preparation Checklist

Know Yourself

- I have read the Strategic Preparation for Interviewing guide.
- I have completed my Career Marketing Plan.
- I have identified three to four key strengths and developed succinct, relevant examples from my past professional or academic experience to illustrate those strengths.
- I have customized my resume and am prepared to answer questions based on my experience as presented on my resume.
- I am prepared to address a perceived weakness in my background, such as lack of industry experience or a gap in work experience.

Know the Job*

- I am familiar with the educational requirements necessary for the job.
- I am familiar with the work experience requirements.
- I understand the position's primary tasks and functions.
- I understand the reporting structure.
- I understand the role of the position within a team and/or as an individual contributor.
- I am familiar with technical or other skills or qualifications that are required.

Know the Company*

- I am familiar with the company's main products and services.
- I am familiar with the company's main competitors.
- I understand what makes the company unique.
- I understand the company's mission and values.
- I understand the company's business model and its profitability and growth potential.
- I have gained insights into the corporate culture of the company.
- I have read recent news about the company.

Know the Industry*

- I understand the main characteristics of this industry.
- I understand challenges or trends currently affecting this industry.
- I understand where the industry is heading in the long-term.

**Adapted from How to Interview Like a Top MBA, by Dr. Shel Leanne*

Know How You Fit In

- I have identified key skills, competencies, education and experience requirements for the position.
- I have completed a STAR response worksheet based on desired competencies for the job.
- I have prepared answers to key traditional interview questions, tailoring my answer to highlight key strengths and skills relevant to the position, such as:
 - o Tell me about yourself;
 - o Why are you interested in this position;
 - o Why should I hire you?
- I have developed 3-4 insightful questions to ask the interviewer to illustrate my understanding of the position, company and industry.

Practice Developing and Delivering your Stories

- I have rehearsed answers to traditional and behavioral interview questions out loud with friends, family, classmates, and/or Career Management staff.
- My audience has provided constructive feedback on my answers, and I have identified and worked on addressing interview weaknesses.
- I am confident that I can speak genuinely and conversationally in response to questions.

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