

# Interviewing Skills

PDCO Career Resources

Your application made it through the initial screening process and you have been invited to interview for a position. Take a moment to be proud of yourself for making it this far in the hiring process. This proves that you had a strong application package and appear to be the kind of candidate employers in your field want to hire.

At this point, you have to prepare yourself for the next stage of the hiring process: the interview. The interview allows the employer to determine if you are a good fit for their company and if you have the motivation and drive to be productive and successful. The interview is your opportunity to show your potential future co-workers who you are, what your strengths and interests are, why you are qualified for the position, and why you want to work for that employer. It also allows you to ask questions about your potential employer and get a feel for the workplace culture to see if it is a place you could envision working for years to come.

## Preparing for Your Interview

### Research the Employer

Before you step into your interview, you will want to research the employer. To prepare for the upcoming interview, visit the organization's website. What is the employer's mission? What is the employer's major contribution to their industry or field? Have they had any recent press releases or news that you should be aware of? Learning this information makes you more knowledgeable and confident before the interview. Furthermore, it allows the interviewers to see that you genuinely care about this job.

### Create an Executive Presence

Plan out what you will wear in advance of your interview. Aim to dress to impress. Even if the employer is known for their casual office culture, wear business or professional attire. Make sure your clothes are clean and fit you well. Most importantly, make sure you are comfortable and confident in your interview attire.

### Pre-Interview Logistics

- Try to get a schedule of the interview and the names of the interviewers in advance, if possible
  - Having the schedule will also help you to determine if you need to wear comfortable shoes for a walking tour of the facility, etc.
- Pre-plan your trip to the employer and aim to arrive 10-15 minutes early. This will give you a little bit of downtime before the formal interview begins.

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- Bring extra copies of your resume, cover letter, and list of professional references, as well as a notepad and pen, should you need to take notes.

## Interview Questions

### Common Interview Questions

Below are some common questions to think through as you are preparing for an interview:

- *Tell me about yourself...*
- *What interests you about this position? Why do you want to work for us?*
- *Why are you thinking about leaving your last job? Why did you leave your last job?*
- *What is your greatest strength?*
- *What is your greatest weakness?*
- *Why should we hire you?*
- *Describe a difficult work situation and what you did to overcome it.*
- *Where do you see yourself in five years?*
- *What salary range are you looking for? Do you have any salary requirements?*

### Behavioral Questions

When interviewers ask you behavioral questions, they are trying to see if you have the key qualities they require for the position. These kinds of questions ask you to consider how you behaved, performed, or reacted in previous situations to help serve as an indication of your future behavior in a similar scenario.

Sample behavioral questions:

- *Describe a time when...*
- *Give me an example of how...*
- *Tell me about a situation when...*

### Industry-Specific Questions

Consider the employer and what kind of questions they might ask you during your interview. Think about how you might respond to those questions. If you are applying for a research position, expect to be asked technical, research-oriented questions in addition to commonly asked questions. You should expect to talk about your research as a postdoctoral fellow or a graduate student in broad strokes. Make sure you relate your project in accessible and concise terms and do not get too specific or use too much jargon. The employer will often be more interested in the techniques and skills you acquired doing your graduate and postdoctoral work rather than the specifics of the research itself. If the position you applied for directly relates to your research, you

can speak more to the specifics of your past research, but only when asked to do so by the employer.

### **“Do you have any questions for us?”**

At the end of every interview, an employer will ask if you have any questions for them. The right answer is yes, or you risk appearing uninterested and underprepared for the interview. Prepare some questions in advance after doing some research on the employer and position, but make sure only to ask questions that were not already discussed in the interview. Questions about salary and benefits are not appropriate to ask at this time; wait until you have been offered the position.

Sample Questions for your Interviewer(s):

- How do you measure success for your employees?
- What is the work/life balance like for your employees?

### **Answering Questions**

- Be concise and to the point with your answers
- Avoid too much scientific jargon and the specifics of your research
- Link your experiences and interests to the position to which you are applying
- Speak to your most recent and relevant work experience
- Stress your interest in a long-term career at the company
- When asked about your preferred salary, research the market rate for positions in that industry and provide a reasonable salary range, based on the nature of the position and your prior experience
- Ditch verbal crutches ('umm', 'like', etc.)
  - Instead, take time to think about your answers
- Don't focus on weaknesses that are a key qualification for the position

### **Interview Stream**

Take every opportunity to practice interview questions or to participate in mock interviews. All JHU PhD students and postdocs have access to **Interview Stream**. The site allows trainees to videotape and online interview that the student and PDCO career coaches can review. Multiple tips and resources targeted at enhancing interview skills are accessible on the website.

**Contact PDCO to set up an interview for you and provide site access.**

### **STAR Method**

Brainstorm 10-12 scenarios from your past work experience in advance of your interview that you can draw from (using the STAR method) that indicate your fit for the position. Having these ready prior to your interview will help you to feel more prepared for any questions your interviewer may ask of you.

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- S- Situation
  - What was the situation you/your employer faced?
  - Give context to your example and help show the value of the outcome
- T- Task
  - What tasks were involved in that situation?
  - Use "I" not "we" to share what you were tasked with
- A- Action
  - What actions did you take?
  - Use "I" now "we" statements to share what actions you completed
- R- Result
  - What were the results of your actions?
  - Use quantifiable/specific answers wherever possible

**Example Interview Response using STAR method:**

(Situation) I was the project leader to develop a 3-D printed model of a heart defect that clinicians could use with patients to explain surgical procedures. The project team consisted of two surgeons, one surgical nurse and one administrator. I developed two different prototypes based on team input and review of existing educational models. (Task) The team could not agree on which model to move forward with, and the meetings became unproductive arguments, and the project timelines were slipping. (Action) I suggested that we test both models with patients, the ultimate client. (Result) Each surgeon tested both prototypes with five different patients and one prototype quickly showed advantages over the other prototype. Moreover, we learned additional information that I was able to design into the prototype that further improved the model. The project was back on track and the product was even better.

**Thank You Notes**

At the end of your interview, ask your interviewer(s) when you should expect to hear from the company. 1-2 days following the interview, send an e-mail and/or handwritten mailed note thanking the interviewer(s) for their time, and restate your interest in the position. If you do not hear from the employer when they said they would follow up with you, call them and politely inquire about the status of the hiring process.

**Additional Resources**

- [4 Types Of Interview Questions PhDs Will Need To Answer](#)