Interviewing Advice

This section provides the person seeking employment within the United States – either with US companies or with foreign companies doing business in the country – with practical advice on what to expect from an interview. It includes how to prepare for an interview in various circumstances and some general behavioral guidelines to help the jobseeker show sensitivity to the country’s business culture.

Job interviews with American companies employ a standard format that job candidates are expected to recognize and follow. Diligent preparation and an understanding of typical interview protocols can increase a jobseeker's chances of securing a position with an American employer. The following guide describes how to best prepare for several kinds of interviews, culturally-appropriate interview behavior and effective strategies for interacting with an employer after the interview.

Pre-Interview Preparation

The résumé and cover letter should be customized to correspond with the specifics of the open position. The résumé should highlight skills and training directly related to the qualifications requested in the job description. The cover letter should demonstrate how the applicant's experiences fulfill the criteria for the position and help the hiring company achieve its goals. Review the Going Global Résumé/CV Guidelines section for further information regarding the recommended content and formatting for résumés and cover letters in the United States.

It is appropriate for a jobseeker to contact a company once to confirm that a hiring manager has received their submitted résumé/CV, but it is impolite for the jobseeker to follow up several times to inquire about interviews. If a company is interested in an applicant, one of its employees will contact the jobseeker and schedule a time to conduct an interview.

Companies usually interview jobseekers in person and by telephone call. Many companies conduct phone interviews, allowing them to quickly and inexpensively interview a large number of applicants in the process of choosing the most desirable candidates. Excellent performance in a phone interview can help a jobseeker earn an invitation to a subsequent in-person interview. In-person interviews are typically used to make hiring decisions, and a jobseeker’s performance in such an interview usually determines whether he/she is chosen for the position. Video interviews are a relatively recent innovation and allow an employer to interview a candidate over the Internet by a video conferencing call. Employers may use these interviews to narrow a large list of job applicants and select final-round candidates; some employers may use video interviews to make a final hiring decision. A jobseeker should prepare for the interview by reviewing his/her résumé, researching the job requirements for the position and practicing good interview techniques. Researching the hiring company and the job description will help a candidate to better prepare for the interviewer's questions. Recruiters and hiring managers expect candidates to demonstrate an understanding of the employer, its competitors and customers.

Jobseekers should review common interview questions and plan answers to these questions prior to the interview. Good interview answers are honest and display how the candidate’s experiences qualify and prepare him/her to fulfill the job’s requirements. A jobseeker should also prepare answers that display a strong understanding of the employer and the field. It is a good idea to prepare three or more career success stories, and two or more learning experience stories that had less-than-favorable outcomes. Career success stories may be shared in answer to common interview questions and to display skills needed for the position. Learning experience stories should include steps the applicant took to correct his/her mistakes and improve performance. A candidate should also prepare questions to ask the interviewer about the company and the position.

It is a good idea to conduct practice job interviews with career coaches, mentors and friends, as these people can evaluate a jobseeker’s interviewing skills and suggest ways the jobseeker can improve his/her performance. Strategic jobseekers practice answering deliberately challenging interview questions that are likely to arise in future interviews with companies. This type of practice helps interviewees become more comfortable with the interview process and more relaxed and confident in actual interviews.
Phone interviews are similar to in-person interviews in their structure and content, requiring similar research and preparation strategies. In addition to researching the prospective employer and designing answers to potential interview questions, a phone interviewee should prepare and have at hand during the interview a folder containing his/her résumé, a list of professional accomplishments and career success stories, and questions to ask the interviewer. It is also a good idea to have paper and a pen to write down important information during the interview, such as the interviewer’s name, phone number and email address. A few minutes before the scheduled interview time, the jobseeker should gather the information folder, paper and a glass of water, and find a quiet place to take the interviewer’s call.

Recent technological advancements have enabled companies to interview jobseekers with Internet-based video conferencing programs such as Skype. Such video interviews resemble traditional in-person interviews as they allow the interviewer and the job candidate to interact face-to-face, permitting the employer to visually assess the candidate’s demeanor and persona. Jobseekers who interview with a company by video call should follow most of the typical rules for interviewing in person, with some additional considerations. Jobseekers should dress as if they were interviewing in person at the company’s offices, prepare any materials they would like to use during their interview and be ready to begin the video call at the scheduled appointment time.

A jobseeker who is interviewing in person or by video call should try to determine the company’s dress code before the interview, either by observing current employees at the office or asking a receptionist about appropriate interview clothing. A candidate should dress slightly more formally for the job interview than the employees at the company. Men should usually wear a suit, dress shirt and tie to an interview, while women should usually wear a skirt suit or a pant suit. Dark, conservative colors such as black, gray and navy blue are good choices. If the company’s dress code is unclear, it is better to be overdressed in a business suit than to be underdressed and appear unprofessional. Clothing worn to an interview should be clean and ironed, and shoes should be polished. Jewelry should be small and conservative, and cologne or perfume should be minimal, if worn at all. It is a good idea to carry a briefcase, pad folio or nice shoulder bag containing a notepad and pen to take notes during the interview, along with extra copies of the résumé printed on high-quality paper.

The day before the interview, a jobseeker should confirm the time and location of the appointment. Candidates interviewing with a company located outside of their city of residence would be wise to do the following: 1) confirm the location of the interview several days before the interview, and obtain directions and parking instructions from the recruiter or contact person; 2) ask the recruiter if there are recommended hotels near the company’s offices, as a business may receive discounted room rates from nearby hotels; and 3) confirm the schedule for the day of the interview. If the company is making travel arrangements, the candidate should confirm those arrangements with his/her contact in the company or with the travel agency assigned to assist him/her.

On the day of the interview, the candidate should allow significant extra time to travel from where he/she is staying to the company’s offices. Accidental delays because of traffic congestion, hindrances during hotel checkout and other unexpected problems may cause a job candidate to arrive late to the interview; tardiness can create a negative impression. Choosing and preparing interview-appropriate clothing the night before the meeting, checking out of the hotel early and leaving extra time to drive to the interview location can ensure the candidate’s timely arrival.

The day before a video interview, a jobseeker should determine where he/she would like to accept the conference call, usually in a private, professional-looking location where they are unlikely to encounter interruptions. The jobseeker should remove any clutter that would be visible to the interviewer and ensure the lights in the room are bright enough for the interviewer to see the candidate. Placing a light above and behind the web camera and screen (where the interviewer cannot see the light) can ensure that the job candidate's face is easily visible and without shadows. A jobseeker should also test his/her web camera, microphone and Internet connection. Conducting a short practice call with an acquaintance is a good idea, as it familiarizes the jobseeker with the video conferencing software and allows him/her to resolve any technical difficulties before the interview. Ten minutes before the interview begins, the jobseeker should log into the video conferencing program and close any programs on the computer that are not directly related to the interview (such as email, non-professional documents and music players). The jobseeker can minimize the possibility of external disruptions by closing the door and asking others to not interrupt the call.
Interview Conduct

Punctuality is absolutely essential in the United States, especially for a job interview. It is a good idea for a candidate to arrive ten minutes before the interview and check in with the receptionist, but to not arrive earlier. However, a candidate must be prepared to wait for the interviewer, who often has a very full schedule of interviews.

Interviewers should be addressed by their titles (Mr., Ms., Dr., etc.) and surnames unless they ask to be called by their first names. It is extremely important for the candidate to be friendly and courteous to everyone, starting with the receptionist. The interviewee’s actions and conduct may be observed to see how he or she interacts with a wide variety of people at different levels in the organization; some employers believe the candidate's behaviors can indicate what kind of team member they will be. The interviewer may ask the receptionist and secretary for an opinion of the candidate when making hiring decisions. Most employers expect both men and women to possess confidence and a positive demeanor. Standing straight, smiling and using good manners all will help a candidate make a strong first impression. When introducing oneself or being introduced, it is appropriate to look the other person in the eye and offer a firm handshake. In the United States, the appropriate space between two people standing and talking is about two feet. People generally do not touch during an interview except when they are shaking hands. It is appropriate to exchange business cards at the beginning of an interview.

The interview will begin with a few moments of casual conversation. Appropriate topics of conversation include the city where the business is located, weather and recent news events. Americans consider politics, religion and personal information such as a person’s weight, age and salary to be inappropriate subjects for casual conversations; these topics should be avoided. After asking and answering a few questions, the interviewer will direct the conversation toward the job and begin the formal interview.

The Interview

During an interview, a job candidate should display confidence, optimism and a team-oriented mindset, as most American employers seek positive, upbeat and energetic employees. Making direct eye contact with interviewers while speaking and listening is vital, as it demonstrates respect, attention and truthfulness. Employers may interpret a jobseeker's failure to make eye contact as a sign of disinterest, a lack of confidence or dishonesty.

It is appropriate for jobseekers to claim credit for their professional accomplishments and achievements in the interview. Truthfully communicating ambitions and successes is also acceptable in a job interview, as American employers perceive such statements demonstrate the jobseeker's self-confidence. American interviewers will also be impressed if the discussion focuses on customer value, shows how the applicant has been an effective team player, and demonstrates how he or she has worked creatively and independently. Discussing the candidate's history of project completion and demonstrating a record of hard work also helps the jobseeker demonstrate professional competence.

Jobseekers interviewing by phone must create a positive impression without the help of visual cues. Though the phone interviewer cannot see the candidate, the jobseeker's posture and movements affect their voice and can help him/her convey a pleasant and confident demeanor. Standing up helps a speaker sound energetic and can improve the quality of his or her voice, and smiling while speaking makes one sound happier and more positive. The candidate should use excellent manners with the interviewer and speak slowly and clearly. Making short, topical comments after the interviewer speaks will help the conversation flow smoothly and also indicate that the candidate is paying attention.
Applicants interviewing by phone have the opportunity to look at their résumés and prepared career stories during an interview. This is a great opportunity for candidates to quickly review their best answers to interview questions. However, interviewers prefer spontaneous responses over heavily-rehearsed answers, and the temptation to read the answers to the interviewer may be difficult to resist.

When participating in a video interview, the job candidate should look directly into the web camera rather than at the screen; to the interviewer, the jobseeker will appear to be looking directly at them. The jobseeker should speak as if he/she is conducting a conversation in person and use appropriate facial expressions, but limit movement of the head and torso. Excessive movements can distract an interviewer and portray the job candidate as fidgety. Video conferencing calls occasionally experience delays and gaps in signal transmission, so the interviewer and the jobseeker should speak as clearly as possible and be willing to repeat themselves. If the call ends unexpectedly or if the quality of transmission becomes poor, the jobseeker and the interviewer should restart the call over the video conferencing program or continue the conversation by telephone.

The ‘behavioral interview’ is popular among American interviewers. Built on the belief that past performance is the best predictor of future success, interviewers spend most of their time asking for specific examples of the candidate’s past experiences. Questions usually begin with such phrases as, “Tell me about a time when....” or “Give me an example of....” Interviewers who favor this format usually develop their line of questioning around the traits and skills important for success in the position or organization. For example, if a job involves a lot of customer service, an interviewer might ask, “Tell me about a time when you had to handle an irate customer.” Interviewers often ask about past mistakes the candidate may have made on the job. It is a good idea to give examples of being creative at work, successfully working in teams, personally taking responsibility for a problem and quickly completing tasks.

Panel interviews are becoming more common in the United States. These are in-person interviews with two to four interviewers and may be two or more hours in length. Rather than scheduling three one-hour interviews with different managers, many companies have found that holding one long interview can allow multiple hiring managers to efficiently and effectively assess a candidate. The panel interview allows all the interviewers to see and hear the same information simultaneously and make hiring decisions on the basis of the same data. Interviewers know many applicants find panel interviews intimidating; it is particularly impressive if the candidate can appear relaxed during the interview. During panel interviews, it is vital for the applicant to convey confidence, have good eye contact with the various interviewers and answer questions clearly. Jobseekers may want to write each panel interviewer's name and a few brief identifying notes about each person in order to correctly remember each panelist.

Many job interviews are conducted over meals, especially second-stage interviews. Some companies may arrange for peer-colleagues, rather than the actual hiring committee, to take the candidate out to eat. This creates an informal setting for the candidate to ask questions about the company culture and working conditions. However, the applicant is still being evaluated — even though the meal may not be an official interview. Practicing formal American table manners, ordering dishes no more expensive than the host’s meal and focusing on the interview rather than the food demonstrates respect for the company and creates a positive impression. Job candidates should focus on the interview conversation rather than their dining experience; many career counselors advise job candidates to eat a small snack before attending a meal interview. Attitudes about alcohol vary among interviewers and employers, but avoiding alcohol is always an appropriate choice during an interview.

Many companies also administer written and verbal tests to job candidates to evaluate personality or suitability for a position. There is no way to prepare for such tests, so it is best for a candidate to just relax and answer the questions honestly and positively. Candidates should avoid emphasizing negative aspects of their backgrounds, and only discuss such topics if they are specifically asked about those areas.
At the end of a job interview, most interviewers will ask the applicant if he or she has any questions. It is a good idea to ask several relevant questions to demonstrate interest in the company and the job. Asking specific questions about the company's industry and the expectations for the person in the job position are good strategies. Questions that demonstrate a strong understanding of the business can exhibit a jobseeker's competence and impress an interviewer; a jobseeker can research and compose such questions before the interview. It is appropriate for a jobseeker to ask when the company plans to fill the job opening. Avoid asking about salary or other compensation questions during the interview unless the interviewer directly addresses the topic. If a candidate has more questions to ask than the length of the interview appointment permits, he or she may ask to call or email the interviewer at a later time. Interviews often end with a second handshake. Always thank the interviewer for his or her time and express appreciation for being considered for the position.

Post-Interview

After an interview, it is polite and appropriate to send a short, personal note to the interviewer thanking them for their time and consideration, and reiterating interest in the position. If interviewed by a panel, each interviewer should receive a unique thank you note. These thank you notes may be electronic or handwritten, should include details about the topics of conversation in the interview and should be sent within a day or two of the interview. Many job candidates neglect to send thank you notes. Sending a thank you note demonstrates diligence and follow-through skills that can distinguish a candidate from other job applicants. Additionally, a thank you note keeps a job candidate in the mind of the interviewer, which can increase his/her chance of receiving the job offer.

It is not unusual for a company to take many weeks to make hiring decisions, especially if a company is hiring many people or if a staffing company is conducting the interviews. American companies typically notify applicants by phone, mail or email if they intend to extend an offer of employment. If the company has not contacted the candidate with its hiring decision by the announced deadline, a candidate may call or email the company and ask if a decision about the job has been made.

After the interview, a jobseeker should inform the potential employer of any changes in his/her contact information, employment status, interest in the position or other important information. If the applicant receives another job offer, but is still interested in working for a particular company, it is customary to call and let that company know about the alternate offer. Such a call is usually appreciated, and, in some cases, could accelerate a company’s hiring decision.

If a company extends an offer of employment, the jobseeker should consider several factors beyond the salary when choosing to accept or decline the offer. An employer may offer health care insurance, 401K/pension plans, tuition benefits and stock options in addition to salary; such benefits can add significantly to a compensation package. Benefits and salary offers can vary significantly between companies and among positions within the same company. Compensation packages are sometimes negotiable if a jobseeker respectfully discusses them with the hiring manager, especially if the jobseeker has researched the standard compensation for someone in his/her field with his/her level of experience. The most appropriate time for a jobseeker to discuss the salary and benefits package is in a meeting with the hiring director or other company official after the company has extended an offer of employment.