

Interviewing for a Job¹

Arnold M. Lund
U S WEST Advanced Technologies

Effective interviewing begins with knowing where interviewing fits within the process of finding a job. You need to think about why you are interviewing, both from your perspective and the perspective of the employer. The reason you are interviewing is to see if you want the job, and for the employer to determine whether your skills match their needs. While the steps in the process are likely to vary from employer to employer, they tend to include the résumé, the telephone interview (if the résumé looks good), and a face-to-face interview (if the telephone interview went well). A job fair (e.g., at the HFES conference) may take the place of a telephone interview and the face-to-face interview, or it may be the contact that results in these interviews. Some positions may require several face-to-face visits or telephone interviews. You may even be asked to give a talk about some of your work so the interviewers can assess your presentations skills, test your reactions in public, and have a basis for some of the questions they may ask later.

Overall Objective of the Interview

Some students think the interview process is to see if their formal skills meet a list of job requirements, but evaluating formal skills is typically a minor part of the interview process. The company has often already determined that your formal skills for the job meet the minimum requirements by the time they talk to you. It is true there may be questions probing the depth of some of those skills and clarifying ambiguous areas. Some interviewers will want to understand more about how you accomplished the things listed in your résumé, and what you actually did as part of projects.

The goal of the interview process is more often to capture aspects of your background that don't come through well on paper. The employer will be trying

to evaluate your communications and teaming skills. They will be interested in how quickly you can become productive and acquire new skills. They will want to get a sense of whether you will fit into the group, and what you will bring to the team. They will want to see whether you have the "spark" that will signal that you will be successful wherever you work. They will want to know whether they will find it satisfying, rewarding, and perhaps even fun to have you around.

The Telephone Interview

Once you have sent in a résumé you need to be prepared for a telephone interview. It can often be helpful to have a file of notes (including your résumé), answers for questions you think might be asked, and questions you would like to get answered located near the phone in a convenient place. When the call comes in quickly grab your file and politely ask the caller to hang on for a moment as you arrange for a quiet place to talk. Speak clearly into the phone. Be positive, friendly, and collected; but beware of being over-familiar.

You are selling yourself into the face-to-face interview, and that should be in the back of your mind throughout the telephone interview. Allow the caller to ask most of the questions, but keep up your end of the conversation. Be brief, but not too brief in your answers. Be factual, but also be thorough. You would be wise to try to keep notes during the interview. This will help you in preparing for the face-to-face interview as you think about questions you might still need to get answered, and as you work out knowledgeable answers to questions that you believe will be asked in a face-to-face interview. Remember to get the name and contact information for whomever you

¹ I would like to express my thanks for the many useful suggestions I received (and the fascinating personal stories that came with them), especially those from Ron Shapiro, Jennifer Trich Kremer, Paula Selvidge, Melanie Diez, and Jen Perotti.

should contact if you have questions following the telephone interview.

You may not be invited to a face-to-face interview on the call. If you are not invited to a face-to-face interview at all, don't despair. Use the experience as a learning opportunity and think through whether you came across in the way you wanted to come across. If something didn't go quite right, mentally rehearse the way you would like it to go next time. You can even call your contact and ask why you were not invited for a face-to-face interview and how you could improve. If you did do everything right, then realize that there probably wasn't a good match.

The Face-to-Face Interview

If you are invited to a face-to-face interview, do your homework and have a game plan. Get to know the employer (perhaps by getting a copy of their annual report and checking out their Web site) and the industry. Try to learn something about their products and the kinds of projects on which you might be working. If you aren't the first human factors person at the company, see if you can track down anything the human factors people at the company have published in the past and whether there are other records of their professional activity. Use the Web and other sources to learn about the area where the business is located and where you might live.

Put together the questions you will need to get answered to know whether you will want to work and live there. When I look at an area that I am considering, for example, I ask about housing costs, about opportunities to teach in the evenings, and whether hiking is conveniently close for the weekends. I ask about the work climate, about the business and the industry, and about how they see the balance of work and home. I ask about how work is evaluated, about typical career paths, and about the support for professional activity. The questions you will ask may be the most important part of the interview. They give you the information you need to determine whether you will

enjoy working there, and they reveal a little about how you think and your values to the interviewers.

Write down the questions you believe they will be asking. You can guess at questions the interviewers might ask based on the categories of questions typically asked, based on your own experience with past interviews, and by role playing with friends. You may want to practice answering the questions they may ask, especially those that you know you will feel least comfortable answering or that you believe will be most critical in their decision making process.

Don't forget that "little" things can be important. Have a good night's rest the evening before, have breakfast, and drink plenty of fluids. It is probably going to be a long day. If you have to travel, try to arrange to get in early enough to be well rested and perhaps to have a quick look at the area. Dress for success, and that often means dressing slightly better than the normal level of dress at the business. Don't be afraid to ask your contact for guidance on how to dress. Be well groomed and remember to project a confident, engaged body language; even as you tire throughout the day. Be on time to the interview, and bring copies of your résumé, example papers, and other exhibits that might be useful during the interview. You want to do everything you can to reduce surprise and stress so you can easily deal with the unexpected things that will arise despite your best efforts.

The interview process often has 3 stages to it, both from the employer's perspective as well as from your perspective. You can think of the day in terms of these stages, and you can think of each interview during the day as having these stages. The first stage is establishing rapport. The second stage is gathering information. Finally, the third stage is the close.

Establishing Rapport. During the stage for establishing rapport, both the interviewer and you are getting comfortable with each other and subtly preparing for the meaty questions ahead. This is

when you each are reading the other's style, and when you want to project comfort with yourself and the situation, confidence in your abilities, and curiosity about the work, the company, and the environment. It is a good time to ask a few insightful questions (e.g., about the business or work process), and you can expect "lightly personal" questions in return. The employer might ask you to tell them about yourself, for example. Mirroring in this situation, loosely echoing the body language of the interviewer back, can often help establish rapport but be natural. Respond with more than "yes" or "no" to questions during this stage, as well as during the later stages.

You will be meeting people throughout the day and trying to build some level of a relationship with each person you meet. Meals will also often be specifically designed to be times when you can be a little more casual, and when the employer can get a sense of what you are like when you relax. These are good times to ask some of those questions mentioned earlier that will be important for your decision about whether to accept a job offer if it is made, and to see if the answers are reasonably consistent across the people.

Information Gathering. During the information gathering stage, you can imagine questions from any or all of the following categories.

- **Credential Questions** – Often designed to clarify elements relevant to the job in (or missing from) the résumé; for example, "What courses did you take for your degree?"
- **Experience Questions** – Trying to get beyond the formal résumé to the experiences that will translate to the new job, or as a transition to behavioral or other questions; for example, "What were your responsibilities in that position?"
- **Behavioral Questions** – Designed to find evidence of the behaviors that will be demonstrated in the new job; for example, "Describe the most difficult problem on that project and how you approached solving it." or

"Here is a problem I am working on. Tell me how you would solve it?" These questions may follow a longer setup of a problem situation, and so if you notice the setup be ready to respond.

- **Opinion Questions** – Often these are trying to capture the style you will bring the organization; for example, "What do you believe are your strengths and weaknesses?"
- **Stress Questions** – These are designed to place you in a situation to see how you handle stress; for example, "Why have you changed jobs so frequently?" A common stress question asked at one company is "HR must have made a mistake you are so unqualified. But since you are here, why should I hire you?"
- **Strange Questions** – Intended to capture your creativity, your flexibility, and other problem solving characteristics; for example, "How many ping pong balls could fit in a Volkswagen?"

Employers, of course, are diverse. Part of being prepared is to help you deal with the unexpected. In some European companies, for example, it is common to include "team work" games to evaluate communications and other skills. While my experience in U.S. interviews has tended to consist of a series of one-on-one interviews, some companies have teams interview you.

Closing. After the interview, it may take awhile for the bureaucratic wheels to turn. Do not get discouraged if there is a delay. In a couple of weeks, follow up with a phone call to the contact person. Update the contact person if your status changes (e.g., you receive a job offer from another company).

Conclusion

Remember that it is important for you to obtain the information you need to determine whether the job is going to be right for you. It is also important for you to share information appropriately to help the employer to work with you to determine whether there is going to be a match. It doesn't help you or the employer for you to talk your way into a job that

doesn't fit your needs or the company's needs. Ideally, you want to be working in an environment that is satisfying, rewarding, challenging, and maybe even fun. The interview process should get you that job.

Other Resources

Help! My job interview is tomorrow!: How to use the library to research an employer. Templeton, M. H. New York: Neal-Schuman Publishers, 1991.

Cover letters that knock 'em dead. Yate, M. Holbrook, MA: Adams Publishers, 1995.

Electronic job search revolution: Win with the new technology that's reshaping today's job market. Kennedy, J. L. New York: J. Wiley, 1994.

Sweaty palms: The neglected art of being interviewed. Medley, H. A. Berkeley, CA: Ten Speed Press, 1984.

career.idsweb.com/prepared.htm. "Are you prepared for interviewers' new techniques?" by T. Washington
www.argus-tech.com/interview/ques_int.html. "Interviewing Techniques"

taonline.com/ticintrview.html. "Interviewing Techniques and Tactics"

www.careercity.com/content/interview/index.asp. "Interview"

www.dummies.com/resources/jobquestions/default.htm.

"World's Biggest Job Interview Question Bank" by J. Cox

home.navisoft.com/hireadvice/ques.txt. Typical questions in common categories.

www.collegegrad.com/book/16-r.shtml. "The Five Types of Interview Questions"



Arnie Lund is Director of Design and Usability at U S WEST Advanced Technologies. His group supports uswest.com e-commerce initiatives, uswest.net and broadband content, intelligent network services, and a variety of applications built with emerging

technologies. He began his career at Bell Laboratories, and eventually supervised both human factors and systems engineering groups. He subsequently joined Ameritech as a Senior Director. In each of his management jobs he has had to grow groups and help them become successful, and so Arnie has had considerable experience in effective interviewing and hiring. At the same time, his career path has also placed him in the role of a candidate for jobs. As a result he has had a chance to learn what is important from both sides of the interviewing experience.