



PREPARING FOR INTERVIEWS SELF-ASSESSMENT AND RESEARCH

“If you don’t know where you’re going you’ll end up somewhere else.”

You might have seen this quote on a popular greeting card. It implies that those who think ahead and develop a plan have a better chance of reaching their destination than those who are merely “winging it.” This advice is very applicable to the subject of this chapter: how to prepare for job interviews. In this chapter we discuss:

- Why preparing for interviews (rather than winging it) is so important
- How to prepare for interviews through self-assessment and company research
- Strategies and tips to use in preparing for interviews effectively and successfully

You’ve prepared your resume, networked for information, used the Web to identify job prospects, created a job search strategy, and obtained one or more interviews. Congratulations! Each of these steps is critical to the success of your job campaign. But don’t stop – now is the time to prepare for those interviews you’ve worked so hard to earn. It’s time to plan a strategy in advance. You might be thinking “Why prepare in advance? Is there a danger that by doing so I’ll sound too ‘rehearsed?’ And besides, I just don’t have time to prepare. Why can’t I just go in and be myself?”

All of these thoughts are common and valid. Studies have found, though, that those who take the step of preparing for interviews seriously are better prepared, better able to handle difficult interview questions (and interviewers!), better able to articulate their strengths and are, in fact, better able to “be themselves” in interviews. Preparing ahead demonstrates to your interviewer how seriously you are taking the interview. It shows initiative and will help you to stand out from other applicants who don’t take time to prepare. Preparing for interviews involves two important steps: 1) knowing yourself, or self-assessment, and 2) knowing the company through company research.

Self-Assessment

Self-assessment is a process through which you become aware of your strengths and weaknesses, skills and abilities, interests, values, goals, and aspirations. For our purposes, self-assessment is aimed at preparing you to feel comfortable in interview situations where the topic is *YOU*. Self-assessment has several benefits:

- Self-assessment helps you identify strengths that can be emphasized in interviews, and assess weaknesses that can be downplayed.





- Self-assessment gives you practice in articulating your achievements, aspirations and goals in a way that connects your experience profile with the strategic needs of the organization with which you're interviewing.
- Self-assessment builds your confidence. As you review your background, you become more aware of what you can contribute to an employer. This awareness makes it easier for you to answer interview questions in a way that is natural and forthcoming.
- Once you learn how to do it, self-assessment is never ending. It helps you refine your career goals, values, and interests as you move throughout your entire career. It not only helps you prepare for interviews, it helps you to keep track of the skills you are developing and identify areas for improvement.

Self-assessment is a crucial step in preparing for interviews. It helps you to anticipate questions that might be asked of you and to prepare ways to handle these questions. It also helps you to begin to look at your background from the perspective of the potential employer. How would you respond to the questions below?

- What are your greatest strengths?
- What are your weaknesses (and what are you doing about them)?
- Where do you want to be in five years? In ten?
- What is your major and why did you choose it?
- How did you choose to spend your summers while in college?
- What courses in college did you most like and why?
- What school activities did you get involved in?
- What is your ideal job and why?

The reason a few typical interview questions are listed here is to get you thinking about how you would respond if a recruiter asked you these questions. How do you feel reading these questions? Nervous or uncomfortable? Talkative or reserved? Pensive or enthusiastic? Some of these questions are answered easily. The answer just rolls off your tongue. Chances are, though, that some of the questions aren't as easy.

Many students have no trouble discussing these questions and others with their friends, roommates, or classmates, but discussing them with a recruiter is more difficult. That's because we know the questions aren't just small talk. The questions are being used as an evaluation/assessment/screening tool. The interviewer is looking for "fit" – as close of a match as possible between the needs of his or her organization and the interests, skills, and abilities of candidates who meet the organization's hiring profile. That's where self-assessment plays a role. With some self-reflection and practice, answering these questions in an interview becomes easier and more natural.

There are a number of tools and resources available to assist with the self-assessment process. One useful technique is to write a narrative about various



elements of your life, using the questions below. Why not schedule some time in the next week or two to reflect on and answer in writing (on a separate page) the questions below? Doing so will help you “take stock” of who you are and what’s important to you – an essential activity for anyone preparing for employment interviews.

1. Who are the three most significant people in your life to date? Who has influenced you (positively or negatively)? Who has made an impact on the decisions you’ve made in life so far? List their names and the kind of work they do. For each, write the reasons they are significant to you, and what you admire about each. End with a sentence or two about what you learned from each, and how thinking of them might shape your career and life goals.
2. Think of a trusted friend or counselor, someone who knows you better than anyone and thinks you’re terrific. Write down seven to ten words this person would use to describe you, and explain why.
3. Make a list of those things you value most (for example: having money; wisdom; world peace; accomplishment; freedom; happiness; excitement). Think of as many values as you can. If you have a long list, rank the top five.
4. Skills are things you are able to do and can be technical such as writing, sales, designing computer programs, math, etc. or non-technical but transferable qualities such as making people feel comfortable, making presentations or finding difficult-to-locate information. Write down seven to ten skills that you possess – things that you enjoy doing and are able to do well. Think of how you have demonstrated the skills in the past.
5. What do you want to achieve in life? What are your short-term goals (things to accomplish in the next year)? Your mid-term goals (next three to five years)? Your long-term goals (within twenty years)? Make a list of three to five things, some personal, some professional, you would like to accomplish in each of the three time spans. What is your plan to attain these goals? Write a specific plan including “how-to” steps with timelines.
6. What would you really like to be doing with your life? If money was not an obstacle, how would you like to spend your time?
7. List three to five things you have accomplished and feel good about. Describe the situation that was involved and how you achieved your goal. These can be minor or major. Examples are overcoming a poor GPA, overcoming shyness, getting through a difficult childhood experience, or doing your best in a school swim competition.
8. List two to three recent jobs. These can be summer jobs, after-school jobs, internships or volunteer experience. Describe each: what you did, what you learned, what you liked and disliked, the skills you learned and used, personal qualities you developed (such as “able to work under pressure” from working in a fast-paced restaurant environment).





9. Describe your ideal work environment. What kind of work would you enjoy doing? With whom? Where would it be? What type of organization?

Survey your responses to the questions above. Now that you've had a chance to reflect on yourself and your interests, make a list of the things that are important for you to have in your next job.

Write down as many features as you can think of, in no particular order. Don't censor yourself. Write down everything that comes to mind. Examples are: close to family, opportunity to travel, access to cutting-edge technology, casual dress, enough money to live on and pay my tuition debts, chances to use my strongest skills (list what they are), chances to learn new skills and increase marketability, etc. Now rank the list from #1 in importance to the last in importance. If it's difficult to choose, ask yourself, "If I could have only one important thing from this job, what would that one thing be?" And second, and third, and so on.

This list defines the things that based on who you are and what's important to you, you want to have in your next position. Naturally it's unlikely you'll get everything you're seeking (at least on the first job after graduating!), but this list can serve as your "blueprint" for evaluating jobs, companies, functions, and industries as you explore career options and interview with prospective employers. Refer to this list as you learn of openings, are contacted by prospective employers, or see position descriptions on the web. It will help you to assess each opportunity according to your own needs and also will be a source for questions you can ask in job interviews with recruiters.

About 70% of organizations that recruit college students use a form of interviewing called *behavior-based interviewing*. It used to be that questions like "tell me about yourself" and "why should I hire you?" were common. Now these questions are considered too general and don't provide the information needed for the recruiter to make a fair assessment of the candidate's capabilities. In *behavior-based interviewing*, you are asked questions about your background, about your experience, about what you've done, and what you've learned. Typical behavior-based interview questions sound like this:

Tell me about a time when you were involved in a team project. What was your role? What did you do? How did you react to problems that arose with the project?

Describe a time when you had to work under pressure. Describe briefly the situation. Who were the major players? What was your role? What did you do? How did you react?

Tell me about a time when you felt you hadn't realized your objective. When you had a major disappointment at work. Describe the situation and tell me how you reacted and what you did.

You might be thinking, "This is easy. I can talk about myself – I don't need any preparation for this." You'd be surprised, though, at how difficult it is when a total stranger is evaluating you. The way to prepare for this type of interview is to conduct your own analysis of your background. This way you're



more prepared to answer questions quickly and succinctly in interviews. Here's how to prepare for behavior-based questions in interviews:

1. Starting with the most recent, make a detailed list of all jobs you've held since you started working. These should include part-time and full-time jobs, internships, summer jobs, and non-paying (volunteer) work.
2. Make a list of all clubs and organizations of which you've been a member and any projects in which you were involved or leadership positions you held.
3. Make a list of all team projects in which you've been involved. These can include class projects, school activities, church group involvement, sports teams, etc.
4. From the above list, choose five activities or projects to analyze in detail. This can be a combination of work experiences, club or organization involvement, or team projects.
5. For each of the five selected experiences, write a detailed description, answering the following questions: What was your role? What did you do? Who were the key players? What were the issues involved? What did you contribute? What problems arose? How did you handle any problems that surfaced? How did you react when problems arose? What did you do to help solve the problem(s) faced in the experience? What are you most proud of from this experience? What did you enjoy? What did you learn? What would you do differently next time?
6. Now, sit back and reflect on the five experiences you've just described and analyzed. Look at them from the perspective of an employer. What kind of person is emerging from these materials? What qualities does this person possess? What positive attributes does this person bring to the table? What patterns are emerging? By analyzing your behavior you can get a pretty good picture of how an employer is going to view your experiences. The employer is less interested in the content than in how you used your skills and handled people and problems. The employer is more interested in the "hows." How do you react in work situations involving other people? How do you make decisions? How do you assess a situation? How do you contribute? The recruiter is also interested in the "whys." Why does this person react the way he does? What motivates her to do a good job?

Recruiters have always known they can learn about a person by listening to that person talk. Now you can learn the same thing by listening to yourself talk. Try it. It's a little intimidating at first, but it's an excellent way for you to understand your strengths and your weaknesses from the perspective of others. This way you cannot only prepare for behavior-based interviews but also continue to build confidence in your abilities and skill in articulating these to employers. You can even identify some areas to work on for self-improvement.

"Know thyself" was a favorite line of the ancient philosopher Socrates. More than 2,000 years later it's still sound advice. Self-assessment is a great way to prepare for interviews. Not only does self-assessment help recruiters get to know you; self-assessment helps *you* get to know you!



Company Research

OK. You've gotten the interview, and you've prepared for interviews by assessing yourself. Equally important in preparing for interviews is assessing the company. The way to do this is through researching the company.

Company research is a step that few candidates take the time to do well. Most only do it seriously after their first interview, when they know an organization is interested in talking with them further. You can rise above the rest by researching a company in advance of the interview. Researching a company before the initial interview has several benefits:

- It can affirm your decision to sign up for an interview. By understanding fully what an organization is seeking ahead of time, you can be sure you have the necessary qualifications and that the position is an appropriate fit.
- It can make you more enthusiastic about the company and the position and also better prepared to ask intelligent questions during the interview.
- It can help you define the degree to which a match exists between your interests and what they're seeking, help you articulate what this match is, and be confident as you relay this information during the interview.

As you can see, researching a company before an interview makes good sense. Researching a company can take many forms. The first source of information about companies, of course, is the Internet. Internet information has become the most common source for college students to research potential employers. Two other sources are 1) reading and analyzing available print information about the organization, and 2) talking with people who are familiar with the organization.

Do your homework before talking with individuals about the companies you are researching. Spend as much time as you can read about a company before spending your time and others' asking questions that could have been answered by reading information that is easily available. This means you can use your time with others wisely, asking them about aspects of the company that may not be as readily apparent from reading printed materials or from downloading information from the web.

Much of this information is now available on-line. The career center may help you find information that is not readily available on the web such as information about relocation and benefits, community involvement by the company, employee newsletters, recent press releases, and specific career-oriented information geared to students from your school. In many cases, the simplest way to get information is to



call or write the organization and ask for it. Once you're familiar with the company, look at the information available on other companies in the same industry. This will help you to compare and contrast the company you're researching with its competitors.

Information to Obtain on Each Company and Its Competitors:

- What are the company's major products and/or services?
- Who comprises the company's primary customer base?
- What marketplace niche is the company targeting?
- How is the company organized?
- What are its primary businesses or business units?
- Where does it operate?
- Who owns the company?
- What is the history of the company?
- Who are the company's top officers?
- What are the company's revenues?
- How many people does the company employ?
- What career opportunities are available to someone with my background?
- What are some of the key components of the company's work environment?

If you are looking at government agencies, nonprofit organizations, or other work environments, most of the above questions still apply.

Once you've looked at company and industry-specific information provided by the companies directly, look at employment directories and resources that provide an overview of career opportunities available at numerous companies. Whereas the printed materials provide you with basic information about the company from the company's perspective, the directories provide information about the actual career opportunities available and about the work environment from the candidate's perspective. Some of the most common resources that collate information on a variety of companies are *The Wet Feet Press* and the *Vault Reports*. Both of these directories publish basic contact information on numerous employers of college graduates and also provide overview information on each company and its reputation as an employer, the work environment, and the types of opportunities available (both resources also maintain Internet sites and make available specific company profiles on order).

There are various sources of financial and product information, particularly on organizations that are publicly held. *Value-line Investment Survey*, *Standard & Poor's*, business magazines, *The Wall Street Journal*, and investment bankers' analyses are great sources of information.

Other print sources of information are industry trade newsletters and journals, which can often be obtained at your university's career center. For example, aspiring consultants will want to check out *Consultant News*; prospective writers will want to read *Publisher's Weekly*; prospective marketers can use information published by the *American Marketing Association*. You can also consult the *Directory of Associations*, which lists professional organizations related to a variety of professions. Keeping current with industry trade journals ensures that you acquire a broad, strategic perspective on an industry and on the industry niche held by the company or companies you're researching. It also provides you with a good source of industry trends that can serve as the basis for excellent questions you can ask in interviews.

- What are some of the key challenges facing the industry and how are specific companies addressing these issues?
- What are some of the "best practices" in the industry?
- Which companies are viewed as leaders in their field and why?



***Information to Obtain on Several Companies Within the Same Industry:***

- How is each company or organization positioning itself?
- How is this company's training program different from others?
- What type of development opportunities are offered at each?
- What is the prospective career path at each for someone with my background?
- What is it like to work at each company?
- How is the work environment similar to or dissimilar from the others?
- How are decisions made? To what extent will I be involved in decision-making? How does this differ from one company to the next?
- Is the atmosphere formal or informal? What about the communication style? Dress code? What about hours? Travel?

Information from People

Once you have thoroughly researched a company, it is time to talk to people who have some familiarity with the company. Networking with individuals who have had some contact with the company is one of the best ways to get information about the topics that aren't covered in the print media or that might be too sensitive to ask about at the actual interview. Some suggestions of people with whom you'll want to network are:

- Career center counselors and staff
- Classmates who have interned at or worked for the company
- Recent alumni from your school who are now employed by the company (or who work elsewhere but formerly were employed by the company)
- Teachers and faculty – particularly faculty who are industry trade experts or who consult with companies in the industry of your choice
- People in your community (neighbors, church members, former teachers, etc.) who might know about the company

Additional Tips and Strategies for Preparing for Interviews

- Practice shaking hands with your roommate or a friend! Make it a firm one – not too limp, not too hard. If you tend to get nervous you'll want to rub a bit of talcum powder on your hands just before the interview.
- Determine in advance the appropriate style of dress. Find out if the office environment is business casual and if that style of dress is appropriate for an interview situation. Generally it's best to dress conservatively for an interview. This usually means a suit, tie, ironed shirt, leather shoes, and dark socks for men; knee-length skirt and jacket or tailored pants suit with a crew neck blouse, panty hose, and low heels for women.
- Go into the interview with questions at hand. Your employer research should open a number of lines of questioning about the job and company. Prepare questions that reflect your knowledge of the organization.





Preparing for interviews is an important and often overlooked step in the job search process. Following the principles discussed above should help you have the self-knowledge needed to make a fair assessment of how well the opportunity matches what you're seeking in a career. This will give you the confidence and knowledge base needed to do well in your job interviews.

Submitted by Karen O. Dowd, Ph.D. Dr. Dowd is on the faculty at James Madison University in Harrisonburg, Virginia. She's also a consultant with The Empower Group (formerly Brecker & Merryman) in New York. Her book on *Interpersonal Skills in Business*, co-authored with S. deJanasz and B. Schneider, will be available from Irwin McGraw Hill's business textbook division in June 2001.

