

Interview Workout – Getting in Shape for Your Next Interview

Interviewing can be a grueling exercise that leaves us questioning whether we measure up to the competition. Like any other competition, it's important to be in peak condition. It takes preparation, training, dedication and persistence to rise above the other competitors.

In this handout we'll get you in shape for your next interview. We'll cover key training tips for your warm up (interview preparation and practice), the day of your competition (interview performance) and your cool down (wrap up and follow up).

Setting Your Goals

Any good workout starts with setting goals. The goals of the interview process are twofold:

- To clearly express, and provide evidence of, your unique qualifications as the best candidate for the position.
- To show your organizational fit – that you will fit (like a hand in a glove) with the personality of the team and the culture of the organization.

Breaking down these goals even further, you will need to be able to effectively answer three key questions during the interview process:

- Why this position? – An assessment of your career goals and path.
- Why here? – An assessment of your organizational fit.
- Why you? – An assessment of your unique qualifications for the position.

Almost any question an interviewer will ask you comes back to these three key questions. So start your process by reflecting on what answers you would give.

Your Four-Step Workout Plan

Interviewing is the opportunity to influence and persuade the employer that you are the best candidate for the position. It requires a four-step workout plan – preparation, practice, performance and precision wrap-up and follow-up

- Preparation – The research and homework you need to do before the actual interview.
- Practice – Participate in mock interviews – ideally multiple interviews with different interviewers. Practice builds both skill and confidence.
- Performance – Influence/Persuade the interviewer that you are the best candidate for the job. This is where your preparation and practice pays off.
- Precision Wrap-Up/Follow-Up – Know how to effectively close the interview and follow up in a professionally persistent manner.

Interview Preparation – Your Warm-Up (Part One)

There are a number of things you can do to effectively prepare for your next interview. Below you will find several areas for consideration for the first part of your warm-up.

Conduct Thorough Research and Do Your Homework

- *Research the Industry* – Become familiar with recent news and trends in your industry. Join relevant professional associations and take advantage of the wealth of information they have to offer about your field.
- *Research the Organization* – At a minimum, thoroughly review the organization’s website. Check out their LinkedIn page, and “follow them” on LinkedIn. Request a copy of their most recent annual report. Google their name to see how they’re making headlines. Also, take a practice run to the location of the interview. Know how to get there and how long it takes, and be familiar with alternate routes in case of accidents or detours.
- *Research the Position* – Review the job posting. Request a copy of the full job description. Conduct an informational interview with someone who works in the same or similar position.
- *Research the Interviewer* – Find out more about who you will be talking with by reading their bio on the organization’s website, and/or by checking out their LinkedIn profile.
- *Research “You”* – Get very familiar with your resume; it may be the talking point during the interview. Have both quantitative and qualitative accomplishments – including specific stories you can tell – to provide evidence of your unique qualifications. No generalities are allowed here – this is a time to focus on specifics.

In addition, write answers to commonly asked questions. Don’t memorize or over-rehearse though; it’s about knowing the key points you want to make in response to each question.

Gather What You Will Bring

- Print five or more copies of your resume on a heavier stock resume paper. You want to have one for you and additional copies for others who may be part of the interview process.
- Prepare and print a list of three to five references (along with appropriate contact information), from most important to least important. Use references who can speak to the quality of your work, as well as your skills and positive qualities/characteristics.
- Prepare a list of questions to ask the interviewer (five to ten relevant questions). These need to be curiosity questions; questions you don’t possibly have the answers to. More on this later!
- Make sure you have the interviewer’s contact information – including name, title, phone number, and email address. Know who you’re interviewing with and how to contact them in case of an emergency.
- Have a professional looking pad folio (with a fresh pad of paper) and several pens for taking notes at the interview.
- If you have a portfolio of some of your best work, consider bringing that along. It could help provide evidence, and serve as visuals for your stories.

Decide What You Will Wear

- Layout and prepare your professional attire for the interview. Make sure it is appropriate for the job, organization and industry. Go to www.quintcareers.com/dress_for_success.html for more specific information on job hunting and interview dress.
- As a point of interest, according to a study commissioned by CareerBuilder, employers say the colors worn by job candidates convey certain messages. Here are some of the associations: black (leadership), blue (team player), gray (logical/analytical), white (organized), brown (dependable), red (power) and green/yellow/orange/purple (creativity).
- Go easy on perfume, cologne, makeup and jewelry – cover any tattoos.

On the Day of the Interview

- Leave plenty of time to get there. It's much better to arrive early than to be rushing because you're late.
- If you smoke, don't smoke prior to the interview.
- Be prepared to enter the building fifteen to twenty minutes early.
- Leave your cell phone in the car. You don't want this as a distraction during the interview.
- Greet the receptionist, and anyone you meet, with courtesy and respect. Treat them as if they have the authority to offer you the job.
- Use the restroom. This is one last chance to check your general appearance.
- Use your time in the waiting area to do additional research on the organization. Check out marketing materials, company awards on the wall, and anything else that provides a glimpse of the organization.
- Be aware of how employees are behaving. This will give you insight into the culture of the organization.
- Greet the interviewer with a smile, direct eye contact and a firm handshake.
- Remember the power of your non-verbal cues, including eye contact, posture, and nervous habits. Go to <http://jobsearch.about.com/od/interviewsnetworking/a/nonverbalcomm.htm> for more information on this topic.

Interview Practice – Your Warm-Up (Part Two)

As previously mentioned, participating in mock interviews – multiple interviews with different interviewers – can help you build skill and confidence in the interview process.

EC JobLinks, a free resource for Excelsior College students and alumni, is a web-based resource geared to your job search. One of the features of EC JobLinks is “mock interviews.” It allows you to conduct and record custom-built mock interviews – anytime and anywhere. This unique feature gives you the opportunity to view yourself from the recruiters' perspective, before an actual interview.

EC JobLinks has a simple registration process. To register and learn more about this mock interview service, as well as the vast number of other resources EC JobLinks has to offer go to the following link: <http://career.excelsior.edu/ec-joblinks/>.

Interview Performance – Your Workout

It's now time for your workout – the interview itself. Your ability to answer interview questions in a clear, concise and convincing manner will go a long way in influencing and persuading the employer that you're the best candidate for the position – thus ensuring successful workout performance.

So now we'll take a look at some common and difficult interview questions, as well as strategies for how to answer them. Interviews and interviewers are different, so you can never fully prepare for every question you may be asked. But preparing for common and difficult questions will provide you with the confidence you need to succeed.

Opening Question

Q. Tell me about yourself. What should I know about you?

A. In many interviews, this question (or some version of it) is typically the first question asked. For job candidates it's one of those dreaded "open ended" questions. Where exactly do I go with this? What is the interviewer looking for here?

Interviewers get a wide range of responses to this question – from information about the job candidate's family – to their outside interests – to a recital of facts on their resume – to a litany of broad skills they possess (skills other candidates will also tell the interviewer – such as communication, organization, and time management).

But this is a time to be focused in your response and to set yourself apart. Consider the following in regard to a response to this question:

- Give a brief introduction – "I will be graduating with my MBA in June, with a focus in Human Resources. As you can see from my resume, I've completed two internships (a total of 400 hours) in the human resources field. This would be my first opportunity out of college, and I'm excited about applying both my academic and practical experience."
- Express your well-researched and informed career goals – "Based on my classroom and internship experiences, as well as informational interviews with professionals in the field, I've developed an interest in recruiting. I believe it's a really good fit with my skill set and personality."
- Touch upon some key qualifications – "Both of my human resource internships were in recruiting, and my supervisors recognized me 'as a natural' for this type of work. I also excelled (and showed great interest) in my sales and marketing courses in college. I believe that I would bring excellent skills in communication, relating to others, influence and persuasion to this position."
- Show you're a fit – "I was attracted to ABC Company because of your great reputation. I know that you were recognized by the Business Review as 'one of the best places to work' in the Capital Region of New York. The values you express in your mission statement – integrity, quality and compassion – are congruent with my own personal values. I think this would be a great place to start my recruiting career."

Be concise, focused and professional in your response. The challenge here is to limit your response to 30 to 40 seconds. This should not be a novel; it is the foreword to the book.

“Why This Position” Questions

Q. Why are you interested in this position?

- A. The interviewer wants to know if this position is truly aligned with your career goals. Is this position a logical step along your career path? Be ready to talk about your researched and well informed career goals in more detail. Talk about how this position directly connects with your passion, and how it will help you advance your goals in a way that will also benefit the company.

In addition, the interviewer wants to know what value you will bring to this position – and thus the organization. So speak briefly about how your motivated skill set is a good match for what the position needs and requires.

Do not speak to areas that are clearly self-serving – such as you need a job, or the salary is great, or the vacation policy is very appealing. Focus more on your passion for the work and your skill for the position. This is not about you – it’s about the position and “how you fit like a glove.”

Q. If you were hiring someone for this position, what skills/qualities/characteristics would you look for in the successful candidate?

- A. How well do you know the position? Well, this is one of the tests given to you by the interviewer. Don’t be too general here – “I’d look for someone who has good communication skills and who’s a team player.” What position doesn’t require this? This may indicate that you really didn’t do your research and you don’t have any idea what you’re getting yourself into.

Be specific and relate it directly to the position at hand – “Based on the high volume of quantitative work, I would look for someone who is highly analytical, who has a proven track record in attention to detail, and who has mastered Microsoft Excel (including shortcuts and formulas).” By the way, if that’s what you would look for make sure you have it. This is a great opportunity to show you know the position, and then follow that up with a statement about your qualifications for the position.

Q. How did you happen to choose your college major?

- A. Did you stumble into your major? Were you influenced by what your parents, spouse or some other significant person in your life thought you should do? Do you have some naïve or stereotypical view of the careers this major will lead to that influenced your choice? If any of these apply, the interviewer will most likely not look favorably on your response.

The best major/career choice is one that is researched and informed. It’s one that has shown the path you have followed, and the compass you have used to reach your destination. Perhaps you changed majors multiple times during your college career. That’s fine, as long as you can verbalize a coherent, informed and understandable story about why you ended up in your present major. The interviewer wants to know that this position makes sense for you, based on your career path and choices (including college major).

Q. What do you see yourself doing five to seven years from now?

- A. The interviewer is probing about your long term career goals. They want to know that you’re serious enough about your career that you’ve taken the time to think long-term, and that you have a well-researched and informed plan for achieving your challenging (yet realistic) goals.

They also want to know that your career goals are compatible with the goals of their position and organization. Are you looking for fast and steady growth in a position the interviewer knows it will not lead to? If that's the case, your personal career goals are not consistent with those of the organization. So this question requires you to research the position and the organization, and to show how your career goals are consistent with both.

Q. Can you describe a time when you set an important goal for yourself, and you achieved it?

A. It's one thing to set a goal and make a plan; it's a whole other thing to actually do the work to achieve it. Here, the interviewer is asking for proof of your ability to achieve your goals.

This is a "behavioral-based" interview question. Interviewers believe they can predict future success through past performance (the generation of results). In answering these types of questions, you need to be a story-teller. It requires you to review your inventory of stories from your work and life experiences, and then pick one that's relevant to the situation and produced a positive outcome.

Your story, to be effective, must have three components – the situation, the action, and the result. Briefly describe the situation (not too much detail – you're simply setting the stage here), describe the action you took (what you did to contribute value), and end with the positive outcome (quantitative or qualitative results). Your result is the most important part of your story, yet it's the part that's most overlooked by the storyteller. A positive result or outcome will show the interviewer that you have achieved success in an area of importance to them. It will be an indication that your past performance will most likely lead to future success.

Interviewers will be looking for evidence of what you say you can do, and of the things that you will be required to do on the job. So make a list of both and think about the stories you would tell if questioned about them. Make sure each story has a situation, action, and result. Choose stories from a variety of experiences. Using stories from the same experience over and over again may indicate that your experiences are limited.

"Why Here" Questions

Q. What do you know about our organization?

A. Research, research, and more research! The number one complaint about job candidates is that they have not taken the time to really find out about the organization. Employers want to know that you know about them, and that there are specific reasons why you want to work for them (beyond the fact that they have a job opening!).

At a minimum, review the employer's website. Get information about them on LinkedIn. Google the company name and see what pops up in terms of recent news stories. Request a copy of their most recent annual report. Find out if you have connections at the organization, and conduct an informational interview for "inside information." Use as many sources as you can to research the organization and learn more about them.

The depth of your knowledge about the organization will truly make a difference. The interviewer will be impressed that you took both the time and effort to learn more about them.

Q. Why do you want to work here?

- A. You've done your due diligence in terms of research. You've learned as much as you can about the organization. Now it's time to connect what you know about the organization to your skills, abilities, characteristics and traits. Find something – or multiple things – that indicate you and the organization would make a good match. Maybe it's their vision or mission, or the products and services they provide, or their ranking and reputation within their industry, or something else – find specific things that indicate your interest in working for the organization.

This is about “organizational fit.” This is about two separate puzzle pieces coming together to form a clear picture that makes sense.

Q. Are you more comfortable working alone, or as part of a team?

- A. Most jobs require both, but more and more organizations are functioning in team-based environments. You should analyze the position and organization, and determine which (independent work or team work) will be more prevalent. Focus your response to the situation at

hand, while also maintaining your integrity in how you respond. You don't want to represent yourself as someone you're not.

Working alone requires focus, dedication, initiative, self-discipline, good judgment and other related characteristics. Working as part of a team requires good skills in communication, relating to others, conflict resolution, consensus decision making and other related characteristics. Remember to focus on the skills, traits, and characteristics that you possess which will also match the environment in which you'll be working.

Q. If you could design your perfect work environment what would it be like?

- A. This is just another way of the interviewer determining if you will be a good fit for the organizational culture. If you've done your research, found things out about the organization that really appeal to you, and can clearly communicate that to the interviewer as components of your “perfect work environment – then you're doing a good job of answering this question.

If, on the other hand, the organization is not a good fit then the description of your “perfect work environment” will not match. This will lead the interviewer to determine that you are not a fit.

Q. Are you a risk taker, or do you prefer to play it safe?

- A. How you answer this question will mostly depend on the culture of the organization. Most organizations today are looking for employees with an innovative and creative mind – in essence, someone with an entrepreneurial spirit who is willing to take risks.

But some organizations are looking for employees who will strictly adhere to company policies and procedures, and not veer “off-course” – or in other words, play it safe. With that said, if you truly like to play it safe and the employer is looking for a risk taker it may be time to reassess your appropriateness for the organization.

“Why You” Questions

Q. Can you walk me through your resume?

- A. The major purpose of a resume is to get you a job interview, but it also can be a “talking point” during the interview itself. As a result, you must be able to explain and tell stories about what’s on your resume.

Your response to this type of question should reflect a clear, concise and coherent review of what’s on your resume. Remember, with this question, interviewers are trying to find out more about what’s on your resume (including the stories behind the words), catch any inconsistencies from what you verbalize to what’s on paper, find an opportunity to “dig deeper” and ask more detailed questions, and evaluate how your education and experience directly relate to the position you’re interviewing for.

Q. Have you ever been fired from a job? If so, what were the circumstances?

- A. If you have ever been fired from a job, you’re not alone. You share this experience with many others, so don’t treat this question with guilt, shame or embarrassment. This is not a time to hide the fact you were fired, or to misrepresent the facts, or to blame others for being fired. Any answer you give should be honest, reflect a willingness to take responsibility, offer a clear analysis of what went wrong, and outline what you have done (and perhaps continue to do) to make sure it doesn’t happen again. Being fired should be viewed as an opportunity for learning and growth.

Q. If I were to talk with your previous supervisors, what do you think they’d say about you?

- A. Essentially, the interviewer wants to know what they’ll hear when they check your references. Will there be inconsistencies in what you said, and what your previous supervisor tells them?

If you have a good relationship with your previous supervisor, and you left your position on good terms, you can always ask them what they will say when contacted as a reference. Or if you have a letter of recommendation from them, you have a fairly good idea of what they may say to your interviewer.

If your relationship with your previous supervisor was less than stellar, you need to be honest with what you think they will say. This is not a time to lay blame or become defensive. It’s an opportunity to identify what went wrong, take responsibility for your part in what happened between you and your previous supervisor, and outline what you learned from the situation.

Q. Can you describe a time when you disagreed with someone in authority, and how you dealt with it?

- A. This is another “behavioral-based” interview question, so keep in mind what has been discussed previously in the goal-setting question under “why this position?”

Identify a relevant story from your work and/or life experiences, and remember to tell your story in three parts that are clearly and coherently woven together:

Situation – Describe a situation where you were in conflict with a supervisor, professor or someone else of authority. All conflict is not bad, so choose a situation where there was a “healthy disagreement” about a specific issue.

Action – Describe the action you took in that situation – specifically how you contributed to resolving that conflict in a calm, rational and constructive manner.

Result – Describe the quantitative or qualitative result of the resolution of the conflict.

Remember to be clear, concise and specific – and to always end with a positive result.

Q. What are your strengths? What do you do well?

- A. We all have things we're good at. So start by doing an inventory of your skills (specifically, your "motivated" skills). Now, analyze the job posting and/or job description for the position you'll be interviewing for. What skills are the employer looking for in their ideal candidate?

Once you have these two lists, look for commonalities. What skills does the employer want/need that you possess? Focus on these skills in your response to this question. Have at least three skills that you can talk about. In addition, be prepared to provide evidence (a story with a positive outcome) in regard to how you successfully used these skills to add value to a project, task or responsibility.

Q. What are your weaknesses?

- A. Who likes to talk about their weaknesses? Not very many of us! But we all have them, so have at least three you can talk about. If it makes it easier, think about them as "areas for improvement" – things that you can do but want to get better at.

When coming up with your list, don't make them so glaring that they'll be viewed as a red flag regarding the position – "I'm the biggest procrastinator that you'll ever run into. I always wait until the last minute to get something done." In addition, don't use a weakness that can be viewed as a positive – "I guess you could say that I'm a real perfectionist. It may take me a little more time but I always get it right." Most employers can see right through this kind of response.

Be honest about your weaknesses, and be strategic in regard to the ones you choose to talk about. The key to this question is being able to tell the employer what you're doing right now (the concrete steps you're taking) to improve in those areas. Most employers will respect your self-awareness in recognizing your weaknesses, your initiative in finding ways to improve them, and your action in taking the necessary steps to get better.

Q. How proficient are you with computers and technology?

- A. Technology is essential to just about any position today, from a position in a manufacturing plant to a high-level management position. Be prepared to discuss what technology you are familiar with (from hardware to software), the level of your familiarity, and what you're presently doing to "get up to speed" with technology you don't know (but may need to know for the position).

In addition, be ready to "back-up" what you say you can do. In an actual interview situation, a job candidate spoke about his proficiency with Microsoft Excel. The interviewer, sitting with her computer in front of her, pulled up an Excel report she'd been working on, turned her computer around so the job candidate could see it, and instructed the candidate to use specific formulas and shortcuts to make changes to the report. You need to be able to "walk the talk" at any given moment.

Q. Why should I hire you?

- A. Often one of the last questions an interviewer may ask you, this is your opportunity to tell the employer why you're uniquely qualified for the position. Don't talk in generalities here; be specific. Think of an attorney's "closing comment" in the courtroom – this is your closing comment. Leave them with something that will make them remember you when you leave.

Q. What are your salary requirements?

A. Provide your requirements in the form of a salary range (based on your previous research of typical salaries for the position in the region and your financial need). State that your salary is negotiable (particularly when considering total compensation – salary plus fringe benefits), and that you look forward to discussing it after the interviewer has had the opportunity to discover the unique value you can bring to the position and organization.

Miscellaneous Questions

Q. What book is on your night stand right now?

A. This may seem like an odd question and unrelated to the job, but the books we read reflect our interests. So this is a way for the interviewer to find out more about your outside interests, and who you really are. Have the answer be interesting, and something that reflects your unique personality.

Try to stay away from textbooks here. If you say the book is your Accounting Principles textbook, the interviewer may think that you're solely focused on academics – and thus don't have a life outside of the classroom. Once again, choose a book that will reflect a passionate interest and/or a unique aspect of your personality.

Q. If you were an animal, what would you be?

A. This question may seem even odder. But, once again, there is a reason for the interviewer asking this question. Animals have certain characteristics, and the animal you choose will speak to those specific characteristics in you.

For example, you may choose a lion because you admire those who have strength and courage – particularly in times of adversity. Or you may choose a Golden Retriever because they are dependable and loyal.

So choose a characteristic that you possess and/or admire, and then identify an animal that projects that characteristic. This is another opportunity to market who you are to the interviewer.

Questions You Can Ask

Q. Do you have any questions for me?

A. Yes you do – or at least you should have. Below you'll find a few sample questions. This is not a comprehensive list. You may think of others that would be good questions to ask. Use this, and your own ideas, to compile a list of questions to bring to your next interview.

- If I'm hired for this position, what will be the three biggest items on my list of "things to do" when I start?
- How long did the previous person in this position stay? Why did they leave?
- What do you think is the greatest opportunity facing this organization in the near future? The biggest threat?

- Who will be my team members? Can you tell me about them? What are their expectations of the person coming into this position?
- What attracted you to this organization? What keeps you here?
- How will my performance be measured over the first year? In other words, how will you measure my success?
- Can you tell me more about the education, training and professional development opportunities that will be available to the person in this position?
- From everything you've told me, I believe I can be a great addition to your team. What's the next step in the hiring process?

Precision Wrap-Up/Follow-Up – Your Cool Down

With the workout over, it's now time to "cool down." In this step you need to do the following:

- Reinforce your interest in the position prior to leaving.
- Make sure to inquire about the timeline or next steps in the interviewing/hiring process.
- Request the business cards from each person you interviewed with. You'll need these for your thank you letters and any follow-up.
- Immediately write down notes after the interview concludes so you don't forget important details.
- Write a thank you note to each person you interviewed with within 24 hours of the interview.
- Follow up in a professionally persistent manner.

For More Information

For more information and resources, visit the Excelsior College Career Center's site on interviewing: <http://career.excelsior.edu/job-search-tools-and-techniques/interviewing/>.



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