

Successful Interviewing – A winning strategy

Everyone acknowledges the importance of the interview in the hiring process. However, we often find that applicants do not spend time preparing themselves for the interview. They expect to just show up and answer the questions. Coming in “second” in the interview process is not of any real value. So the question is, what do the people that come in first and get the job offer do that others don’t do. Of course, objective qualifications and experience are important, but often *how you present yourself* is more important.

In other words, you must be prepared for the interview and must have a strategy to make certain your qualifications are presented in the best possible way. In this article, we will discuss the following topics.

- The purpose of the interview from the employer's perspective
 - Ways to deal with the natural tendency for nervousness in the interview
 - The need for a positive strategy
 - The importance of understanding the job requirements
 - A plan for matching your skills and accomplishments to the real job requirements
 - Types of **Interviews**
 - Unstructured
 - Structured
 - Behavioral
 - Types of **Interviewers**
 - Untrained (normally use unstructured interviews)
 - Trained (normally use structured interviews and/or behavioral interviews)
 - Emotional Intelligence search
 - Resonant reactions from associates
 - Dissonant reactions from associates
 - Closing the interview
 - A strategy for follow-up
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The Employers Objectives for the Interview

First, we need to understand the purpose of the interview. The interview is used to “weed out” unqualified candidates and to identify only those most qualified. In this process the employer is trying to find the technical qualifications for the position and to determine the personality and temperament characteristics of the applicants. Therefore, preparation for an interview must take into consideration the employer’s objectives as well as a strategy to respond to these objectives.

All applicants are nervous when approaching an interview. This is a good thing as it forces him/her to concentrate and focus on the interview. Excess nervousness may also make us too tense when we get into an interview and may cause memory lapses which will prevent us from showing our stronger technical and temperament characteristics. So what are the causes of nervousness? Lack of training and preparation for the interview are the two most significant. Since we know the interview is critical, it makes common sense to prepare well for an interview. However, few people actually take the time for necessary training and preparation. Some think that an interview is just an opportunity to respond to simple questions by the potential employer and does not require any preparation. Nothing could be farther from the truth.

Preparation for an interview

The best place to start preparation is with a thorough assessment of your Accomplishments and Skills. During the course of the interview you will most likely be asked a series of questions on how you would react in a given situation or how you previously reacted in the situation presented by the interviewer. The best way to respond to these questions is by illustrating your actions and decisions in one of those situations. After a careful assessment of the significant accomplishments of your career, you will be well prepared to use actual situations to show that you have successfully met the challenges presented in the question. Look further in this web site for more specific information on developing a list of your accomplishments. Further down, we will discuss the contemporary use of behavioral questions in the interview. To be able to respond successfully to these questions, you must have developed a list of your significant accomplishments.

Training and preparation for an interview must also acknowledge not only the types of interviews and interviewing styles but must also develop a positive strategy to respond in a way that demonstrates the applicant’s strengths and qualifications for the position.

Underlying the preparation for an interview is an understanding of the *real* requirements for the job. Normally in advertisements or in referrals by another person, there is very little about the *real* qualifications for the job. There may be statements about the duties involved, but they are *not* the job requirements!

There is always a reason why the employer is seeking to hire someone. That reason is that the employer has a need that must be met and has concluded that hiring another employee is the correct solution. In today's business environment, employers do not want to hire people, period! Employees are expensive; benefits are getting even more expensive. Employee's get sick, want vacation and cause problems of various kinds in the workplace. The employer would rather contract the work out, send it overseas or automate the job duties with machines or computers. But, for whatever reason, the employer has concluded he/she must hire a human being because only people can solve certain problems.

At this point, the candidate must understand the real dynamics of the interview situation. Most applicants go into the interview thinking the discussion will be about *them*. Absolutely nothing could be further from the truth. If the interviewee has that assumption, the interview most likely will not be successful. The truth is that this interview is really all about the employer and his/her needs. The issue is whether or not the applicant is the best person to help the employer solve the problem. Many interviewees make the fatal mistake of trying to show the employer how good they (the applicant) are!

The real questions in an interview are: Can this potential employee sitting here in front of me in the interview actually solve my problem? Is this person the best problem solver I can find for this problem at this time? The duties of the position that need to be performed are only clues as to the real problem. So, how can we do a good job in the interview with no idea what the real problem is? How can the applicant show he/she has the necessary qualifications, skill and previous accomplishments that demonstrate that the applicant can solve the problems? Many applicants can perform the "duties" of the job, but which one is going to be the problem solver and not a problem creator?

Fundamental to preparing for the interview is research on the specific problem of the employer. How can this external research be done? The first step is to think through the statements the employer has made about the duties and *anticipate* the type of problems these duties would

indicate. The second step would be general research on the company, its industry, competitors, product strengths and weakness and customer issues. Where do we get this type of information? This type of information is available through a good reference business library with the help of a research librarian, and from the internet. Most importantly, applicants can get this information from other employees of the company itself or others closely related to the industry, customers, suppliers, etc. This is one of the most important reasons to start networking. An upcoming interview with an employer is a good reason to contact other people in the company and elsewhere who can give some information regarding these issues. Our JTSG Resource List is invaluable for this purpose.

The third step, is internal research on specific issues, concerns, problems the employer has and is done *during* the interview itself. In the course of the interview, we can ask specific questions of the interviewer that will reveal the most critical issues that must be resolved. Suggested questions are in the documents named “Questions to ask HR” or “Questions to ask the Hiring Manager” located in the Interviewing Documents (Step5) section of this web site.

With information on the real needs of the employer, the candidate can then respond to the interviewer’s questions with answers relating to the application of previous experiences that have resolved similar or related problems. In other words, the key to a successful interview is to demonstrate to the potential employer that the candidate has the skills, interests and accomplishments in the past that give the interviewer confidence that the candidate will successfully solve the employers current problems.

Types of Interviewers

An important part of preparation for the interview is to beware ahead of time of the various types of interviewers and to prepare an appropriate response for each type.

Interviewers, whether in HR or the hiring managers, will either be trained to some extent or untrained. Many may have much experience at interviewing but no formal training. Some companies hire and train their HR interviewers and also their hiring managers. Some interviewers have very little and others have many years of interviewing experience. Regardless, preparation must include having a strategy that will be effective with trained or untrained, experienced or inexperienced interviewers.

Untrained interviewers generally will want you to review your background, education, training, physical characteristics, etc and generally want to get acquainted with you, but seldom will be able to go beyond that. They will make their decision (unfortunately) on their impressions and their somewhat fuzzy projection of what they *think* you will be like as an employee.

Other interviewers have specific training in issues that the company believes are important for success on the job, and will probe in depth regarding those issues. These questions may be clues to what their real problems are.

It is important to remember that generally in the first part of the interview, the interviewer will try to establish good rapport with you and put you at ease. That's fine, but remember that you want to remain "in control" of the interview. The interviewer will then want to be certain that you have the technical qualification to actually do the work involved. For example, If it is a software engineer's position and requires specific experience in Java, html and SQL and you do not have these experiences, there is not much you can do to turn that interview around.

If, however, you do have the basic technical qualifications, the interview will then turn to how well you fit within the organization. In other words, will you be a person who helps them solve problems or a person that creates more problems for them? Here our basic personality types come into play.

It is at this point that the strategy of guiding the interview in the direction you wish comes into play. Instead of their "gut feel" as to whether or not you fit, you want to allow them to learn that there are good reasons why you will fit and will be able to deal successfully with their problems.

The interviewer wants to conclude the interview by determining whether or not the interviewee will be a *resonant* employee or a *dissonant* employee.

A "resonant" employee is one who instinctively/intuitively causes other people to react favorably to them. In general, they may be liked, thought of as positive and focused on seriously helping the organization reach its goals.

The “dissonant” employee is thought of as one who has an “attitude” that tends to focus on themselves. They interpret what is happening on the basis of how it affects them, rather than the goals of the organization, and react accordingly. These people tend to be self-centered, often critical and negative.

Therefore it is up to you to make certain that you are seen as a resonant employee rather than a dissonant employee.

Employers naturally want resonant employees because they cause other people to work positively with them to get the job done right. In our responses to questions, the S-T-A-R system allows you naturally to show by your actions and accomplishments that you are a resonant employee. See “Behavioral Interviewing Illustrated” in the Interviewing Documents (Step 5) section of this website.

Types of Interviews

Just as there are different levels of training for the interviewers, so there are very distinct types of interviews. In general they are: 1) the *unstructured* interview, 2) the structured interview, and 3) the behavioral interview.

1. The Unstructured Interview¹

The *unstructured interview* is used less frequently but can be a little unnerving. Some interviewers will seem to “lay back” and not give much structure to the process. They will ask very open-ended questions and allow you to talk as little or much as you want. This approach demonstrates what you will likely do in a situation that is not highly structured or is ambiguous. The interviewee needs to be careful as this technique can result in a nervous tendency to “be a motor mouth” and say more than you may want to say. The *unstructured interview* can have the effect of being “a projective screen” onto which you project your underlying personality. Think before responding and don’t ramble. Ask “Did that cover the subject well enough?” or “Did I answer your question satisfactorily?” Take time to make key points if they are not already made. You could say “I think there a few things you might want to know about me” and cite past work experience, your goals, why you think you would be a good fit for this job or company, etc.)

2. The Structured Interview²

The *structured interview* is the most common type. The interviewer will have a set of questions that will be asked of all candidates. Candidates will be rated on how well they answered the questions and how they handled the process of interviewing. They will be looking for evidence of your ability to do the work and your attitudes about work. They will watch how you reason and how you respond when you don't know an answer or are unsure. Stay calm, think before answering. Be concise and don't ramble. Don't pretend to have knowledge or skill you don't have.

3. The Behavioral Interview³

The last type of interview strategy is the *behavioral interview*. Behavioral interviewing is a popular style now being used by most large organizations in their hiring processes. The underlying belief is that the most accurate predictor of future performance is past performance in a similar situation. The behavioral interviewing approach is more probing and seeks to pinpoint certain characteristics. It provides more objective facts on which to base employment decisions.

In the interview, your response needs to be specific and detailed. Here is where you must be familiar with your significant accomplishments discussed above. You will want to tell about a particular situation that relates to the question. Tell briefly about the situation, what you did specifically and the positive outcome or results. Your interviewing preparation should include identifying examples of situations where you have demonstrated the behaviors sought by the company. The S-T-A-R process is most helpful here.

The interviewer determines the capabilities and traits that are essential for success in the position. Areas of probing may include assertiveness, commitment to task, dealing with ambiguity, decision making, interaction, leadership, management skills, communication skills, organizational skills, problem solving, team building and others. Questions are designed to determine whether the applicant does or does not have the ability based on

specific past experiences. The interviewer is listening for factual information, outcome, and especially the individual's role in achieving that outcome.

The candidate can prepare for behavioral interviews by identifying specific examples for each of the traits. One of the best strategies to prepare for a *behavioral interview* is to think of specific situations from your life that demonstrate how you reason and problem solve, how you relate to others, how you function in teams, and how you deal with crisis and opportunity. Remember that skill with people and problem solving ability are central aspects of most jobs. If you lack work experience, then use examples from school or other situations. For example, you can describe how you handled a person on a school project who did not hold up their share of the work or how you were highly creative and motivated on a project or assignment.

It is also helpful to identify an unsuccessful example of a time when things didn't work out as planned. This provides opportunities to turn a negative into a positive through such statements as "the mistake caused me to delay the project, but it helped me to develop a project-tracking system which would reduce the chances of this happening again."

The behavioral interview technique is highly specific. After some preliminary questions, the interviewer will ask the candidate about a very specific example. They might say "tell me about a time when you encountered a problem at work and did not know how to handle it." Or, "tell me about a situation at work where you had to learn something very quickly and implement your learning." The interviewer may even give you a specific scenario.

"Suppose you were given a brand new sales territory to cover. The possible consumers know nothing of your company and the product. What strategy would you use to get started in the territory?"

Sample Behavioral Interviewing Questions:

The job applicant will want to note that behavioral interviewing or competency-based questions often start with a lead in phrase. This should

alert the applicant to the important fact that specific examples are being asked for. Examples of lead-ins include:

"Describe a time when you... "

"Give an example of a time in which you... "

"Tell me about a time when you... " "when you didn't want to

"Tell me about a specific job experience in which you... "

"Give me an example of a specific occasion when you... "

"Describe a situation in which you were called upon to... "

"Describe the most significant... "

"What did you do in your last job in order to... "

"How often in the last year were you called upon to... "

The interviewer might ask:

Give me an example of a time when you were...

- especially hard working, or not motivated to work hard
- proud of your ability to cope, or disappointed with your coping skills
- especially adaptable, or "hardheaded"
- motivated by a good boss, or de-motivated by a bad boss
- especially creative, or not able to use your creative skills
- able to accept change, or resistant to change

Decision Making and Problem Solving

- Give me an example of a time when you had to keep from speaking up or making a decision because you did not have enough information.
- Give me an example of a time when you had to be quick in coming to a decision

Leadership

- What is the toughest group that you have had to get cooperation from?
- Have you ever had difficulty getting others to accept your ideas? What was your approach? Did it work?

Motivation

- Give me an example of a time when you went above and beyond the call of duty to get the job done.
- Describe a situation when you were able to have a positive influence on the actions of others.

Communication

- Tell me about a specific situation where you had to get something across to someone you found difficult to understand.
- Tell me about a situation when you had to be assertive in order to get a point across that was important to you.
- Have you ever had to "sell" an idea to your co-workers or a group? How did you do it? Did they "buy" it?

Interpersonal Skills

- What have you done in the past to contribute toward a teamwork environment?
- Describe a recent unpopular decision you made and what the result was.

Planning and Organization

- How do you decide what gets top priority when scheduling your time?

- What do you do when your schedule is suddenly interrupted? Give an example.

After the initial behavioral question, the interviewer may seek to elicit more details by asking probing questions involving the candidate's thoughts, feelings, behaviors, dialogue and closure or how the situation turned out. Some examples include:

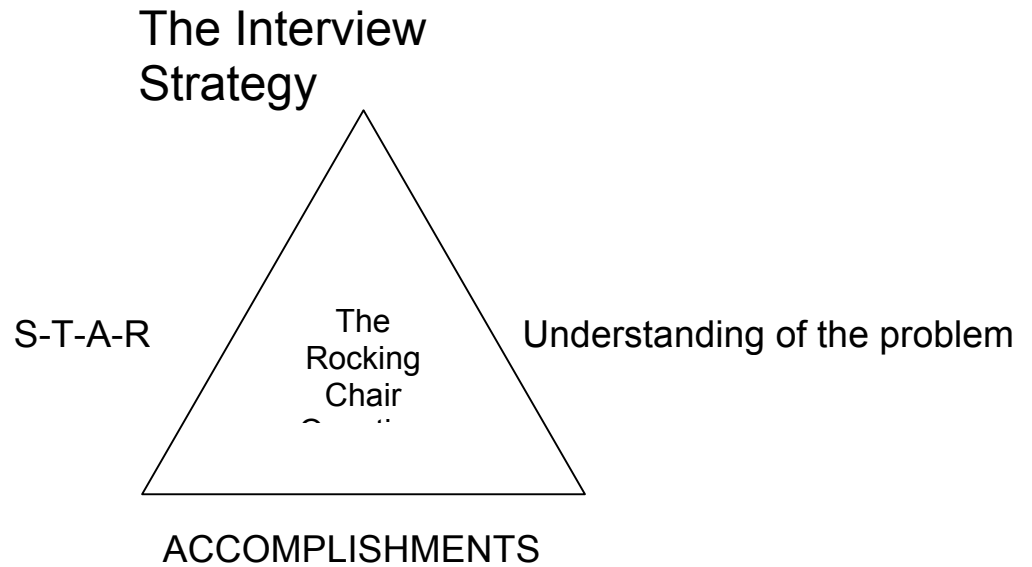
"What were you thinking when that happened?" "What was your reaction?" "What did you actually do?" "What did you actually say?" "What did other people say in response? " "How did it finally turnout?" "What happened?" "What was the end result? "
"Tell me more... "

"Is there anything else I should know about this situation? "

For appropriate responses we suggest you read the document "How to Answers the 64 Most Difficult Interview Questions" found in the Interviewing Documents section of this web site. Another web-based resource is, "How to answer the 109 most difficult behavioral interviewing questions." You will also find the link to this web site in the Interviewing Documents section of this web site. An excellent diagram to help you understand the response strategy to behavioral interviewing questions will be found in the document, "Behavioral Interviewing Illustrated," also in the Interviewing Documents section of this web site.

Please Note: Behavioral interviewing questions may be one of two types. In the first type you will be asked to respond to a *situation in the past*. The S-T-A-R system is extremely helpful for this type of question. The second type may focus on how you would react to a *situation in the future*. Questions like, "Suppose you were faced with this situation, (described) what would you do or how would you react?"

It is very important that in your response you deal with the three audiences that will always be involved. They are 1) your fellow employees, 2) your management and 3) your external or internal customers. The interviewer wants to know if you understand the dynamics of problem solving in a business situation, because there are *always* several parties and interests involved.



Closing the Interview

Earlier we have discussed the necessity for understanding the *real* problems the employer is seeking to solve. Generally the interviewer, at some point but often at the end of the interview, will give you the opportunity to ask questions. This is your opportunity to set yourself apart from other applicants. You must be prepared with good

questions that demonstrate at least two things. 1) That you have studied the company and are anxious to learn more about how you can make a contribution to the success of the organization and 2) that you have paid thoughtful attention to the details that were brought out in the interview. At this stage of the employment process, you DO NOT ask questions about benefits, vacations, etc. Remember you are there to discuss how you can solve their problems and not how the company can solve yours. This is critical.

If you are not certain that you understand the real problems, which are the reason they are considering hiring another employee, this *is* the time to ask questions to be sure you understand the problem the employer is trying to solve. Be sure and review the articles “Questions for the HR Manager” and “Questions for the Line Managers” elsewhere in the “Read These Documents” section.

Assuming you have now asked several questions to clarify the issues, you may confirm your understanding by feeding back to the interviewer what you understand are the critical issues they are trying to solve. Assuming the interviewer agrees, you are now set up for a powerful close. This is your opportunity to link your accomplishments, experience and qualifications to the company’s specific problem.

However, if you are not sure you really understand the critical issue, or even if you do, when the interviewer asks you if you have any further questions, you will want to ask this question. *“What will the person you hire for this position have to accomplish in the first six months on the job, to convince you that you have hired the right person.”* Think about it. The answer to this question is the basis on which the hired employee will be judged at the end of six months. This is precisely the information you need to know. Now you have a second chance to go over your accomplishments, experiences and qualifications that meet the criteria just described. This question we call the “rocking chair” question because few interviewers have been asked this question before. Normally they rock back in their chair as they consider their response.

Asking for the Job

Unfortunately, we often find that applicants leave the interview without indicating an interest in the job. Nobody wants to offer you a job if it does not appear that you want it.

Even if you may still be on the fence, you want to express an interest in the job. Once an offer is made, you generally can get more information for your final decision. Just after you have summarized your accomplishments, qualification and experience at the end of the interview, you may want to add something like, “The challenges (be specific if you can) we have discussed are very exciting, and I would very much like to meet these challenges at (name of company or department).

Thank you Note

It should not be necessary to discuss this step but, unfortunately, far too many applicants do not realize its importance. We suggest that you bring with you to the interview a note card that you can complete *in your car* before you even leave the parking lot. Thank the person you interviewed for the interview, their time and the information they provided you. It is helpful if you can mention one point that you believe was significant in your conversation. This makes certain that the note is personal. Again, tactfully express interest and indicate that you are looking forward to hearing from them soon. Then mail the note on your way home. Read the articles on how to write an effective thank you note found in the “Read These Documents” column of the Follow-Up (Step 6) section of this website.

Follow-Up

One of the greatest frustrations involved in the interview process is the wait to hear back from the employer as to whether or not there is continuing interest in your application. This is the time to deal with this issue. As you sense that the interview has been completed, ask the interviewer about the *process* involved in their reaching a decision. If they do not volunteer information about when they will contact you next, ask them when you might expect to hear from them. You may also ask them who to contact should you have any further questions, the line manager or HR department.

Assuming a week has gone by since your interview and you have not heard from the potential employer, be prepared to send a follow-up note.

When you haven't heard for a week or more

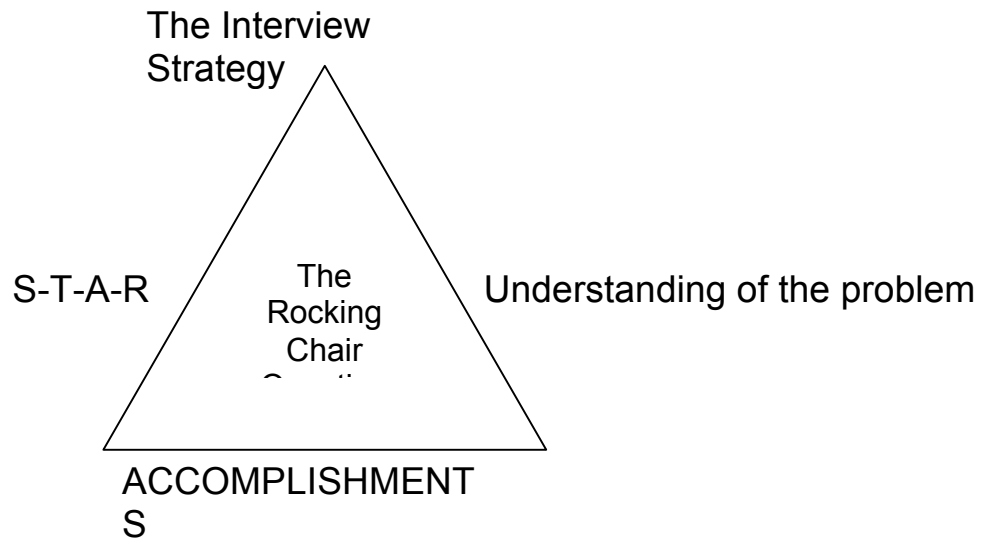
During the intervening week, look for an article preferably in a technical journal or an industry magazine that discusses some aspect of the work for which you interviewed. Make a copy of it and attach a simple handwritten or typed note referencing the relationship of the article to something discussed in the interview. It may be positive news about the company, a new product launch or some new technology that may be of interest. Without making a big letter out of it, mail it to the line manager you interviewed. The impact of this little action is always positive. It further demonstrates your interest without your bugging them, and shows that you are paying attention to issues important to the company. When delivered to the line manager, it brings your name again to the surface in a very positive way.

Summary:

Let's summarize the strategy by looking at a graphical illustration of what we are trying to do.

1. We will know our accomplishments and will have practiced describing them in terms of the S-T-A-R concept. To the extent possible we will respond to "behavioral interviewing" questions this way.
2. We will focus our answers on our understanding of the companies issues, problems; i.e., the reason they need to hire someone. We will research the company situation before we go for the interview by using networking, our Yahoo e-mail service and direct questions in the interview itself.
3. At the conclusion of the interview we will use the "rocking chair" question to sharpen our focus on the exact job requirement and then close the interview with a positive statement either by adding new information or reinforcing earlier

response that focus on the attribute being described by the interviewer's answer to the rocking chair question. We will then reinforce our interest in the position and the challenge just described.



"Job seekers do not plan to fail, but job seekers often fail to plan, which leads to the same result."

Have a great and successful interview!

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1. Interview Guide; The University of St. Thomas, St. Paul, MN
2. Interview Guide; The University of St. Thomas, St. Paul, MN
3. Interview Guide; The University of St. Thomas, St. Paul, MN

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