

INTERVIEW SKILLS: On the Phone and In Person

'TELL ME ABOUT YOURSELF'

Job Applicants Make Most Mistakes During the Interview, Survey Finds

MENLO PARK, CA -- Acing the interview is no easy feat, a new survey shows. Nearly one-third (**32 percent**) of chief financial officers (CFOs) polled believe job applicants make more missteps at this stage of the hiring process than at any other. **Twenty-one percent** of those polled said the greatest number of errors occur on resumes.

The survey was developed by Robert Half Finance & Accounting, the world's first and largest specialized financial recruitment service. It was conducted by an independent research firm and includes responses from more than 1,400 CFOs from a stratified random sample of U.S. companies with 20 or more employees.

CFOs were asked, "In which of the following job application areas do you feel candidates make the most mistakes?" Their responses:

Interview	32%
Resume	21%
Cover letter	9%
Reference checks	9%
Interview follow-up	7%
Screening call	6%
Other	2%
Don't know/no answer	<u>14%</u>
	100%

"Not knowing enough about the company or position, displaying a bad attitude or inquiring about compensation prematurely can all leave a negative impression with hiring managers," said Max Messmer, chairman of Robert Half Finance & Accounting and author of *Managing Your Career For Dummies*® (John Wiley & Sons, Inc.). "For job seekers, the interview represents a time to shine. Thorough preparation -- including researching the employer, rehearsing responses to common questions and understanding appropriate topics to discuss -- is the key to avoiding potential pitfalls."

According to Messmer, how candidates behave during an interview is often viewed as a barometer of how they will perform if hired. "Accounting professionals must be able to present complex data and concepts to senior executives, clients and colleagues in other departments, many of whom may not have financial backgrounds. By effectively delivering information in a challenging situation such as the job interview, accountants can prove they possess the communication skills required to be successful."

The resume also is a critical job search tool, Messmer added. "The most fail-safe method for ensuring all application materials are error-free is to have a friend or family member review them before they are submitted."

PHONE INTERVIEWS

In general, we prepare for a phone interview the same way we would prepare for an in-person interview. We research the organization/institution, prepare for standard questions as well as situational and behavioral questions, prepare our questions, and create an agenda. Important: Make sure there will be no distractions during the interview. If you are in a residence hall, close the door and put up a sign that says, "Interview – Quiet Please."

Do not assume that because this is not an in-person interview, you don't have to do as much preparation. The only difference between the two types of interviews from the preparation point of view is that you don't have to 'dress up' for the phone interview. Having said that, it's a good idea to dress in 'business casual' clothes for a phone interview. It's easier to project a professional tone if you're properly dressed and not still in your pajamas.

The critical difference between a phone and in-person interview is the absence of an affective response. Because you are not able to see the people interviewing you, you have no way of judging their response to your answers and questions. Their tone of voice will give you some clue as to how things are going, but for some people the lack of visual affective response can be unsettling. One way to prepare for this is to have a friend call you and do a short 'mock' interview so you become accustomed to the lack of affective response. Another option is to have a friend sit across the room from you during the phone interview and give you positive visual encouragement. This should be someone who can do this seriously, and not be a distraction.

Other differences between the two types of interviews are that the phone interview is often a shorter time; and the phone interview is somewhat more formal than an in-person interview. A good idea is to ask the interviewers how much time the interview will take. You'll often be told this when the interview is scheduled or when it begins. If this is a half-hour interview, keep track of time (have a small clock visible to keep track of time) and, in general, keep your responses crisp and to the point. Don't make any assumptions that because the interviewers don't sound friendly, that you're not doing a good job or that these might not be comfortable people to work with. Phone interviews can be challenging for the interviewers, too.

REMEMBER:

- You want to ask the 'golden question': "How would you describe the ideal candidate for this position?" in this interview, particularly if this is a first interview with the purpose of screening for final candidates. You'll want this information for the second interview, whether it's by phone or in person.
 - *I'm confident you'll agree that my qualifications are a good match to those you've described!*
- Don't lose sight of the fact that this is a sales presentation, just like the in-person interview. You want to 'close the sale' by:
 1. Asking the interviewer what the next step is (if this is a first interview), or when they expect to make a decision (if this is the last interview).
 2. Make one last positive statement ("I am excited about the possibility of joining your team, and I feel with my leadership experience and expertise, that I'd be an asset to.....").
 3. Thank them for their time.

Adapted from Mary E. Hayward, M.Ed., Professional Development Resource Center, School for International Training, Brattleboro, VT

INTERVIEW SKILLS

INFORMATION AND RESEARCH

Nowhere is the axiom “information is power” more clearly apparent than as an interview tool. When you have researched an organization or institution, you will experience an increase in self-confidence that will help diminish overall interview anxiety. You will also be able to communicate with the interviewers as a peer, rather than just another applicant. Your self-confidence will not only be evident to you, but will also be noted by the interviewers throughout the interview.

In addition to making you feel more confident and well-prepared, this research will generate ‘quality’ questions that will further enhance your ability to relate to the interviewers as a peer.

Some questions you should consider while you are researching are:

- What services does this organization provide? You want to have as comprehensive a picture of what they do as possible.
- What are some of the problems facing this organization, or other similar organizations (market factors, government regulations, funding challenges, competition)?
- What major organizational changes have taken place in this organization or institution in the last year? What are some of the factors that influenced this change?
- What are they highlighting on their website? Compliment something 😊
- Who are their competitors? How are they viewed in the general marketplace? How are the services that they provide viewed in their industry/field?
- What new projects, new technology, new funding sources have they developed in the last year?

For most research needs today, it’s a click away to the organization’s website. If a section is down or under construction, or if the site is rather bare-bones, contact the organization and ask for any materials they might have available. If you are really interested in a particular organization, conduct further research to see if they pop up in news articles or journals. It is very impressive to be aware of recent achievements. It helps establish your credibility and builds rapport between you and the interviewers.

NOTE: As you’re conducting your review of relevant information, keep a pad of paper handy to write down questions that occur to you as you’re reading. You will use these questions in the interview to display your knowledge and interest in the opportunity as well as the organization. It can also be helpful to print out the most relevant pages to study further and make notes or highlights that you’d like to discuss.

Adapted from Mary E. Hayward, M.Ed., Professional Development Resource Center, School for International Training, Brattleboro, VT

INTERVIEW SKILLS

BUILDING RAPPORT

Rapport is a feeling of mutual trust between you and the interviewer that allows for openness and a free flow of information. Once rapport is established, the interview will become a more interactive conversation about possibilities rather than a single series of questions and answers.

HOW TO BUILD RAPPORT

- **See the interviewer as a person**, not a function. Speak to him/her as you would to a colleague.
- **Address the interviewer formally** and, if invited, by her/his first name. Use the name of the department or company in conversation as often as you can.
- **Ask how much time has been allotted for the interview.** Toward the last five or ten minutes, ask for more time if you think it's needed, but be respectful to stay within the time boundary as well as possible.
- **Speak the interviewer's language.** Personnel interviewers may not know all the jargon of the position. Use lay terms if the interviewer is not familiar with technical terms. Speak out acronyms that aren't fully established.
- **Demonstrate that you are listening.** Physical gestures (nodding, facial expressions, etc.) communicate awareness. When something is not clear, ask the interviewer for clarification. This isn't the time to muddle through.
- **Reflect on what the interviewer tells you** and indicate that you understood it:
 - **Interviewer:** We're looking for people who can take over projects on their own and complete them with a minimum of direct supervision.
 - **Candidate:** I see you are willing to give people responsibility and authority. This is rare in some organizations where I've been associated. Could you give me a picture of how this works? How frequently would I need to report results to my manager?
- **Relax. Be yourself.** Laugh or express amazement or surprise when appropriate. Overuse of slang, however, may create too casual an impression.
- **Elicit feedback.** "Am I giving you the information you need?" or "Was I clear?"
- **Be personable, but not overly familiar.** People want to know what interests and excites you, but be careful to avoid political or controversial social topics. If the interview is promoting more social chatter than is necessary, deftly steer the interview back on track with a question about the job.
- **CAUTION:** Do you know someone on the search committee personally? Be cautious about acknowledging any prior personal relationships. Treat everyone on the committee professionally and equally, and keep the conversation about the job and organization. Inside jokes or comments can make other interviewers feel awkward and left out, which is NOT a feeling you want to invite into the room.

Excerpts from *Interview Express*, Tom Jackson and Bill Buckingham (1993)

INTERVIEW SKILLS

DO'S AND DON'TS

DO:

- Do have a neat and clean appearance, including attention to hair, nails, and clothing.
- Do get a good night's sleep.
- Do smile and maintain culturally appropriate eye contact since interviewers place emphasis on this.
- Do appear enthusiastic, using moderate gestures to make a point.
- Do speak clearly.
- Do find out the interviewer's name and use it during the interview.
- Do research the organization ahead of time to determine the dress code and the work environment.
- Do defer to the interviewer in setting the pace of the interview.
- Do write out questions to ask before the interview.
- Do indicate your interest in the job.
- Do let the interviewer end the interview, but try to make the closing remarks yourself.
- Do inquire about when you might expect to hear from the interviewer next.

DON'T:

- Don't be late for the interview.
- Don't drink excessive coffee or other caffeinated beverages before the interview; it causes you to sweat and can make you jittery.
- Don't wear perfume or cologne.
- Don't sit down or dash to your chair until the interviewer gives some indication to be seated; otherwise you appear overanxious.
- Don't lean on the interviewer's desk. Sit up in your chair.
- Don't demonstrate your nervousness by tapping your fingers, swinging your legs, playing with your hands, or fidgeting with your clothes or hair.
- Don't appear to eavesdrop on any phone calls the interviewer might receive while you are there.
- Don't read materials on your interviewer's desk.
- Don't overextend your humor or tell jokes.
- Don't answer questions with one or two-word remarks.
- Don't dominate the conversation or interrupt the interviewer.
- Don't mumble.
- Don't try to impress the interviewer by bragging.
- Don't lie.
- Don't criticize your current or former school, classmates, organization, supervisor, or employer.
- Don't show anger or irritation during the interview.
- Don't answer any questions that you consider too personal.
- Don't ask if you can have the job.
- Don't mention salary during the initial interview.

INTERVIEW SKILLS

COMMUNICATION TIPS

In an interview, **you are 100% responsible** for messages being received, either by you or the other party.

If the interviewer asks a question that you do not understand, **don't try to "fake it"** or mumble an answer; ask to have the question repeated or clarified. There is no quicker way to disqualify yourself than by making up answers to questions you don't understand.

Keep **observing the interviewer** to see if what you are saying is getting through. If not, rephrase your message and check with the interviewer to make sure you are being understood.

Avoid unnecessary information. Answer the questions with the required information, add anything you feel is necessary or will communicate your abilities, and then end your response.

Be observant. If you see that the interviewer's attention is wandering, change the subject or ask a question. If the interviewer looks surprised or puzzled, offer to try again (example: "I'm not sure I can clear; let me rephrase that.>").

Eliminate negativity, gossip, complaining, and criticism (especially of past employees!) from your comments. If you can't say anything good, don't say anything at all!

Avoid being tentative. Words and phrases such as "possibly," "somewhat," "I hope," "I think," "I'd try my best," express doubts about your abilities and undermine your competence. Instead preface your statements with phrases like, "I am confident that..."

Refer to your **accomplishments**, not just your responsibilities. Be specific. Use numbers whenever possible (example: "My suggestion saved the program over \$16,000 in one year.>"). Use active verbs such as "I designed / directed / improved / increased / trimmed / researched" etc.

Lighten up! While it's not all about joking around, don't be so serious that the interview loses energy and the interviewer becomes bored. Remember that people want to hire someone who will be pleasant to be around. Smile, laugh, and be amused as frequently as you can while acting appropriately.

Remember that **an interview is a conversation**. Like any conversation, it works best when both parties participate equally and keep the flow of the conversation moving along.

Adapted from Mary E. Hayward, M.Ed., Professional Development Resource Center, School for International Training, Brattleboro, VT

INTERVIEWING SKILLS

POSSIBLE QUESTIONS TO EXPECT FROM THE INTERVIEWER

1. A. What career goals have you established for yourself in the next five years?
B. What are your goals for professional development in the next three years?
C. How do you plan to achieve your goals?

2. A. What event or experiences initially sparked your interest in this field?
B. Why did you choose to enter this career?

3. You have no direct experience doing precisely this kind of work. What can you bring to our organization that will offset that limitation?

4. A. What is one significant problem you have overcome, and how did you do it?
B. What has been your biggest obstacle in adapting to another company culture? How have you responded to that challenge?

5. Compared with (small town/region), "X" (large urban area) is much faster-paced, stressful, and congested. How do you know you can make that transition easily?

6. Tell me about a challenging work project. Tell me about your most successful project.

7. What has been the biggest shortcoming in your work? What have you done to address that?

8. How have you measured your own success in previous positions?

9. Given your understanding of this job, can you tell me what your primary goals would be during your first three months with the organization?

10. How do you tend to manage disagreements in the workplace? Can you give me an example?

11. Tell me about the qualities you seek in a supervisor.
12. Describe the best supervisor you've ever worked for.
13. How would you describe your supervisor's management style?
14. A. How would you describe your relationship with your last supervisor?
B. How would your last supervisor describe you and rate your job performance?
15. Why have your recent positions been of such a short duration?
16. Why did you leave your last job?
17. What salary expectations do you have for this job? (you can defer this question!)
18. What aspects of your last job did you like the most? The least?
19. Why should we hire you?
20. Describe your major skills – both professionally and personally.
21. What two or three accomplishments have given you the most satisfaction?
22. Why did you decide to seek a position with this company?
23. What two or three things are most important to you in your job?
24. What have you learned from your mistakes?

25. In what way will you make a contribution to our organization?
26. What criticism have you received that has been most useful to you?
27. What are your prominent work habits?
28. What are your three greatest strengths?
29. What are your three greatest weaknesses? (Frame it, state it, pivot it!)
30. What types of things did you and your supervisor disagree on? Agree on?
31. What motivates you most?
32. Do you work well under pressure?
33. What kinds of work situations irritate you? (keep in inanimate!)
34. Were you ever fired from a job, and why?
35. How much responsibility do you like?
36. How does this job/internship fit into your overall career plan?
37. Tell me something about yourself.
38. We are one of almost two dozen organizations addressing this issue with a similar constituency. In your perception, what makes our organization unique? What specifically attracts you to our organization?
39. What would your former boss/colleagues say about you?

INTERVIEW SKILLS

BEHAVIORAL INTERVIEWING

Behavioral questions are meant to give employers an understanding of how you have handled situations in the past that may be similar to those you'll face in their organization. The goal of these questions is to produce enough concrete examples of past behavior to predict accurately future behavior in the target position.

Behavioral questions produce behavioral reports or stories by asking the applicant to think of, and describe, actions they took in particular situations (often at work, though potentially outside of work) in their past experiences. Behavioral questions are carefully worded and direct applicants to discuss what they have actually said and done in the past.

Behavioral questions discourage theoretical responses. By directing applicants to describe specific situations, behavioral questions require the applicant to describe past actions, and prevent the applicant from offering theoretical answers, feelings, or opinions. This helps the interviewer get a sense of the applicant's character, and better determine whether or not the applicant is a good candidate for the position.

There is no "correct" answer, since every applicant is asked the same question and will describe a unique circumstance. Examples of behavioral interview questions are:

- Describe a situation where you set your sights on a goal and saw it to completion, despite obstacles.
- Summarize a time where you took initiative and played a leading role to achieve results.
- Describe a problematic situation where you had to seek information, define key issues, and decide which steps to take to get results.
- Give an example of how you have effectively worked with a team to accomplish a result.
- Describe a time when you fielded a customer complaint, and how you handled the situation.

In the interview, your response needs to be specific and detailed. Tell them about a particular situation that relates to the question, not a general one. You can use the **S-T-A-R technique**:

1. Describe the **SITUATION**,
2. the **TASK** at hand,
3. the **ACTION** you took,
4. and the **RESULT** or outcome (and, if relevant, what you learned from the experience).

Always listen carefully to the question, ask for clarification if necessary, and make sure you answer the question completely. It's perfectly reasonable to take notes during an interview, and this is a good time to jot down a note about the question to **keep yourself focused**.

Your interview preparation should include identifying situations where you have demonstrated the behaviors and preferred qualifications sought by the organization. Your resume serves as a good guide for answering these questions. **Refresh your memory** before the interview regarding your achievements in the past couple of years. Use a variety of examples from past internships, classes, activities, team involvement, community service, and work experience. You can use examples of which you may be especially proud, such as running a marathon, exhibiting paintings at an art show, or running for student body president.

Adapted from the MU Career Center, University of Missouri; and Center for Career Development, Babson College, MA

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APPLICANT QUESTIONS – GO FOR QUALITY!

- How would you describe the ideal candidate for this position?
- What are the challenges and opportunities that come with this position?
- Why do you like working for this organization?
- What are the goals of this department? Have they been recently modified?
- What is the most important goal to be achieved by the successful candidate in the first year?
- What would you most like to see an employee in this position do to improve job function?
- Could you share with me your thoughts on the organization's mission?
- What other people and departments will the candidate be working closely with in this position?
- What organizations do you perceive to be your main competitors? How do you view your organization's work in comparison?
- What changes do you anticipate for the organization in the next few years in terms of technology, structure, scope, etc.?
- Could you share a few of the accomplishments for this department within the last year?
- How is information communicated within the department, and with other departments?
- How would you describe your organization's management style?

NOTE:

Have 8-10 questions prepared in advance of your interview. Create a mix of general questions (from the list above), and specific questions based on your research on the organization and knowledge of the position.

REMEMBER:

Your questions demonstrate your interest in the position and organization, your knowledge of both, and that you are a serious professional. They also help create and maintain rapport between you and the interviewers.

Adapted from Mary E. Hayward, M.Ed., Professional Development Resource Center, School for International Training, Brattleboro, VT

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AGENDA

Company/Organization: _____ Date/Time: _____

Position: _____ Location: _____

Interviewer/s: _____

List 4-5 key things you want to communicate to the interviewer (accomplishments, credentials, specialized training, experience, etc.):

List some special or unique things you can do for the organization/institution (how you can anticipate their needs):

Quality questions you will ask the interviewer/s (in order of importance; have additional questions prepared):

Research notes:

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PREPARATION CHECKLIST

- Reviewed and organized my research on organization; highlighted sections of webpages and/or prepared notes to use in the interview.
- Selected and prepared interview clothes (cleaned, pressed, shined, etc.).
- Refocused my career goals and personal strengths to meet the job description.
- Have a good understanding of what the employer is looking for or needs, and how to convince the interviewer/s I am the best candidate for the position (specific ways I can contribute).
- Filled out the interview agenda (you can create this as a Word doc and bring it with you to the interview).
- Answered all the organizational research questions I need to for this interview (questions that arise as a result of your research; example: the website states they are using FJW31L Software to track program costs, and you had no idea what that is).
- Practiced general interview questions I might be asked.
- Answered all situational or behavioral questions I'll need for this interview.
- Formulated a list of questions I need to ask the interviewer (mix of specific and general).
- Have collected all paperwork needed to bring to the interview: copies of resume, copies of letters of recommendation, reference list, interview agenda, selected organization webpages, copy of position description).
- Know the name/s of interviewer/s, have confirmed date and time of interview and have directions to the location.

Adapted from Mary E. Hayward, M.Ed., Professional Development Resource Center, School for International Training. Brattleboro, VT

INTERVIEW SKILLS

THE CLOSE

'CLOSING' THE INTERVIEW

As the interview is coming to an end, you must do what all good salespeople do: **close the sale!** If you remember that there are three things to do before leaving the interview, you will be able to leave knowing you have done your best. When you hear the interviewer say, "Do you have any more questions?", then it's your signal to remember these three steps:

1. Ask the interviewer (if more than one person, ask the lead person) when a decision is expected to be made.
2. Deliver one last positive job-related statement (example: "I am very excited about the possibility of joining your team, and I look forward to hearing from you soon.").
3. Thank them for their time.

THE THANK-YOU NOTE

The very last thing you need to do when the interview is over is to send the thank-you note. If there will be a week or more before you'll hear further from the interviewer, send a mailed card or letter (card if you established a warm rapport in the interview; letter if it's been a more formal process). If you'll hear something within a few days, be sure you have an email address for the lead interviewer at minimum (email addresses for the full committee if possible) and send a formal email the day after your interview.

Remember: The thank-you note is the most powerful tool in the job search process. It always brings your candidacy to a very professional close and is often the determining factor in the decision to hire.