

Interviews: What you Need to Know

First Impressions

First impressions matter. An employer will base a first impression on a variety of things, including: your online activities, your appearance, your attitude, etc.

- Conduct a web search on yourself to see what employers could access when pre-screening you as a candidate.
- Update security settings on social media websites.
- Be punctual. Arrive ten minutes early to allow time to collect one's thoughts.
- Look professional (neat, clean, well groomed).
- Select appropriate clothing for the type of organization doing the interview. If in doubt, dress conservatively.
- Turn off cell phone.
- Greet each person with respect and professionalism. Make eye contact and smile.

Research indicates that an interviewer decides to hire an applicant in just **51/2 minutes!**

It is normal to be nervous! Remember, the interviewer wants to hire you if you have the right qualifications and interest in the position.

Preparation

It is important to adequately prepare for an interview because this will likely result in achieving more success in that interview.

- **Know yourself!** You should review your portfolio, cover letter, and resume so you can effectively demonstrate your suitability for the position and value to the organization.
- Be prepared to give examples to substantiate claims on applicant's resume.
- Be prepared to **answer questions about weaknesses and mistakes.** The interviewer wants to see how you have grown and improved.
- Be familiar with the position and organization. Interviewers will often ask an applicant what they know about the organization.

Interview Questions

An employer asks an applicant questions to determine their fit in the company. Being familiar with the types of interview questions will help you prepare more effectively for an interview. It

is important to think about why a question is being asked and what the employer really wants to know.

1. Behaviour Based Questions

These questions are designed to elicit information about how an applicant has performed in the past because past behaviour is a good indicator of how an applicant will function in the future. Interviewers develop their questions around the traits and skills they consider necessary for succeeding in a position or organization.

Examples:

- Tell me about a time...
- Describe a situation in which...
- Recall an instance when...
- Give me an example of...

Themes:

- Working effectively under pressure.
- Handling a difficult situation with a co-worker.
- Applying good judgement and logic in solving a problem.
- Thinking creatively.
- Completing a project on time.
- Persuading team members to do things a certain way.
- Making a quick decision during absence of a supervisor.
- Making an unpopular decision.
- Adapting to a difficult situation.
- Being tolerant of a different opinion.
- Dealing with an upset customer.

Prepare for these questions by having **work, academic, and life experiences ready to share.**

Be certain to tell the truth, get to the point, stay focused, turn negatives into positives, and be consistent with your responses.

The **W5 model** is a useful method for answering behaviour based questions. The answer should take about 90 seconds (average attention span).

70 seconds:

- Identify the skill/knowledge/ability and give an example of how you applied or developed it.
- Consider what, who, when, where, why, how when answering the question.
- Mention what the successful outcome was.

20 seconds:

- Re-state the skill and outline the benefits transferable to the interviewer's organization.

Example:

“What experience do you have organizing?”

Qualification: Organizational skills.

Statement: I have developed excellent organizational skills by organizing inventory as a customer service representative at Walmart.”

Use examples, if possible, that are most similar to the prospective work responsibilities.

Describe **specific benefits the applicant can bring to the position** due to experience described.

2. Situational/Hypothetical Questions

An interviewer will use situational/hypothetical questions to establish how an applicant would react to and handle real life situations. For these questions, you must have a good understanding of the job and its requirements.

Examples:

- If you had met a project deadline and the supervisor was not available, describe how you would remain busy.
- There is a conflict between two employees. Describe how you would handle it.
- A customer is being difficult. How would you handle that situation?

3. Skill-Testing Questions

Potential employers often require proof that an applicant has the practical skills and savvy to successfully do the job. Skill-testing questions can be hands-on.

Examples:

- If certified in WHMIS, the applicant may be required to identify the meanings of labels on a variety of products.
- If certified in First Aid, the applicant may be required to demonstrate the appropriate actions to take with a choking casualty.
- If certified in OHS, the applicant may be required to point out safety hazards in a sample location.

If you do not know the answer, be truthful and indicate a desire to learn. If possible, indicate something else you know that may compensate for the lack of knowledge.

4. Problem-solving Questions

When answering these questions, the applicant should demonstrate their ability to process information quickly, think logically, and problem solve creatively. Employers place emphasis on the thought process rather than the conclusion.

Examples:

- How many automobiles are in St. John's?
- Describe how you would extract caffeine from coffee beans.
- Do more people prefer apples or oranges? Describe your reasoning.

Answering Problem-solving Questions

1. Listen carefully to what is being asked.
2. Ask clarifying questions to determine what the interviewer is looking for.
3. Respond by first explaining how you would gather data necessary to make an informed decision.
4. Discuss how you would use that data to generate options.
5. Explain how you would make an appropriate decision.

The key is not to worry about getting the “right” answer, but to demonstrate logical thought processes for solving problems.

5. Classic Questions

In addition to asking the other types of questions, many employers rely on a series of standard questions and the applicant should prepare for them.

Examples:

- Tell me about yourself
- What are your short-term goals? What about in two and five years? How are you preparing to achieve them?
- What is your vision or mission statement?
- What do you think you will be looking for in the job following this position?
- Why do you feel you will be successful in this work?
- What other types of work are you looking for in addition to this role?
- What supervisory or leadership roles have you had?
- For you, what are some advantages and disadvantages of working in a team environment?
- What have been your most satisfying/disappointing experiences?
- What did you like/dislike about your last job?
- What motivates you to do a good job?
- What are your strengths/weaknesses?
- What kinds of problems do you handle best?
- How do you reduce stress and try to achieve balance in your life?
- How did you handle a request to do something contrary to your moral code or business ethics?
- What was the result the last time you tried to sell your idea to others?

- Why did you apply to our organization and what do you know about us?
- What do you think are advantages/disadvantages of joining our organization?
- What is the most important thing you are looking for in an employer?
- What were some of the common characteristics of your past supervisors?
- What characteristics do you think a person needs to work effectively in our company/department?
- What courses did you like best/least? Why?
- What did you learn or gain from your part-time/summer/internship/co-op experiences?
- What are your plans for further studies?
- Why are your grades low?
- How do you spend your spare time?
- If I asked your friends to describe you, what would they say?
- What frustrates you the most?
- When did you last have a disagreement with someone at work, and what was the outcome?
- What could you do to increase your effectiveness?
- What was the toughest decision you have had to make in the last year? Why was it difficult?
- Why haven't you found a job yet?
- How will you be successful in the job, given your lack of experience in _____ (a skill area such as sales, fundraising, bookkeeping)?
- Why should I hire you?

The **PAWS model** is a useful method for answering classic questions such as “Tell me about yourself.” The answer should take about 90 seconds (average attention span).

Profile: Mention how the applicant became interested in this field. Mention experience that demonstrates commitment to field.

Academic: Talk about educational background and training.

Work: Highlight paid or unpaid work experience related to the job.

Skills: Refer to specific skills that relate to the position.

Use information about the position and company to answer these questions.

Tricky Situations

Awkward situations may occur during an interview. You should be prepared to handle this with confidence.

Salary:

It is acceptable to ask about salary. If the interviewer does not provide this information during the interview, ask about it as your final question. Do so politely and carefully.

Example: “This seems like a great place to work. May I inquire about the salary for the position?”

Silence:

If an applicant answers a question and there is no prompt response or follow-up question, remain calm and collected. The employer may be just taking time to process your answer. In response, ask the employer if they require further details regarding the last response. Do not ramble.

Note-taking:

The applicant should not take notes. You will not be able to engage in the conversation and show enthusiasm. Making brief notes is acceptable if it is important information that may be forgotten.

Being stumped:

Some applicants may have difficulty communicating their thoughts clearly and concisely. Remain calm and positive. Request clarification. Ask for a few moments to consider a response. You may also ask for the question to be deferred to the end of the interview. If you still cannot answer the question, be honest. When asked about a skill you do not have, you should reference a transferable skill.

Example: “I have excellent computer skills but I do not have knowledge of that specific program. However, I learn quickly and I am hard working, so I’m sure it would not take me long to catch on.”

Negative Questions:

Interviewers will often ask negatively phrased questions to assess the applicant’s perceived weaknesses and strengths. Be honest. Use an example that will not negatively impact performance for the prospective position. Mention how you overcame the weakness.

Example:

- What are your weaknesses as an employee?
- Recall a time from your work experience when you made a bad decision or mistake. How did you get beyond it?
- Give me an example of a time you did not meet a deadline at work. How did you handle the situation?

Example: “As an employee, one of my weaknesses has been dealing with conflict. However, I have improved by being more confident and assertive in more recent conflict resolution experiences.”

Gaps in Employment History:

Be prepared to provide reasons for frequent job change or gaps in employment history. There are many reasons this can occur: short term positions, lay-offs, health/personal concerns, a time for career planning, etc. Focus on what you learned from these gaps.

No Work Experience/No Recent Work Experience:

Tell the interviewer about relevant courses, workshops, volunteer activities, etc. Indicate if you researched the industry to stay knowledgeable. Convey interest in the position.

Example: “While I have not had an employment position in a few months, I feel excited and prepared to re-enter the employment world as a member of this organization.”

Being Underqualified:

Emphasize positive traits and describe how your experience will help you succeed in the position. Demonstrate commitment by describing how the position aligns with your career goals.

Interview Talker:

Sometimes the interviewer will monopolize the discussion. Tactfully break into the conversation to keep the interview focused on the applicant. At the end of the interview, you can always ask for a few moments to summarize qualifications.

Example: “It is interesting that you say that because I had a similar experience with a difficult customer. This is how I handled it...”

Ageism:

An interviewer can never ask how old an applicant is, other than to determine whether a candidate meets minimum federal age requirements under child labour laws. If you feel that you are younger/older than the average employee in the industry, you can refocus attention on experience and qualifications.

Example: “Some may feel I am too young to successfully fill a management position, but my qualifications and experience indicate otherwise. For example....”

Disclosure of a Disability:

People with disabilities are encouraged to focus on their abilities when choosing a job. It is important to be upfront and honest about a disability if it will require the company providing an accommodation. If the disability does not require an accommodation, you may choose to disclose the disability when the job is formally offered.

Example: “Due to a spinal injury, I have no sensation in my legs. However, I can get around and travel easily in my wheelchair. My injury does not affect how I think, solve problems, or communicate and will not affect my performance on the job.”

Reasons for Leaving Last Job:

An employer may inquire about the reasons an applicant left a previous job to determine if concerns from that job might impact the organization. Be positive about the previous job and be honest about the reasons for leaving. If the experience was positive, refer to the previous employer as a reference. If the experience was negative, focus the interviewer's attention on what you accomplished. Avoid speaking negatively about previous employers.

Example: "The reason I left my last position was I felt there were few opportunities for me to move up in the organization. The company was a considerate and positive organization, but it simply didn't fit my needs at the time."

Poor/No References:

If you were unable to obtain a reference from the previous place of employment due to leaving on bad terms, you must explain why. Refer to the references that you selected and suggest the employer contact them to get a more accurate description of your work experience.

Proprietary Information:

If asked to provide confidential information about a past employer, refrain from giving information not publically available. Revealing certain information could be a breach of confidentiality.

Criminal History

For a number of reasons, some employers may need to know if you can obtain a clear code of conduct. It is your right to refuse to answer this question if you so wish. However, be aware that doing so could result in be denied for the position. Jobs that require working with children or elderly people, for example, often require a code of conduct. This is a safety measure that employers and volunteer coordinators put in place.

Key Points:

- Tell the truth.
- Give as much information as you are comfortable with sharing. Too much detail may scare off employers, while too little may not reassure employers.
- Declaring innocence does not land well if you were convicted and did the time.

Answer Template:

1. State when the conviction occurred and note where it was non-violent or non-theft related.
2. Express remorse.
3. Tell employer if you have changed.
4. Tell employer how you have changed.
5. List accomplishments achieved since conviction.

6. Share some goals.
7. Reassure employer of commitments to move forward.

Example:

Charge: Drug Possession

I was convicted of a non-violent, non-theft related offence four years ago. It was a bad time in my life. I made some negative choices with the people who were in my life at the time and paid the price. I regret what happened and the impact it had on my family and friends. Today, I am a different person. Since my conviction, I have had no other offences, I received my high school diploma, and I enrolled in an employment program to build my employment skills. I eventually want to go back to school and train as a carpenter. I am very dedicated to continuing living in a positive manner.

Your Rights

There are clear human rights guidelines for employment interview questions. An applicant for employment may be asked to divulge only information relevant to the position applied for. By law, an employer must focus on gathering formation relevant to deciding if an applicant can perform the functions of a position.

Examples:

- Race
- Ancestry
- Place of origin
- Ethnic origin
- Citizenship
- Religion
- Gender
- Age
- Record of Offences
- Marital/Family Status
- Sexual Orientation
- Disability
- Medical History

Sometimes these types of questions are merely the interviewer's way of getting other information. Try to gauge what they are really asking. Otherwise, politely and considerately refrain from answering these questions.

Example: “I don’t feel comfortable answering this question.”

Ending the Interview

You should do your best to end an interview on a positive and professional note to increase the chances of being hired.

- Before the interview ends, make sure you have covered certain points.
- Understand the process that occurs before a candidate is selected for the job.
- Ask the interviewer when you can expect to hear about a decision.
- Enthusiastically express interest in the position.

Reasons for Rejecting Job Applicants

1. Poor personal appearance.
2. Over aggressive, conceited, “know-it-all” attitude.
3. Inability to express oneself.
4. No purpose or goals for employment.
5. Lack of interest and enthusiasm.
6. Lack of confidence.
7. Too much emphasis on salary.
8. Unwilling to start at bottom.
9. Makes excuses.
10. No interest or knowledge of company or industry.
11. Inability to take criticism.
12. Late to interview without good reason.
13. Wants job for only short time.
14. Intolerant, strong prejudices.
15. Poor personal hygiene.
16. Lack of maturity.
17. Critical of former employer.
18. No job experience.
19. Shows high degree of indecision.
20. Too cynical.