

# Interview Styles and Approaches

A job interview provides an opportunity for an employer and candidate to meet, assess one another, and make an informed process. You'll probably have several interviews with an employer before receiving a job offer.

During **pre-screening interviews**, usually by telephone, the employer narrows the applicant pool by identifying the strongest candidates to invite for an interview. In **hiring/selection interviews**, typically in a face-to-face meeting, the employer determines whom to hire based on in-depth questioning.

**The employer** needs to learn more about your qualifications in relation to a specific position and will evaluate your:

- Abilities—skills that match job requirements.
- Accomplishments—a pattern of success.
- Personal qualities—attributes that are likely to contribute to your success with the organization.
- Enthusiasm—your desire to work for this employer in this position.
- Short- and long-term goals—a sense of direction and interest in the career field.

**As a candidate**, you should take a critical look at the organization to consider your:

- Ongoing interest in the specific position—short- and long-term goals for challenging and interesting work.
- Comfort level with the employer—stability of business, “fit” with supervisor and colleagues, etc.
- Advancement and promotion opportunities—training and mentoring programs, etc.

## *Hiring/Selection Interviews*

Descriptions of some selection interview styles follow. Telephone and face-to-face interviews are the most common of these for entry-level positions.

### **Telephone Interviews**

Sometimes employers find it efficient to conduct initial selection interviews by phone. The content may be similar to other interviews you have, but additional preparations are needed for these interviews:

- Keep close at hand a copy of your resume, notes on the organization, appointment calendar, and questions you want to ask the employer.
- Dress for the interview just as if it were in person; you will perform more professionally.
- Practice ahead of time using a tape recorder. Strive for a clear, confident voice that projects a positive attitude and conveys a professional demeanor
- Schedule the call in a room free of interruptions. Never interrupt a phone interview to take another call or speak to someone who enters the room.

### **Face-to-Face Interviews**

One or more employer representatives interview the candidate. When two or more interviewers are involved, they may meet with the candidate together or consecutively. Meetings can take place on campus; at the employment site; or in a restaurant, hotel, or other facility.

### **Panel Interviews**

Several employer representatives, usually from different parts of the organization, interview the candidate at the same time. The panel interview can be stressful because questions may come quickly on a variety of topics.

### **Group Interviews**

Several candidates participate together in a group interview. When a question is posed to the group, an employer can observe behaviors and assess candidates' interactions and interpersonal, leadership, and teamwork skills.

### **Videoconferencing and Internet Interviewing**

These formats are cost-effective for an employer located in a distant city and may occur on or off campus using special equipment. Wear solid clothing that contrasts with your skin tone, focus on the interviewer's image, speak clearly, and avoid quick movements.

## *Selection Interview Approaches*

An employer chooses an interview approach that tests whether the job candidate has the skills and/or personal qualities needed to perform the job. Try to learn what kind of interview you will have so that you can prepare fully in advance.

### **The Basic Interview**

In the most widely used interview technique, an employer asks questions that pertain to the job and your qualifications for it. The interviewer may also ask questions about what you would do in certain hypothetical situations like those that would arise in the job. The employer generally asks similar questions of all candidates to compare and distinguish them from one another.

### **The Behavioral Interview**

The behavioral approach to interviewing is based on the premise that past performance and actions can predict how a candidate will behave in similar situations in the future. That is, if you have been successful previously in demonstrating capabilities and personal qualities necessary to do the job, then you are likely to perform the same way again.

In traditional interviews, questions are often open-ended and hypothetical. In the behavioral approach, the employer seeks an accurate assessment of your performance in an actual situation. For example, when interactions with others in a work group are highly important, questions in the two approaches could be:

- **Traditional:** How would you handle disagreeing with a colleague's approach to solving a problem you are working on together?
- **Behavioral:** Tell me about a time when you worked on a group project and disagreed with another team member's ideas.

### Successful Behavioral Interviewing

The interviewer will be assessing your ability to identify a situation that is a good example of the skill of interest, to explain the role that you played in the situation, and to describe the results of your actions. If you frame your responses using the "STAR" approach, you will make the interviewer's task easier:

- **Situation/Task:** provide a good example from your past experience.
- **Actions:** specify what you did in that situation.
- **Results:** detail the outcomes of your efforts.

### Sample Skills and Related Behavioral Questions

**Goal Setting.** Tell me one of the most significant goals you have set at Cornell and how you achieved it.

**Time Management.** Describe a time when you had to set priorities to meet a deadline.

**Problem Solving.** Tell me about a situation where you might have missed an obvious solution to a problem.

**Decision Making.** Tell me about a time when you had to make an unpopular decision.

**Leadership or Supervision.** Describe an instance in which you had to motivate others.

### The Case Interview

An interview including case questions is typical for management consulting and analytical positions. Questions are usually about hypothetical situations and can be ambiguous in nature. The purpose is to test your analytical and problem-solving skills in assessing the issues and developing a solution to the problem posed.

### Preparing for Case Interviews

Employers report that practice is the key to becoming adept at case questions. Advance preparation to learn what to expect is essential.

- **Familiarize yourself** with the types of questions that may be asked. Attend employer information sessions and workshops; meet with a counselor; refer to sample case questions on websites of companies such as Capital One, Bain, and McKinsey; consult resources in the CCS Library (e.g., *Ace Your Case!*; *Consulting Interviews*; *Case in Point: Complete Guide to the Case Interview*; etc.).
- **Learn common statistics** that may be helpful in solving/substantiating your solutions (e.g., world population, U.S. population, number of U.S. households, etc.).

### Successful Case Interviewing

During the interview, you will need to retrieve the pertinent information from the question, probe the interviewer for more details, and make appropriate assumptions:

- **Understand the Question.** Listen actively to the question and take notes, if necessary. Summarize the question and verify the objective.
- **Think Logically.** Determine what additional information you need and what key issues need to be addressed. Ask questions to probe for additional information needed to analyze the problem, develop assumptions, and determine a solution(s).
- **Analyze the information and establish a hypothesis.** Substantiate your response and provide logical back-up for answers. Explain what case facts led to a conclusion and, if your final answer seems flawed (e.g., number too high), do not be afraid to go back and reevaluate it.
- **Organize and structure your response.** Organize a response and use common frameworks (for instance, Porter's 5 Forces, The 3 C's, The 4 P's, etc.) when necessary. Keep in mind that the focus is as much on your approach as on your solution.
- **Have a conversation, but be concise.** Talk through your answer with the interviewer and explain your thought process. Confine your response to the question asked.
- **Be innovative.** Brainstorm creative solutions and offer alternatives.
- **Be adaptable.** Show ability to tailor your response to changing situations. Ask if you are on track with your assumptions, but do not let mistakes distract you. Stay focused on your response.
- **Summarize.** Make a summary or conclusion at the end.

### Types and Sample Case Questions

There are four main types of case questions:

- **Brain teasers** test your ability to think quickly "on your feet" and handle pressure. Example: *How many street lights are there in NYC?*
- **Market-sizing** questions test your quantitative skills and ingenuity i.e. *What will the market for laptops be in 10 years?*
- **Business operations** questions assess your knowledge of basic business principles, such as revenues and costs, fixed and variable expenses, etc. Example: *A bank discovers that its customer turnover is 25% higher than its competitors'. Why?*
- **Business strategy** problems focus on your analytical ability and strategic thinking for advising clients on future directions, diversifying product lines, outsourcing labor, etc. Example: *A sock manufacturer wants to start exporting to Germany. Should it?*

### Stress Interviews

While not widely used, this approach is more typical of fast-paced positions where quick decisions under pressure are needed, for example, sales and trading. The interviewer poses questions and comments in a challenging or aggressive manner to evaluate your composure, confidence level, and response to adverse situations. Interruptions, quick subject changes, testing, and uncomfortable physical settings are common in this interview technique.