



OCS

INTERVIEWING



Undergraduate Resource Series

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08/12

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ACE THE INTERVIEW

During an interview, potential employers are trying to assess your qualifications for the job, your "fit" with the employer or organization, how well you have considered your reasons for applying, how clearly you can express your potential contribution to the organization, and your "soft skills" such as communication and professionalism. In other words, the interviewer wants to know: Why should we hire you?

Employers are looking for applicants who are focused and mature, understand the requirements of the job for which they are interviewing, and can communicate how their skills can be used to meet those requirements. They want to hire people who are cooperative, organized, and hard-working.

Listed below are some suggestions for improving your interviewing skills.

Research the company, field, and position—Before the interview, read the employer's website as well as any print material that you may have picked up at job fairs or other hiring events. Be sure to stay current on industry news by reading daily news publications and associated periodicals. Google search the organization on the day of the interview to be current on any new developments. Utilize Harvard online subscriptions such as Vault (OCS) and Hoovers (Hollis) for additional industry and company information. Whenever possible, attend the employer's Information/Networking session or network with someone who works there to increase your visibility and to gather additional information.

Know your resume—Be prepared to discuss everything on your resume. Remember that your resume is the only information most employers will have about you. Expect questions about your choice of activities, concentration, and thesis if you have included a reference to it. Employers and organizations are interested in knowing how you've chosen to spend your time and energy, and why. Help your interviewer get to know you and differentiate you from other students. Don't be too brief when answering "what and why" questions, but don't ramble, either. Expand on your experience and skills, but whenever you can, **focus your responses on how these relate to the job for which you are interviewing.**

From a recent employer:

"All Harvard candidates are capable of doing the job. What distinguishes the candidates is the level of interest."

Practice interviewing techniques and answering questions—The old saying, "practice makes perfect" certainly applies to the interviewing process. Practice here doesn't imply that you are memorizing answers to questions, but instead assessing *how* you answer questions, whether you are making eye-contact, seeing if your explanations are clear, and understanding the reasoning behind certain questions and how to connect your experience to them. You can practice with roommates, family, friends, tutors, and of course advisers at OCS by scheduling a half hour appointment. The more experience you have articulating your thoughts and highlighting your skills, the more effective and polished your presentation will be.

There are a variety of guidebooks available that offer helpful strategies. Many of these resources are available in print and on the OCS website. Additionally, OCS offers a number of interviewing workshops. Refer to the calendar section of the OCS website for dates and times.

Prepare some questions to ask an employer—These questions will help you obtain the information needed to make an informed decision and also underscore your interest in the job. Make sure you know the next step in the process before you leave. Ask, “When might I expect to hear from you?” and, if applicable, indicate your continued interest in the position.

Make sure your attire is appropriate—A well groomed, professional appearance is essential. Anything else will detract from the best possible presentation you can make. Decide what to wear well before the day of the interview. A good way to determine suitable attire is to look at what people typically wear in the organization or industry for which you are interviewing. Both men and women should generally plan to wear a fairly conservative outfit in a dark color. In some creative and technical fields you may have more leeway in terms of formal vs. casual attire, but it is always safe to err on the plain side. Avoid: wild ties, attention-grabbing jewelry, strong scents and bold colors.

Attire	For Men	For Women
Corporate Dress	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • dark suit with a light shirt • conservative tie • dark/well-polished shoes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • dark suit or tailored dress • simple jewelry • dark/well-polished close-toe shoes
Business Casual	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • khakis or dress pants • button-down long-sleeve shirt • have a blazer and tie handy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • skirts or dress pants • sweater sets or blouses • have a blazer handy

Map out the location—Map out the location ahead of time, especially if you are in a major urban area or interviewing at a time when traffic may delay your travel. Plan to arrive 10-15 minutes early so that you can relax and compose yourself.

Have a good attitude—Project enthusiasm, confidence, and a positive attitude! You must convey the message that you are the best candidate for the position, and that this is the employer for whom you want to work. A job interview is not the place to be “laid-back;” it is up to you to “sell” yourself for the job. You must market your skills and experience to fit the job requirements, which you know from careful and extensive research of the employer. Be professional, polished, and confident.

What to bring with you to the interview:

- Extra copies of your resume
- Pen and paper or notepad
- Writing samples
- List of references
- When invited to a full-day of interviews, bring a bottle of water and snack such as a granola bar. Often the employer will provide refreshments but just in case they don’t, these will come in handy late in the afternoon if you start to “fade.” Take a moment between interviews to “recharge” out of sight of your interviewers.

Interviewing Basics:

- **Confirm the location of the interview**
- **Arrive 10-15 minutes early**
- **Bring extra copies of your resume**
- **Silence your cell phone**
- **Smile and shake hands**
- **Make eye contact**
- **After the interview, send a thank you note or email**

INTERVIEW TYPES

Behavioral/Fit Interviews

Many employers use what is called a “Behavioral Interview” to assess a candidate’s skills and fit with their organization. The principle behind this type of interview is that past behavior will predict future behavior.

In most cases, the employer has predetermined a specific set of characteristics, often referred to as “competencies,” that are required to be successful in the available position. Some examples of competencies include problem-solving, teamwork, communication, writing skills, and leadership. The employer then designs open-ended questions that ask you to refer back to a particular situation and describe how you responded.

Many employers believe that past behavior predicts future behavior.

INSIDER TIP: When you are asked a behavioral interview question, think about the situation you want to describe. What action(s) did you take related to the question asked and what was the result based on that action?

For example, an interviewer may request, “Tell me about a time when you were on a team that was not working well together.” The expectation then is that you cite a specific situation from your own experience. Unless the interviewer indicates otherwise, the incident you describe can come from your work, school, activity, or volunteer experience. It is important that you have something specific to say and that you can describe your own role and what you learned from the particular situation you cite. Be aware that the interviewer is expecting to ask you multiple questions in a thirty minute interview, so be as concise as possible while getting your point across.

This type of interview is a great way for you to tell the story behind your resume. Rather than merely presenting a list of your achievements, you have the opportunity to elaborate on some accomplishments that you may be particularly proud of. But like a good story, it is best to keep a few guidelines in mind:

- **Show, don't tell**—use a specific example and relevant details
- **Stay on topic**—remember the question you are trying to answer; don't get sidetracked
- **Have a conclusion**—be sure to include the outcome or what you learned from the situation
- **Make it resonate**—touch upon why your behavior or response would be useful to the employer or in the position

Phone Interviews

The phone interview has traditionally been used to screen a candidate's communications skills, interest in the position, salary requirements, and other qualifications. This method also helps minimize the cost of bringing an applicant from a distant location by determining whether they are a strong candidate.

In a weak economy, employers may opt to use the phone (and video) interview more comprehensively beyond a general pre-screen. In light of this, we encourage you to prepare as you would for any interview. Be ready to answer challenging questions and provide feedback on a variety of issues related to the field and the organization.

The main difference between a phone interview and a face-to-face interview is that you are not able to see the interviewer's reactions. There is a certain amount of energy that is shared between interviewer and interviewee that is somewhat lost in a phone interview. Make sure you compensate for this by being prepared, focused, and able to communicate clearly. A few tips:

- Enunciate clearly and do not speak too quickly.
- If possible, use a landline instead of a cell phone. If you are using a cell phone in a crowded place, the background noise and possibility of static could easily undermine your interview.
- Plan the time and place of your phone interview so that you know you will have privacy, quiet and a good connection.
- Dress as you would for a real interview. Dressing the part will help you focus on the importance and purpose of the conversation.
- If there is one benefit of a phone interview, it is that you can have plenty of notes in front of you as reminders of questions to ask, background information about the employer and perhaps even strategies for answering tough questions.
- Use your time wisely to earn a chance to meet the employer in person for a follow-up interview.

Video Interviews

For similar reasons to those described for phone interviews, employers are increasingly using technology to make a long distance interview seem as close to a face-to-face interview as possible. Skype, Facetime, and other video conferencing technologies have made it possible for employers to interview candidates in a more efficient and cost-effective way and are most often used by employers on the West Coast or overseas. In addition, these technologies have made it easier for employers to interview students when they are studying abroad or otherwise off campus.

Prepare for a video interview as thoroughly as you would for any interview. However, there are some additional things to keep in mind:

- Get familiar with the technology. Ask what product or service will be used and try to practice with your friends and family if you can. This will make you more comfortable in the interview, allowing you to focus on the conversation.

- Formal video conferencing tools can be expensive and are often paid for by the employer. In these cases, whether you use equipment at Kinko's or at Harvard, you will most likely still have a "trial run" where you can test the technology.
- Remember that the interviewer will be able to see you AND the things that surround you. Items in the background can reflect on you as a candidate. Consider removing items from the walls or shelves in your dorm room, or find an alternative location for your interview.
- Maintain eye contact. Many technologies allow you to view yourself simultaneously, and it is tempting to monitor yourself rather than stay focused on the interviewer.
- As with an in-person interview, dress appropriately for the position and/or organization.
- As with a phone interview, make sure that you have privacy, quiet, and a good connection.

Finance Interviews

The finance interview seeks to assess two things in a candidate:

- (1) fit for the job and the organization, and
- (2) technical knowledge.

In the world of finance, there are multiple functions such as investment management, investment banking, sales and trading, brokerage, financial advising, etc. Assessing "fit" for a position usually involves questions you are familiar with such as "Tell me about yourself," and "Why are you interested in working for our organization?" It may also include behavioral questions such as "Tell me about a time when you had to work with people who were different from you?" The technical questions will be specific to the finance area for which you are interviewing. For example, common questions for investment management might be "Tell me about your dream stock portfolio? What is your investment strategy? If you are given a market or an industry, what would be the steps to evaluate them?" The point here is to make sure that you have adequately reviewed the basic concepts of the area you are interviewing for and keep up to date on the literature in the field such as the *Financial Times*, *American Banker*, and the *Wall Street Journal*. **It is especially important to review the financial news on the day of the interview.**

Finance interviews may also use case questions as part of their general interview format. Although the use of case questions in finance interviews varies depending on the employer, it is important to be prepared.

Case Interviews

The case question, inherent in many consulting interviews, is one way of determining whether or not the candidate has an aptitude for handling complex business problems. How a candidate answers the case question can reveal his/her ability to do the job and perhaps their desire as well.

Case questions most often illustrate the nature of the employer's work. Questions are sometimes drawn directly from the employer's experience or can be crafted on the spot from news of the day. Most employers don't expect in-depth business knowledge or high-level business terminology (there are exceptions, usually on the individual interviewer level). What they are looking for is whether the student has the analytical or problem-solving ability and the business sense to know what matters in a specific situation and can clearly explain it.

Most often, the employer verbally presents a business scenario to the candidate and asks how he/she would approach the problem. Sometimes, most notably later round interviews, some employers will present the candidate with a case study in print and allow the candidate a designated period of time to analyze the data either alone or in groups. If the case question is presented verbally, make sure you understand what is being asked of you. Reiterating the question

is an effective way of confirming that you're on the right track to begin with, but also, it gives you a moment to think about the situation with which you are faced.

Once you are sure you understand what has been presented, don't be afraid to ask a few questions. A few clarifying questions may well save you from launching into an elaborate analysis that lacks focus and misses the point.

Case interviews step by step:

- **Repeat the question**
- **Ask clarifying questions**
- **Organize your thoughts**
- **Share your thoughts on how you are solving the problem with the interviewer**
- **Suggest solutions**

In preparing to answer the case, don't feel that you need to dive headfirst into immediate solutions. Remember that it's not the solutions they're looking for, it's the analysis. They want to hear how you're thinking about this problem. Organize your thoughts. Think of a systematic way to look at the evidence that has been presented to you. The guidebooks to answering case questions offer a variety of frameworks and strategies that can be useful tools for organizing your thoughts, but none take the place of common sense. You may not have taken business courses at Harvard, but you most certainly learned how to use analysis and reasoning.

Begin by talking about how you "might" want to look at the situation. Share your thoughts with the interviewer so that he/she can hear what you're thinking about the broadest dimensions of the problem before you begin suggesting potential paths that you might follow in pursuit of a solution.

Taking the time to introduce your approach allows the employer to see that you get the "big picture." In a first-round interview it is unlikely that you will have time to proceed through all of the analysis that is necessary. Having scored on understanding the scope of the problem and developing a strategy, the employer may very likely suggest that you spend the rest of your time on one area of the analysis. For example, "Let's talk about the customer. How would you carry out that analysis?" The case interview is not something you want to try without careful preparation and practice.

OCS will offer a number of opportunities this year to learn more about interviewing and to practice. Refer to the calendar section of the OCS website for dates and times.

Resources include:

- **Mock interviews**
- **OCS interview workshops**
- **Employer interview and case workshops**
- **Online interview tutorial**

Preparation is the key! Plan to spend some time each week preparing for interviews and continue doing so until you get an offer for a job or internship.

COMMONLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Traditional General Introduction Questions

- Tell me about yourself.
- How would a friend or professor who knows you well describe you?
- What strengths would you bring to this position?
- In what way do you think you can make a contribution to our organization?
- What are your long/short range goals and objectives? How will this job contribute towards your achieving them?
- Why did you choose Harvard? Your concentration?
- What class have you taken that has had the greatest impact on your thinking?
- If you could change something at Harvard what would it be?
- How do you decide which co-curricular activities in which to participate?
- In what way do you think you can make a contribution to our organization?
- What do you think it takes to be successful in this position/organization/field? In what ways does this fit you?
- What about this organization impresses you in comparison with others in the field?
- What do you believe are the key issues and problems in the field/industry today?
- Why do you want to work here?

Behavior-Themed Questions

- Describe a situation in which you were required to work with people different from you.
- Describe a time/activity when you were highly motivated to complete a task.
- Tell me about a time when you were tolerant of an opinion that was different from yours.
- Tell me about a time when you worked effectively under pressure.
- Tell me about a time when you handled a difficult situation with a co-worker.
- Tell me about a time when you were creative in solving a problem.
- Describe a time when you were a leader. What is your leadership style?

Questions to Ask Employers

- What is your timeline for the interview process?
- What will be the challenges for the person taking this job?
- Do you have new initiatives planned for the next year?
- What role will this position play in addressing these new initiatives?
- Can you tell me how your career has developed at the organization?
- I read on your website that you have a new office in Mumbai. Could you tell me more about what you're working on there?
- Describe your ideal candidate to fill this position.

Questions the Interviewer Should Not Ask *

- What is your age? What is your date of birth? Were you born in the U.S.? Are you a citizen?
- What is your race, color, religion, or national origin?
- Do you have any disabilities of any kind?
- Have you ever been treated by a psychologist or a psychiatrist?
- Are you taking any prescription medications?
- Have you ever been treated for a drug addiction or alcoholism?
- Are you married, single, or divorced?
- When do you plan to start a family?
- Do you observe the Sabbath or any days that would interfere with this job schedule?

* Questions courtesy of HRHero.com's June 17, 2005 article, "Questions Interviewers Shouldn't Ask."