

THE JOB INTERVIEW

a concise guide to preparing for the
Employment Interview Process



developed by the Career Services and
Transfer Services offices of
Mercer County Community College

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Introduction

The Career Services office of Mercer County Community College provides students and alumni with various services to assist in the job search process. These services include providing assistance with networking, Internet source information, preparing for interviews, as well as writing resumes.

Included in this publication are networking tips, tools to prepare you for the interview process, as well as sample interview questions. These questions along with suggested answers, if carefully studied and rehearsed, will almost certainly help you to navigate the tricky waters of the employment process.

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I Getting the Interview

We hope to provide you with valuable information and tips to help you with the interviewing process. But first, your initial goal in “the job-hunting game” is to get the interview! To do this, you must be prepared with the right tools and know as much as you can about the job search process. Here are some of the things you should be doing:

Have Your Resume and Cover Letter Ready

You should have your resume up-to-date and ready for the world of prospective employers. The Career Services office has put together a Guide to Resumes brochure that is a great resource to help you with this document as well your cover letter.

Remember: As far as resumes are written, “one size does not fit all.” They should be organized and written to highlight your own set of unique, specific skills and work experiences.

You should always have someone read your resume. Certainly, the Career Services office can help you in this regard.

Know How to Use the Internet

The Internet is a valuable tool that can certainly help you with your job search. There are, however, some “do’s” and “don’ts” involving this tool. Here are a few things to keep in mind:

- There are many websites that allow you to search jobs and post your resume. Job search websites that are focused on specific job fields or industries are usually better than wide-open, generic ones.
- Try to use job searching websites that have restricted or limited access to job seekers or groups. The job search website for MCCC students and alumni – www.collegecentral.com/mccc – would be such an example.
- Investigate company or government agency websites. Most of these will have sections devoted to current job openings and the application process associated with applying for these jobs.

Networking

When you are in a job search mode, you will need to extend your contacts with people beyond your normal circles. This would include friends, professors, people you know in your field of study, etc. The number of contacts is important, but the quality of your contacts is also critical. You need to let as many people as possible know that you are looking for a job. Many people can get good job leads through networking!

Other Resources

While the Internet continues to be a prominent tool for job searching, do not overlook the traditional print media. Industry periodicals, local newspapers, etc. can still provide useful job leads. In the Mercer County area, one such resource is the *U.S. 1 Business Directory*, which lists more than 5000 businesses and organizations in the Mercer County and central New Jersey area. Organized alphabetically as well as by industry, these listings include key information such as company address, websites, number of employees, etc. For more information about this directory, check their website directly at www.princetoninfo.com.

II Preparing for the Interview

Know and Understand Yourself

You have now been invited to interview for a position at the XYZ Company. Congratulations! This is an important step in getting the job. The more interviews you get, the better your odds at getting the job.

You now want to be prepared for the interview. Take some time to assess your strengths, skills, accomplishments, etc. Also examine your weaknesses. Consider what you want in a job and how the job links to your skills and strengths. This means you will need to know as much as possible about the job and yourself.



Learn About The Company

Before the interview, find out as much as you can about the company or organization. The Internet can be a source for plenty of information. Learn as much as possible about the company's products, employees, culture, etc. Many organizations will list or display a mission statement or company philosophy.

If your interview is with a business, you would want to know about its financial condition. Reference sources such as *Dun and Bradstreet*, *Moody's*, *Standard and Poor's*, and *Best's* could supply various financial information and ratings that may prove helpful.

Be On Time

As part of your preparation, make sure you know the location of the interview. In some cases, you may need to do a "dry run" or arrive with plenty of time to allow for locating the interview site.

Overall Appearance / Dress The Part

Your primary goal in dressing for the interview is to make sure you are projecting an image that is consistent with the position and organization that is interviewing you. Dress conservatively and wear subdued colors. Ensure that your clothes are neat, fit well and are clean. Avoid excessive makeup, perfume, cologne, or jewelry. Unless you are applying for a highly creative position in a very casual company, jeans and casual attire are not appropriate.

III. Interview Structure

Types of Interviews

Depending on the size of the organization, type of job, and other such variables, the interview process will vary. In general, larger organizations and/or higher-level positions will require more than one interview. The first interview would more than likely be conducted by a Human Resources representative. Second interviews typically involve the hiring manager and perhaps other colleagues who are familiar with the position to be filled. Smaller organizations may combine the two into one.

Educational institutions generally will use a “search committee” method, where a group of three or more may interview applicants at the same time.

Parts of the Interview

The actual interview can be broken into three phases: (1) an introductory stage; (2) discussion of your background; and (3) conclusion.

1) Introductory Stage

This is the part of the interview that sets the tone for the balance of the interview. First impressions are very important. Your dress, appearance, facial expressions, etc. all will come into play. The interviewer is getting an overall picture of some of your “social” skills. He or she will be assessing traits including your general conversation patterns, listening skills, eye contact, and composure. You should try to be relaxed, but attentive.

2) Your Background

Using your resume as a guide, the interviewer will now focus on the details of your background, including your education, work history, special skills, etc. Try to respond to questions directly. Avoid wandering off from the subject or telling unrelated anecdotes.

This is the part of the interview where your communication skills will be tested. Are you listening to the questions? Are you able to communicate your responses clearly and to the point? In addition, the interviewer will be looking at other important work attributes such as teamwork, work ethic, enthusiasm, and flexibility. Companies are looking for employees who are reliable, self-motivated and who are self-starters.

Here is where the “matching” process begins. It is here where your previous work experiences will be reviewed to see how they relate to the existing job opening. During this segment, you may want to gather information about the job and the company to determine if it is a good fit for you – just as they are exploring the same of you.

3) Closing

At this stage, if the interview is going well, the interviewer will most likely try to “sell you” on the job and the company. Such topics as training,

advancement, and employee benefits may be discussed. In addition, at this point in the process, you will usually be invited to ask questions yourself. It is important that your questions are well thought out, since the interviewer will be evaluating you on the type of questions you ask. Sample questions are included toward the back of this brochure.

In the final stages of the interview, you should express your interest in the position (if you in fact consider it a good fit) as well as express your appreciation for the interview. In addition, you should clarify the next steps – additional interviews, how long the selection process will take, etc.

IV. How to Conduct Yourself During Interviews

- **Express yourself clearly.** You should express yourself with enthusiasm and a high energy level. Be clear and avoid mumbles, “yeahs,” or “ums.”
- **Be aware of your nonverbal communication.** Watch your posture. Lean in and show that you are engaged and interested. Maintain eye contact. Avoid moving your arms and legs frequently.
- **Answer the question asked.** Stick to the topic with brief answers. Be honest with your answers and don’t exaggerate. If you do not know something, admit it rather than give the wrong answer.
- **Compensate for limited experience.** If your experience is limited, stress your skills, abilities, flexibility, and your desire to learn.
- **The bad-mouthing rule:** If you had a negative experience with a previous employer, keep your discussion brief. Be careful not to bad-mouth previous supervisors. They may be known to your interviewer, and/or your remarks may reflect poorly on you.
- **Focus on the future.** While you certainly will want to discuss your past accomplishments, move the discussion to the future. Talk about how you can contribute toward your prospective employer’s goals.
- **Present a positive attitude.** Express yourself with enthusiasm and with genuine interest. Keep a high energy level.
- **Demonstrate good listening skills.** Listen carefully to the interviewer. Pause and reflect before you answer. Ask for clarification when necessary.
- **Send a “thank you” letter.** Do this right after the interview. Be brief and show your interest in the position.

V. Sample Interview Questions and Suggested Responses

Studies indicate that employment interviews show patterns in terms of the types of questions asked and the information that the interviewers are seeking. If you know these questions ahead of time, you are better prepared to develop and practice your answers and thus you increase your chances of improving your interview performance. Here are some sample questions and suggested responses:

1 Tell me something about your background that's not on your resume.

This question has a couple of objectives. One, it is testing your listening skills. Your answer should reveal information not already evident from your resume. Being open-ended, the question also is designed to see how well you can put together a number of pieces of information about yourself.

2 Why did you leave your last job/employer?

Be open and honest. Try not to dwell on negatives about past positions or employers. Show ways that this prior employment helped you for the future. Do not "bad-mouth" your previous employer.

3 Why do you want to work for our company?

You should answer this question in a way that shows your knowledge of the company as well as how your skills can help the organization.

4 Where do you want to be five years from now?

Focus on how you will have developed and hopefully will have increased your skill level to be able to take on a more responsible position. Avoid discussing the desire to achieve higher-level titles such as Vice President.

5 What are your strengths? Weaknesses?

Answer this question in such a way that shows confidence in your skills and abilities. Try to show how your strengths relate to the available position.

As for weaknesses, volunteer those that are relatively unimportant and/or do not relate to the position. Discuss strategies that you are employing to eliminate a weakness. Also, consider opportunities to express perceived weaknesses as strengths. For example, you could point out that your tendency to be overly careful delivers value as "exceptional attention to detail."

6 Describe something you had accomplished in a previous job.

Convey not only what you accomplished, but also how it helped the organization you worked for. Try to link your past experiences to the job available.

7 Why do you want to leave your current (or a previous) position?

Avoid saying anything that speaks negatively about a previous job or employer. Focus on the future and how your past experiences have helped you to grow as well as how they could contribute to the available position.

VI. Other Frequently Asked Questions

Following are examples of additional questions you may be asked in an interview. Again, think about how you would answer these questions and formulate your responses ahead of time, prior to the interview.

- 1 Why has it taken you so long to find another position?
- 2 Why have you changed jobs so frequently?
- 3 Can you work under pressure? How do you feel about deadlines?
- 4 Describe the duties of your current job.
- 5 What qualities or experiences make you the best candidate for this position?
- 6 On the basis of the information you have received so far, what do you see as the major challenges of the position and how would you meet them?
- 7 Describe how you go about solving problems.
- 8 What do you admire most in others?
- 9 Can you tell us about other employers that you are considering?
- 10 From your academic history, what classes did you like best?
- 11 What was your most pleasant/unpleasant work experience?
- 12 What was the biggest conflict you've had at work, and how did you handle it?
- 13 Describe some of the committee work you've been involved with.

VII. Questions You Should Ask

As the interview draws to a close, the interviewer typically will offer the applicant an opportunity to ask questions. This is your chance to clarify any outstanding issues concerning the job, what is expected, etc. The interview process is a two-way communication event. You are being evaluated; at the same time, you should be evaluating the employer and position. You must acquire information that will help you decide whether or not to accept the job if it is offered, and to determine appropriate compensation.

The questions you ask – another mechanism for the interviewer to evaluate you – reflect your own level of communication. Keep the focus on the job and the organization. Avoid questions concerning salary, unless asked. Following are some sample questions that you may wish to use:

- 1 What objectives would you like the hired person to accomplish during the first year?
- 2 How would you describe the corporate culture of the organization?
- 3 Why is this position open?
- 4 Where does this position fit in the overall organizational structure?
- 5 What is the largest single challenge facing your staff this year?
- 6 How would my performance be evaluated?
- 7 What opportunities exist for growth or advancement?
- 8 Could you tell me about the people reporting to me?
- 9 What are your computer resources for this position?

VIII. Illegal Questions

Federal and State legislation protects the rights of employment applicants from discrimination based on age, race, color, religion, national origin, physical handicap, and sexual orientation. Most employers are trained in these areas and, in general, you should not encounter violations.

You may, however, be asked questions that, while technically not illegal, are clearly inappropriate. Such questions may be considered discriminatory, although the burden of proof will be on you.

During an interview, the employer is permitted to ask only those questions that are job-related. For a position involving a certain amount of lifting, it would be unacceptable for the interviewer to ask, “Are you physically handicapped?” A more proper question would be, “Do you have any physical limitations in lifting 50 pounds?”

If you are asked these types of questions, you may ask the interviewer to restate the question as it relates to the job. For example, a good reply to “Do you have any children?” might be, “I know this job requires some travel and this will not be a problem.”



IX. After the Interview

You should always follow up the interview with a “thank you” note. Keep it brief, mention that you are interested in the position (if you are), and note that you hope to hear from the employer soon.

If you are in the midst of interviews, be sure that your telephone answering machine or voice mail not only is available, but that it responds with an appropriate message. Cute jingles, loud music, etc. may be viewed adversely by certain employers.

If everything went well in the first interview, you more than likely will be called back for a second. This follow-up interview typically will involve either the hiring manager or someone more directly related to the position. Questions will be more technical in nature, especially if the position requires higher-level skills or experiences. Prepare yourself accordingly.

The MCCC Career Services office would like to acknowledge the career services staff at the County College of Morris. They were gracious enough to share their work and efforts in this area of recruiting and interviewing.

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