

Interview for Positions in Industry

<http://postdocs.cornell.edu/interview-positions-industry>

Perform

During the interview, stress what you can do to meet the needs and goals of the employer:

- Emphasize your accomplishments and experience.
- Reinforce the positive. Negative comments about past experiences could give the impression that you lack self-confidence and are hard to get along with.
- Demonstrate your enthusiasm and self-confidence by relaxing and smiling.
- Watch for clues that the interviewer is connecting with you. You are on track if he or she seems interested and relaxed, encourages you with nods and expressions of interest, and continues to maintain eye contact.
- If the interviewer appears puzzled, stop and restate your reply. If he or she has obviously lost interest, ask if you have covered the point adequately.
- Before leaving an interview, make sure you understand the employer's time frame and process for filling the position.

When answering questions:

- Be sure that you understand a long or complex question before you answer. Don't hesitate to ask for clarification.
- Take time to think before you answer. Short pauses are acceptable.
- Learn to generate answers that are neither too long (over 2 minutes) nor too short (under 20 seconds).
- Frame your answer with introductory words when appropriate. For example: "I see three main points that relate to this issue . . ."
- Use "bridging" techniques to introduce and expand upon information. For example, if asked about your research experience, you might respond: "For my PhD, I researched nutrient deficiencies in diets in western Africa."

After the interview, ask yourself:

- Was I properly prepared?
- Was I able to keep the interviewer's attention?
- Which questions were particularly tough?
- Did I learn enough about the job?
- Did the interviewer learn enough about me to make a sound decision?

Follow Up

Following each interview, write a short and timely letter of appreciation to the interviewer.

- Include any information or documents requested.
- Briefly restate any points that you may not have communicated effectively or add an important point you may have forgotten.
- For on-site visits, send a letter to the key contact person who arranged the visit and request that your thanks be conveyed to others involved in the interview process.
- Consider sending a separate letter to your potential supervisor, if you interviewed with that person.

Application Status

- If you have not heard from the employer a week or so after the stated time frame, call and ask for an update on your application status.
- Realize that activities and decisions may be delayed during holiday and prime vacation periods.

- If you receive a rejection from an employer you would really like to work for, follow up with another letter reiterating your interest in the organization and in future positions.

Typical Time Allotment for Interview Segments

- 10% Introduction (small talk, ice breaker)
- 60% Focus on you
- 20% Focus on the position/organization
- 10% Your questions and conclusion

Travel

Understand who is responsible for expenses and travel arrangements before accepting an invitation for an on-site interview.

- **Expenses:** Clarify *before* the visit what expenses the employer will cover (if any), if you will need to prepay reimbursable expenses, and who will make travel and hotel arrangements. You'll need to submit receipts for reimbursable expenses. Assume that expenses for personal entertainment and phone calls will not be reimbursed.
- **Hotel:** Upon arrival, ask for any messages or packages the employer may have left for you. Schedule a morning wake-up call to allow for adequate preparation.
- **Flights/other travel:** Avoid tight scheduling; cancellations or delays may make you late for the interview. Bring interview clothes and other necessary items in a carry-on bag.
- **Miscellaneous arrangements:** Ask the employer about local transportation options (hotel courtesy van, taxi, limousine, bus, rental car); directions, including parking instructions; and name of your main contact.

Dress and Personal Appearance

First impressions are lasting impressions.

- Learn how people in the field/organization dress; then dress similarly. If in doubt, dress conservatively. Revealing clothing is never acceptable.
- In general, attire is more formal/conservative for large corporations and less formal for nonprofits, government offices, and academia.
- Business attire consists of a two-piece suit in a conservative color (black, gray, navy) with a dress shirt/blouse; matching-color or dark shoes/pumps with low or medium heels. Men should wear ties.
- Business-casual attire varies by organization. In some, it might be a coordinated jacket and skirt/slacks and blouse/shirt (without a tie). In others, khakis/slacks and a shirt/blouse may be the norm. No tie is required.
- Pay attention to personal grooming.
- Polish shoes; avoid perfumes and scented body products (after-shave, deodorant, etc.); remove body piercings, cover tattoos. Keep jewelry or accessories minimal.

Interviewing during Meals

Meal hosts will provide feedback to hiring managers about your manners, poise, conversation skills, and judgment.

- Choose a light meal—you will be talking more than eating!
- Avoid foods that are difficult to eat, have strong smells, or may stick in your teeth.
- Order menu items that are mid-range in price, or ask the host for his/her recommendation.
- In general, avoid alcoholic beverages. Certainly do not exceed one drink.

Interview Etiquette

“Soft skills” make a good impression on a potential employer.

- Make sure the message on your answering machine sounds professional. Ask others whom you live with to inform you about calls, including name, return phone number, and time of call.
- Accept or decline an invitation to visit an employer in a timely manner. Accept the invitation *only* if you are seriously interested and haven't accepted or intend to accept another job offer.
- Inform the employer immediately if you must cancel or change the date of your interview. Plan ahead for conflicts with other interviews, exams, project deadlines, etc.
- Arrive at the interview 10–15 minutes early, allowing time for security checks, traffic delays, etc.
- Request an agenda in advance to know what to expect: Will you have one or more interviews? With whom? How long will you be at the interview site? Will meals be included?
- Greet the interviewer using his/her last name, asking for correct pronunciation, if necessary. Use first name only if given permission to do so. Introduce yourself if the employer does not call you by name. Make eye contact and extend a firm but not bone-crushing handshake.
- Treat administrative staff with the same courtesy you give interviewers.

Telephone Interviews

Sometimes employers conduct interviews by phone. The content may be similar to other interviews, but you need to make additional preparations for this style of interview.

- Keep a copy of your resume, notes on the organization, appointment calendar, and your questions for the employer nearby.
- Dress for the interview just as if it were in person; you'll perform more effectively.
- Practice ahead of time using a tape recorder to hear how you sound to others.
- 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. If possible, use a phone without call-waiting.
- Never interrupt a phone interview to take another call or speak to someone who enters the room.

Miscellaneous Interview Advice

- Bring a folder or portfolio containing extra copies of your resume/CV and other supporting documents.
- Consider any interaction with an employer—career fair, phone conversation, informal dinner, or lunch during the interview day—as part of the assessment process.
- Questions from human resources staff will be more general than questions from staff in the hiring group, who will focus on job content and responsibilities.
- Be prepared to answer the same questions repeatedly throughout the day, while maintaining your level of enthusiasm.
- If you receive a verbal offer at the end of your interview, respond on the spot only if you have no doubt that this is the right employer and position for you. Alternatively, request a defined time frame to make a decision.

Less-Common Interview Types

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 Interviews

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

Interview Approaches

An employer selects an interview approach that will test whether the job candidate has the skills and/or personal qualities needed to perform the job.

Basic Interview

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

Behavior-Based Questions

Currently popular with many employers, this approach presumes that past behavior can predict future behavior. The interviewer asks you to give an example of your past performance in a certain type of situation, often using a lead-in phrase such as, "Tell me about a time when . . ." The employer is not asking you simply to identify such a time. Instead, you should:

- Demonstrate your understanding of the question by selecting a good example situation.
- Describe the concrete actions you took. Even if you're asked about a group project, describe your individual contributions.
- Identify the outcomes that are attributable to your specific actions.

Sample Skills and Related Behavioral Questions

- **Goal setting.** Tell me one of the most significant goals you've 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 in which 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.

Case Approach

The employer asks a question and sometimes provides miscellaneous data. You are expected to use an organized approach to derive a conclusion. Management consulting firms might use this approach to introduce you to the kinds of questions consultants encounter. The case study tests your analytical ability, creativity, and problem-solving and organizational skills. The interviewer is looking for your thought process.

Prepare for Case Interviews

Practice is the key to becoming adept at case questions. Prepare in advance so you'll know what to expect.

- Attend employer information sessions and workshops
- Meet with a Cornell career advisor
- Refer to sample case questions on websites of companies such as Capital One, Bain, and McKinsey
- Consult resources in the Cornell Career Services library (e.g., Wetfeet Guide to Consulting Interviews, Vault Guide to the Case Interview, The Fast Track, Ace Your Case! Consulting Interviews; Case in Point: Complete Case Interview Preparation, 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.).
- Schedule a mock case interview to gain confidence in the process and develop approaches to different types of questions.

Successful Case Interviewing

During the interview, you'll need to retrieve the pertinent information from the question, ask 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 the key issues you should address. 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 your conclusion. If your final answer seems flawed (e.g., number too high), don't be afraid to go back and reevaluate it.
- Organize a response and use common frameworks. 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 don't be afraid to offer alternatives.
- Be adaptable. Show ability to tailor your response to changing situations. Ask if you are on track with your assumptions, but don't let mistakes distract you. Stay focused on your response.
- Summarize. Give a summary or conclusion at the end.

Types and Examples of Case Questions

There are four main types of case questions:

- **Brain teasers** test your ability to think quickly "on your feet" and to handle pressure. Example: How many street lights are there in NYC?
- **Market-sizing questions** test your quantitative skills and ingenuity. Example: What will the market for laptops be in ten 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 is considering exporting to Germany. What should we advise?

Stress Approach

Not widely used, this is more typically used for fast-paced positions that require quick decisions under pressure, such as sales and trading. The interviewer poses questions 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.

Mock Interview Questions

- For international graduate students and postdocs: Are you authorized to work in the United States? For how long?
- Tell me in 2–3 minutes the gist of your PhD research and why it is valuable.
- Give me an example of your problem-solving skills in the laboratory.
- Describe a project in which you played a leadership role; what was the greatest challenge?
- Describe a situation where you had a conflict with another individual, and how you dealt with it.
- What 2 or 3 things are most important to you in a position?
- What are your team player qualities? Please give examples.
- You don't really have much of a business background. How do you plan to fill in that gap?
- What are some of your career goals?
- Tell me about your extracurricular activities or volunteer work (and why you chose that work).

- What else should I know about you?
- Do you have any questions for me?

Phone Interview Questions

About the New Job and the Company

- What interests you about this job?
- Why do you want this job?
- What applicable attributes and experience do you have?
- Are you overqualified for this job?
- What can you do for this company?
- What do you know about this company?
- Why do you want to work here?
- What challenges are you looking for in a position?
- What can you contribute to this company?
- Are you willing to travel?
- Is there anything I haven't told you about the job or company that you would like to know?

About You

- What are you looking for in a job? What is important to you?
- What is your greatest weakness?
- What is your greatest strength?
- How would you describe the pace at which you work?
- How do you handle stress and pressure?
- What motivates you?
- Tell me about yourself.

About Your Career Goals

- What type of work environment do you prefer?
- How do you evaluate success?

Questions to Ask an Employer

- What are some challenges facing the department in the next 90 days? (This lets you know what to expect if you accept the position.)
- I understand the primary duties of this position. What are some of the secondary responsibilities? (Secondary work can account for the bulk of your time if an employer doesn't staff effectively. Know what's expected before saying yes.)
- Why is this position vacant? (You're hoping to hear that the previous employee was promoted—meaning the firm likes to promote from within. Perhaps it's a newly created position because of growth. But it might be that there's high turnover and the company struggles to find the right fit. You may be just who the company needs, but you don't want to discover on Day One that you're the fifth person in 10 months to occupy that seat.)
- How did previous employees excel in this position? (Be curious and learn from the success of others who've come before you.)
- How would you and the people who directly report to you characterize your management style? (Your prospective boss may be a micromanager or might be totally hands off. Probe a bit to understand what you would be dealing with.)
- If you could change one thing about the culture of the department, what would it be? (Another way of asking, "What's wrong with this place?" without being rude.)