

Interview Preparation

Job interviews are an opportunity to showcase your skills and learn more about a specific position and organization. Employers use the interview to determine if you are qualified for the position and whether you would be a good fit for their organization or unit. You should use the interview to highlight your most relevant skills and experiences and gather information about the company. Remember, all interviews provide an opportunity to strengthen your communication skills and assess what is important to you in your next role.

TYPES OF INTERVIEWS

Telephone/Skype Interviews

Employers frequently use telephone/Skype interviews as a screening tool before inviting a candidate for an in-person interview. Keep the following rules in mind when preparing for an effective phone interview:

- Provide accurate and detailed contact information in your cover letter and resume so potential employers can easily get in touch with you.
- If necessary, re-record your personal greeting to further demonstrate your professionalism. Personalizing your message assists recruiters and hiring managers to confirm they have reached the correct number.
- Answer your phone when it rings: state your name and wait for the caller to respond before continuing.
- Always conduct phone interviews in a quiet location with minimal distractions, preferably using a landline if available. Contact CDO about reserving an interview room on campus. If living with family members or roommates, communicate how important it is that you are not disturbed during this time. It is critical that you are able to concentrate and take notes while on the call. If interviewing via Skype, keep in mind that the space around you is viewable to the interviewer and should reflect your professionalism.
- As with all interviews, preparation is key. If possible, practice answering some questions with a friend over the phone to confirm the quality of your connection and clarity of your answers.
- Treat phone interviews as if you were speaking in-person. Dress nicely (no pajamas!), and be articulate and poised. Smile when you talk, and speak in a moderate, clear tone of voice. If you treat the situation casually because the interviewer cannot see you, it may come across in your conversation.
- A benefit of a phone interview is that you can use your notes to your advantage. In addition to a prepared list of questions (see page 5) for the interviewer, consider using a Phone Interview Log to enable you to answer questions efficiently. Also remember to keep a copy of your resume handy during the interview.
- Request contact information (email addresses) to facilitate your follow up with a thank you message.

On-Campus Interviews

The Career Development Office partners with employers interested in recruiting Chicago Harris students and alumni. On-campus interviews usually last between 30-60 minutes. A typical format includes greetings and introductions, discussing your background and interests, reviewing employer information, setting aside a few minutes for questions, and closure. The same format is also often used for preliminary interviews off-campus.

Employer Site Visits

Site visits can range from short interviews to elaborate, full-day events. It is always in your best interest to do as much personal research as possible ahead of time. In addition to researching the organization, try to identify potential interviewers and research their interests and backgrounds through search engines and social media sites such as LinkedIn.

If possible, visit the employer's physical site prior to your interview to confirm travel times and parking information. On the day of your interview, plan to arrive 15-20 minutes early to overcome traffic or other delays. Since you may be on your feet for an extended period of time, wear comfortable (yet professional) shoes. Depending on the length of the interview, you may also want to bring a bottle of water and energy bar or snack to remain energized—but do not eat unless on a break.

From the moment you arrive on site, consciously treat everyone politely and respectfully from the receptionist to senior level administrators. You will be watched and evaluated throughout your visits from seemingly casual social interactions to formal interviews.

In addition to one-on-one interviews, other formats include:

- **Panel Interviews:** Involve a number of interviewers, usually between 2-5, who represent a variety of teams and/or departments. Prior to the interview, research the organizational roles of the people you will be meeting so you can ask questions that display your knowledge of that individual's background. Be sure to maintain comfortable eye contact with each of the interviewers.
- **Group Interviews:** Consist of several applicants interacting simultaneously. Employers incorporate group interviews to assess a candidate's ability to work in a team, leadership skills, and other important interpersonal qualities.
- **Case Interviews:** Designed to evaluate your analytical skills, creativity with ambiguous situations, and ability to interface with potential clients. These interviews are also used to gauge your sense of prioritization and judgment within a business context. Visit this [link](#) to view sample case interview questions representing a variety of issues and industries under "Consulting."

INTERVIEW PREPARATION

By the time you have secured an interview, you most likely have evaluated your skills and conducted market research. If you need additional preparation in these areas, please refer to the [Career Development Guides](#).

Preparing Responses and Questions

Using the information from your personal assessment and company research, develop a strategy to best present your qualifications and organizational fit. Consider the following criteria:

1. **Why are you the best person for the position?**
Consider the applicability of your prior experiences and current skills to the position.
2. **How are you prepared to address the challenges of the position?**
Consider the lessons you've learned from past experiences and how they relate to these challenges.
3. **What are your personal strengths that make you a good fit?**
Consider which characteristics are most relevant and interesting to the employer.

Types of Interview Questions

In advance of the interview, develop a spreadsheet with answers to commonly asked interview questions (see page 4). Prepare your answers to these questions thoroughly and with meaningful reflection—your preparation will be evident throughout the interview. In addition to rehearsing your answers, it is also very important to prepare strong interview questions that you will ask the employer (see page 5).

STARR Method

In posing interview questions, employers seek to learn more about your approach to problem solving, communication abilities, and professional contributions. If you are changing careers, carefully assess the applicability of your experiences, and use concrete examples to illustrate your transferable skills. The STARR method can be a useful tool to craft compelling and applicable answers to a variety of interview questions.

SITUATION: Present a prior experience that will highlight transferable skills/knowledge/ability.

TASK AND ACTIONS: Describe the steps you carried out to address the situation.

RESULTS: Summarize your impact.

RELATE: How does this relate to your target position/employer?

Remember: *Always make an explicit connection between your prior experiences and the responsibilities of your target position.*

Practice, Practice, Practice

As mentioned earlier, practicing your responses, questions, and demeanor is a critical component of effective interviewing. Presenting yourself professionally is a skill that you develop over time. Make an appointment through [HarrisLink](#) to conduct a confidential mock interview with a Chicago Harris Career Counselor. Ask for feedback on your handshake, facial expressions, and personal mannerisms.

Prior to the interview, get a good night's sleep and have a solid breakfast. It is important to be energized, yet relaxed enough to collect your thoughts, listen attentively, and respond calmly and clearly to questions.

DRESSING FOR INTERVIEWS

In most cases, it is best to dress conservatively in a suit of a traditional hue (black, navy, gray) that makes you feel comfortable and confident. You want the employer to focus on you, not your appearance. Please note that different organizations may have varying standards for professional dress and appearance. If you have any questions, please contact a CDO counselor.

Tips for comportment:

WOMEN	MEN
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Controlled hairstyles• Neatly manicured hands• Formal suit/skirts just above the knee or lower, or a business pantsuit• Dress shoes (preferably closed-toe), and neutral stockings (no patterns or colors)• Makeup and perfume, light and natural• Conservative jewelry	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Controlled hairstyles• Neatly manicured hands• Pressed dress shirt, suit, and conservative tie• Dress shoes and dark knee-high socks

THE INTERVIEW

Employers want to know:

- **Why should I hire you?**
- **Why would you be good for my organization?**

The employer's goal in the interview is to confirm the answers to these two questions. Everything about you—from the answers you provide, to your manner and dress—should address these two questions.

General Advice

- Always arrive at least 15 minutes early for an interview. Again, it is very important to know exactly where you are going, available parking, and traffic estimations.
- When greeted by the employer, smile, give a firm handshake, and maintain eye contact.
- Be professional and polite at all times. Focus on the positive, particularly when speaking of colleagues, managers, and former employers.
- Display candid interest in the interviewer, position, and employer. Enthusiasm is important.
- Present yourself positively and honestly, highlighting your past achievements. Remember the STARR method and provide concrete examples of when/how you have successfully used your skills and abilities.
- Express yourself clearly and concisely. Answer the specific question asked, incorporating an example, and then stop talking. Do not be intimidated by silence. Allow the interviewer time to ask a follow up question.
- Careful listening is important to help you offer relevant and articulate answers. If you are unsure of how to respond to a particular question, ask for clarification. Additionally, if you feel the interviewer did not fully understand your answer, ask if you may provide further explanation.
- Bring extra copies of your resume and a list of references.

The Interviewer's Questions

While there are a variety of questions an interviewer may pose, he/she is striving to address the two main concerns listed above: what do you bring to the job, and how will you fit in at the organization? A thorough interviewer will often address your responses with additional questions derived from your answers. Respond thoughtfully as the interviewer probes deeper into a topic. Know your resume and be prepared to answer detailed questions about the information in it. Remain cognizant of the interviewer's body language and watch his/her reactions to your responses to determine key topics and skills of interest.

Standard Questions:

- Tell me about yourself. Walk me through your resume.
- Why did you decide to study public policy?
- Why are you interested in this particular position? Organization?
- Where do you see yourself in five years? How does this position align with that goal?
- What are your greatest strengths? Weaknesses?
- Why should I hire you?
- How do you deal with pressure?
- How do you prioritize multiple tasks?
- What three adjectives best describe you?
- Describe your time management skills.
- What accomplishments have given you the most satisfaction? Why?
- What two or three things are most important to you in your next position?
- What motivates you?
- Describe the significance of your extracurricular, volunteer, or academic activities.
- What book are you reading now?
- Describe the course that has had the greatest impact on your thinking.
- If you could make a major policy change in the city of Chicago, what would it be?

In addition to standard inquiries, employers are increasingly incorporating behavioral-based questions throughout interviews. In asking these questions, employers seek to learn more about the frequency in which you have encountered certain situations, your reactions, and the skill sets you chose to incorporate in your decision-making. You can answer many of these questions using the STARR technique described on page 2.

Behavioral Questions:

- Describe one of your greatest accomplishments. Describe a time you failed. What have you learned about yourself as a result of these experiences?
- Tell me about a time when you have successfully resolved a conflict.
- Tell me about a time you led a team/project.
- Describe a time when you made a difficult decision.
- Tell me about a time when you had to use persuasion. What was the outcome?
- Describe how you have applied analytical skills to situations outside of your coursework.

Your Questions

The questions you ask can be as important as the ones you answer. This is a key opportunity to demonstrate your organizational research and sincere interest in the position and organization. Avoid asking questions that could be answered by their website or other easily available materials—you will appear unprepared. Additionally, do not raise salary or benefit questions in a first interview. When possible, tailor your questions to specific aspects of the organization, team, or position.

For example:

“I know your organization raised over two million dollars for environmental research in your last campaign. How do you see this position contributing to this year’s goals?”

“As I mentioned earlier, there are multiple areas of interest to me in your organization, including minority poverty and schooling. How do you envision this position interacting with multiple organizational units?”

Additional Sample Questions:

- What would I be expected to accomplish in the first six months on the job? In the first year?
- What are the priorities of this department over the next five years?
- How would you describe your organization’s culture?
- How would you describe your management style?
- What are the characteristics of a successful person in your organization?
- What training is available for new employees?
- What opportunities are there for career development?
- What do you find to be the most rewarding aspects of your work? The most challenging?

Wrap Up

Remember to think about how you intend to close the interview. It is your last opportunity to give the interviewer a positive impression and convey your passion for the position. It is always wise to ask if they would like you to provide further clarification on any of your earlier comments. This provides a second opportunity to address any remaining concerns and further persuade the employer that you are the right person for the job. Remember to ask for a business card and make sure you know the names of the people with whom you interviewed—this will save you time in writing thank you notes.

FOLLOWING THE INTERVIEW

Evaluate the interview. Record the questions you found most difficult, and consider the following:

- How could you have improved the interview?
- Are you satisfied with your answers to difficult questions? If not, how can you respond better in the future?
- Do you need to do more research? What resources might be useful in providing additional information?

Always send the interviewer(s) a thank you letter or email. In addition to showing your appreciation for the interviewer’s time, this correspondence allows you to reiterate your continued interest in and qualification for the position. Send a letter within 24 hours to each of the interviewers. Even if the position is no longer of interest to you, you should still send a thank you as a common courtesy (and in the case an additional opportunity arises.)

Sample Thank You Email

Dear Ms. West:

I am writing to thank you for meeting with me yesterday regarding the Sr. Policy Analyst internship. I particularly enjoyed learning about your upcoming projects and how you envision your team contributing to future organizational goals. I believe the strong analytical skills I have acquired at the University of Chicago, coupled with my leadership experience as the president of Habitat for Humanity, qualify me as a strong candidate for this position. I am committed to supporting the goals and objectives of World Hunger and would be thrilled to join your team. Thank you for your consideration, and I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,
Joe Smith