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Interview Preparation

Too often people are intimidated by the prospect of a job interview. This booklet briefly addresses some of the key issues involved in the interview process. It is designed to demonstrate the steps necessary when preparing for the interview, the skills for maximizing interview performance and the strategies for following up in a professional manner. There are many books available in the Career Centre which discuss the interview process in much greater detail and you are welcome to make use of these resources. We also recommend attending an Interview Success workshop and making arrangements for a Mock Interview and/or an Interview Coaching appointment in the Career Centre to address your individual needs.

Tip - Know yourself and what you have to offer

Part I - Research

Know Yourself

It is important to have a good sense of who you are before choosing a career path. You will need to know and communicate to an employer your skills and the reason you are interested in a job or career field. An introspective look at your abilities, interests, goals, preferences, experiences and personality will help you present yourself more effectively. It will also help you avoid targeting a profession, job or organization in which you will be dissatisfied. Employers generally want an employee who knows what he or she can bring to a position or to an organization. By enhancing your self-knowledge, you can demonstrate maturity and insight and enhance your ability to communicate your qualifications in an interview. In the Career Centre, we can assist you in developing this knowledge and communicating what you have to offer to a potential employer.

To begin the process of identifying your interests, skills, qualifications and so on, we have provided you with a list of sample questions you may want to consider.

Ask yourself:

What are my personal work-related values and priorities?

- What type of challenges do I like?
- What level of responsibility do I want to have or am I ready to manage?
- For what type of supervisor do I work best and why?
- What role in a team or with my co-workers do I like best and least?
- What have I gained from past work experience, volunteer positions, academic programs and other activities?

- What are my most relevant skills? What are my key weaknesses?
- Which skills do I want to use in a work setting?
- What is unique about my skills?
- What are my short-term and long-term career goals?

If you are unable to answer these questions, you might want to consider an appointment with a Career Consultant. Once you have identified answers to these questions, you may wish to give some thought to the following:

- How are my answers relevant to the job or career I am pursuing?
- How can I demonstrate that my skills and experiences are relevant?
- Can I explain everything on my résumé and provide examples of the skills I have identified as relevant in the current job?

Know Your Occupation

Be informed about your chosen occupation. This information will be useful to you in your job search and will help you present relevant information to a potential employer. The following suggestions will help you develop a comprehensive understanding of an occupation.

- Understand the general tasks and responsibilities which the job requires
- Identify the typical setting (who employs people in this type of occupation)
- Be aware of other aspects of the job which may affect your decision (travel, overtime, evening work, shift work)
- Know the population group with whom you will work (if applicable)
- Be aware of future job trends in the field
- Determine the salary range and non-monetary benefits (e.g., flextime) which are generally related to this field

Determining this information will require both formal and informal research on your part. The following are suggestions which should help you conduct thorough research.

Internet Resources:

- Review information found in the National Occupational Classification (NOC) and other occupational literature. The NOC and related resources are available in the Career Centre or online at www.hrsdc.gc.ca/noc
- The Service Canada website is an excellent source of Labour Market Information and salary information at www.labourmarketinformation.ca
- Canada Job Futures is available online at www.jobfutures.ca

Other Sources of Information:

- Conduct informational interviews with individuals in the field (use the Alumni Sharing Knowledge [ASK] program in the Career Centre as a resource)
- Volunteer in the field or work at a summer job related to your area of interest
- Join a professional association related to the field
- Read articles written by people who are knowledgeable in the field

Know the Organization

To convey interest and professionalism, it is essential that you research the organization with which you will interview. Many employers expect you to know about the organization and you will make a more positive impression if you have done your homework. The more you know about the organization, the more likely you are to effectively communicate what you can contribute or how you will 'fit' into the organization. In addition, knowing the organization will help you develop appropriate questions to ask an employer at the end of the interview. You will be judged as much by the quality of your questions as by your responses to their questions.

Consider the following when researching an organization:

- Organizational structure and practices
- Age of organization (longevity versus growth potential)
- Products and/or services offered (including any recent additions)
- Recent events and future plans
- Growth, financial and/or sales record
- History of the organization and key competitors
- Public image and/or corporate responsibility and/or any ethical issues
- The organization's community interests or involvements
- Skills required and valued
- Corporate culture (the values and informal or formal activities expected of staff)
- Staff turnover rate, available positions and avenues for advancement
- Initial and on-going training policies

Consider the following issues if you are interviewing with a not-for-profit organization:

- The purpose or mandate of the organization
- Funding sources (Are funding sources diversified? This may affect your chances to get a renewed contract or a full-time appointment.)
- The client population served

Information is available from a variety of sources such as the following:

- The organization
- The public library
- Newspaper articles (it is always a good idea to read the local newspaper)
- Career Centre information (employer literature and directories)
- People within the field
- The Internet

Use the information you have gathered about yourself, the occupation and the organization and be prepared to communicate the connections between these components.

Part II - Preparation

Make a Good 'First' Impression

As you begin your job search, be certain you are prepared to begin receiving interview inquiries as soon as your first contact is received. First impressions begin the moment you send an application and continue through the first contact. Consider the following:

- Inform everyone with whom you share a living space that you are searching for work
- Place a pen, paper and a calendar near the telephone
- Ask that the telephone be answered politely and that messages be recorded promptly
- Be sure that your answering machine message is short and professional
- If you have provided employers with your cell phone number, be certain that you do not answer the phone in noisy or inconvenient locations (such as in the car)
- If you provided an email address, check it frequently and avoid unprofessional email addresses
- Return messages within 24 hours. Arrange for a quiet location to do this.
- If you must leave a message for an interviewer, identify your name, the position about which you were contacted, when you were contacted and by whom you were contacted

During an initial telephone or email contact, gather the following information:

- Confirm the specific job and request the names and positions of the interviewer(s)
- Confirm the time, date and day of the week of the interview (ensure that the day and the date match by consulting a calendar)
- Confirm the location (it may not be the same as where you sent the application)
- Request a detailed job description or posting
- Request a contact phone number in the event you need to contact the organization

Prepare an Agenda

Once you have been granted an interview, you should spend time preparing an agenda for the event. Your agenda should contain the key pieces of information you want to communicate to an employer during the interview. You will identify these key pieces of information by moving through steps 1, 2 and 3: know yourself, know the field or position and know the organization. Your agenda should contain 5 - 10 points and may include:

- An outline of your qualifications (with relevant examples) as outlined in the job description and based upon your knowledge of the field or position
- Information on your key strengths and how they are relevant to the job
- Information which demonstrates your knowledge of the organization or the field
- A list of questions you want to ask the interviewer

Tip: Practice talking about your agenda items; do not memorize specific answers.

STARR Examples

Prepare **STARR** examples for your key agenda points:

- Situation:** describe the general setting or situation and the issue
Task: outline what needed to be done or accomplished (your role or focus)
Action: describe the action you took (and the skills you used)
Result: outline the positive results or, in the event you are asked about a negative situation, indicate what you learned and/or how you would act differently
Relevance: connect your experience and skills to the job you are discussing

For each of the key qualifications outlined in the job posting and on your résumé, you should be able to provide an example of a time you demonstrated the key skill. You may not need to use **STARR** examples for every question asked, but, by having identified and practiced **STARR** examples, you will be more comfortable talking about your skills and qualifications. The following is an example of how you would use a **STARR** format.

In the example below, an interviewer has asked the candidate to identify a key skill. In this situation, the candidate has selected customer service skills.

Situation - you want to provide an overview of the general situation and the 'issue':

"I have very well-developed customer service skills. One time, while working as an assistant manager at a donut shop, a customer was unhappy and complaining loudly that he had received an incorrect order at the drive-through. He had already eaten over half of the food and wanted a full refund."

Task - indicate you are aware of your task/role and that you know what you need to address:

“As assistant manager, I was responsible for ensuring customer satisfaction, dealing with customer complaints, but also with following store policy. In this type of situation, general store policy was to exchange only incorrect items which had not already been consumed. In this specific situation I knew it was important to learn the facts and to make a decision about what steps were necessary to resolve the issue.”

Action - describe your actions step-by-step. Indicate you know why you undertook them:

“I noticed that the customer was very upset and causing a disturbance. I knew that I needed to calm him down to resolve the situation quickly. I asked him to explain what happened and listened to what he was saying. I felt that by asking to hear his side he might calm down and this would assist me in resolving the situation (what you did and why you did it). After listening to him, I explained our policy but indicated to the customer that I had decided to provide him with the item he originally had ordered. Although I was not convinced that we had made a mistake, I felt that, in this instance, this was the best solution.”

Result - indicate the results of your actions and the overall outcome or effect:

“The customer agreed to my offer and I was able to resolve the situation quickly and to mitigate the potentially negative experience of the other customers.”

Relevance - Indicate to the interviewer how and why the experience is relevant and demonstrate how your abilities will be of use in the job:

“In the position, I know it will be important to find a way to make the customer feel valued and listened to in order to build a long-term customer base. With my ability to listen and reason with a customer I know I can do this.” (Cite an example specific to the job to which you are applying.)

Simply telling a story about a situation is only a small part of presenting a STARR answer. Think about your examples and be certain that you understand what happened and why you made specific decisions, took certain actions and how these were related to the final results. The point of a STARR example is not the details of the past situation, but how well you describe your actions and the skills you used and how successful you are at demonstrating how you will use your skills and experiences on the new job.

Pre-interview Preparation

Dress and Appearance

Several studies have demonstrated that those who are judged to be appropriately groomed and attired receive higher impression ratings than those judged to be inappropriately dressed. Through your research, you can determine how you will be expected to dress on the job.

General Tips

- Dress one step above the appropriate on-the-job attire
- Dress conservatively for the field or organization
- Be certain all clothes are clean and well pressed and shoes are shined
- Usually, you want to avoid brightly-coloured clothes or busy prints
- Minimize makeup, cologne and jewellery
- Make a final check of appearance before the interview
- Do not eat or drink anything which will give you bad breath (including coffee) right before your interview

Failure to follow these rules does not mean you will be passed over for the job, but they could negatively affect the interviewer's evaluation of you.

What to Take to the Interview

What you take to an interview should be guided by what the interviewer has asked you to bring and what you deem to be important. You may consider taking:

- A business folder including pad and pen
- A piece of paper with your key agenda points (point form, not details)
- A list of questions you have for the interviewer
- A list of three professional references (unless otherwise indicated)
- Copies of reference letters
- A portfolio (examples of your work, i.e., writing samples, a relevant paper, outlines of projects you have organized, etc.)
- Extra copies of your résumé
- If you are a student or recent graduate, a copy of your transcript

References

Prior to attending an interview it is advisable to contact your references and inform them that they might be contacted. It is a good idea to provide your references with a copy of your résumé. You should be prepared to provide three professional references. A professional reference may be any individual who has worked or volunteered with you in a professional capacity. When possible, you

should have at least one reference from a person for whom you have worked (a manager or supervisor). Potential references include:

- Supervisors and/or managers
- Professors, teachers and coaches
- Co-workers and teammates
- Individuals with whom you have volunteered

In some instances, employers may request a personal reference. Usually, a personal reference is an individual who has known you personally for several years (a friend, neighbour, classmate, doctor, religious advisor). References should not be relatives.

When providing a list of references, include the following information:

- The person's full name (first and last)
- Current status (current job title and organization)
- Current contact information (city, province, telephone number and email where the person can be reached during business hours)

You may also want to consider obtaining a written letter of reference or a letter of recommendation. Typically, a letter of reference from an employer (or volunteer organization) confirms your employment with an organization or volunteer organization (dates of employment, job title and main job duties). A letter of recommendation includes positive statements about the quality of your employment. Some organizations may not provide you with a letter of recommendation, but most will provide you with a letter of reference.

Part III - The Interview Day

Arrival and Greeting

- Arrive at the interview location 10 minutes early
- If you are unavoidably detained, call as soon as possible to briefly explain your situation and offer apologies
- Be pleasant and professional with everyone (assume that everyone you meet has input into the hiring decision)
- Offer a firm, dry handshake to your interviewer(s) (a good handshake is part of that all-important first impression)
- In the interview room, wait until asked to be seated
- Place your briefcase or purse on the floor (slightly under your chair)
- Be aware of your posture - good posture shows confidence

The First Few Minutes

It has been said that you only get one chance to make a good first impression. This is especially pertinent to employment interviews. Some studies have suggested that hiring decisions can be

made within the first few minutes of an interview. Often what happens in the first few minutes of the interview will set the tone for the remainder. By projecting a strong, positive image as soon as the interview begins, you will likely make a good first impression with the interviewer. An interviewer who has a good first impression of a candidate is more likely to hear evidence to support his/her impression. If, however, a candidate fails to make a positive impression, he/she will spend the rest of the interview playing 'catch-up'.

One way of creating a positive impression early in the interview is to establish a good rapport with the interviewer. The following are some suggestions to build and maintain rapport and a positive impression throughout the interview:

- In North America, it is important to smile, maintain eye contact, appear interested and be enthusiastic
- Address the interviewer formally; do not use a first name (unless invited to do so)
- Engage in opening conversation with the interviewer (the weather, your travel to the interview or the organization's premises). This will set a relaxed tone and demonstrate your ease in communicating with others.
- Try to match the interviewer's style. For example, if he/she is more conversational, consider responding in a less formal manner (but always remain professional).
- Use effective listening skills including positive verbal and non-verbal communication
- Maintain relaxed but proper posture to demonstrate confidence
- Do not overdo it with flattery. State your ideas positively, honestly and tactfully.

Interview Questions and Answers

Fundamental Questions

Although there are seemingly an endless number of questions you may have to respond to in an interview, the reality is that almost all interview questions are based on a few underlying concepts. The ability to answer questions related to these underlying concepts will make preparing for the interview easier.

- Why do you want to work for us? (What do you know about us?)
- What can you do for us? (What are your skills? What is your knowledge base?)
- What kind of person are you? (Will your personality fit in the organization? How will you respond or behave in various situations?)
- What distinguishes you from all the other candidates?
- How much will you cost us?
- What do you think or know about the field and future trends?

Opening Questions

The following questions are typically used to start an interview:

- Tell me about yourself.
- What do you know about the position/our organization?
- Why are you interested in this position/our organization/this field?
- What are the key skills and qualifications you bring to this position?

Answer these types of questions with the information you gathered through your research.

When asked the question **‘Tell me about yourself’**:

- Unless otherwise indicated, the interviewer is looking for professional information
- Give a brief synopsis of your education, work, volunteer activities and interests
- Begin with a time which ‘makes sense’ (5 - 10 years ago, depending on your age)
- Your answer should take 45 seconds to one minute, maximum
- Tell a story, in reverse chronological order, highlighting relevant skills/experiences
- End by indicating why you are interested in the position
- Briefly highlight a few key relevant skills or qualifications as you ‘tell the story’

‘Prior to beginning my studies at Laurier, I lived in _____ and worked summers as a lifeguard. During my first year at university, I decided to study _____. My studies have focused on _____ and I have learned _____. For the past two summers, I have worked in the Pro shop at a Golf Club. In this position, I have had the opportunity to develop my skills in _____ (select relevant skills). Currently, I am _____. I also am involved in community activities such as _____. I am very interested in this position because _____.’

Skills and Key Qualifications Questions

Your strengths are the most relevant and impressive qualifications you want to relay to the interviewer. You should always state your strengths clearly, followed by specific and relevant examples. Use the STARR method when formulating your answer. The following are some examples of ‘strengths’ questions:

- What are your strengths?
- What makes you stand out from the crowd?
- Why would you be better than any other candidate?
- What three words best describe you?
- What are your best attributes?
- Why should I consider you a strong candidate for this position?
- What do you see as the key competencies required for this position?

When asked the question **‘What are your key skills or strengths?’**:

When discussing a key skill or strength, you do not want to focus on generic skills. Although you may begin by identifying a broad or generic skill, the key to providing a good answer is your ability

to divide the skill into its essential components. By doing this, you demonstrate to the interviewer that you can identify the key components of a skill and that you understand what is involved in using these skills.

For example, if you selected customer service skills as one of your key strengths, you will not 'stand out' from others if you simply say that you have good customer service skills. As you discuss your customer service skills, you should indicate that you understand the key components of excellent customer service and can demonstrate these skills with examples:

“As a result of working extensively with customers I have developed very strong customer service skills. In particular, I have demonstrated an excellent ability to build rapport with customers in a short period of time. As a result of my ability to communicate technical information effectively, I have found that I can put customers at ease and establish long-term customer relationships.”

As part of your preparation you should have identified the key skills for the position and taken some time to identify what it is you do which specifically demonstrates that you have this skill. Always select the components which are most relevant in the current situation. If you are interviewing for a position in a bank, you may focus on different aspects of customer service skills when compared to interviewing for a position as a youth leader.

Key Competencies Desired by Employers

As part of preparing your agenda, you should identify and be prepared to discuss key 'competencies'. Competencies are the key qualities required to succeed in a position or field. You can identify many competencies from the job description and usually these will include both soft and hard skills.

Key Hard and Soft Skills

- Communication skills
- Problem-solving skills
- Responsibility
- Information-seeking
- Organizational skills
- Computer skills
- Knowledge of procedures, legislation, guidelines, regulations
- The ability to use equipment (such as scientific equipment)
- Cultural awareness and knowledge of a second language
- Adaptability
- Maturity
- Ability to learn
- Positive attitude
- Time management
- Research skills
- Interpersonal/teamwork skills
- Integrity
- Ability to influence others
- Stability
- Technical skills
- Data management/analysis

When discussing your skills, be prepared to demonstrate both **what** you have done and **how** you have done it.

Situational/Hypothetical Questions

Situational or hypothetical questions require the candidate to imagine him/herself in a situation and to describe the action he/she would take in solving the problem presented. An example of such a question would be, "An angry customer complains about an item you sold her. What do you do?".

The following are some further examples of situational/hypothetical questions:

- Here is my cell phone. How would you sell it to me?
- How would you handle
 - an argumentative customer?
 - a complaint about our product/service?
 - a disagreement with one of your colleagues?
 - a disagreement with your supervisor?
 - a complaint from a customer about your predecessor?
- How would you market this product? Why?

Behaviour-based Interview Questions

Behaviour-based interview questions are different from situational questions in that the interviewer asks the candidate for a specific example of a skill or behaviour used in a past experience. Past behaviour often serves as a potential indicator of the applicant's future on-the-job behaviour. When answering behaviour-based questions you should use a STARR format and include information about your key skills and competencies.

When selecting past examples, we suggest that you try and draw upon your most relevant and recent professional experiences (this could include work, school and volunteer activities). If you find that you do not have an experience on which to base your answer, you can say "I have never experienced _____, but if that situation occurred I would . . .".

The best way to prepare for situational/hypothetical and behaviour-based interview questions is to examine the skills required in the position and determine the best examples from your experience. Select examples which demonstrate your ability to use a key, relevant skill. In other words, as part of your agenda or preparation, prepare a story about each of your key skills.

As you answer these questions you want to present your answers logically, demonstrating your thought processes systematically. Indicate what happened first, followed by the next step and so on. Include information on what you noticed, saw or recognized which led you to select certain actions or make certain decisions. Employers are interested in why and how you did what you did, not only in what happened.

If your answer is incomplete or unclear on any of these points, the interviewer will probe for more information until he/she has a clear understanding of your skills and abilities in that particular situation. This helps to ensure that you are giving a complete answer.

The following are some examples of behaviour-based questions:

- Tell me about a challenge you faced in your most recent job and how you handled it.
- Describe a situation in which you have
 - taken initiative
 - performed as a team member
 - been in conflict with a co-worker
 - disagreed with your supervisor
 - demonstrated leadership/flexibility/resourcefulness/organization/etc.
 - been under a lot of stress and how you handled it
- What was the most difficult interpersonal situation you have experienced in a work environment and how was it resolved?
- Tell me about an accomplishment of which you are most proud.
- How have you earned the award(s) mentioned in your résumé?
- Describe a work project that you had to complete independently.
- What have you learned from your summer (part-time, volunteer) job(s)?
- What did you contribute in your last job that made a difference to the organization?
- What is the most difficult obstacle you have ever encountered?
- Tell me about a decision you made that did not turn out the way you wanted.

Remember to identify the competencies or skills you used in these situations. If, for example, you are asked about an accomplishment, indicate the accomplishment and the qualities, skills and competencies which enabled you to achieve this accomplishment.

The following is an example of an answer to a behaviour-based question.

'Tell me about a time you had a conflict with a co-worker?':

'While working on a class project, I found myself in conflict with a classmate who had a different opinion about the best way to approach the project. I realized that our competing ideas were causing conflict in the group and, as a result, we were unable to move forward on the project (**the Situation**). One of my strengths has always been my ability to build consensus (a skill) with others and I realized that I needed to find a compromise if this project was to be completed on time (**the Task**). I realized that the first thing I needed to do was to _____. After this I recognized that _____ and then was ready to _____. To succeed I came to the conclusion that the group needed to generate a plan of action . I took a lead role in identifying tasks and organizing the group's schedule of activities (**Actions**). In the end, the project was completed on time and conflict was kept to a minimum (**Result**). In the role with your organization, it will be important to work effectively as a team because..... (**Relevance**).

Weakness Questions

The weakness question is perceived to be one of the most difficult to answer. When answering this question, you need to be honest without providing the interviewer with a detailed analysis of all of your shortcomings.

The following are some examples of the weakness question:

What are your weaknesses?

- What do you consider to be your biggest failure?
- What are the areas you need to develop?
- What would your last supervisor say is the area in which you need the most improvement?
- What weaknesses might you bring to this position?

The following are some guidelines for answering the weakness question:

- Avoid answers like "I'm a perfectionist" or "I take on too much". Besides being over-used, an interviewer can be left with the feeling that you will take a long time to complete projects or that you over-extend yourself.
- Do not mention personal qualities which can hamper job performance such as procrastination, laziness or bad temper. These take a long time to develop and a long time to fix.
- If you have an **obvious** weakness (a qualification requested in the job posting which you do not have) then select this as your weakness for discussion.
- If pressed to give a job-related example, pick a knowledge or skill base which can be easily/quickly improved.
- In stating your answer, always state the weakness quickly, but focus the majority of your answer on the steps you are taking to improve upon the area of weakness.
- Always end your answer on a positive note.
- Think of a 'weakness' as a challenge you will face on the job during the first few months (learning the organization's reporting protocols or computer software).

"One of the challenges I will face in this position will be to learn the needs of this organization's national customers and learn how to increase our customer base across the country (**this needs to be true and relevant**). Although I have excellent customer service skills, in particular my ability to _____, I have not really generated customer business on a national level. What I would do first to address this weakness is _____."

Prohibited Questions

The Human Rights Commission in each province has clear guidelines on interview questions which are prohibited. Laws prohibit discrimination in employment based on areas such as disability, marital status, sexual orientation, age, religious affiliation, national origin and ethnic background.

Please note that there are some exceptions to these guidelines and consult with the Career Centre staff for further information on special cases.

The focus of the interview should be based on information the employer needs to know to decide whether you are a qualified candidate. When the employer asks questions related to prohibited areas, use discretion when responding. For example, if you choose to introduce information about a disability at the interview, the employer may make inquiries about your accommodation needs and ability to perform the essential duties of the job.

If you feel you have been asked an illegal or inappropriate question in an interview, discuss it with a Career Centre staff member or contact your local Human Rights Commission

Prohibited Questions

- How did you become blind?
- Do you have a psychologist?
- How many sick days did you have last year? Were you hospitalized?
- Do you have any disabilities or medical conditions?
- Are you planning on starting a family?
- Where is your accent from?

Permissible Questions

- Can you perform the essential functions of the job?
- Can you demonstrate how you would perform the following job-related function?
- Are you eligible to work in Canada?
- Can you start at 7:30 a.m. and work overtime if necessary?
- Would you be willing to relocate if necessary?

After a conditional job offer has been made, the applicant may be required to have a medical examination.

Options for Responding to a Prohibited Question

Prohibited questions that are asked in interviews are often not intended to be offensive. An inexperienced interviewer may have not realized the question was inappropriate. If you are asked an inappropriate question, you have a few options:

- Examine the question for intent and respond with an answer as it might apply to performing the job. For example, if you are asked if you have been sick a lot in the past, your reply may be, "I'm dedicated to my work and have been recognized as doing a very thorough job by past employers."
- Answer the question. You may answer the question as asked but you may inadvertently reveal more information than you intend. Be cautious about how much information you

reveal as it may jeopardize the chances of you getting hired if you provide the 'wrong' answer.

- Refuse to answer the question. A strategy is to ask the interviewer how the information he/she is seeking is relevant to the position. By not answering the question, you are within your rights but you may appear unco-operative or confrontational. It is important to be tactful with your reply as the interviewer may not have even realized that the question he/she asked was inappropriate.

For more information, visit the Ontario Human Rights Commission, Ministry of Labour online at www.ohrc.on.ca, or view a copy of the Employment Standards Act, available in the Career Centre or online at <http://www.labour.gov.on.ca/english/es/>

Options for Informing an Employer about a Disability

Deciding when or if you will disclose a disability to employers is a very personal decision. There are numerous factors to consider such as your personal comfort with the issue, knowledge of your rights and whether your disability has an impact on your work. If your disability does not affect your performance on the job, you do not have to disclose at all. A Career Consultant is available in the Career Centre to discuss these options with you.

Sample Interview Questions

The following is a list of some other typical questions that may be asked in an interview:

Job Knowledge

- Why have you chosen this particular field of work?
- What previous experience have you had in this area?
- What do you believe to be the 'down side' of this type of work?
- How does this position fit with your long-term career plans?
- How/why do you think you will be a valuable employee in this environment?
- What do you see as the most challenging aspect of this job?
- Is there a current issue in the field about which you feel strongly?
- Toward what position in our organization/field do you want to work?

Values Orientation

- What do you expect to have achieved in your career in five years?
- What are the key aspects of workplace co-operation?
- In what ways have you benefitted from your university education?
- What experience do you have working with others whose backgrounds differ from yours?
- How would friends/previous co-workers describe you?

- What is the most important event that has happened to you in the last five years?
- If you could have three magical wishes, what would they be?
- What are your greatest attributes/strengths?
- What kinds of people/situations really annoy you?

Workplace Adjustment

- This job will involve long hours and some travel. How will this fit with your lifestyle?
- What are your expectations surrounding salary and benefits?
- Are you prepared to relocate?
- How would you describe your ideal supervisor?
- What weaknesses might you bring to this position?
- What are your plans for your own professional development in the next five years?
- What do you look for in a job?
- How do you handle stress on the job?

University-Related

- When and why did you choose your major? This university?
- How are you a different person as a result of your experiences at Laurier?
- In what extra-curricular activities have you been involved?
- How does your academic record illustrate your strengths?
- What is the most important thing you have learned at university?

Closings

- Do you have any questions for us? (see below for a list of appropriate questions)
- When would you be available to begin work?
- Is there anything more you would like us to know about you before we finish?
- Would you leave a list of your references with us?

Questions to Ask the Interviewer

Often, your choice of questions to ask the employer leaves as great an impression as the answers you give to his/her interview questions. Consider the following in preparing your questions.

- Questions must be 'real' not 'cosmetic'. If the interviewer asks you 'why' you asked the question, you need to be able to explain the purpose of the question.
- Prepare 6-10 questions so that you can ask them during the interview (to create a conversational tone) and still have some left to ask at the end of the interview
- Your questions should demonstrate research into the organization and/or an understanding of the position
- Write questions out in full; it demonstrates organization and preparedness
- Be aware of your interviewer's reactions and ask only as many questions as he/she

- appears to accept as reasonable (2 - 3 ending questions is acceptable)
- Do not ask questions which could/should have been answered through research
 - Do not turn the table on the interviewer and begin asking questions which may put him/her on the spot (e.g., "Tell me about your background.")

The following questions are suitable:

- How was this position created?
- Will I be able to work with the person I am replacing?
- What kind of training will be provided?
- How much responsibility will I be given in this position?
- What is the first task I would be undertaking?
- Does the organization promote from within?
- Can you tell me about the organization's training policies/incentives?
- In your opinion, what is the most difficult part of this job?
- How would you describe the work atmosphere in this organization?
- Does the organization have any plans for expansion?
- When do you expect to be making a hiring decision?
- Is there any other information you require from me?
- Would you like me to leave my references at this time?

Ensure that you include a few questions which demonstrate your research and knowledge of the industry or organization.

"While preparing for this interview, I read that you are launching a new service. Will I have an opportunity to be trained in or work in an area related to this new service?"

"I am aware that you are investigating the possibility of expanding your customer base to include _____. I have experience working with _____ and was wondering if I would have an opportunity to become involved in this project?"

Tough and Unusual Questions

In rare instances, interviewers may ask unusual or tough questions, such as one of the following:

- If you could be an animal, what animal would you be?
- What can you tell me about yourself that would surprise me?
- If you were stranded on a deserted island, what three books would you want to have?

There are no correct answers to these types of questions. The key to answering these questions is to present your answer in a considered way. The interviewer may be looking at why you select an answer and how you explain your reasons. You want to explain your answer in a way which demonstrates a strength or preference.

Dealing with Nervousness

One of the biggest mistakes you can make as a candidate is to approach the interview thinking only of how you will convince the interviewer to hire you. Consider the interview a two-way street. In other words, as the employer is assessing you, you are assessing the employer. In his popular book, **What Color is Your Parachute?**, Richard Nelson Bolles likens the interview to dating; both parties have to like each other prior to going out. Candidates who have used this approach indicate that it has reduced their nervousness.

Consider also that you may not be the only one in the room who is nervous. With the exception of professionally-trained human resource professionals (many of whom conduct on-campus interviews), many interviewers have never been formally trained in interviewing and/or are very inexperienced. Consequently, they are functioning outside their area of expertise and may feel nervous about making an appropriate decision. A mistake on the interviewer's part could cost the organization thousands of dollars in wasted recruiting and training time.

The following are a few other tips to help you remain calm in an interview:

- Know more about the organization than the interviewer knows about you
- Take a few deep breaths. Oxygen is a relaxant and it helps you think clearly.
- Practice, practice, practice. Practice with friends or in front of the mirror
- Arrange to have interview coaching or a mock interview at the Career Centre

Tip - Be yourself. If they hire you for who you are, you will likely enjoy working there. If they hire you for what you think they want you to be, the position will not likely be a good match.

Tips on Answering Questions

- Be sure the interviewer has finished asking the question before you begin your answer
- Listen carefully to the question and ask for clarification if necessary
- Answers should be clear, concise and well organized. Ensure that your answers are systematic, step-by-step and logical (especially behaviour-based answers).
- Take your time in formulating an answer ("I would like to take a moment to think about that.")
- Tailor your answer in a way which matches you with the job. 'Draw the line' between the skill or experience you are discussing and the current position.
- Try to begin your answer with the most important point first, then use the rest of the answer to support or demonstrate the point
- Clearly identify key skills and qualifications as you present your answers
- Indicate the key components of generic skills as you discuss your most relevant skills
- When you have finished answering a question, stop talking. Do not ramble when there is silence in the room. If the employer says nothing for 10 seconds, ask if he/she

- would like you to add additional information.
- Avoid sounding needy (e.g., "I need a job with many growth opportunities" versus "Professional development is important to me.")
 - Quantify answers whenever appropriate (e.g., "I supervised a crew of 7 workers.")
 - Avoid using slang terms or words (e.g., 'kinda', 'stuff like that', etc.). Use of slang will be interpreted as unprofessional.
 - Always be honest in your answers. If you lie in an interview, you could lose all credibility with that organization and its associates.
 - If you give a particularly complex answer, ask if you have made yourself clear or if you have answered the question. It will provide the employer with an opportunity to clarify any questions he/she may have.
 - Provide proof in your answers, do not simply make claims (e.g., STARR examples)
 - Never criticize anyone such as a former employer, supervisor, faculty member, etc.

Tip - Avoid saying anything negative throughout the interview. That way, the interviewer is more likely to associate positive feelings with you. Two negative words to eliminate from your interview vocabulary are 'just' and 'only' (e.g., "Just did this", "Only did that").

End of the Interview

As the interview comes to a close, try to assess how well you have covered all the points you feel the employer needs to know about you. If you have not sold yourself completely or have not covered your agenda, ask for permission to offer more information.

The Salary Question and Negotiation

The general rule is that you should not be the one to first mention salary. Prior to the interview, you should have an idea of the salary you are expecting and/or are prepared to accept. If you are new to a field and have no real idea what would be an appropriate salary, there are some ways to gather this information:

- Speak to other students or people in the same or similar occupations
- Review the graduate survey data and other resources available in the Career Centre
- Conduct Internet research and scan newspapers for salary listings for similar jobs
- Review the salary information available at the following websites:
 - Service Canada website is an good source of salary data
www.labourmarketinformation.ca
 - Job Futures - www.jobfutures.ca
 - www.workopolis.com, click on 'Find Salary Info'

If you are asked 'What salary are you expecting?', you do not want to simply blurt out a number. Your initial response should be to subtly 'throw' the question back to the interviewer. You are not avoiding the question and you do not want to respond, 'What are you offering?' or 'My salary is

negotiable.’ An employer may actually want to gauge your salary range and/or determine if you have realistic expectations. Before you ‘throw it back’ you want to establish that you are professional and have a salary in mind, but you also want to hear what they have to offer first. A simple way to ‘throw it back’ would be:

‘Although I am new to this field, I have done some homework (**you must be prepared to briefly indicate what this homework entailed**). I have an idea of the salary range I think is appropriate. I was, however, wondering what you were offering?’

At this point, the employer may decide to let the topic drop and/or indicate this is something you could discuss at a later date. If the employer does indicate a salary, you could simply respond by saying ‘that is interesting’ or ‘that is certainly something to think about’ and that you would be ‘interested in discussing salary when there is an offer on the table’. If the interviewer insists that you ‘name your price’, you may request additional information (hours, benefits, responsibilities) and ask for some time to consider all the information (24 - 48 hours is generally appropriate).

When actually indicating a salary expectation, it is best to have a range in mind. Below are very basic guidelines to help you select salary ranges.

For summer or part-time positions which pay an hourly wage,

- Under \$15 per hour, select a range differentiated by three to four dollars per hour
- Over \$15 per hour, select a range differentiated by four to five dollars per hour

For ongoing, full-time positions with annual salaries:

- Under \$35,000, you could select a range differentiated by \$4,000 - \$5,000 per annum
- \$35,000-\$50,000, select a range differentiated by \$5,000 - \$6,000 per annum
- Over \$50,000, select a range differentiated by \$5,000 - \$8,000 per annum

If you know the minimum salary you are willing to consider, use that salary as the base during salary negotiations (do not state this base to the employer, simply use it as a guide for your negotiations). For example, if you are not willing to work for less than \$30,000 and you think the job will pay \$32,000 - \$35,000, you could suggest a salary range from \$31,000 to \$36,000.

Apart from salary, there may be other factors or ‘benefits’ you are equally interested in negotiating. Listed below are some common areas often considered as negotiable:

- Money
 - Salary (about a 5% range)
 - Stock options and/or shares
 - Signing bonus and/or performance bonus
 - Severance packages
- Perks
 - Accelerated salary review
 - Relocation expenses
 - Flexible hours
 - Additional vacation time

- Training and education reimbursement
- Expenses (clothing allowance, Internet access, vehicle leasing)
- Professional membership fees and club membership fees

Prior to any negotiation, you should identify and prioritize the items most important to you. Ask yourself, 'Is an extra week of paid vacation more important than an additional \$1,000 in base pay'? If you are unhappy about the salary offered, but decide you still want the job, negotiating an early salary review or a performance bonus can compensate for a lower salary.

Generally, two rounds of negotiations are considered appropriate. The initial offer, a counter offer, (round one), a follow-up offer and one final negotiation (round two). Dragging negotiations on and negotiating over small details can appear petty and may, in the long run, leave a mutually bad impression.

If you are negotiating with two employers at the same time, it is appropriate to indicate this. Avoid 'playing one employer against the other'. You may want to be careful about the impression that 'ping-pong' negotiations might leave on all involved. Determine an opening offer from each employer, then approach one employer and negotiate a counter offer. You may then approach the other employer and negotiate a counter offer. You want to avoid more than two rounds with each employer.

Before accepting an offer, inform the employer whose offer you are rejecting, that you have decided to accept another offer (do not use this as a negotiating tactic unless it is true). If this employer makes a third offer you may consider it, but do not enter the discussion trying to elicit yet another offer.

There are many relevant books on this topic available in the Career Centre and related information on the Web. In addition, the Career Centre has an excellent video on salary negotiation. If you are not certain how to conduct a salary negotiation, you are welcome to arrange an appointment with a Career Consultant and discuss your options.

Part IV - Types of Interviews

There are many different styles of interviewing which a job applicant may face. Every employer will have a different approach. You may have only one interview for a position or you may face a series of interviews. Students involved with on-campus recruiting will likely be interviewed more than once.

Behaviour-based Interviews

The popularity of behaviour-based interviewing is rising rapidly within large and small organizations. Employers carefully analyze the job and the skills needed to do the job well. They then prepare questions which target those skills. In a behaviour-based interview, the employer is trying to obtain a complete understanding of the STARR example - the candidate's past behaviour

and application of relevant skills. The most difficult part of these interviews is selecting the best examples or situations to share with the interviewer. For information on how to answer behaviour-based questions refer to Part III - Behaviour-based Interview Questions (page 12). Practicing for this type of interview will prepare you well for any interview.

Competency-based Interviews

Very similar to a behaviour-based interview, the competency-based interview focuses on core competencies required to manage the job. The candidate is asked to demonstrate his/her ability to manage the competencies required in the job. The approach to these questions is similar to those used for behaviour-based questions. However, you focus more on what you can do in the job and less on how you have used a skill in the past. For example, you may be asked to 'demonstrate how you would use decision-making skills in a specific situation'.

Screening Interviews

Screening interviews are brief (i.e., 30 minutes to an hour) and are used to screen out or eliminate inappropriate candidates. Most on-campus interviews are screening interviews. These types of interviews are often conducted by a human resources representative who is trained in interviewing techniques. Screening interviews may also be conducted over the telephone.

After your first interview, it is perfectly acceptable to inquire about the process. This will help you to determine what the subsequent interviews may involve and to plan accordingly.

One-on-one Interviews

One-on-one interviews are a common type of interview, especially in the early stages of the interviewing process. Typically, these interviews are the least stressful, as the candidate only has to worry about making a positive impression with one person.

Panel Interviews

Panel interviews involving two or more interviewers are becoming more popular. In this situation, try to give equal attention to all interviewers. Begin your response by addressing the person who has asked the question and then shift your gaze to the others in the room. A common mistake of unseasoned interviewees is to assess which person is the most senior and to focus exclusively on him/her. You want to pay equal attention to all interviewers and demonstrate your ability to interact effectively with a variety of individuals.

Structured Interviews

Structured interviews follow a formal pattern of questions which are asked of all candidates. Commonly used by governments and other large organizations, this type of interview does not generally allow the interviewer to delve deeper into certain issues which may be of interest to him

or her. Therefore, when facing a structured interview, you must know your agenda (what it is you want them to know about you) and present your strengths and accomplishments wherever and whenever possible.

Unstructured Interviews

Unstructured interviews are a common type of interview and tend to be less formal and more conversational in nature. While an interviewer may have the latitude in this type of interview to examine certain issues more freely, the onus is on the candidate to effectively communicate his/her strengths and interest in the position.

Telephone Interviews

Because of the absence of visual contact between you and your interviewer(s), telephone interviews pose a unique challenge. You must sell yourself with only your voice and your words. On the other hand, there are some advantages to telephone interviews. You can keep a copy of your résumé in front of you to help you summarize your most relevant skills and achievements. You can also write out answers to anticipated questions and any questions you have ahead of time. This way, you will be sure to include all the information you want to address during the interview.

All the guidelines for a face-to-face interview apply to telephone interviews. Tips for telephone interviews include:

- Be prepared and plan for the call. Set up your environment to be quiet and free from distractions.
- You should be ready with quick, interesting statements indicating the benefits of hiring you.
- Keep your résumé, answers to anticipated questions and a list of questions in front of you (but be careful not to shuffle papers noisily).
- Have a pen and paper handy to write down any comments or questions.
- Answer questions in short sentences. Short sentences are usually more readily understood as opposed to long, rambling explanations.
'Check in' with the listener more frequently by asking a question such as 'would you like me to expand on that' or 'would you like another example?'
- Shorter replies also allow for more interchange between you and the employer, keeping the interview more lively and interesting.
- Just as in a face-to-face interview, answer questions concisely and courteously. Give the interviewer your undivided attention.
- Avoid the use of cellular or portable telephones.
- Smile. Smiling tends to make you sound energetic, enthusiastic and relaxed.
- At the end of the interview, invite the interviewer to call you if there are any further questions he/she may have.

Second Interviews

Many offers of employment are not made until after a second interview. This is especially true of on-campus interviews. Second interviews vary in terms of their content, purpose and structure.

Being granted a second interview means that you are one step closer to getting the job. These interviews may be more intense because you will likely be meeting with people who are more closely involved in the decision-making process. However, a second interview is not a sure sign that an employer is going to offer you a position. In fact, second interviews can serve a variety of purposes.

- To give the organization an opportunity to assess the candidate more thoroughly
- To permit the organization to delve more deeply into possible areas of concern raised during the previous interview
- To allow the organization to sell itself to the candidate so an offer of employment will be accepted

When arranging a second interview, it is both acceptable and recommended that you inquire as to whom you will be seeing, the length and format the second interview will take and the nature of any testing that might be included. On-site interviews may include:

- An initial interview with someone from the office
- A tour of the office, plant or facility
- Interviews with the supervisor to whom you would report if hired and more senior executives of the organization
- Tests and/or simulations
- A chance to talk with someone recently hired by the organization (sometimes a Laurier graduate) and lunch and/or dinner with a representative of the organization. (If the representative orders an alcoholic beverage with his/her meal, it is acceptable for you to do so as well. However, it is advisable to avoid alcohol.)

Some organizations reimburse candidates for any travel, lodging and meal expenses incurred by attending the second interview. Therefore, it is recommended that these expenses are kept to a minimum. Some candidates have experienced multiple interviews with the same organization. Keep receipts of all expenses incurred throughout the interviewing process. If the organization does not offer to reimburse your expenses, it is not a good idea to ask them to do so.

A second interview held on site may take as little as an hour or as long as a full day. You should only book one second interview per day, even if it is only scheduled to take a couple of hours. The process can be exhausting and you want to be fresh for every interview.

The following are some tips for second interviews:

- Be aware that you may be asked the same questions by several of the people you meet during the second interview session. Always respond as if it is the first time you have

- heard the question and always be consistent with your answers.
- At some point you may be discussing salaries; have an idea what the job is worth. If it is a contract position, calculate your acceptable range in yearly, monthly and hourly rates (i.e., \$42,000/year = \$3,500/month = \$23.00/hour).

Receptions and Dining Interviews

Many employers are opting to meet candidates in less structured environments to gauge a candidate's interpersonal skills and their ability to deal with novel situations and people. Subsequently, it is not uncommon, particularly during on-campus recruiting, for candidates to be invited to attend a reception or dinner. These events may occur prior to a first interview or between a first and second interview.

Generally, you will be invited to attend an event which may include a presentation, a casual reception and/or a sit-down dinner. The key to success at these events is to be prepared to mingle and initiate contact with others. To assist you in preparing for these events, the Career Centre offers a workshop on etiquette appropriate for receptions and dining situations. You may also review related books in the Career Centre, search for information over the Internet or meet with a Career Consultant to discuss these situations.

Part V - Interview Follow-up

Follow-up

Immediately following the interview, you should contact your references. Inform them of the points which seemed to be of particular interest to the interviewer and details of the position. This allows your references to provide potential employers with the most relevant information.

It is strongly recommended that follow-up occur within 24 to 48 hours of the interview. Make a follow-up 'check-list' and record items such as:

- Interviewer's name (correct spelling) and title
- Telephone number, fax number or email
- Organization, division or department
- Time, date and length of interview
- Next steps to take (include a due date after each heading)
- Follow-up letter to interviewer(s)
- Follow-up telephone call
- Thank-you letter, card or telephone call to the person who referred you to this position (if applicable)

On a separate sheet of paper, write down details about the interview itself. This information can be used in writing a brief follow-up letter and to strategize about future actions to take.

- Most important aspects of the job as presented by the interviewer
- Interviewer's key concerns and how you responded to them
- Any questions for which you were unprepared
- Things you wish you had said, but did not
- Things you said, but wish you had not
- How you could have improved the interview
- Questions you forgot to ask about the position and the organization (may be a potential follow-up question)
- Issues raised by the interviewer which may help in re-writing or clarifying your résumé

Tip - Remember to appreciate your network. If a colleague, friend, family member or other person referred you to the organization or arranged a personal introduction with an interviewer, be sure to drop that person a note of thanks.

Interview Follow-up Letter

Consider the follow-up letter an extension of your interview. A typed or handwritten (if you have exceptional handwriting) letter is a professional way to follow up. Express your thanks for having met with the interviewer and stress your interest in the position. Mention something specific from the interview so that your letter does not have that 'form letter' feel. Clarify any points which you feel are particularly relevant or that you did not articulate well in the interview (one or two points maximum). Send the letter within 24 hours of the interview and keep it interesting, relevant and brief. Remember, this is not another cover letter or letter of application. (Please refer to the Career Centre's **Résumé Guidebook** for sample letters.)

Follow-up Telephone Call

Often the interviewer will tell you when a hiring decision will be made. If you have not received any information from the employer by the date stated (or within 10 working days if no date is stated), a follow-up telephone call is quite appropriate. Confirm that the follow-up letter was received and then inquire as to the status of the employer's decision or the scheduling of second interviews. Ask any questions which you may have developed since the interview (make sure that they are intelligent and relevant) and suggest the possibility of a second meeting.

The Job Offer

Accepting an Offer

If you wish to accept a job offer, advise the employer as soon as possible. Often the offer will be verbal and followed up by a written offer. If you receive a verbal offer, it is appropriate to request a written copy of the job offer. Read the written offer carefully. If it is acceptable, either sign the form provided or prepare a written response in letter format which outlines your understanding of the terms of the offer and your acceptance. Return it to the employer at your earliest convenience. If

you have any questions about the terms, check with the employer or a lawyer before signing the offer. If you are interested in negotiating any items in the job offer, this should be undertaken prior to agreeing, either verbally or in writing, to a job offer.

Postponing an Offer

Chances are you may want some time to review a job offer or to complete interviews with other organizations before making a decision on a job offer you have received. If you require some time and the offer has been extended verbally, thank the employer and ask if he/she will be sending you a written offer. If yes, you have bought some time. If not or if the offer has been extended in writing, let the employer know you are very interested in the position but ask if you could have some time to think it over to ensure you are making the right decision. It is certainly acceptable to request 24 to 48 hours to consider a job offer. However, if you require more time, be sure to specify a date by which you could reply. A request for time to consider an offer is common and most employers will be understanding of this.

Most employers who participate in on-campus recruiting adhere to CACEE (Canadian Association of Career Educators and Employers) guidelines on acceptance dates. Employers are requested to provide a reasonable amount of time for students to respond to job offers; that is, three to four weeks from the date of the offer for positions available upon graduation.

Rejecting an Offer

Should you decide to reject an offer, be tactful. You never know when you will come in contact with the organization again. Express your appreciation for the job offer and decline gracefully. Decline in writing and keep a copy of your letter.

Rejection

While it often feels like the end of the world, not getting the job offer should be taken in stride. The reality is that you may have done nothing wrong and were a strong second-place candidate. So be kind to yourself. Always ask the interviewer if he/she has time to provide you with feedback on the strong points and the weak areas of your qualifications and your interview performance. Then use the information gained to improve your résumé and future interview skills. While this information may be primarily important for you to improve your skills, it also conveys to the employer a sense of interest and professionalism which might make them remember you in the future -- hopefully when another position is available. Keep your follow-up checklist and interview notes on this organization for future reference.

Final Tips

- **Know yourself, the organization and the position**
- **Prepare an agenda with relevant STARR examples**
- **Offer clear, focused, informative, logical and concise answers**
- **Demonstrate that you understand the components of key skills**
- **Clearly outline your skills and indicate how and why they are relevant**
- **Demonstrate enthusiasm, interest and knowledge**
- **Never offer anything negative, but if asked about something negative, always end your answer on a positive note.**

While this booklet covers many of the important aspects of how to succeed at an interview, please visit the Career Centre if you still have questions or want more information.