

## INTERVIEWS

Interviewing skills can be developed through research, preparation, and practice. Preparing before an interview will demonstrate your interest and make you a more confident interviewee.

### INVESTIGATE THE ORGANIZATION

Do your homework for every interview. Read about the firm/corporation/agency (use Martindale-Hubbell, firm websites, annual reports, LEXIS and WESTLAW, etc.). Speak with anyone who may know something about the employer, the particular legal community, or the geographic area in general. Most employers interviewing on campus will provide literature to our office. Lastly, you can obtain a firm resume or other literature directly from the prospective employer.

Learn about the person who will interview you, particularly his or her name and position or specialty. Organizations, firms, or companies that interview on campus or through consortia programs usually provide Career Services with the interviewers' names in advance.

### EVALUATE YOUR BACKGROUND

Before an interview, study your resume and other records. Analyze the relationship between your background and the requirements of the job. Identify major strengths and work experiences to emphasize, just as you did for your cover letter. Think of examples that will demonstrate your skills and commitment. To make your interview more memorable, make sure you can discuss in depth anything on your resume, particularly a law review note or a publication. Reread any writing samples you have submitted and be prepared to discuss them.

In preparation for an interview, it is often helpful to write a summary of your background, indicating two or three ways in which you could benefit the organization. Note specific achievements in past jobs that are highly related. You will not bring this summary to the interview, but rather use it as a preparation tool to assist you in making the basic points in the interview to show you are prepared to make a superior effort and produce results.

### THINK ABOUT WHAT YOUR BODY LANGUAGE CONVEYS

Your body language can sabotage an interview without you realizing it. Fidgeting, avoiding eye contact with the interviewer, keeping a closed posture (crossed arms, clenched fists), and slouching are some common ways interviewees appear uncomfortable, dishonest, defensive, or insecure. A few simple corrections can turn the interview around. Try to avoid fidgeting. It might be helpful to have a folder to hold during the interview. Be sure to look at your interviewer—alternate looking at her eyes, mouth, and shoulder (you don't want to glare). Sit with your ankles crossed or feet on the floor, occasionally leaning in toward the interviewer to express interest (avoid crossing your ankle over your knee). And, of course, sit and stand up straight.

### PRACTICE

Ask a friend or a counselor in Career Services to do a mock interview with you. Prepare answers to questions you may be asked. Ask for honest feedback on both your answers and how you come across.

## **CONSIDER THE EMPLOYER'S PERSPECTIVE**

Understanding the employer's point of view can give you a more realistic picture of the interview process and help you prepare. The employer is interested in finding the best candidate for the job. However, even a candidate with a superior resume must demonstrate that the qualifications outlined there will translate into an effective employee. Many of these are intangible qualities that cannot be described in a resume but can be demonstrated by the candidate in an interview.

## **MATERIALS**

Bring several copies of your resume, list of references, transcript, and writing sample to the interview in a professional-looking folder. You may meet new people who might be interested in seeing these materials, particularly if this is your second or third interview with the employer. A small notebook will be useful if you want to make a notation about something during or after the interview. Immediately following an interview, when everything is fresh in your mind, stop to write down the name of the interviewer(s) you just met and a few phrases to remind you later of what was discussed. You can refer to these notes in preparing for subsequent interviews and when writing your thank-you letters.

## **LOGISTICS**

Find out where the interview will be held. Some law firms and other organizations have more than one location. If you are not familiar with the area, be sure to get exact directions and parking instructions. Be generous in estimating when you need to leave for the interview. Arrive at the firm about ten minutes early.

## **DRESS**

A business suit is appropriate for most interviews. When in doubt, dress conservatively.

## **TYPES OF INTERVIEWS**

### **Screening Interviews**

This first interview may be held on or off campus, and is usually conducted by a member of the hiring committee or, if the employer is a corporation, by the human resources department. This interview is used to identify a pool of candidates who will later be interviewed at the employer's place of business by one or more partners, managers, or in-house counsel. The interviewer will be looking for concrete information to substantiate the qualifications described on your resume. The person interviewing you may or may not take part in the final hiring decision.

### **Selection Interviews**

The selection interview may be conducted by one or more persons, usually at the employer's office. You may be interviewed by several people at one time, or may go through a series of interviews throughout the day. You may meet with the interviewers in an office, in a conference room, or over lunch. Wherever the interviews occur, remember that they are formal proceedings and you should conduct yourself accordingly. Some law firms and corporations will require a majority vote of all those persons with whom you interviewed. Other employers give the hiring authority to one person who will use input from everyone who interviewed or met with you. Either way, remember that each contact with someone in the organization is equally important. Employers will often observe carefully your interaction with the receptionist or other support personnel for clues about how you may treat their clients.

### **Group Interviews**

If more than one person interviews you, remember to address every person. From time to time make eye contact with each interviewer in the group. The advantage of a group interview is that everything doesn't rest on one person's reaction; you have the advantage of connecting with one or more members of the committee.

## Behavioral Interviews

Many interviewers believe the best predictor of future performance is past performance in a similar situation. They ask questions to find out if an applicant has a set of skills they have determined are necessary for the job. In responding to these questions, use concrete examples of past experiences to demonstrate your skills and qualifications. The “**STAR**” method will help you think about your background:

- Situation:** What problem were you facing? What was the situation?  
**Task:** What needed to be done? How did you become involved?  
**Action:** What did you do specifically? If you were part of a team, what was your role?  
**Result:** What were the outcomes? What did you learn? What would you do differently?

If it is a situation you have never faced, simply say so and then give some sense of how you would approach it.

## Career Fairs

Before attending a career fair, investigate the participating employers and identify several of interest. When attending a fair, be prepared with your resume, a synopsis of your background and skills, an explanation of why you are interested in the employer, and a positive attitude.

## Mealtime Interviews: Dining Etiquette

The nature of interviews means that at some point you will probably be faced with a mealtime interview. Interviewers see this as an opportunity to determine how you may act in social settings as a representative of the employer. With this in mind, here are a few pointers for the mealtime interview:

- **Do you know the first thing to do when you sit down for the meal?** Before doing anything else, it is essential to put your napkin in your lap. Take this step after everyone sits but before you eat or drink. Keep in mind that in some upscale restaurants it is customary for your waiter/waitress or host to place your napkin for you.
- **Do you know where to place your napkin?** It belongs on your lap while at the table, but happens when you leave the table? If you leave your seat temporarily, place your napkin on your empty seat. When you leave your seat at the end of the meal, place your napkin to the right of your plate. At all other times (while sitting) keep your napkin in your lap.
- **Do you know which water glass to drink out of?** Do not get overwhelmed by the massive amounts of fine china, crystal, and silverware located at your dining table. Look only at your individual setting, the plates, bowls, and silverware in front of your exact seat. Your water and any other liquids will be located to your right, above the knives and spoons. Your non-liquids, such as a bread plate, will be to your left, above the (presumably) many forks.
- **Do you know what to order?** It is important to remember that you are out to dinner not for the pleasure of food but for an interview. Order food that is considered easy to eat. Stay away from foods like spaghetti or spare ribs. Never take advantage of the company's expense account. Avoid the most expensive items on the menu. It is alright to ask the interviewer for suggestions, but if you do so, make sure you follow them. Be sure, even if you aren't very hungry, to order something so the interviewer isn't uncomfortable.
- **Do you know what fork to use when?** Now that you have ordered a non-messy food, the first course comes, usually a salad. Which of the three forks should you go to first? The simple answer is to follow the outside-in rule. For your first course, use the fork to the outside, this is the salad fork. For your main meal use the next fork in. Lastly, for dessert, use the fork closest to your plate.
- **Do you know what to do if you drop something or knock something over?** Whatever you do, do not panic. Do not get on your hands and knees in search of your long lost spoon or napkin. Quietly ask the waitress/waiter for another utensil or napkin. Do not go without the lost item as this would show bad judgment to the interviewer. If you knock something over,

just remember this is your chance to show grace under pressure. Apologize once, and only once. Keep talking in a confident manner as you clean up quickly.

- **Do you know what to order to drink?** Don't order alcohol. Even if your interviewer orders a drink, do not feel obligated to do the same. The interview process is hard enough without complicating the situation by throwing alcohol into the mix.
- **Do you know who pays for the meal?** This question may seem obvious since the interviewer invited you to lunch. Don't reach for the bill or offer to pay; the interviewer will pay for the bill and the tip. Do say "thank you."
- **Do you know what to talk about?** It may seem obvious that the interviewer will ask questions and you will answer. What more is needed? Small talk is usually essential so use this time to show your individuality and to gain common ground with the interviewer. Try to avoid controversial topics such as religion or politics. If the subject is unavoidable, take a neutral ground so as not to invoke argument. Try to be up to date with the news as it is important to show that you know what is going on in the world around you.
- **What else should you know?** A sign of bad judgment is to put salt or pepper on your food before you taste it. No matter what your compulsions are with these seasonings, take one bite first. Try and have a snack before you meet for the interview. It will help to keep your mind on track and off the food. But remember, you should still order something to eat at the interview. Lastly, use common sense, otherwise known as the rules your mother taught you as a kid. Say "please" and "thank you," keep your elbows off the table, don't talk with your mouth full, and sit up straight.

### **The Telephone Interview**

Phone interviews are used to minimize the expense of interviewing out-of-town candidates and to narrow the pool of applicants who will be invited for in-person interviews. During your job search, it's helpful to be prepared for a phone interview on a moment's notice. Prepare just as you would for a regular interview.

*A few tips for effective phone interviewing:*

- Keep your resume and background summary in front of you.
- Be prepared with a pen and paper for taking notes.
- Take the call in a quiet place where you will not be interrupted. (*Never take call waiting during the interview.*)
- Don't smoke, chew gum, or eat while talking.
- Speak slowly and clearly.
- Smile at appropriate places in the interview, as you would during an in-person interview; smiling projects a positive image in your voice.
- Use their title (Mr., Ms., Dean, Dr.) unless they ask you to use their first name.
- If more than one person is interviewing you, clarify who is asking the question.
- Practice with a friend to see how your voice comes across on the phone.
- After the interview is over, thank the interviewer and ask if it would be possible to meet in person.
- Send a thank-you note.

## **STAGES OF AN INTERVIEW**

### **Introductions and Ice Breakers**

Greet the interviewer by name (be sure you know how to pronounce it) and shake hands firmly. Be sure to make good eye contact. During the first stage, the interviewer may immediately ask you questions, or may exchange small talk about the weather, your trip to the office, or the day's headlines. The interviewer normally sets the pace of and takes primary responsibility for the interview, while you respond. This small talk is designed to relax both participants and facilitate later communication. Interviewers are nervous about conducting good interviews; if you appear relaxed, you will make the interviewer feel comfortable and successful.

## **Sharing General Information**

The second stage involves a mutual sharing of information. The interviewer shares information about the organization and the job, and gathers more information about you. Answer an interviewer's questions with more than a simple "yes" or "no." An excellent technique is to include in your answers concrete examples that demonstrate your points.

Emphasize your strengths; be confident and sincere and avoid including negative information if possible. Take a positive approach. Do not refer to what you did not do, but instead speak with enthusiasm about what you learned or accomplished.

## **Responding to Questions**

The interviewer will focus on critical information such as your career goals and work values. They may follow a definite pattern that involves the use of notes, checklists, or prepared questions, or may use open-ended statements like, "Tell me about yourself." Frame your answers within the context of your career, describing succinctly how your background and experiences contributed to your interest in their field and organization. The interviewer will rely on your ability to organize and present information. Always include your most powerful and valuable selling points in the beginning of your presentation. There is no need to volunteer information about your perceived weaknesses or failures, but do not evade direct questions about them. Explain circumstances briefly, making sure to emphasize what you learned or gained from an experience, and end your response by showing your positive attitude. Occasionally interviewers may deliberately ask questions designed to see how you respond in tense or uncomfortable situations. Remain as calm as possible; you are a competent professional who has a great deal to offer an employer, even at this early point in your career.

You also will ask the interviewer questions. Ask questions and initiate discussion in areas not yet covered. "What challenges does your organization face?" "What makes someone successful at your firm?" The answers to these questions will not only inform your decision to accept a potential job offer, but will also convey your interest in the position to the employer.

## **The Closing**

Briefly reiterate your interest in the position and your qualifications for it. You might solicit feedback by asking the interviewer if there are still questions about any of your qualifications or experience. This will give you a chance to demonstrate not only how well you handle questions about a possible deficit, but also to fill in information that was overlooked. If the interviewer has not volunteered a date by which the hiring decision will be made, you may ask when and how you can expect to hear back. End the interview the same way you started it; shake hands and thank the employer for the interview.

## **FOLLOW UP**

Always type or email a thank-you letter after the interview that indicates your continued interest in the position and highlights your qualifications. If several people interviewed you, it may be appropriate to send a thank-you letter to each person. If it was a group interview, you may write one thank-you letter to the group. In your letters refer to specific topics that were discussed or questions the interviewers asked, or make follow-up comments about things you forgot to discuss. Your notes will be helpful.

If, after the interview, you are not interested in the position, be honest and tell the employer you no longer wish to be considered. Thank them for taking the time to speak with you.

## **INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

When preparing for your interview, think about the most difficult questions you could imagine being asked and prepare yourself to answer them. Be prepared to talk in some detail about anything on your resume.

The following list of often-asked questions can help you prepare for an interview. Be honest in responding to an interviewer's questions. If you do not know the answer to a question, say so. If you do not understand a question, ask that it be repeated or rephrased before answering to be sure you are answering what was asked. As much as possible, give a direct answer—"yes" or "no"—and then elaborate on your answer.

### **General Questions (no employer will ever ask all of them)**

- What led you to become a lawyer?
- Why did you choose Western New England University School of Law? (\*See "About the School of Law" at the end of this publication.)
- To what other law schools did you apply?
- Tell me about the school.
- If you could change your law school, what changes would you make?
- What law school subjects and areas of practice have you liked best? Least? Why?
- Can you explain the grading system to me?
- Do you think that your grades are a good indication of the level of your learning?
- What have you learned from participating on a journal or in a clinical program or externship?
- Describe your most rewarding law school experience.
- Why aren't you on law review?
- How has your law school prepared you to work here?
- How would you describe yourself?
- What do you think are your greatest strengths? Weaknesses? (Most people's weaknesses are usually over-extensions of their strengths.)
- How do you define success?
- What are your personal goals? (Answer in professional terms.)
- What is unique about you?
- How do you spend your spare time?
- What books are you currently reading (other than law books)?
- What two or three accomplishments have given you the most satisfaction? Why?
- Describe a major problem you encountered and how you dealt with it.
- What motivates you to put forth your greatest effort?
- How do you work under pressure?
- What have you learned from your mistakes?
- In what kind of environment are you most comfortable?
- What qualifications do you have that make you think you will be successful in the law?
- What are your long- and short-range career goals?
- What in your view is the most significant item on your resume?
- Tell me about the writing sample you submitted.
- Tell me something about yourself that isn't on your resume. (No personal information.)
- How would you describe your ideal job? Ideal work situation?
- What two or three things are most important to you in a job?
- If you were hiring someone for this job, what would you look for?
- Why weren't you offered a job by the law firm where you worked last summer?
- Are you aggressive enough for this kind of work?
- How many hours per week are you prepared to work?
- Why do you want a position with this firm/agency/company?
- Have you read our firm website? What do you think of it?
- What type of work would you be unwilling to do if we hired you?
- How long do you expect to work here? Can you give a long-term commitment?
- In what ways do you think you can make a contribution to our firm/company?

- What would you do if a client did not want to work with you?
- Why do you think you might like to live in this community?
- Which is more important to you – salary or the type of job?
- How important to you is the matter of compensation?
- What salary would you expect at the start?
- With what other firms have you been interviewing? How do we compare?
- What have you learned from the other attorneys with whom you have spoken today?
- Why should I hire you?
- Do you have any questions for me?

### **Questions for Specific Employers**

#### Large- & Medium-sized Firms

- What part of our practice would be of special interest to you? Why?
- Do you think you have the qualities that would enable you to become a partner in our firm?
- What do you think those qualities are?

#### The Small Office

- Do you have any ties to this community?
- What familiarity do you have with the way a small firm operates?
- What do you know about our firm that leads you to believe it would be a satisfactory place for you to work? Why?

#### Judicial Clerkships

- Why are you interested in a clerkship?
- Have you any particular reason for seeking a job with me?
- What aspects of a clerkship do you value?

#### Government, Legal Services, & Public Interest Groups

- What interest do you have in service to the public generally?
- How committed are you to service for the poor, and what past experiences do you have as evidence of this commitment?
- What do you see as the basic rewards for working for legal services, government agencies, or in public interest law?

#### Corporations

- What do you know about our company?
- How do you feel about having us as your only client?
- Unlike private law firms, partnership is not an opportunity here. How do you feel about that?

### **Grade Questions**

Grades are often a topic of discussion at interviews. If your class rank does not appear on your resume, an employer is likely to assume it is not high. If an employer asks about your grades, do not be defensive and do not offer excuses or apologies. Family obligations, employment, or other commitments that took time away from studying can be briefly mentioned. An illness during a semester or an examination period may account for a somewhat lower rank, but a large number of illnesses during law school will appear questionable. Be careful of the “I don’t do well in high-pressure situations but really know a lot” type of answer. It sounds like an excuse and, since the majority of legal positions require the ability to work well under pressure some of the time, you may find yourself convincing the employer not to consider you for the job.

### **Inappropriate Questions**

The School of Law has a strong nondiscrimination policy; nevertheless, very occasionally you may be asked discriminatory questions, such as: How do you plan to get to work? Are you married? Do you plan to have a family? Have you ever been arrested? What nationality is your name? What type of work does your father do? Interviewers may ask these questions because

they do not realize they are inappropriate, realize they are but want to see how you respond, want to know the answers whether the questions are inappropriate or not, or because they are just making conversation.

You could refuse to answer the questions, which may create an unpleasant atmosphere in the interview; or you can simply answer the question, which may or may not be what the interviewer is seeking. Consider, however, the message you are conveying by answering, and how it will leave you feeling about yourself. Oftentimes, you can answer the employer's underlying concerns without answering the actual question and without alienating the interviewer. *Example:* "If you're asking me whether I have the time to commit fully to the job, I assure you I do."

### **Questions for You to Ask**

When you are being interviewed, it is not unusual to be asked, "Do you have any questions for us?" Have a few prepared – they will show that you have thought about the position and have a real interest in it. If you are interviewing with several persons at the same firm, you may wish to ask each one some of the same questions. You may find that the same questions can elicit very different responses from each interviewer. Ask questions that indicate you have researched the firm. Unless the employer has not provided the law school with any information and is not listed in *Martindale-Hubbell*, on the web, or in any other law or business directory, they will expect you to know such basics as the approximate size of the organization, its areas of practice, its offices in other cities, and other relevant information.

- As a law clerk, will I be doing research or other work in a specialty, or in a variety of areas?
- Will I have the opportunity to go to court for cases I work on?
- Do law clerks work primarily with one attorney or with several?
- Am I expected to bring in new business?
- Will I receive additional compensation for bringing in new business?
- How are associates supervised, trained, and evaluated?
- As a new associate, will I be rotated among a variety of areas of practice, or will I specialize immediately?
- How and when do associates become specialists, if they do?
- What is a typical day like for a new associate? How does that change after bar admittance?
- What is the average number of billable hours for a new associate? Is part of my compensation determined on the basis of hours billed?
- To what extent are new associates given immediate responsibility and direct contact with clients?
- How much contact is there with partners?
- What opportunities are there for advancement or growth within the firm, company, or organization?
- What is the policy regarding admission to partnership?
- Are there tiers in partnership?
- How will I be reviewed? What makes someone successful here?
- How is the firm governed?
- What are the growth plans for the firm, company, or organization?
- I understand that recently many smaller firms have been merging with larger ones. Do you anticipate any mergers in the near future?
- Is pro bono work encouraged?
- How much continuing legal education is expected or permitted?
- Are there social life or lifestyle expectations? If so, how strong are they?
- Tell me about your work in the firm.



## **Salaries**

Never discuss salary in your first interview unless the employer does so first. Some firms may mention rates of compensation in their description and some information is available in the NALP Directory of Legal Employers. In some cases salaries are not negotiable (e.g., government and legal service salaries are usually fixed). In other cases, offers can depend upon how the employer views you as a candidate.

If the interviewer brings up the subject of salary and you are asked what salary you expect, try to avoid giving a direct answer. Ask what salary range has been budgeted for the position. You might say, "Given what you know now about me, I hope we can discuss something at the upper end of your range."

Be realistic, and consider the future potential of the position. Depending on the employer, there are other compensation arrangements that might be made as an alternative to a straight salary.

## **AFTER THE INTERVIEW**

### **If you are not offered the Job**

If an employer does not make you an offer, you may ask if they know of others who may be interested in your experience, or if they would please keep you in mind in the event the situation changes. It is often helpful to ask why you did not get the job or ask them for advice on how to enhance your candidacy. Some employers will be candid about answering this question; others will not. Employers who are willing to provide this kind of information can help you assess your qualifications for future jobs. Remember, you may have been an excellent candidate but simply the number two choice, and they may be very happy to help and encourage you. Learn what you can from any interview.

The following list of common reasons why candidates receive rejections is a guideline to some major pitfalls to avoid:

- Inability to express self clearly.
- Not prepared for the interview – no research done on employer.
- Lack of proper career planning – purposes and goals not defined.
- Insufficient evidence of achievement or capacity to motivate action in others.
- Lack of knowledge of field or specialization – not qualified.
- No real interest in the employer – merely shopping around.
- Little interest and enthusiasm – indifferent.
- Overbearing – overaggressive – conceited.
- Asks no, or poor, questions about the job.
- Poor personal appearance or inappropriate attire.
- Makes excuses – evades – hedges on unfavorable factors in record.
- No confidence and poise – fails to look interviewer in the eye.
- Unwilling to start at the bottom – expects too much too soon.
- Interested only in best dollar offer, not in the job itself.

### **When You Get an Offer**

Job offers are not usually made during the interview. If, after the interview, you do not hear from the employer within a reasonable time after the date specified for a decision, you may call or write to ask about the status of deliberations. Be careful not to call repeatedly or place undue pressure on the employer for an answer. Depending on the situation, it may take two to four weeks or more following your interview to hear from the employer.

If you are offered a job during your interview, with few exceptions, you should not accept it on the spot. Take some time to think through the terms of your acceptance. When you receive any offer, indicate your pleasure, ask for a date by which the employer needs your decision, and

indicate that you will get back to them by that time. (See the NALP guidelines for offers and acceptances from member employers at the end of this handbook.)

Timing and tact are critical when you have been made an offer; the employer, naturally, wants your decision, but you may be waiting to hear about another offer for a job you would prefer. In this case, you can ask the first employer to extend the time by which you must give them your decision. Be careful how you present that request. You may be working there if you do accept their offer, so do not give them the impression that they are a poor second choice.

It is acceptable practice to call your preferred employer and tell them that you have another job offer but that you would prefer working with them. Ask when the hiring decision might be made. Here, too, be careful of your presentation. Your preferred employer's time constraints may still mean that, in the end, you will have to make a decision about the first employer's offer without learning what your preferred employer decides.

Whenever an employer makes a job offer, particularly for a permanent position, the offer should be made in writing. The offer letter should state the salary for the position, the benefits that accompany it, and any other terms of employment. Confirm your acceptance of the position in writing, restating the terms of employment.

When you are in the fortunate position of having to choose from among multiple offers, use the same tact and finesse that you would want from an employer. Carefully prepare what you will say, and be gracious. You never know what the future will bring. Some day you may again have the desire and opportunity to work for the employers whose offers you have previously declined, or you may face them in court!

**GOOD LUCK!**