

INTERVIEWING

Interviewing is a skill that you can learn to do well. Practice makes all the difference. We *strongly* recommend that you schedule a mock interview with a career advisor because legal interviews are very different from the interviews you may have gone on in the past. Moreover, it is impossible to objectively assess your own interviewing skills.

An interview should be a dynamic conversation during which your interviewer gets a glimpse of who you are as a person. In order for that to happen, you have to be relaxed, confident, and most importantly, you need to be yourself. So don't adopt a stiff interviewing persona. Be yourself . . . but your best self, just as you would on a first date!

One of the most important things to keep in mind is that if you got an interview, then you are qualified for the job. The interview is simply an opportunity for the employer to see if there is genuine interest as well as a good match in terms of personality and "fit."

Do your research first. Interviewers are looking for candidates who display enthusiasm for both the position and the employer. You cannot convincingly convey enthusiasm during an interview unless you know everything you reasonably can about the organization. Thus, research is the cornerstone of a successful interview. You can be exceptionally well qualified and personable, but you will not receive an offer if you cannot demonstrate a genuine interest in the work. As one hiring attorney put it, "The most impressive interviewees are those who can clearly articulate why they are interested in our firm, with specific reasons that are based on research."

Arrive ten minutes early and be friendly to everyone you meet in the office. It is essential that you arrive on time (ten minutes *before* your interview is scheduled to start is on time), and convey that you are a confident, friendly professional. Be sure that your handshake is firm, but not too firm, and that you make sufficient eye contact. Be friendly and courteous to all the support staff, and do not show annoyance or impatience if you are kept waiting.

Wear a suit. The legal industry is conservative by nature, and the Baltimore/DC region is very traditional in its style. Lawyers on television are not representative of how lawyers living and working in Baltimore dress. The basic interview suit is even more conservative than what lawyers wear on a regular day at the office. It should be dark in color and well-tailored. No dresses or sleeveless blouses. Shoes should be low-heeled and conservative.

Always be positive in all of your responses. If questions arise regarding experiences that were negative in some way, focus on the best aspects of those experiences, not the worst.

Prior to the Interview

Review your strengths, abilities and qualifications.

You need to take the time for self-assessment before an interview. Carefully review the job description. For each job responsibility identified in the description, think of an example from your academic or professional history that demonstrates you have the requisite experience or transferable skills. Do the same with all of the "qualifications," "skills" and/or "experience" that the employer requires.

For example, many job descriptions stress the importance of communication skills, i.e., "ability to communicate effectively with individuals of all responsibility levels." If you interned last summer with the Public Defender's

Office, you will want to highlight the experience you gained in explaining complex legal concepts to diverse constituencies from judges to clients with little prior knowledge of the law. If you do not have directly relevant experience, discuss how you developed skills that are transferable to the position, e.g., working as a bartender during college, you learned how to talk with anyone. Select an example in which you displayed each of the requisite skills and tell a brief story about it. As one interviewer from a large government agency observed, “Being able to tell a good story is impressive; it can make a wonderful impression if the interviewee says ‘Let me tell you about this . . .’”

Research the employer.

The more you know about the employer, the better able you will be to answer questions appropriately and to highlight those of your strengths that are most relevant to that particular employer. Research will also fuel thoughtful questions about the particular firm or agency.

It can be very helpful to do a news search in Google for the employer and your interviewers. This will alert you to big cases and professional accomplishments that are great topics for questions.

Practice: anticipate and prepare for interview questions.

Obviously, you will not be delivering canned responses when you actually get to the interview, but if you have prepared adequately in advance, you are less likely to walk away feeling that you missed opportunities to sell yourself, or that you were thrown by unexpected questions.

Sample Interview Questions

You can anticipate the questions that will be asked by the interviewer and prepare appropriate responses in advance. However, interviewers vary widely in their approaches to questioning. Most attorneys are casual and friendly during the interview, looking just to get to know you better.

Common interview questions:

- **Tell me about yourself.**

This is a classic open-ended starting question. What they are really asking is, “How did you come to be interviewing with me today?” You should provide a brief summary of why you went to law school, your previous relevant work experiences, your reasons for being interested in the job, and why you think you would enjoy working there.

- **Why do you think you would like to work for our firm/agency/office?**

You should be very well prepared for this question if you did your research. If you did not yet offer a brief summary of why you went to law school and your previous relevant work experiences, then do so before giving your reasons for your interest in the job, and why you think you would enjoy working there. They want to know the “story of you” - your motivation and background - not just that you like litigation.

- **What is your greatest weakness?**

The best way to answer this question is to describe a weakness that you have overcome, e.g., “When I had more free time, I sometimes used it ineffectively. Law school has taught me to make use of every minute of

the day.” The weakness should be minor and unrelated to core lawyering skills, such as writing and legal research.

- **What area of practices are you interested in? Why do you want a career in...tax, litigation, etc.?**

If you know, this is a good chance to show that you understand the substantive work involved and that you are a committed, hard-working individual. If you are a 1L or 2L, it is okay not to be 100% sure what you want to do, so long as you show enthusiasm for the law, and the organization you are interviewing with.

- **Tell me about your article, internship program, work experience, cases, etc.**

You should be prepared to discuss everything on your resume. If you have written an article or worked on cases in a law office, you should be prepared to discuss the topic analytically. Remember that anything on your resume is fair game, including undergraduate papers or activities and early work experience. If you cannot remember anything about an item, or if your membership in a club or society is limited to attending one meeting, it should not be on your resume.

- **What do you do in your spare time? What are your hobbies, activities, outside interests? What is the last book you read/your favorite book?**

This is an opportunity to establish a personal connection with the interviewer, and your answer should be something that is inclusive and that opens the path to further conversation, not to impress or show how original and interesting you are. Remember, your main objective is to connect with the interviewer in a personal way and have a good, mutually pleasant conversation.

Thus your answer has to be tailored to your interviewer, as you are looking to find commonalities. Look for something that interests you, and which may interest your interviewer, and talk about that. For example, if you are interviewing with a sixty-something male judge, then it is pretty unlikely you two will connect over your love of scrapbooking and crafts. But if you are a foodie, and enjoy checking out new restaurants, sharing that with the judge could lead to a great conversation about great places to eat in the Baltimore area, and you may discover that you both love Korean food.

During law school, it is unlikely you have much in the way of free time. It is fine to say so, and to share that to relax you watch a certain television show. People definitely can bond over a shared appreciation for a certain television show, movie, or book. But you should add something else that is more active and gregarious, that you enjoyed doing in the past or would be doing if you had more time.

- **What are your grades like? Why are you not on a journal/moot court? Why are your grades not on your resume?**

You must know your official G.P.A. and class rank. Do not become evasive when asked about grades but answer these questions forthrightly and accurately. Class rank and grades can be the most difficult issue to deal with in an interview. But assume that if you are having an interview, you have a real chance at the position. Do not be defensive. Look for subjects that may be pertinent in which you did well. Cite any evidence of strong research and writing skills.

Prepare questions to ask the interviewer.

Most interviewers will ask towards the end of the interview, “So what can I tell you about [the employer]?” or “What questions do you have for me?” This is a critical part of the interview, and many otherwise strong candidates stumble at this point because they either don’t have questions, or their questions are boring.

It is essential that you have prepared in advance for this situation, and that you are able, based on what has gone on in the interview, and on your previous research of the employer, to ask a thoughtful and pertinent question. The most impressive questions are highly informed, and relate directly to the work the interviewer or employer does. Asking such a question, in and of itself, demonstrates your intelligence, intellectual curiosity, and genuine interest in the employer's work. It will distinguish you from your competition, and a good question could very well get you the job.

Example of a good question for a senior level attorney at the Federal Trade Commission:

I read that the Commission recently revised its Merger Review Guidelines, and that the changes have been well received by industry. How have the changes impacted your work so far?

Example of a good question for a law firm partner:

I saw on your biography that in addition to representing energy clients, you have a lot of expertise in helping cell companies navigate all the challenges that come with the construction of new cell towers.

I would love to hear how you developed that type of practice. It sounds really interesting.

It is always good to give the interviewer an opportunity to say nice things about their employer or themselves. So a few "safety questions" to ask are:

- Why did you choose this [organization]? What do you most enjoy about working here?
- What do you think goes into doing this type of work really well?
- What do you enjoy most about working with the clients you help?

If you are interviewing with a large law firm or federal agency at a call back interview, then you should ask questions that show you care about what life is like for its junior lawyers, and their professional development:

- What type of matters do your junior associates typically work on? Do they work with more than one partner or practice group?
- Do you set professional development benchmarks for your associates? How do you your midlevel associates know that they are on track with their professional skill development?

For a public interest organization, you can ask:

- What initiatives, developments, or trends in [their area of expertise] are you most excited about?
- What are some of the challenges facing your clients that worry you the most? (E.g., proposed program cuts, pending legislation, etc.)