

This handout will help graduate students prepare for interviews in corporate, non-profit, and government environments.

## **DO YOUR RESEARCH**

Before any type of job interview, it is essential that you do your research – on the organization, department, interviewers, community, etc. Much to employers' dismay, many candidates lack basic information about the organizations with whom they are interviewing. Being well-informed about employers will help you make a positive impression during interviews.

Purposes:

- Researching helps you decide if you want to apply, accept a job interview, and accept a job offer.
- Research helps you prepare answers to potential interview questions.
- Doing your research will help you prepare good questions to ask during the interview.

Using the Internet:

- Read potential employers' websites.
- Read organizations' profiles on websites listed in the Company/Industry Research section at - <http://careers.uw.edu/Resources/Web-Resources>
- Type employer and employee names into a general search browser.
- Peruse online newspapers, trade journals, business directories, and blogs for insights into an organization's reputation and current events.

Asking Others:

- Ask your advisor, professors, classmates, and other professional colleagues if they have any information about particular companies, departments, or employees that would be helpful as you proceed through the interview process.
- Ask professors and staff in your department if they know of any alumni from your program that might have helpful knowledge about these issues.
- Check to see if there are UW alumni working at specific employers by accessing the UW Alumni Association's Husky Career Network - <http://www.washington.edu/alumni/careers/hcn> - or by accessing the "University of Washington Alumni Group" in LinkedIn.

## **LEARN THE BASICS**

You should start preparing for the interview process before you are invited to interview. Familiarize yourself with some basic information and protocol regarding job interviews.

Four Important Preparatory Steps:

- Look at lists of sample interview questions and jot down a few thoughts for each question, including concrete examples to demonstrate your point.
- Review the job description, highlight the skill words mentioned, and think of a story that demonstrates your competence in each skill area.
- Practice saying your answers aloud to yourself because spoken answers usually sound much different than answers in your head.
- Participate in a mock interview.
  - Ask a group of colleagues to pose the most difficult interview questions they can create.

- Schedule a free mock interview at the Career Center by calling (206) 543-0535. The 50-minute appointments usually consist of 30 minutes of interviewing and 20 minutes of debriefing. If you provide a copy of your resume and the job description two days prior to your scheduled mock interview, a career counselor will create the most realistic interview possible. You can record the session on a flash drive and watch yourself later on.
- If you are unable to participate in a mock interview, consider using other interviewing resources available at the Career Center:
  - Interview Survival Kit – deck of cards with sample interview questions available for \$5 in 134 MGH.
  - Employer Conversation – free event where employers share their insights on interviews
  - Online narrated interviewing workshop - <http://careers.washington.edu/Workshops>

General Suggestions:

- Develop rapport.
- Answer questions in an organized manner – if you are surprised by a question, take a brief moment to think or even ask for time to think so you do not ramble.
- Keep your answers short – 90 seconds to 2 minutes in length.
- Remember that everything in your resume and cover letter is fair game for interviews.
- Do not assume the interviewers have read your resume.

Attitude & Approach:

- Answer the silent question – How are you going to be valuable to the employer?
- Keep the focus on your skills and how they match an employer’s needs.
- Always back up talk about skills with proof from experience.
- Remember you are marketing yourself – do not mention the qualifications or experiences you *don’t* have!
- Demonstrate that you are a confident, calm, forward-thinking professional.
- Present yourself in a lively, engaged manner.
- Be honest and genuine.
- Convey passion for your work and excitement about the possibility of working at the organization with which you are interviewing.

## PREPARE ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS

You can start preparing your answers to potential questions regarding past experiences, skills, and personal qualities well in advance of interviews so you have more time to do your research and prepare answers to company-specific questions after you are invited to interview.

Past Experiences:

- Employers believe past behavior predicts future performance.
- They may ask questions about your past using phrases like: “tell me about a time when” and “describe a situation when” - such questions are called behavior-based questions.
- A method for answering behavior-based questions is the STAR method.
  - Mention the SITUATION. (I was a marketing intern at a large national retailer.)
  - State the TASK. (I was asked to create a new marketing campaign geared towards teens.)
  - Describe the ACTIONS you took to accomplish the task. (I met with XYZ, researched XYZ, developed a proposal, and presented it to XYZ.)
  - Discuss RESULTS. (My boss was impressed by the comprehensive plan I developed. The company decided to adopt 4 of the 5 major strategies I suggested and are currently working to implement them.)
- Sample questions:
  - Tell me about a time you demonstrated [insert skill from job description].
  - Tell me about a time you were an effective leader.

- Describe a time your communication skills served you well.
- Discuss a time you had to resolve a conflict with a colleague.
- Tell me when you initiated and completed a project with minimal supervision.
- Describe a time you solved a difficult problem.

#### Skills & Knowledge:

- Employers want to know how you are going to be valuable to them.
- Skills are the language of the job search so you may be asked to describe your skills and knowledge.
- If you do not have experience with a specific task, discuss your experience with related tasks and mention your confidence in your ability to learn the task in question.
- Sample questions:
  - How would you describe your problem-solving approach?
  - How do you handle yourself under pressure?
  - With what types of technology / procedures / equipment are you familiar?
  - What do you know about \_\_\_\_\_?
  - Describe your style of supervising others.
  - What did you learn in your graduate program that is relevant to this job?
  - What special knowledge would you bring to this job?

#### Personal Characteristics:

- Hiring managers are interested in you as a colleague; they want to know what it will be like to work in the office next to you.
- Be careful that you only divulge personal information you are comfortable sharing.
- Legally, you do not have to tell potential employers your age, marital or parenting status, sexual orientation, political affiliation, religious preferences, etc. (although you may need to disclose some of this information when applying for some government jobs)
- If you are asked a question that you do not feel comfortable answering, try to figure out the underlying question (i.e. Can you fulfill the responsibilities of this job?) and answer it, rather than directly answering the question that was asked.
- When asked to describe yourself, briefly describe your background and then mention the skills you have to offer that match the company's needs.
- If you are asked about a weakness, mention a minor weakness that is professional in nature but not related to the job description or mention a weakness that is the opposite of one of the characteristics mentioned in the job description, thereby making it a strength in relation to the position.
- For a demonstration of strengths-based interviewing, attend the Successful Interviews workshop offered at The Career Center several times per quarter. Find the next date at: <http://careers.uw.edu/Calendar>
- Sample questions:
  - Tell me about yourself.
  - What is your greatest strength? Weakness?
  - How would others describe you?
  - What are your long-term goals?
  - What do you consider your biggest accomplishment?
  - What are your hobbies?
  - How would you describe your sense of humor?
  - Why are you interested in this line of work?
  - Why did you decide to pursue a position outside academia?
  - What other career paths have you considered?

#### Case Questions:

- Interviews in consulting and other fields often include case questions.
- Case questions pose real-world problems and require you to solve them.
- Demonstrate your thoughtfulness, logical thinking, cool-headedness, and problem-solving skills.

#### Company & Industry:

- Companies want to make sure the people they hire are going to be happy in their jobs because it is not in anybody's interest to hire somebody who is not a good fit.
- Interviewers will ask you how you see yourself in their department and organization.
- Sample questions:
  - Why do you want to work here?
  - What unique strengths would you contribute to this department?
  - What do you know about us?
  - Why are you the best candidate for this particular position?
  - What have you done to demonstrate your commitment to this field?
  - How do you handle yourself in competitive environments?
  - What do you expect from your supervisor?
  - How do your values coincide with the mission of this company?
  - How do you feel about living in rural \_\_\_\_?

#### Questions for You to Ask:

- Search committees are usually curious to know what questions you have for them.
- It is important to have a few questions prepared.
- Ask questions that demonstrate you have done your research on their department and organization – don't ask questions that are answered on the front page of their website.
- Many types of questions are appropriate but you should try to avoid questions about salary during the interview process (although you need to be prepared to talk about salary, in case they bring it up).
- Sample questions:
  - How is success in this position measured?
  - What are the most challenging aspects of being a new employee here?
  - I've read about XYZ initiative. How do you see it impacting the company?
  - Where do you see the department (or company) heading in the next 5 years?
  - What do you consider the strengths of this organization?
  - When will you be making a decision?
  - When/how may I follow-up with you?

## ATTEND TO LOGISTICS

It is very important to attend to the logistics listed below because they impact first impressions.

#### Technology:

- Make sure your voicemail is set up properly. Record a professional greeting on it.
- Consider letting phone calls from unrecognized numbers go to voicemail when you are not in a place conducive to giving your full attention to the phone call.
- Keep a pad of paper, a writing utensil, and a list of questions by your phone so you are prepared to schedule interviews over the phone.
- Make sure your email account is not full.
- Try to make your email filter the least sensitive possible and be sure to check your "junk" folders so you are certain to receive emails from companies to which you are applying.

#### Attire:

- If you do not have professional clothing, buy some before you are invited to interview so you are not scrambling at the last minute to find appropriate attire. Break them in before your interview.
- When in doubt, go for traditional, conservative, and dressy. Another good rule is to be dressed up one level beyond which you think your interviewers will be dressed.
- Limit your perfume, wear moderate jewelry, and consider covering your tattoos.

#### Transportation:

- Before the day of your interview, get driving directions and consider driving to the organization so you know how long it will take you to get there.
- Be sure you know where to park.
- Leave early enough for your interview that the worst-case traffic scenario will not make you late.
- Try to arrive 10-15 minutes early (but no more than that) to the actual interviewing office (not the parking lot, elevator, etc.) – arriving early will demonstrate professionalism and give you a few minutes to relax.

## PREPARE FOR SPECIFIC TYPES OF INTERVIEWS

#### Phone Interviews:

- Basic Information:
  - Companies often invite several applicants to participate in screening interviews over the phone.
  - Phone interviews are generally less in-depth than in-person interviews.
  - You will need to talk about your experiences, skills, and interest in the company.
  - Interviewers will also expect you to have questions for them.
- Advantages of Phone Interviews:
  - You are able to wear what makes you feel confident.
  - You can sit comfortably.
  - You can have your application materials in front of you and refer to them.
  - You are able to take notes.
- Disadvantages of Phone Interviews:
  - You do not get non-verbal feedback so it is often difficult to read how the interviewers are reacting to your answers.
  - Some companies have low-quality telephones so there might be an echo or a slight delay, or it may be difficult to hear everybody on the other side of the line.
- Suggestions:
  - Choose a quiet, interruption-free environment.
  - If you have a cordless/wireless phone, make sure it is fully charged and you have great reception.
  - Listen very carefully so you can hear as much as possible on the other end.
  - Try not to talk over others. Make sure others are done speaking before you speak.
  - Check in. (Does that answer your question? Would you like me to say more?)
  - Maintain a strong and steady voice.
  - Communicate energy. Smile as you talk.
  - Organize your notes so you don't rustle papers when answering questions.
  - Don't rely too heavily on your notes; try to connect/engage with interviewer.

#### Videoconference Interviews:

- Employers may request to conduct interviews using Skype or any number of videoconferencing platforms.
- Suggestions:
  - There is usually a time lag so you should pause after you are finished speaking so individuals on the other end have a chance to hear the end of your answers, and pause after their lips stop moving so you hear the full question.
  - Try not to move too much because movements are exaggerated on camera.
  - Try to set up the equipment so there is a small box on your screen showing how you are being projected to the search committee.
  - Be conscious of your physical surroundings, attire, and noise levels.
  - Use a wired connection, rather than wireless internet, for a higher quality experience
- The UW has videoconferencing equipment available for student use.
  - Career Center - email [crecruit@uw.edu](mailto:crecruit@uw.edu) if interested in using
  - Kane Hall - <http://www.css.washington.edu/Videoconferencing>

#### Marathon Interviews:

- Candidates in the final pool may be asked to spend an entire day interviewing.
- Sometimes you will meet individually with multiple people, each for 30-60 minutes.
- If you meet with several employees at once, be sure to engage everybody with eye contact.
- Some organizations interview several candidates together in a group interview format.
- Workplace tours are common during day-long visits as well.
- It is important for you to maintain enthusiasm and energy all day.

#### Meal Interviews:

- Many companies conduct interviews over meals, especially during day-long interviews.
- Maintain your professionalism during these meetings.
- When ordering and making conversation, follow your hosts' lead.
- Eat and drink in moderation, and order easy-to-eat entrées.

#### Out of Town Interviews:

- Many organizations will pay for select out of town job candidates to travel to their site for interviews.
- If you travel to job interviews, be sure to pack all important stuff in your carry-on luggage - multiple copies of your resume and cover letter, career portfolio, interview clothing, personal items, and medication.
- Pack an umbrella and other items for inclement weather.
- Try to arrive by afternoon of the day prior to your interview so you have time to prepare, eat a good meal, relax, and sleep.
- Companies often pay for candidates' travel arrangements. Ask some clarifying questions:
  - Who is responsible for making the travel arrangements?
  - Who is responsible for paying for the travel arrangements?
  - What documents do I need to be reimbursed for my expenses?
  - Will somebody pick me up at the airport and transport me during my visit?
  - When will I receive my agenda? Can I have one prior to my arrival?

## FOLLOW-UP

#### Thank-You Notes

- Within 48 hours of your interview, send a brief thank-you note (3-5 sentences) to each person who spent significant time with you on an individual basis during the interview process.
- Consider sending one note addressed to all of the people you want to thank.
- While nicely written notecards are nice, emails are usually more likely to get read in a more timely fashion.

#### Calls & Emails

- If you do not hear back from an employer by the date they indicated they would be making a decision, call or email them to express continued interest and to inquire about the status of the search process.

## RESOURCES

<http://careers.washington.edu/Students/Resumes-and-Interviews>

<http://careers.washington.edu/Workshops> (online interviewing workshop)