

INTERVIEWING

A Harvard Extension School Resource

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Harvard Extension School



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ACE THE INTERVIEW

During an interview, potential employers are trying to assess the following:

- Your qualifications for and ability to do the job
- Your "fit" with the employer or organization culture and values
- Whether you are truly interested in and motivated to do the job
- How clearly you can express your potential contribution to the organization and whether you could develop in the role
- Your "soft skills" such as communication and professionalism.

In other words, the interviewer wants to know: Why should we hire you?

Employers are looking for applicants who are focused and mature, understand the work the company is doing and the requirements of the job for which they are interviewing, and can communicate how their skills can be used to meet those requirements. They want to hire people who work well with others and are able to solve the problems the employer needs to address. They are also looking for those who will be excited to join the company and the team.

It's important to be as prepared as possible before your interview. Here are some suggestions for improving your interviewing skills:

Research the company, field, and position: Before the interview, analyze the job description for what the organization most needs from someone in the role, and identify how your experience and skillsets correspond. Read the employer's website and any print material that you may have picked up at career fairs or other hiring events. Be sure to stay current on industry news by reading daily news alerts. Conduct a search on the organization on the day of the interview to be up-to-date on any new developments. Check the employer's social media accounts to learn about company updates and organization culture. Utilize Harvard resources such as Firsthand/Vault (available through the Mignone Center for Career Success for admitted degree candidates and recent alumni) for additional industry and company information. Whenever possible, attend any networking and information sessions the employer is having or speak with someone who works there to increase your visibility and to gather additional information. Use the Advisors section of Firsthand as well as LinkedIn to identify alumni to reach out to for information, advice or a mock interview.

Know your resume: Be prepared to discuss everything on your resume in relation to the needs of the specific employer and role. Remember that the contents of your resume may be the only information an employer will have about you. Expect questions about your professional experiences, field of study, and capstone or thesis (if you referred to it).

Employers and organizations are interested in knowing how you've chosen to spend your time and energy, and why. Help your interviewer get to know you and differentiate yourself from other candidates without going negative. Don't be too brief when answering "what and why" questions, but don't ramble, either. Expand on your experience and skills with a specific example. **Focus your responses on how these relate to the job for which you are interviewing.**

From a recent employer:

"All Harvard candidates are capable of doing the job. What distinguishes the candidates is the level of interest."

Practice answering interview questions: Practice here doesn't imply that you are memorizing answers to questions, but instead assessing *how* you answer questions, whether you are making eye-contact and seem interested, whether your explanations are clear, if you have an understanding of the reasoning behind certain questions and how to connect your experience to the role you are seeking. You can practice with roommates, family, friends, or alumni, using Big Interview (available to admitted degree candidates and alumni) and other AI-based tools, or with an advisor at the Mignone Center for Career Success. The more experience you have articulating your thoughts and highlighting skills relevant to the position, the more effective and polished your presentation will be. If your interviews will be on the phone, over an online meeting platform, or via asynchronous video interview (AVI) software (HireVue is just one example), practice for that particular modality as well.

Prepare questions to ask the employer: Questions will help you obtain the information needed to make an informed decision and also reiterate your interest in the job. Always consider your questions carefully, to make sure they are relevant to the scope of person who is interviewing you and the answers aren't easily found online. Make sure you know the next step in the process before you leave. Ask, "When might I expect to hear from you about next steps?" and, if applicable, indicate your continued interest in the position.

Make sure your attire is appropriate: A well-groomed, professional appearance is essential. Decide what to wear well before the day of the interview. A good way to determine suitable attire is to look at what people typically wear in the organization or industry for which you are interviewing and dressing one level more formally than they are (if they wear shorts on the job, for example, consider business casual for the interview but do not go as formal as a suit). You can always ask the person arranging the interview what would be appropriate. Generally, plan to wear a fairly formal outfit in a dark color. In some creative and technical fields, you may have more leeway in terms of formal vs. casual attire, but it is always safer to err on the more formal side. Avoid: wild ties, distracting jewelry, or strong scents.

Attire	
Corporate Dress	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• dark suit with a light shirt or tailored dress• conservative tie / simple jewelry• dark/well-polished, closed-toe shoes
Business Casual	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• khakis or dress pants or skirt• button-down long-sleeve shirt, sweater sets, or blouse• have a blazer handy

Map out the location: For in-person interviews, plan your trip ahead of time, especially if you are in a major urban area or interviewing at a time when traffic may delay your travel. Plan to arrive 10-15 minutes early so that you can relax and compose yourself. If you arrive earlier, wait and review your notes. See below for more information on remote interviews.

Have a good attitude: Project enthusiasm, confidence, and a positive attitude! Convey the message that you are the best candidate for the position, and that this is the employer for whom you want to work. It's up to you to "sell" yourself for the job.

Market your skills and experience to demonstrate that you can tackle the problems the employer needs this role to solve, which you will learn from careful research into the employer and role. Be professional, polished, and confident.

What to bring with you to an in-person interview:

- Extra copies of your resume
- Pen and paper or padfolio
- List of references (in case you are asked for them)
- Any additional material requested. You may need an ID for security

Carefully read correspondence from the employer received before the interview, and respond promptly. There may be specific guidance included. When invited to a full day of interviews, bring a bottle of water and a snack such as a granola bar in case the employer doesn't provide refreshments. Take a moment between interviews to "recharge" out of sight of your interviewers, if possible.

TIP: Turn off your cell phone before the interview begins! Interruptions from a phone call, text, or notification are disruptive and unprofessional.

Don't Forget To:

- **Confirm the location of the interview**
- **Arrive 10-15 minutes early**
- **Bring extra copies of your resume**
- **Smile and shake hands**
- **Make eye contact**
- **Send a thank-you email after the interview**

INTERVIEW TYPES

Behavioral/Fit Interviews

Many employers conduct "behavioral interviews" to assess how a candidate's background, personality and skills fit with their organization and the position. The principle behind this type of interview is that past behavior will predict future behavior.

In most cases, the employer has predetermined a specific set of characteristics, often referred to as "competencies," that are required to be successful in the available position. Some examples of competencies include problem-solving, teamwork, communication, writing skills, and leadership. The employer then designs open-ended questions that ask you to refer back to a particular situation and describe how you responded.

Many employers believe that past behavior predicts future behavior.

INSIDER TIP: When you are asked a behavioral interview question, think about the situation you want to describe. What action(s) did you take related to the question asked and what was the result based on that action?

For example, an interviewer may ask, “Tell me about a time when you were on a team that was not working well together.” The expectation is that you will cite a specific situation from your own experience. Unless the interviewer indicates otherwise, the incident you describe can come from your work, school, activity, or volunteer experience. It is important that you have something specific to say and that you can describe your own role and what you learned from the particular situation you cite. Be aware that the interviewer is expecting to ask you multiple questions, so be as concise as possible while getting your point across.

This type of interview is a great way for you to tell the story behind your resume. Rather than merely presenting a list of your achievements, you have the opportunity to elaborate on some accomplishments that you may be particularly proud of. But like a good story, it is best to keep a few guidelines in mind:

- **STAR format: Situation and Tasks, Action, Result**— follow this framework to answer behavioral questions
- The Action, or how you handled the situation, is the core of the answer, but without an understanding of the Situation and Tasks that you had to handle, for context, the answer will not be clear. Keep the situation brief, so that you can focus on how you handled it and then what the Result of your action was in terms of resolving the initial situation
- **Show, don’t tell**—use a specific example and relevant details
- **Stay on topic**—remember the question you’re trying to answer; don’t get sidetracked
- **Have a conclusion**—be sure to include the outcome or what you learned from the situation
- **Make it resonate**—touch upon why your behavior or response would be *useful* to the employer or in the position

The qualities listed below are sought by many employers, and you will want to continue to develop these across your career. To prepare for interviews, identify and practice telling stories for each of these eight competencies, demonstrating at least one of the related qualities in your example. For a specific role you are interviewing for, ensure that you have at least one scenario to discuss for each of the elements needed to perform that position well, based on an analysis of the job description. Do not memorize your answers, as you will need to adjust how you share the story depending on how the interviewer asks the question.

Concrete/Technical Skills	Critical Thinking
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Research skills • Analysis of large data sets • Technical/social media knowledge • Quantitative analysis • Qualitative analysis • Specific technical programs or languages needed for a role 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deal with complexity • Handle ambiguity • See issues from multiple perspectives • Uncover flaws in arguments • Ask good questions

Learning Orientation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intellectual curiosity • Quick learner • Flexible and adaptive • Open to new ideas • Innovative • Reflect on mistakes, able to make improvements 	Leadership <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demonstrate initiative • Justify decisions • Advocate • Motivate/empower • Conviction • Good judgment and integrity • Resolve differences
Problem Solving <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • See multiple possibilities • Evaluate options • Synthesize/integrate information • Multidisciplinary approach • Entrepreneurial • Think on feet • Resourceful 	Teamwork <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consensus builder • Listen to others • Collaborative • Ability to work in diverse teams • Aware of diverse/global perspectives • Can build professional relationships and network

In addition to determining how your interests and skills mesh with the position and organization, the interviewer is also assessing how you might fit with the company or team culture. Sometimes fit questions are simply about whether you can connect with the interviewer on some other topic apart from your work or Harvard experience. Consider how you want to discuss another interest that you have, whether it be art, current events, gaming, etc., should an interviewer ask you about them—especially if you have referenced these interests on your resume!

Many interviewers also apply what is colloquially referred to as the “airport test,” especially in fields where people work for long hours in teams. While they are listening to your responses, the interviewer is mentally asking themselves, “Is this someone I could be stuck with at an airport for 12 hours?” It is important to keep in mind that this question is *not* a social question about friendship—this question is in a professional context to encapsulate other questions like: “Can you make the most out of a bad situation?” and, “Can you get along with your colleagues for long periods of time under less than ideal circumstances?” You may consider applying this test yourself as you evaluate whether this is an organization or field where you want to work.

Phone Interviews

The phone interview has traditionally been used to screen a candidate’s communications skills, interest in the position, salary requirements, and qualifications. This method also helps minimize the cost of bringing in an applicant from a distant location by first determining whether they are a strong candidate.

Employers may opt to use the phone (or video) interview more comprehensively beyond a general pre-screen. In light of this, we encourage you to prepare as you would for any interview. Be ready to answer challenging questions and provide feedback on a variety of issues related to the field and the organization.

The main difference between a phone interview and a face-to-face interview is the absence of non-

verbal cues. There is a certain amount of energy that is shared between interviewer and interviewee that is somewhat lost in a phone interview. Make sure you compensate for this by being prepared, focused, and able to communicate clearly. A few tips:

- Listen carefully. You want to make sure that you understand and can answer the question asked and clarify if needed, especially when you are not able to see verbal cues.
- Enunciate clearly and with adequate volume. It can help to smile throughout the interview- they can't see you, but your voice will sound clear and positive. It can also help to speak at a slightly slower pace than you would if face-to-face.
- Convey enthusiasm, passion, and competence through your voice. Avoid “up-talk”—the verbal punctuation of each sentence with a question mark.
- Plan the time and place of your phone interview so that you know you will have privacy, quiet, and a good connection.
- Dress as you would for a real interview. Dressing the part will help you focus on the importance and purpose of the conversation.
- One benefit of a phone interview is that you can have plenty of notes in front of you as reminders of questions to ask, background information about the employer, and perhaps even strategies for answering tough questions. However, keep most of your focus on listening to the interviewer- not on your notes!
- Use your time wisely to earn a chance to meet the employer in person for a follow-up interview.
- Don't be afraid of silence. If you've given a strong answer and there is no response, the interviewer is most likely taking notes. Don't ruin a great response by rambling on with more detail

Video Interviews

For similar reasons to those described for phone interviews, most employers use video technology to make a long-distance interview seem as close to a face-to-face interview as possible. Zoom and other video conferencing technologies have made it possible for employers to interview candidates in a more efficient and cost-effective way.

Prepare for a video interview as thoroughly as you would for any interview. However, there are some additional things to keep in mind:

- Become familiar with the technology ahead of time. Ask in advance what product or service will be used and practice with your friends and family if you can. This will make you more comfortable in the interview, allowing you to focus on the conversation. Update to the newest version of the product before the interview.
- Remember that the interviewer will be able to see you AND the things that surround you. Items in the background can reflect on you as a candidate. Aim for a non-cluttered background with adequate lighting.
- Maintain eye contact, focusing on your computer camera. Many technologies allow you to view yourself simultaneously, and it is tempting to monitor yourself rather than stay focused on the interviewer.
- As with an in-person interview, dress appropriately for the position and organization.
- As with a phone interview, make sure that you have privacy, quiet, and a good connection

Asynchronous/Recorded Video Interviews

While the video interviews described above are intended to mirror the real-time, back-and-forth dynamic of a face-to-face interview, in an on-demand or automated video interview employers use cloud-based software to relay written or pre-recorded questions, and the candidate uses the same software and their webcam to record and submit responses in the allotted time. Some examples of the tools being used include HireVue, Spark Hire and Wepow. An advantage of this method for both the employer and the candidate is that an organization can share the candidate's video easily with a hiring manager and can conduct first-round interviews with more candidates. While some candidates have complained that this process feels impersonal and does not allow them to ask questions, please note that you will have at least one real-time interview before receiving an offer. For this reason, some employers consider the recorded interview to be a way of augmenting the resume or application as opposed to thinking of it as replacing one of the interview rounds. Either way, it is still a critical evaluation tool for the employers who use it, and candidates should take the time to prepare accordingly. A few tips to prepare for recorded interviews in addition to the video interview tips offered above include:

- Schedule plenty of time. Typically, you will need to complete the interview in one sitting and cannot pause and come back to it later. Each interview response will have a time limit (e.g. 3 minutes), but some employers will allow you multiple attempts at a given question. Make sure you allow enough time to take advantage of this if available.
- These interviews may be screened by AI, which could be assessing tone, eye contact, posture, facial expression and content of answers. Pretend that you are interviewing with a person, so that the system and any person who watches the interview recording can sense your engagement, confidence, and enthusiasm.
- Pick a time to interview when you will be at your best. Just because you can complete the recorded interview at 2 a.m. does not mean that it is a good idea to do so.
- As with any video interview, make sure you have a quiet private space with a neutral background. Dress in interview attire, make eye contact with the camera, and practice with specific software in advance when possible.
- Accept any help offered by the employer. Most employers understand that this is a new process and may have tip sheets and other preparation tools specific to their organization.

Technical and Finance Interviews

Technical interviews are often used in fields such as finance and technology, but can also be applied in other areas. They seek to assess two things in a candidate:

- (1) Fit for the job and the organization, and
- (2) Technical and job-specific knowledge.

Assessing “fit” for a position usually involves questions you’re familiar with such as “Tell me about yourself,” and “Why are you interested in working for our organization?” It may also include behavioral questions such as “Tell me about a time when you had to work with people who were different from you.” In contrast, the technical questions will be specific to the area for which you’re interviewing. For example, technology companies will ask you to spend time writing code (based on the skills you’ve described on your resume) via a whiteboard or an online tool and will evaluate and assess your work. In another example, common questions for investment management might be “Tell me about your dream stock portfolio. What is your investment strategy? If you are given a market or an industry, what would be the steps to evaluate them?”

Regardless of your particular field, make sure that you have adequately reviewed the basic concepts of the area you’re interviewing for and keep up-to-date on the tools, terminology, and news in the field. It is especially important to review the industry news on the day of the interview.

Finance interviews may also use case questions as part of their general interview format. Although the use of case questions in finance interviews varies depending on the employer, it's important to be prepared.

Case Interviews

The case question, inherent in many consulting interviews, is one way of determining whether or not the candidate has an aptitude for handling complex business problems. How a candidate answers a case question can reveal their ability to think like a consultant and perhaps even their desire to do the job. Case questions most often illustrate the nature of the employer's work. Questions are sometimes drawn directly from the employer's experience or can be crafted on-the-spot from news of the day. Most employers don't expect in-depth business knowledge or high-level business terminology (there are exceptions, usually on the individual interviewer level). What they are looking for is whether the candidate has the analytical or problem-solving ability and the business sense to know what matters in a specific situation and can clearly explain it.

Most often, the employer verbally presents a business challenge to the candidate and asks how they would approach the problem. Sometimes, most notably in later round interviews, some employers will present the candidate with a case study in print and allow the candidate a designated period of time to analyze the data either alone or in a group. If the case question is presented verbally, make sure you understand what is being asked of you. Reiterating the question is an effective way of confirming that you're on the right track to begin with, but also, it gives you a moment to think about the situation with which you're faced.

Once you are sure you understand what has been presented, don't be afraid to ask a few questions. A few clarifying questions may well save you from launching into an elaborate analysis that lacks focus and misses the point.

Case interviews step by step:

- **Repeat the question**
- **Ask clarifying questions**
- **Organize your thoughts**
- **Share your thoughts on how you are solving the problem with the interviewer**
- **Suggest solutions**

In preparing to answer the case, don't feel that you need to dive headfirst into immediate solutions. Remember that it's not the solutions they're looking for, it's the analysis. They want to hear how you're thinking about this problem. Organize your thoughts. Think of a systematic way to look at the evidence that has been presented to you. The guidebooks to answering case questions offer a variety of frameworks and strategies that can be useful tools for organizing your thoughts, but none take the place of common sense. You may not have taken business courses at Harvard, but you most certainly learned how to use analysis and reasoning.

Begin by talking about how you "might" want to look at the situation. Share your thoughts with the interviewer so that they can hear that you're thinking about the broadest dimensions of the problem before you begin suggesting potential paths that you might follow in pursuit of a solution.

Taking the time to introduce your approach allows the employer to see that you get the "big picture." In a first-round interview it is unlikely that you'll have time to proceed through all of the necessary analysis. Having scored on understanding the scope of the problem and developing a strategy, the employer may very likely suggest that you spend the rest of your time on one area of the analysis. For example, "Let's talk about the customer. How would you carry out that analysis?"

Case Interview Tip: Don't make things overly complicated. For example, if you need to know population sizes and quick math is needed, round the numbers to make them easily divisible.

The case interview is not something you want to try without careful preparation and practice. Additional information is available on the MCS website.

THANK YOU NOTES

After your interview, follow up with short, tailored emails to each interviewer to thank them for their time. Keep the tone professional, address each interviewer as they introduced themselves when you met. Thank them for discussing the role with you, reiterate your interest in the position, and mention something that came up in the conversation that interested you (ideally something that particular person mentioned). To close, you can mention that you look forward to the next step in the process, depending on what was discussed at the end of the interview.

SAMPLE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Traditional General Introduction Questions

- Tell me about yourself.
- How would a friend (or colleague, or professor) who knows you well describe you?
- What strengths would you bring to this position?
- In what ways can you make a contribution to our organization?
- What are your long/short range goals and objectives? How will this job contribute towards achieving them?
- Why did you choose Harvard Extension School? Your field of study/concentration?
- What class have you taken that has had the greatest impact on your thinking?
- If you could change something at Harvard what would it be?
- What do you think it takes to be successful in this position/organization/field? In what ways does this fit you?
- What about this organization impresses you in comparison with others in the field?
- What do you believe are the key issues and problems in the field/industry today?
- Why do you want to work here?
- Why should we hire you?

Behavioral Questions

- Tell me about a time when you handled a difficult situation with a co-worker.
- Tell me about a time when you were creative in solving a problem.
- Describe a time when you led a team. What is your leadership style?
- Describe a situation in which you were required to work with people different from you.
- Tell me about a time when you had to make a decision based on incomplete data. Tell me about a time when you were tolerant of an opinion that was different from yours.
- Tell me about a time when you worked effectively under pressure.
- Tell me about a time you made a mistake or failed at something.

Potential Questions to Ask Employers

- What will be the challenges for the person taking this job?
- Do you have new initiatives planned for the next year?
- What role will this position play in addressing these new initiatives?
- Can you tell me how your career has developed at the organization?
- I read on your website that you have a new office in Mumbai. Could you tell me more about what you're working on there?
- Describe your ideal candidate to fill this position.
- What do you enjoy most about working here?
- Can you tell me about your career path?
- What is your timeline for the interview process?

Questions the Interviewer Should Not Ask [U.S.]

- What is your age? What is your date of birth? Were you born in the U.S.? Are you a citizen?
- What is your race, religion, or national origin?
- Do you have disabilities of any kind?
- Have you ever been treated by a psychologist or a psychiatrist?
- Are you taking any prescription medications?
- Have you ever been treated for drug addiction or alcoholism?
- Are you married, single, or divorced?
- When do you plan to start a family?
- Do you observe the Sabbath or any days that would interfere with this job schedule?
- In some U.S. states it is no longer legal to ask for salary history.

For more information on interviewing, watch the [Ace Your Interview](#) webinar. You can find information on how generative AI can be a resource for your interview preparation on MCS' [AI for Professional Development and Exploration](#) page.