

# MONTEREY INSTITUTE

MONTEREY INSTITUTE OF INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

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An affiliate of Middlebury College

Graduate School of International Policy Studies <http://policy.mis.edu>

## *A Guide to Successful Interviewing*



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## I. INTERVIEWING 101

OK. Your efforts to write that perfect cover letter and resume have paid off. You just got off the phone with a recruiter or contact and now that person would like to schedule an interview. So what now? Before you take the "interview plunge," read on.

The purpose of an interview is to take what is written on your resume and cover letter and personalize that information through a conversation, or interview. Interviewing is the process through which both the hiring organization and the candidate have an opportunity to exchange information to determine whether a good fit exists between them.

### BEFORE THE INTERVIEW

To prepare for the interview, you need to develop a strategy based on research of yourself and the organization. During the interview process you will be judged on how well you meet four criteria:

- Are you capable of doing the job successfully?
- Do you wholeheartedly want the job?
- Are you able to relate well to the staff?
- Do you present a professional appearance and demeanor?

Preparing for the interview therefore requires that you assess your interests and skills, and research the organization and the position for which you are interviewing. In preparing for an interview, it is helpful to assess the job description of the position for which you are interviewing. Make a list of pertinent functions of the job and the skills needed to get the job done. Then make a list of your experiences and how you have developed and strengthened your skills. Doing this exercise will help you articulate your experiences to an interviewer. You will also have a list of examples ready to support your assertions.

*The following is an example of how you might do this:*

<b>PROJECT COORDINATOR, AFRICARE</b>	<b>MY BACKGROUND</b>
1. MA in relevant field	1. MA, International Policy Studies
2. Knowledge and familiarity of women's issues and human rights	2. Research papers on women's rights, especially in Africa
3. Demonstrated experience working with multinational staff and government orgs.	3. Internship with non profit community development organization; Rotary exchange student in high school to Gabon
4. Overseas experience	4. Peace Corps experience
5. Fluency in French and preferably Portuguese	5. Fluent in French, proficient in Spanish

### DURING THE INTERVIEW

Not unlike any other presentation, an interview has a beginning, middle, and end. What happens during those stages varies with the employer; nonetheless, the following stages give you an idea of what to expect.

When first meeting a candidate, employers will make an initial assessment. When you meet an employer, stand straight, provide a firm handshake, and begin with some small talk as you walk to the interview room. Make sure you are dressed appropriately.

As an interview begins, both the employer and candidate are trying to establish rapport. An employer may cite an item from your resume or commence the interview with an open-ended question such as "tell me a little about yourself" or "why are you interested in my organization?" Respond to the questions as though he or she was asking "why do you want to be in this interview room?" Employers want to know that you are focused.

During this time, also assess the employer. Is he or she relaxed or formal, focused or conversational? You may want to adapt your strategy to the style of the interviewer, but always remember to be professional.

As the interview progresses, the employer will ask you a variety of questions to determine interest and competence. When answering the questions, make sure your answers are clear, concise, and followed by an example. Remember to maintain strong eye contact.

As the interview winds down, the employer will ask you whether or not you have any questions. It is imperative that you ask questions. This is an opportunity for you to demonstrate your career focus, and it is how employers assess the depth of your interest in their organization. Most employers will not consider a candidate further if he or she does not ask questions.

**Listed below are some typical questions you may want to ask:**

- What are you looking for in a candidate?
- How did you choose this organization?
- What are the things you like most/least about working here?
- How would you describe a typical day in this position?
- Describe to me your career path within this organization.
- What is your experience with personnel turnover?
- How does this department fit into this organization's structure?
- Outside my department, who else will I work with?
- What has been your greatest challenge while working here?
- What is the average stay in this position?
- How often will my performance be evaluated?
- How does one advance in the organization?
- Why are you looking to fill this position?
- How much travel is normally expected?

As the interview concludes, the employer should tell you how the process will continue from this point. If that does not occur, take the initiative to find out. Many employers will also request references or writing samples, so you should have those ready. Ask for a business card. Conclude the interview with a firm handshake and a statement reaffirming your interest in the position, and thanking the employer for his or her time.

## **AFTER THE INTERVIEW**

### **Follow-up**

Within a day or so, you should send a thank you note to the interviewer. In the note, reinforce your interest in the position. Take the opportunity to highlight a positive from the interview or restate something that did not go as well as planned.

**Keep the following tips in mind when writing your letter:**

- Use the same bond paper as your resume and cover letter.
- Keep it to one page.
- It can be handwritten or typed, depending on the organization's environment

You can write to all the people with whom you interviewed or identify the decision-maker and write to him or her; within the letter thank everyone with whom you interviewed. (This is more pertinent to an office visit.)

There. You've survived the interview process. What now? It's starts all over again.

**Do not stop your job search, networking or research. Remember: you can not make decisions unless you have the choices!**

## II. THE CLASSIC QUESTION: "Tell Me About Yourself"

The question "tell me about yourself?" is a common first interview question. What are employers looking for in this question?

This and other open ended questions are asked to see how well you can focus your answers to the position for which you are interviewing. Responses to this question should be geared to show understanding of your skills and interests, and how these and your past experiences would contribute to the position and organization.

**Use a 90 second guideline when answering this question.**

- Focus the first 15 seconds on any personal information you wish to share (e.g. where you are from);
- Focus the next 30 seconds on your academic experience (e.g. what you are studying, any study abroad experience);
- Focus the next 30 seconds on your professional experience (e.g. leadership activities, internships);
- Use the last 15 seconds to discuss why you are interested in the position (given the background you just discussed).

Remember, **this is a short answer**; give highlights of your experiences and focus your answer. Spend some time writing down the experiences you wish to discuss and then practice how you want to answer the question.

### III. SAMPLE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Tell me about yourself.

Describe your most rewarding academic experience and tell me why it was so rewarding.

Relate your studies and/or experience to this job.

What do you want out of your career?

Why are you interested in working for \_\_\_\_\_?

Why do you think you would like this type of work?

What are some of the things you find difficult to do? Why?

Why did you choose your particular degree program?

As described to you, what about this position appeals to you?

How do you feel you'll add value to our organization?

Do you make your opinions known when you disagree with the views of your supervisor?

How?

Why should I hire you?

What do you know about my organization?

What qualifications do you have that will make you successful in this field?

What have you done that shows initiative and willingness to work?

Tell me about some things you learned in graduate school that could be used on the job.

Why did you choose to attend the Monterey Institute of International Studies?

What is your greatest weakness?

Give me an example where and how you dealt with pressure.

What have your previous jobs taught you?

What personal characteristics are necessary for success in this field?

What is the most difficult situation you have faced?

In what ways has graduate school prepared you to take on greater responsibility?

Describe a difficult problem you've had to deal with.

How do you organize and plan for major projects?

Do you prefer working independently or on a team?

What are your biggest accomplishments?

What would you like to be doing five years from now?

Why do you think you would be successful in this field?

What is your energy level like? Describe a typical day.

What have you gotten out of your extracurricular activities?

How do you manage stress? How do you handle criticism?

Describe the relationship that should exist between a supervisor and subordinates.

What qualities should a successful manager possess?

#### IV. ILLEGAL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Anti-discrimination laws in the United States forbid potential employers from not hiring someone on the basis of race, religion, color, national origin, sex, age, disability, marital status, sexual orientation and arrest record. Therefore, questions that require you to disclose this type of information are illegal.

INQUIRY AREA	ILLEGAL QUESTION	LEGAL QUESTION
<b>National Origin/Citizenship</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are you a U.S. citizen?</li> <li>• Where were your parents born?</li> <li>• What is your native tongue?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are you authorized to work in the U.S.?</li> <li>• What languages do you read/write/speak fluently? <i>(Only okay if this ability is relevant to the job.)</i></li> </ul>
<b>Age</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How old are you?</li> <li>• When did you graduate?</li> <li>• What's your date of birth?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are you over the age of 18?</li> </ul>
<b>Marital/Family Status</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What's your marital status?</li> <li>• Whom do you live with?</li> <li>• Do you plan to have a family? When?</li> <li>• How many kids do you have?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Would you be willing to relocate if necessary?</li> <li>• Would you be willing to travel as needed by this job?</li> <li>• Would you be able and willing to work overtime as necessary?</li> </ul>
<b>Personal</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How tall are you?</li> <li>• How much do you weigh?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are you able to lift a 50-pound weight and carry it 100 yards, as that is part of the job.</li> </ul>
<b>Disabilities</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do you have any disabilities?</li> <li>• Please complete the following medical history.</li> <li>• Have you had any recent or past illnesses or operations?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Are you able to perform the essential functions of this job? <i>(Okay if the interviewer has thoroughly described the job.)</i></li> <li>• As part of the hiring process, after a job offer has been made, you will be required to undergo a medical exam.</li> </ul>
<b>Arrest Record</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have you ever been arrested?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have you ever been convicted of _____? <i>(The crime named should be reasonably related to the performance of the job in question.)</i></li> </ul>
<b>Military</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• If you've been in the military, were you honorably discharged?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In what branch of the Armed Forces did you serve?</li> <li>• What type of training or education did you receive in the military?</li> </ul>

#### Handling Illegal Interview Questions:

Therefore, while it is within your legal right to respond to these kinds of questions by saying, "I chose not to answer that question because, as you may or may not know, it is illegal", I would suggest a milder approach: try to address the underlying concern. When the interviewer asks the marriage question, respond by saying, "I have no problem with

frequent travel or even relocation." Or if they ask how old you are, you can say, "I feel completely comfortable with the level of responsibility inherent in this job." If an interviewer asks a question that isn't so easy to analyze, you can simply say, "I'm not sure how that relates to the job. Can you explain your concern more explicitly?"

## V. INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEWS

One of the best sources for gathering information about what's happening in an occupation or an industry is to talk to people working in the field. This process is called informational or research interviewing. An informational interview is an interview that you initiate - you ask the questions. The purpose is to obtain information, not to get a job.

Following are some good **REASONS TO CONDUCT INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEWS:**

- to explore careers and clarify your career goal
- to discover employment opportunities that are not advertised
- to expand your professional network
- to build confidence for your job interviews
- to access the most up-to-date career information
- to identify your professional strengths and weaknesses

Listed below are **STEPS TO FOLLOW TO CONDUCT AN INFORMATIONAL INTERVIEW:**

- Identify the Occupation or Industry You Wish to Learn About
- Assess your own interests, abilities, values, and skills, and evaluate labor conditions and trends to identify the best fields to research.

### **Prepare for the Interview**

Read all you can about the field prior to the interview. Decide what information you would like to obtain about the occupation/industry. Prepare a list of questions that you would like to have answered.

### **Identify People to Interview**

Start with lists of people you already know - friends, relatives, fellow students, present or former co-workers, supervisors, neighbors, etc... Professional organizations, the yellow pages, organizational directories, and public speakers are also good resources. You may also call an organization and ask for the name of the person by job title.

### **Arrange the Interview**

Contact the person to set up an interview:

- by telephone,
- by a letter followed by a telephone call, or
- by having someone who knows the person make the appointment for you.

### **Conduct the Interview**

Dress appropriately, arrive on time, be polite and professional. Refer to your list of prepared questions; stay on track, but allow for spontaneous discussion. Before leaving, ask your contact to suggest names of others who might be helpful to you and ask permission to use your contact's name when contacting these new contacts.

### **Follow Up**

Immediately following the interview, record the information gathered. Be sure to send a thank-you note to your contact within one week of the interview.

**NOTE: Always analyze the information you've gathered. Adjust your job search, resume, and career objective if necessary.**

## 20 Questions for Informational Interviews

*Prepare a list of your own questions for your informational interview.*

**Following are some sample questions:**

- On a typical day in this position, what do you do?
- What training or education is required for this type of work?
- What personal qualities or abilities are important to being successful in this job?
- What part of this job do you find most satisfying? most challenging?
- What are some of your major successes and achievements in this field?
- How did you get your job?
- What opportunities for advancement are there in this field?
- What entry level jobs are best for learning as much as possible?
- What are the salary ranges for various levels in this field?
- How do you see jobs in this field changing in the future?
- Is there a demand for people in this occupation?
- What special advice would you give a person entering this field?
- What types of training do companies offer persons entering this field?
- What are the basic prerequisites for jobs in this field?
- Which professional journals and organizations would help me learn more about this field?
- What do you think of the experience I've had so far in terms of entering this field?
- From your perspective, what are the problems you see working in this field?
- If you could do things all over again, would you choose the same path for yourself?  
Why? What would you change?
- With the information you have about my education, skills, and experience, what other fields or jobs would you suggest I research further before I make a final decision?
- What do you think of my resume? Do you see any problem areas?
- How would you suggest I change it?
- Who do you know that I should talk to next? When I call him/her, may I use your name?

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