

INTERVIEW TIPS: For Jobseekers with Disabilities

CONGRATULATIONS! Your strong resume and cover letter have helped you cross the threshold ... you are now scheduled for an interview with the company. Although you haven't secured a job yet, you are well on your way. Here are some tips to make sure you stay on track.

Before the Interview

Preparation is key in a successful interview. Before you go into any interview, be sure you have carefully prepared yourself in each of the following:

Research the Company

Always research the company beforehand. It's only beneficial for you to learn more about your possible future place of employment and it will help you prepare for certain interview questions such as "What do you know about our company?", "Why do you want to work here?" or "Do you have any questions for us?" There are a variety of resources to utilize, including the company's Website, annual reports, trade organizations and journals, the Internet, or people who work there. At the very least you should know the industry, the company's products or services, and their competitors. It's also a good idea to look at the company biographies, in order to get a feel for the company culture as well as perhaps learn something about your interviewer.

Interview Questions

Practice makes perfect, so before you go into the interview you should know what questions to expect and be prepared on how to answer them.

Although you should acquire a list of expected questions and practice answering each one, here are some general guidelines for dealing with interview questions.

- ***Be concise and direct.*** Answer the question but don't ramble on and lose the interviewer's attention. If you don't know how to answer right away, stall a little bit or ask them to clarify the question so you will better understand what they're looking for.
- ***Be honest.*** Don't lie about potential pitfalls in your resume or job experience. Instead, admit the discrepancy and either steer the conversation towards your skills and experience that you want to highlight or put a positive spin on things. For example: "Although I have not been employed for the past two years, I have been furthering my education and involving myself in community service."
- ***Give an example/Tell a story.*** You can usually expect at least one behavioral question in your interview. Examples would include "Tell me about a time when you ..." or "Can you give me an example

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when you ...” The trick to answering these questions is to present an example or tell a story that demonstrates the abilities the interviewer is looking for, and your effectiveness in applying those skills (i.e. the result). In general, you should shoot for PAR.

- Problem: What is the situation or task that you had to address?
 - Action: What action did YOU specifically take?
 - Result: How did it end? What did you accomplish? How does this demonstrate your capabilities?
- *Tell Me About Yourself.* One of the most frequently asked questions. You know they don't want a story of your childhood, but what do they want? Todd Anten of Yahoo! HotJobs suggests that you prepare an answer that addresses the following points:
 - What are your key accomplishments from previous jobs?
 - What strengths are demonstrated by those accomplishments?
 - How do they relate to the job for which you're applying?

Consider this your personal statement and constantly practice until you have it down cold.

- *Strengths and Weaknesses.* Usually, most people have no trouble identifying their strengths. They just have to be sure those characteristics are relevant to the job position. Weaknesses, on the other hand, are more troublesome to discuss. Try to choose a weakness that is really a strength or a weakness that is understandable or relatively harmless. Be forewarned that “I'm a perfectionist and workaholic” is considered overused. Again, be sure to choose a weakness that is work-related, and ideally be able to explain what you have done to overcome it. An example would be, “I'm not the most organized person around, so I make sure to return all phone messages and e-mails right away. I also use a personal organizer, and so far it's worked wonderfully to keep me on track.”
- *Don't provide negative information,* either about a disability, failures or previous employers/employees. Especially concerning the latter, no matter how horrible your former boss was, you should not bad-mouth him or her since that would lead to the interviewer viewing you as a troublemaker or worse. Instead, stay positive and demonstrate your professionalism.
- *Salary questions.* As much as we'd like to shoot for the moon on high salary requests, we know that it's probably not going to happen. So what should you do when the interviewer asks you what salary you're looking for?

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First of all, do some research beforehand to determine a salary range for the position you're interviewing for. Check out online job calculators such as [Salary.com](#) or [CareerOneStop](#), or look for listings in industry associations and government reports. You can also ask people you know in the industry or occupation. Keep in mind that salaries can differ depending on geographic location and the employer type (i.e., non-profit vs. for profit, private vs. government).

Now, even though you're armed with your salary range, you should avoid being the first one to name a number. Try to get employers to do that. If they ask you what your previous salary was, you should emphasize the worth of your skills and how they would be beneficial to the company. If they really press you for a number, either say your salary is negotiable or give them a range, depending on the salary range you've researched, and how much you'd like to make. Finally, remember that salary isn't an absolute number since company benefits, such as insurance or vacation days, should also be factored in.

- *Do you have any questions for me?* No matter what, do not simply say "No." It shows that you're not serious about the position or don't really care about the company. Remember, you're interviewing them as much as they're interviewing you; both sides want a good fit. Fortunately for you, you've done some research and therefore can reel off questions about the company, the position or the industry. Try to avoid asking obvious questions or something that has been covered thoroughly in the interview, and never ask about salary or benefits until you're offered the job.

Again, come up with responses to these questions before the interview, and then practice answering them over and over again.

Interviewing with a Disability

Disclosure

A common concern is the issue of whether or not to disclose one's disability, and if so, how? This is a highly personal decision, and should be made on a case by case basis. However you decide to handle the issue, it will help you to have a plan in advance and be prepared.

Generally, employers want workers who they can rely on and who have the skills, background and abilities to get the job done. When and if you discuss your disability to a potential employer, you will want to emphasize your Abilities and describe how you'll get the job done, especially if you will use methods and tools unfamiliar to the employer.

If you have a visible disability or need an accommodation for your interview, you may not. It's possible that the employer has no experience or knowledge of your disability and may have inaccurate notions of what you can and

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cannot do. You may benefit from bringing up the issue first and putting the employer at ease. Making a positive statement about your disability may dispel any doubts or misconceptions the employer may have. Here is one example of how a candidate addressed the issue of his disability during an interview:

As I am sure you've noticed, I am blind. I often meet people who have never met someone with a visual impairment and wonder how I am able to do everyday things and work. Since I am unable to drive, I get around using public transportation and the taxi system, which, incidentally, comes directly to this office. I use a cane when I walk around and can get around on my own once I have a quick tour of a new place. The position description states that this job requires advanced knowledge of the Microsoft Office Suite. I previously worked as an administrative assistant in a busy office for two years where I regularly produced PowerPoint presentations, Word documents Excel spreadsheets, handled the phones and emails. I use a screen reading software that reads the necessary information off the screen to me and allows me to access everything by keyboard. I have headphones I wear so I don't disturb co-workers but keep the volume low so I can still talk with others and answer the phone.

For more information on disclosing disability, read:

[Disability Disclosure and Interviewing Techniques for Persons with Disabilities](#)
Job Accommodation Network
[Contacting Employers: Disclosure, Interviews, and Accommodations](#)
National Center on Workforce and Disability
[Disclosing Your Disability to an Employer](#),
Boston University's Center for Psychiatric Rehabilitation

Know your rights

For a brief overview of the ADA and employment issues, visit:

Job Accommodation Network's [ADA Questions and Answers](#)

To see a sampling of the difference between legal and illegal questions, look at:

The U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission's [ADA Enforcement Guidance: Preemployment Disability-Related Questions and Medical Examinations](#)

If you feel that you have been discriminated against in your employment, contact your [local Equal Employment Opportunity Commission](#) and read:

National Center on Workforce and Disability's [Discrimination in Employment: What to Do](#)

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Handling inappropriate questions

In general, there are three ways to deal with inappropriate questions:

- *Answer the question.* Sounds simple and you get the situation out of the way. However, only do so if you are comfortable answering the question, and be aware that the information you provide might come back to haunt you.
- *Refuse to answer the question.* You inform the interviewer that that question is potentially illegal and not relevant to the job description. However, being too direct might put you at odds with the interviewer, so don't resort to this unless the questions are truly offensive.
- *Not answer the question,* and instead address the intent or concern behind the question. This way you attend to the interviewer's worries without forfeiting your rights. Emphasize your skills and experience, and direct the conversation back to how qualified you are for the job. An example would be if they ask you "Do you have a disability that requires you to go to the doctor often?" Realize that the interviewer is worried about your attendance, so reassure them that you are just as responsible as the next person and can provide a list of references that will vouch for your high attendance records. Again, you don't necessarily state your disability, but rather address their concern and mention positive characteristics, such as responsibility, organizational skills, etc.

Other links for handling illegal questions:

Monster's [Illegal or Just Inappropriate?](#)

The Day of the Interview

Dress

First impressions are made within thirty seconds, and how you look is a critical component to how an interviewer perceives you. You want to "look the part," so dress appropriately to the position you're interviewing for or suitable to the culture of the company. Usually this consists of a neat and conservative business suit. For women who choose a skirted suit, the skirt should be a little below the knee. You should wear clean and polished dress shoes, have clean and trimmed nails and hair, no cologne or perfume, minimal jewelry, and any accessories should match your suit. Overall, just use common sense and present yourself as a professional who is ready to get to work.

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What to Bring

You've decided to bring the perfect briefcase or purse, but there is only one problem: it's completely empty. What do you bring to an interview besides your sparkling personality? Bring several copies of your resume, printed on resume paper and placed in a folder of some kind so they are not crumpled in any way. If necessary, you might want to bring a portfolio containing samples of your past work or writing samples.

In addition, you should bring a list of references and a notepad to take notes during the interview. This shows that not only are you serious about the job, but any notes will be helpful in composing your thank you letter after the interview. Finally, if you bring a cell phone, make sure it is off or the ring tone is silent. If you think people are annoyed when a cell phone interrupts their movie, wait until you see a potential boss' reaction when you interrupt an interview!

Now that you've prepared a game plan, it's time to act on it! Here are some general guidelines to keep in mind:

- Arrive 10-15 minutes early and never more than 15 minutes early. Make sure you know ahead of time how to get there and have arranged appropriate transportation.
- During introductions, smile and give a firm handshake.
- Maintain eye contact. You don't have to stare at them nonstop, as if you're giving them the third degree. Instead, constantly keep eye contact and occasionally break away. Avoid looking at the floor though, since it could be seen as a sign of dishonesty or submissiveness.
- Project positive body language. You want to show them that you're paying attention and are interested in the employer. This might include sitting straight, not fidgeting and leaning slightly forward occasionally throughout the interview.
- Relax! The company's already demonstrated its interest in you by inviting you in for an interview and you've prepared yourself thoroughly for whatever they might throw at you. Just relax and be yourself, which is what they're really looking for anyway.

Finally, at the end of the interview, it is important that you close the sale. Like your resume, the interview is an opportunity for you to sell yourself to the company. However, it's not enough to just list all the benefits and wait for the customer to throw money your way. Instead, you want to conclude by doing the following:

- Restate your interest in the position and company. You might also want to remind them of three to five skills you previously mentioned that you'd like for them to remember.

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- Ask what the next step is so you'll know what to do and when the decision will be made so you'll know how long you'll have to wait.
- Ask them how you can contact them, just in case you don't hear back from them.

After the Interview

Immediately following the interview, you should sit down and list your immediate feelings and thoughts about how it went. This not only helps you to work on your next interview but also it is useful for composing your thank-you letter.

The art of letter writing is largely forgotten today and gives you a great opportunity to stand out of the crowd applicants. For those who do want to follow up on their interview, it's recommended that you send a typed or hand-written letter through the mail. It is usually more thoughtful, more professional and enduring. Besides, people are usually deluged with e-mails and phone messages and might not pay attention to another. However, you should also go by the company culture. If everything seems to be done via e-mail, then by all means send a thank-you using e-mail.

Now, what do you say in a thank-you letter? You want to thank the interviewer for their time and interest in you. Other than that, just think of this as the last opportunity you have to sell yourself to the employer. Try to reiterate the most pertinent points you made in the interview or ones you forgot to make. Finally, you want to restate your skills and how they are a perfect fit for the position.

Examples of thank you letters:

Susan Ireland's [Sample Thank You Letters](#)

For basic interviewing hints, read:

[Job Seeking Skills for People with Disabilities](#)

California State University

[Preparing For Interviews](#)

Monster