

INTERVIEW SKILLS

Additional resources pertaining interview skills are available in the Career Services Library and on the CSO website.

GENERAL OVERVIEW

Your resume and cover letter have gotten your foot in the door, and now you have an actual interview! For many law students, the interview is the great unknown and is probably the most anxiety-producing aspect of the job search process. Because legal employers vary so much, it is difficult to predict how an interview will unfold. They vary in style and format depending on the interviewer and the applicant. During the interviews you will want to project the image of:

- Being poised and self-confident.
- Liking hard work.
- Feeling that the opportunity to grow is more important than high compensation.
- Being a fast learner.
- Being adaptable to new situations.
- Having good judgment, being trustworthy.
- Being well directed - knowing where you want to go.

TYPES OF INTERVIEWS & INTERVIEWERS

There are generally four types of interviews:

- **First-Round Interview** – Usually held on-campus or in the prospective interviewer’s office. You typically meet with only one person during this round.
- **Callback Interview** – A second interview is usually more in-depth and at the employer’s office. You will likely meet with several people during this round, including members of the hiring committee.
- **Telephone Interview** – These interviews are valuable if you are searching for employment out-of-state and the employer wants to get a better idea of your candidacy before you (or they) spend money on travel expenses. Further details on telephone interviews can be found at the end of this section.
- **Informational Interview** – This interview is for informational purposes only, but may lead to a more formal interview at a later time. Further details on informational interviews can be found in the Networking section of this Notebook.

There are as many types of interviewers as there are people. However, they tend to fall into four distinct categories. Be prepared to meet with all of them:

- **The Information Trader** – Asks factual questions that amplify the resume and clarify professional, legal and academic experience.
- **The Psychologist** – Asks effective questions and makes career goal inquiries.
- **The Professor** – Asks questions on substantive legal issues and may often debate the candidate’s answers.
- **The Conversationalist** – Asks non-directed, informal questions. Be prepared for the following, “So tell me about yourself.”

PREPARATION IS THE KEY

Careful preparation will enable you to be more confident and to present yourself as an attractive potential employee. Remember that successful interviewing takes practice, patience, feedback and a sense of humor.

- **Research the employer as much as possible.** There are many resources on the CSO website and in the Career Services Library for your reference.
- **Know your resume like the back of your hand.** This includes your undergraduate thesis and the name of your supervisor from three summers ago.

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- **Do a mock interview.** Interviewing is a skill that improves every time you do it. Practice makes perfect.
- **Dress professionally.** Always err on the side of more professional attire, even if you are interviewing with a non-profit agency.
- **Arrive 5-10 minutes early.**
- **Bring extra copies of your materials.**
- **Be conscious of body language.** Make sure you have a firm handshake. Sit a bit forward with your shoulders back and try not to appear stiff or uncomfortable. You want to project confidence and interest. Maintain eye contact and be sure to smile.
- **Speak clearly.** Enunciate clearly and try not to speak too quickly. Avoid fillers such as “um.” Answer questions clearly, speak in declarative sentences and be as direct as possible.
- **Listen to the questions and be sure to answer them.** Avoid digressing from an answer since you will soon forget the question.
- **Ask intelligent, pertinent questions.** These questions should relate to the employer and to the position you are pursuing. Prepare these questions before your interview.
- **Before your interview, create several succinct bullet points about your skills and experiences. Do not leave the interview until they have all been covered.** This may require that you tactfully inject some of this important information during the course of the interview.
- **Be prepared to talk about grades.** Discuss them honestly and realistically and then move on to specific accomplishments that demonstrate your skills.
- **Be aware of the 80/20 Rule.** You should be talking 80% of the time, listening 20% of the time. Otherwise, you may not be getting all of your points across.
- **Be yourself.** It is important that your personality shows through. You have already impressed the interviewer with your credentials; now it is your opportunity to establish a personal rapport with the interviewer. Show genuine enthusiasm.
- **Turn off your cell phone!**

DRESSING APPROPRIATELY

Given that first impressions can greatly influence a hiring decision, the manner in which you present yourself during an interview can make a big difference in your ability to advance further in the interviewing process. The following are suggestions designed to help you choose an appropriate interview wardrobe.

For men

A well-tailored, two-piece suit in a conservative color is most appropriate for interviews. Dress shirts should be solid, preferably white or cream. Be sure the shirt and suit are pressed or ironed. A variety of ties may be worn, but muted colors in solid, stripes, or small patterns are preferred. Men should wear dress shoes in black or brown. Accessories should be limited to a belt and a watch. Belts and shoes should match. Facial hair should be trimmed and neatly groomed. Avoid cologne. Never bring a backpack.

For women

A nicely tailored suit in a conservative color is most appropriate. Keep in mind the type of employer who you are interviewing with (Judge versus non-judge and always err on the conservative side). If wearing a skirt suit, the length of the skirt should hit right below or right above the knee. Cream or white blouses are the most professional. Shoes should be conservative (closed toed and closed heeled) and a 1-2 inch heel is most appropriate. Belts and shoes should match. Jewelry should be limited to small earrings, a watch, and a simple necklace. In addition, make-up should be minimal and fingernails should be kept short with clear polish only. Too much make-up and jewelry is distracting and unprofessional looking. In addition, longer hair should be worn away from the face. Go light on or avoid perfume. Bring a lint brush, an extra pair of panty hose, and have clear nail polish on hand if you need to stop a run.

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WHAT ARE EMPLOYERS LOOKING FOR IN A CANDIDATE?

There are several questions that employers are trying to answer while they interview you:

- Could I leave this person alone with my most important client?
- Will I end up re-doing this person's work product or will it be done right the first time?
- What would I do if I were stuck in an elevator with this person?

These questions highlight several key traits that all employers look for:

- **Competency** – Not just in terms of your grades, but in how you articulate your thoughts, your level of self-confidence, maturity, and your overall presentation.
- **Judgment** – They want to hear how you make your decisions and get a better understanding of your thought processes. If you show a strong pattern of solid decisions in the past, it hopefully means that you will not become a liability for them in the future.
- **Personality** – It is important to develop a good rapport with the interviewer as soon as possible. They want to make sure that you are the type of person who can get along with their attorneys and their clients. They look for people with leadership skills, adaptability, a sense of humor, well-rounded interests, etc.
- **Interest** – They are looking to see how interested you are in their organization. The questions you ask and the extent of your research are good indicators of your level of interest and enthusiasm.

You must convey all of these qualities during an interview and give specific examples of how you have achieved success or overcome obstacles. Make yourself memorable and do not leave an interview without making sure that they know more about you than just what is on your resume.

The interview should be a conversation, during which you demonstrate your self-confidence, your communication skills and your personality. Do not assume that the interviewer will ask all the right questions to uncover all your good qualities. You may have to actively try to work in all the information you want them to know. You can accomplish this by answering a question and then enthusiastically discussing your accomplishments and illustrating your point with examples. Interviewers tend to remember candidates who enliven their responses with specific references to their personal experiences.

Your goal is to persuade the employer that you are an outstanding candidate. Convey a confident, professional image, highlighting your relevant skills and achievements. Responses that are thoughtful, articulate, concise, relevant and reflective of what is really important to you as an individual will be the most convincing.

SAMPLE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

To be well prepared, you should prepare answers to the following questions. Preparation might include actually verbalizing the answers in a practice interview situation. In most instances, **your answer is less important than the attitude you project!** Be friendly, confident, and organized. The employer is judging your intelligence and clarity of expression, as well as personality attributes which make you compatible with their members.

Below is a breakdown of the typical pattern an interview takes and some of the questions you can expect.

Introduction

- Tell me about yourself. (Resist the temptation to re-iterate what is on your resume. Start with why you are there – why do you want to work for that employer and then outline what your background and skills are that make you a strong candidate.)

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- Why do you wish to work for our firm/agency?
- Tell me something that is not covered on your resume.
- Why did you decide to study law?

Educational Background/Work Experience

- How do you rank in your class academically?
Do you think this is an accurate indication of your abilities?
- Why did you decide to attend this law school?
- In which courses did you get your best grades? Worst grades? Why?
- Which courses did you like best? Least? Why?
- How do your courses and experiences apply to the job for which you are applying?
- Describe all the school activities in which you have participated. Which ones did you enjoy the most?
- Do you think LSAT scores should be considered by the employer? Why or why not?
- Did you participate in the moot court/journal/clinical programs? Explain your experience and feelings about them.
- Describe the job experiences you have had in the time you were in law school. How much of them were law-related? Part-time or volunteer?
- What do you like best about law school? Least?
- Tell me about your volunteer experiences.
- Did you receive an offer from your summer employer?
- Can we get recommendations from previous employers? How would they describe you?

Experience and Skills Information

- Describe your most recent work experience.
- What qualifications do you have that lead you to believe you will be successful at this firm/agency/organization?
- How do you determine or evaluate success?
- How do you spend your spare time? What are your hobbies?
- Why should we hire you?
- Describe your most rewarding law school experience.
- What qualifications do you have that lead you to believe you will be successful in the law?
- How has your law school prepared you to work here?

Career Goals

- Why do you wish to be a lawyer?
- In which areas of the law are you most interested? Why?
- What are your long-range and short-range career goals and objectives, when and why did you establish these goals and how are you preparing yourself to achieve these goals?
- What has led you to this firm?
- What personal goals are you seeking through a career in law? What specific goals, other than those related to your occupation, have you established for yourself for the next ten years?
- Suppose you hadn't chosen law - what would be your second choice?
- How did you come to choose law as a career?
- What are the most important things you are looking for in your first position?
- What do you think you would like to do (tax, labor, corporate, litigation)?

Self-Analysis

- What have you learned from some of the jobs you have held?
- Do you believe you have done the best scholastic work of which you are capable?

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- If you could change one thing about yourself, what would it be?
- Are there any particular types of cases on which you would feel uncomfortable working?
- Could you go to court to represent a client in whose case you did not fully believe?
- Is it an effort for you to be tolerant of persons with a background and interests different from your own?
- What two or three accomplishments have given you the most satisfaction? Why?
- What is the greatest obstacle you have had to overcome in your life/career?
- Give me an example of an instance when you were given an assignment under pressure and how you handled it. In retrospect, would you handle it in the same way again?
- What do you see as some of the most difficult ethical questions you will have to face as a lawyer? How would you respond to them?
- Do you prefer working with others or by yourself?
- Do you like routine work and routine hours?
- What motivates you to put forth your greatest effort?
- Do you have an analytical mind?
- Tell me about the most recent book you read?
- What do you consider your greatest strengths? Weaknesses?

Knowledge of the firm/organization/agency/court

- What do you know about us?
- What are your ideas concerning salary?
- What personal characteristics do you believe are necessary for success in your chosen field?
- If you were entirely free to do so, which specialty of law would you choose to practice in our legal organization?
- What are the disadvantages of practicing the type of law in which you have expressed interest?
- What makes you think you might want to live in this area?

Conclusion or Closing

- Is there anything I should be aware of about yourself, which we have not covered?
- Would you like to ask any questions about our organization/firm in general?

The interview is normally terminated by the interviewer. As the interview comes to a close, tell the interviewer that you have enjoyed speaking with him/her, that you appreciated her/his time and the opportunity to meet, and that you are looking forward to hearing from him/her. Be sure to shake hands as you exit.

QUESTIONS YOU SHOULD BE ASKING

Solid preparation for any interview also dictates that you formulate some questions for the interviewer. You should ask these with honesty and sincerity and show real interest in hearing the answers. Avoid questions whose answers can easily be found on a website or in the employer's file in the Career Development Office, such as practice areas or number of lawyers.

Government/Public Interest Agencies

- How is the legal department organized? Where do junior lawyers fit in?
- How does the legal department relate to the head of the agency?
- What opportunity is there for promotion within the agency?
- Are there any possibilities of intra/inter-agency transfers?
- How often will I be reviewed for salary increases or promotions?
- What promotions can I expect in the next two or three years?
- How soon can I expect to hear from you if an offer is to be made?

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Corporate Law Departments/In-House Counsel

- Could you explain the department's hiring policy?
- Do you expect growth in the corporate law department? How much and in what areas?
- How is the department organized? What is the relationship of the general counsel to the Chairperson of the Board? The Board of Directors? How is outside counsel used and for what matters? What is the relationship of the office of the general counsel to outside counsel?
- How are promotions made? What will a typical career pattern look like?
- Is there a pro bono practice?
- What are your attrition rates?
- How often will I be evaluated/reviewed?
- How common are transfers to other departments within the company?

Judicial Clerkships

- If I receive an offer for permanent employment, will it remain open through the period of my judicial clerkship? What about a two-year clerkship?
- If I accept a position with your firm following my clerkship, will my standing be the same as other new recruits, or will I receive "credit" toward partnership because of my clerkship?

Summer Employment

- How is your summer associate program structured?
- How many summer clerks do you plan to hire?
- What type of projects/assignments do summer clerks receive?
- Is there a chance for involvement in client meetings? Depositions? Hearings?
- What type of evaluation/feedback process do you have?
- Do you allow split summers?
- Are most offers for permanent, entry-level positions made from the summer program?
- What must one do as a summer clerk to receive an offer?
- What percentage of summer clerks typically receive offers for permanent employment?

Considering an Offer

- If I accept the offer, will I have a voice in choosing the kind of work I do?
- How many associates do you expect to hire? Do you recruit at law schools or laterally?
- At what rate am I expected to bring in new business? Am I compensated for doing so?
- Am I expected to bill a certain number of hours or dollars? How many hours does the average associate work? Bill? Is any part of my bonus or compensation determined on the basis of bills collected? Are admission or promotion decisions based in part on hours worked or on bills collected?

Law Firms

- Why did you choose to work at this firm?
- What type of work do you do?
- What do you see as the benefits/drawbacks of working at a firm your size?
- What type of client base does the firm have? Does it rely heavily on one client?
- For interviews with an organization with more than one location: Are the offices independent? Is there a shared client base?
- Who are your closest competitors?
- What is on your desk right now?
- What can you tell me about your firm that is not on your website?
- When do you evaluate people for possible partnership?
- What is the relationship between younger and older lawyers in the firm? To find out how well the senior members can train the associate it is necessary to try to evaluate both the ability of the senior members and their willingness to share their experience with associates. Separately ask as many members of the firm as possible to

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describe what each of the other members of the firm do and the extent of the specialization. If you are very sensitive to what is said -- and perhaps more importantly what is not said -- the descriptions of the other members of the firm, the extent of their cooperation with new associates, and how the members of the firm regard the ability and productivity of each other, you can make an informed judgment.

- Find out who appears to manage the firm and who really makes the decisions in the firm. They may not be the same person. It may be difficult to find out the power structure in the firm, but you can determine whether there are any relationships among the firm members by blood or marriage, which members associate together socially, and the extent to which various members have similar outside activities.
- Find out how active the members of the firm are in bar association activities. This is some indication of the vitality of the firm and also some indication of the standing of the firm with fellow lawyers and judges.
- How does the firm feel about political activity on the part of associates and members? Does the firm permit freedom in choosing which political party to support? Does the firm object to active political involvement? How does the firm feel about an associate or member running for political office?
- What are the firm's prevailing attitudes -- and practices -- on such matters as pro bono work, community service and government service?
- Does the firm have a particular type of practice in mind for the new associate? How do associates work and responsibilities change over the years? How much freedom is there for the associate to eventually choose his or her own type of practice?
- To what extent does each member of the firm participate in continuing legal education and if so, what types? How much continuing legal education on the part of associates is permitted and expected? This is some indication of which members are likely to be helpful to associates and what expertise they have to offer. The quality of the law library is probably some indication of the quality of the work product turned out by the firm and will also indicate what resources are available to you for learning.

Discriminatory Questions

The single most important guideline for lawful interviewing is for interviewers to focus on job-related questions that can be asked of all applicants. Generally, an employer is not trying to be discriminatory; many times they ask inappropriate questions out of ignorance or to promote conversation. If you are having a good interview and are asked an inappropriate question, answer it only if you feel comfortable. You should never, however, feel pressured to answer an illegal question. If this is the case, answer positively and focus on your professionalism and job ability. Your demeanor and handling of an offensive question could work in your favor and let the employer know why you are such a good candidate. Be sure to let the Director know about your experience with this employer. If you wish, you may file a complaint with the Director utilizing the procedures outline on page G-3 of this handbook.

Some typical discriminatory questions and suggested responses include:

National Origin

- Where were you born?
- Where were your parents born?
- Of what country are you a citizen?

Suggested Response: "As a permanent resident and citizen of the United States, I feel like I was born here since it has been my home for so long."

Religion

- What is your religion?
- What church do you attend?
- Do you hold any religious beliefs that would prevent you from working certain days?

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Suggested Response: "In all my previous employment, schooling and other activities, my religious practices have never interfered with my performance."

Age

- How old are you?
- How would you feel about working for a person younger than you?

Suggested Response: "I relate well to people of all ages. In law school, most of my friends were younger than I was. I respect people based on their knowledge and competence."

Marriage or Family

- What are your marriage plans?
- Do you plan to have children?
- What does your spouse do?
- What happens if you or your spouse gets transferred or needs to relocate?

Suggested Response: "I believe my career will be successful with or without a spouse or a family. My spouse and I make career decisions together. Certainly law school was not undertaken lightly and I am not interviewing frivolously. I am here because I am committed to my career and interested in this position."

Race or Ethnicity

- What is your ethnic background?
- Would you feel out of place being a minority in our office?

Suggested Response: "Throughout my life, I have gone to school with persons of diverse backgrounds and cultures. I have always worked hard and gotten along with everybody. A person's race, whatever it may be, should not interfere in the work environment."

Gender or Sexual Orientation

- How would you feel about working for a man/woman?
- Do you think you would be comfortable working for or with someone of the opposite sex?
- As a gay, lesbian or bisexual, would you feel out of place working in our office?

Suggested Response: "As long as a person is qualified, I have no problems working for or with someone of the same or opposite sex. A person's sexual orientation, whatever it may be, should not interfere in the work environment."

Physical Impairments

- As a physically challenged person, what help are you going to need in doing your work?
- How severe is your handicap?

Suggested Response: "Actually, I do not need help doing my work, because I have been adequately trained. What I need might be minor adaptations of the work station and colleagues who relate to me as a fellow professional."

NOW WHAT?

Thank You Letters

Immediately following each interview, take time to jot down notes summarizing your conversation with the employer. Send a thank you letter to the interviewer as soon as possible (see the section Thank You Letters in this Notebook).

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Follow Up

If you have not heard from an employer you interviewed with, be sure to follow up with them within a couple of weeks to re-iterate your interest and to see if they need any additional information from you.

Getting an Offer

When you receive an offer, reply immediately. Thank them for their expression of confidence in you and the fine opportunity presented. Indicate that you are extremely interested and will notify them of your decision as soon as you have completed the interviewing process. Then, make your decision as soon as possible (or by a certain date), in fairness to the employer and to other candidates.

THINGS TO CONSIDER

Do not forget that this is your opportunity to interview the organization as well. Keep in mind the following points when evaluating potential employers:

- Are the lawyers there people you will enjoy working with?
- Does the firm have a friendly atmosphere -- is it a place where people can laugh and enjoy themselves in spite of their hard work or is it stiff and formal?
- Is there a spirit of cooperation among the lawyers -- a desire to help each other to get the job done well, or is there a harsh, competitive spirit?
- Your own satisfaction with the size and character of the community.
- How pleasant the relations within the firm/organization would be. Take a look around and see if office doors are open, if the support staff is happy, and if everyone knows each other.
- The future condition of the firm/organization.
- The extent and quality of the training given by the firm/organization.
- The quality of the business that would be referred to you from other members of the firm/organization
- How much freedom you have to experiment and develop the type of practice you prefer.
- How much freedom you would have to choose your own lifestyle.

THE TELEPHONE INTERVIEW

Employers use telephone interviews as a way of identifying and recruiting candidates for employment. Phone interviews are often used to screen candidates in order to narrow the pool of applicants who will be invited for in-person interviews. They are also used as way to minimize the expenses involved in interviewing out-of-town candidates.

While you are actively job searching, it is important to be prepared for a phone interview on a moment's notice. You never know when a recruiter or a networking contact might call and ask if you have a few minutes to talk.

Be Prepared

Prepare for a phone interview just as you would for a regular interview. Compile a list of your strengths and weaknesses, as well as a list of answers to typical interview questions.

- Keep your resume in clear view, on top of your desk, or tape it to the wall near the phone, so it is at your fingertips when you need to answer questions.
- Have a short list of your accomplishments available to review.
- Have a pen and paper handy for note taking.
- Turn call-waiting off so your call is not interrupted.
- Clear the room - evict the kids and the pets. Turn off the stereo and the TV. Close the door.
- Do not smoke, chew gum, eat, or drink.
- Do keep a glass of water handy, in case you need to wet your mouth.

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- Smile. Smiling will project a positive image to the listener and will change the tone of your voice.
- Speak slowly and enunciate clearly. It may help to open your mouth a bit wider while you are speaking.
- Stand up. It gets your blood flowing, improves your posture, and improves your response time. Some people also feel like they think better on their feet.
- Use the person's title (Mr. or Ms. and their last name.) Only use a first name if they ask you to do so.
- Do not interrupt the interviewer.
- Take your time – it is perfectly acceptable to take a moment or two to collect your thoughts.
- Give short answers.
- Remember your goal is to set up a face-to-face interview. After you thank the interviewer, ask if it would be possible to meet in person.
- Follow up with a thank you letter.

THERE MAY BE SURPRISES

The Hostile Interview

(Adapted from Harvard Law School's Public Interest Job Search Guide)

Employers at U.S. Attorney, criminal defense, and prosecution offices may conduct hostile interviews. These employers are not targeting you personally. Rather, the interviewers are interested in seeing how you respond to pressure which is comparable to the nature of adversarial courtroom trials. They are assessing how well you perform on your feet.

The FBI and other federal agencies conduct comprehensive security checks and often ask probing questions about drug abuse and criminal record. Before interviewing at these places, please be sure you feel comfortable answering these types of questions.

The key to handling a hostile interview and answering difficult questions lies not in how you answer the questions thrown at you, but rather in your overall composure. Keep a calm demeanor and overall poise, and respond directly and non-defensively.

Multiple Interviewers

(Adapted from Harvard Law School's Public Interest Job Search Guide)

Sometimes, because of time crunches, schedule conflicts, or overall logistics, you may find yourself meeting with multiple interviewers. This scenario can result in an awkward situation where you feel overwhelmed by the ratio of interviewers to interviewees.

You may be uncertain as to whom you should direct your responses when asked multiple questions from the interviewers. You should attempt to recognize who among the interviewers has seniority and gear most of the interview contact with him/her. However, make sure that you do not disregard the other interviewers. Focus on engaging the remaining interviewers in your responses to give them the opportunity to ask further questions. When responding to direct questions, make initial eye contact with the person who asked the question, but as you expand on your answer, remember to include the others during your response.