Preparing for Interviews

The first task in any interview is to review information about the candidate using the application form, resume (curriculum vitae), phone screen, and similar sources, and tailor the interview guide based on this background information. Going into interviews well prepared shows candidates you believe that their time is important and that you want to learn more about them. This gets the interview off to a good start, builds the candidate’s self-esteem, and sets a positive tone for the rest of the discussion.

The interview guide makes it easy to prepare for interviews. Interview Preparation provides reminders of how and what to prepare for key parts of the interview.

Reviewing Candidate Materials

Review all available application materials—resume, application form, screening results—to decide which of the candidate’s jobs and experiences are most relevant to the position.

Jobs/Experiences

Review the information provided for the candidate’s jobs/experiences; note anything that is unclear or any knowledge and experience areas for which you would like more information.

Gaps

If there are gaps in the candidate’s employment or education history, make a note to discuss them with the candidate. Discussing gaps is the only way to determine why they occurred and whether they reflect negatively on the candidate.
Preparing the Planned Behavioral Questions

Section

Familiarizing yourself with the candidate’s background allows you to identify the areas you want to focus on when asking planned behavioral questions. After identifying these focus areas, you can modify the questions in the guide to fit the candidate’s background and the job. The more you do to focus the planned behavioral questions before the interview, the less you’ll have to do during the interview.

Another important preparation step is to review your assigned targets’ definitions and key actions. The four steps outlined in Interview Preparation will help you prepare the planned behavioral questions.

1. Review Targets

Read the target definitions and key actions (key actions describe the behaviors candidates need to demonstrate) to remind yourself of the kind of information you’ll be seeking. Review each target’s planned behavioral questions, asking yourself:

- Why are these questions included? How will they get me the behaviors or other information I need?
- What types of situations in the candidate’s background can I expect the person to draw from to provide the information I need?
- What kinds of actions will I be listening for?

2. Modify the Questions

Although most planned behavioral questions will stand as written, you may want to modify them to better fit the candidate’s jobs and experiences. Tailoring questions to the candidate’s background makes it easier for the person to answer with relevant, recent, and complete examples.

The following examples show how you can adapt the planned behavioral questions in the interview guide to the candidate’s background. Ideally, you should make any changes to planned behavioral questions while preparing for the interview, but you can modify questions during the interview too.
Example 1

This question from an interview guide for an administrative position is reworded for a candidate who just graduated from business school and has no work experience. (The target is Decision Making.)

**Planned question:** “Tell me about a recent problem you uncovered in your job at __________. What sources of information did you check to identify the problem?”

**Modified question:** “What sources of information did you check when deciding which school to attend? How did you use this information?”

Example 2

The interviewer modified a question for the target (Delegation) after learning that the candidate had never delegated tasks or responsibilities, even though he had the title “project manager.”

**Planned question:** “How have you made sure that people met due dates for the work you delegated? Give me an example.”

**Modified question:** “How have you kept track of tasks and assignments that were someone else’s responsibilities but affected your productivity? Give me a specific example.”

3. Determine the Order of the Questions

You can change the order of the planned behavioral questions to fit the candidate’s experience and the interview’s flow. For example, when reviewing the candidate’s background, if you believe the second and third questions under a target are more likely to produce meaningful information, ask those two questions first. In doing so, you might get all the information you need and, therefore, will not need to ask the one you omitted.

You need to balance your questions between those that encourage candidates to describe successes (or are neutral) and those that seek negative information. Planned behavioral questions are arranged so that (1) you never ask for too much negative or sensitive information at one time and (2) the candidate has ample time to describe successes between negative questions. Upsetting this balance—asking for too much negative information at one time—can undermine a candidate’s self-esteem, causing him or her to be less open.
When you plan your questions:

- Choose the best planned behavioral question to ask first.
- Don’t start with a negative question.
- Plan to ask at least two questions; be sure one is designed to elicit negative examples.
- If you get one or two complete, meaningful STARs, ask for another example to answer the same question (e.g., “Can you give me another example?”).

4. Develop Additional Questions

The interview guide provides more planned behavioral questions than you’ll have time to ask. But there are two situations in which you’ll need to develop additional questions. The first situation occurs when the questions don’t apply and you can’t modify them to fit the candidate’s background. This situation should become apparent during your preparation; at that point, you can write new questions or pull from your organization’s library of questions.

The second situation occurs during the interview when you’ve asked all the planned behavioral questions for a target yet still don’t have at least three STARs you’ll need to evaluate the candidate. You can use the planned behavioral questions in your guide as a model to develop new questions. Make sure your questions:

- **Are behavioral.** They should ask for specific examples of what the candidate has said or done to reveal behavior that’s recent and relevant to the open position. Following the example of the planned behavioral questions, phrase your questions in the past tense and ask the candidate for only one situation at a time.

- **Focus on the most important aspect of the target you’re interviewing for.** Study the target’s key actions and word your questions so they go after behavior that reflects those actions.

- **Aren’t leading or theoretical.** Leading questions guide the candidate to the answer you want. Theoretical questions ask candidates for theories and opinions. Neither produces the STAR information you need.
Managing Time in the Interview

A good first step in managing any interview is to create a timetable. Begin by estimating how long you think it will take to cover each segment of the interview, then put together a timetable with times for each segment. Take the timetable with you to the interview or write the times in your interview guide. Knowing how you’re doing on time will tell you how to pace the interview and whether you need to shorten any areas so that you can cover in depth your most important targets.

Following is an example of a timetable for a typical one-hour interview:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Segment</th>
<th>Time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Opening</td>
<td>2 min.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key Background Review *</td>
<td>6 min.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planned Behavioral Questions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gaining Commitment</td>
<td>7 min.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Initiating Action</td>
<td>7 min.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decision Making</td>
<td>7 min.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Customer Focus</td>
<td>7 min.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning and Organizing</td>
<td>7 min.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivational Fit</td>
<td>7 min.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview Close</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional Information</td>
<td>3 min.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job/Organization Information *</td>
<td>6 min.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Close</td>
<td>1 min.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* These parts of the interview usually are assigned to one interviewer, typically the hiring manager.