



Engineering Co-op & Career Services
www.coop.eng.umd.edu
301.405.3863



•: Interviewing Techniques

EFFECTIVE INTERVIEWING TECHNIQUES

The interview is one of the last steps of the hiring process - and one of the most important. It offers both you and the employer the opportunity to meet, exchange information, and come to tentative conclusions about whether you are a good fit for the organization/position and whether the organization/position are a good fit for you.

The interview is a two-way process. You evaluate the employer while he/she evaluates you. In the short amount of time that you will spend with a potential employer, you will either be screened in or screened out, so you must project yourself in a positive, enthusiastic manner.

The interview gives the employer the opportunity to meet you in person and to evaluate the "total" you. This includes your attitude, appearance, personality, confidence, knowledge about yourself, and knowledge about the organization, as well as basic ability to do the job. Remember: the interview starts long before you appear in the interviewer's office! You will need to take some time to prepare for the interview by researching the organization, evaluating your goals, reviewing how you might respond to commonly asked questions, and developing your own questions for the interviewer. The pages that follow are intended to help you with this preparation, and it includes information on the following topics:

- Determining Your Qualifications
- Employer Research
- Appearance
- Timeliness
- What To Bring
- Frequently Asked Interview Questions
- Behavioral Interviewing & the STAR Technique
- Technical Interviews
- Questions You May Want To Ask Interviewers
- Thank You Letters

INTERVIEWING WORKSHOPS & MOCK INTERVIEWS

While the following pages give detailed information to assist you in learning how to interview effectively, we strongly encourage you to attend an Interview Workshop at the Engineering Co-op Office. At an Interview Workshop, you will learn more about what to expect at an interview, practice interviewing techniques, and have the opportunity to ask questions. Visit our website at <www.coop.engr.umd.edu> to check out our workshop schedule and sign-up for a time that is convenient for you.

After attending an Interview Workshop, if you would like additional individualized comments, you may sign-up for a mock interview. During a mock interview, one of our staff members will take you through the interview process as if you were interviewing for a real job. We will then give you feedback on your interview skills. You should treat this as a real interview (which includes dressing professionally) to get the most out of your mock interview. To schedule an appointment for a mock interview, stop by the Engineering Co-op Office.

DETERMINING YOUR QUALIFICATIONS

Whether or not you've already had an engineering co-op or internship, you've probably gained some skills that you can highlight on your resume or in interviews during your job search. Consider the course projects you've completed, teams you've participated in, extra-curricular activities and leadership roles, and past or current work experiences even if they are unrelated to engineering. Many of the skills you've gained in these roles are transferable to engineering-related positions.

The first column below lists the qualities and skills employers say they look for in new hires, according to the *Job Outlook 2005—Student Version*. Use the next column to list specific instances when and how you used a skill.

Desired Skills	Examples of Skill Used
Communication skills (verbal)	
Communication skills (written)	
Honesty/integrity	
Interpersonal skills (relate well to others)	
Strong work ethic	
Teamwork skills (work well with others)	
Analytical skills	
Motivation/initiative	
Flexibility/adaptability	
Computer skills	
Detail oriented	

EMPLOYER RESEARCH

What are the benefits of researching an employer before your interview?

1. The interviewer will be impressed to see that you have taken the time to learn about the company. Your level of preparation also conveys your level of interest in the position.
2. Your research may reveal any problems or challenges a company is facing. This may help you select in advance appropriate examples to share during the interview that will demonstrate how you can contribute to the solution.
3. Interviewing is a two-way street. Company research will help you assess whether the position and organization are good fits for you.
4. You will feel more confident going into the interview when you have a good understanding of what the organization is all about.
5. Your research will enable you to prepare a list of well-researched questions for the interviewer.

What types of things should you try to learn about an employer prior to an interview?

- Mission
- Products and services
- Size of company/how many employees
- Target markets/who their clients or customers are
- Major competitors
- Plans for growth
- Recent items in the news
- Key challenges
- Company's annual revenue
- Where the offices/plants are located
- Some history of the organization, such as how long they have been in business
- How and where your position fits into the grand scheme

Of course, you may not be able to find all of this information. What you cannot learn before, you can ask during the interview if you are interested.

Where can you find information about employers?

1. Employer files in the Co-op Office
 - Previous students' work reports
 - Recruiting brochures/literature
 - Annual reports
 - Position description
2. Employer presentations on campus (see eLink for dates and times)
3. Internet
 - Company web page – if unknown, check eLink or do an Internet search.
 - Web sites that specialize in researching employers, such as: <http://www.collegegrad.com/employers/>.
4. Articles in business magazines or newspapers
5. The Career Center Resource Room at 3100 Hornbake has additional information on engineering employers.

For truly thorough preparation, try using the Lexis-Nexis database in McKeldin Library. This database will search all of the major periodicals in the U.S. for articles mentioning a given employer and/or any other key words that you choose. This is a great way to uncover the latest news about a company.

APPEARANCE

Employer surveys consistently indicate that clothing is an important factor in the total picture of the candidate. In the same way that you have invested in your education and the preparation of your credentials, you may want to consider investing in an “interviewing outfit.” Choose clothing that is comfortable, clean, and professional looking. Below are some tips on interview attire for both men and women.

- **Clothing for men:**
A conservative, well-fitted suit is generally recommended. Sport coat with tie and nice slacks can be worn if you are unable to invest in a suit.
- **Clothing for women:**
Skirt or pants suit or matching skirt and jacket, with coordinating blouse. Conservative (dark) colors and patterns. If wearing a skirt, check skirt length when sitting down.
- Shoes should be polished, not worn-looking or scuffed.
- Personal hygiene is important. Pay particular attention to your fingernails, breath and hair.
- Make-up is not required, but if you wear it, keep it natural looking.
- Consider using little or no perfume/cologne. The interview room may be small and scents can be stifling.
- Avoid large pieces of jewelry or jingly items that may be distracting.

Company literature and professional magazines can also give clues as to what is appropriate in different company environments. There are a number of engineering organizations where dress is “business casual” on a regular basis. If you are interviewing for a company where you know this policy is in effect, you should nevertheless dress as you would for any interview. The only instance in which you should dress casually for an interview is when the interviewer specifically tells you to do so (for instance, a recruiter may tell you to dress casually because you will be going on a plant tour during your visit). In general, even if you know that employees wear jeans to work at a particular company, you should still wear business attire to the interview to give a good impression and show that you are taking the interview seriously.

TIMELINESS

It goes without saying that you should be on time for an interview. It’s always a good idea to give yourself some extra time in case you have difficulty finding the interview site or parking. (Make sure you have good directions and you account for traffic if your interview is off-campus!) Plan to arrive at your interviewer’s office about 5-10 minutes before your scheduled appointment.

WHAT TO BRING

- **Extra copies of your resume.** You may end up speaking or meeting with someone who might not have a copy of your resume on hand.
- **Reference sheet.** Your interviewer may ask for a list of your references at the interview. Be prepared and have it with you. See our Resume Writing handout for a sample, as well as tips on selecting references.
- **Transcript.** Similar to your Reference sheet, you’ll look more prepared than most interviewees just by being able to immediately produce your transcript if asked for it. Go to <www.testudo.umd.edu> to print an unofficial copy or to request an official copy of your transcript.
- **Employment History.** Keep an informal document for yourself with the details of your past experience (former employer addresses, phone numbers, start and end dates, supervisor names, etc.) in case you are asked to complete an application form during your interview.
- **Portfolio/Padfolio with pen.** It’s worth it to spend \$15 or so at an office supply store or the book store to have a professional looking padfolio to hold all the documents listed above. Look for one that has a place to hold a pen, and a business card holder for the card(s) you collect at your interview.

FREQUENTLY ASKED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Use this list to prepare for an interview. Have a friend ask you the questions. Often what seems like a simple question on paper seems a lot more difficult when you have to articulate it out loud.

1. Why did you choose your particular field of study?
2. What courses have you liked the best? Least? Why?
3. Have you held any leadership positions?
4. Why do you want to co-op? What do you hope to gain from a co-op position?
5. What have you done that shows initiative and willingness to work?
6. What are your future career plans?
7. Do you prefer to work with others or alone?
8. What qualifications do you have that will make you successful in your field?
9. What interests you about our product/service?
10. What jobs have you enjoyed the most? The least? Why?
11. Why should I hire you?
12. Are you willing to travel? Relocate?

Responding to Challenging Questions

1. *"Tell me about yourself."*

This question is asked to find out about your job skills, recent educational background, and any experiences related to the job at hand. Refer mentally to your resume; briefly recap your skills and experiences as they relate to this particular job. Be specific and use examples to support your claim. This type of question requires you to take a few moments to describe your background, so don't be too brief. Prepare for this question in advance by thinking about what types of experiences you would talk about if asked a broad-based question such as this.

2. *"What is your major weakness?"*

There are several techniques for dealing with this question. You could mention a weakness that will not significantly hinder you in the job for which you are interviewing. You can also highlight a strength that compensates for the weakness, and/or you can describe steps you are taking to overcome the weakness. Another strategy sometimes suggested is to mention a "weakness" that may also be viewed as a strength (but be careful with this one – the "I have a tendency to take on too much" weakness gets overused and employers get tired of hearing it!). Finally, you could also point out something that they already know but does not appear to be a stumbling block (a low GPA, a lack of certain technical skills, etc.). Here are some examples: (1) "I've always dreaded talking in front of large groups, but I took a public speaking class last semester to develop my skills in that area and to force me to practice. I think I am improving and gaining the confidence to do this when I need to." (2) "While I have strong technical abilities, I am not as proficient in C++ as you might like, since I know you use C++ extensively here. However, I am a fast learner, and I am willing to work hard and train to get up to speed quickly."

3. *"How much do you expect to be paid?"*

You may not get asked this question in an interview for a co-op or intern position, since many times the salary is a set figure. However, if you are asked about salary, try to avoid stating a flat dollar amount unless you know what the job pays. You should do some research on salaries beforehand so that you have an idea of the general range for co-op and internship positions in your field (salary information is available at the Co-op Office and on our website). In your response you can demonstrate that you are knowledgeable about the going rate. For example: "My research has shown that mechanical engineering co-op students are earning a range of \$12 - \$21 with an average of \$15.00 an hour. Given my strong qualifications I feel that a salary in the range of \$15-\$17 would be appropriate." Another option to the range is to turn the question back to the employer such as, "What would a person with my background, skills and qualifications typically earn in this position?" Or try a neutral statement such as, "While salary is certainly important, my main goal is to further develop my skills. I am sure that we can agree on a fair salary once we have determined that I am a good fit for the job."

4. *"Why do you want to work for this company?"*

The employer expects you to show knowledge of and interest in the company. You can do this with an answer that indicates that you have researched the company before the interview. Examples: "I've talked with some of your previous co-op students and they feel that this is a good company to work for because..." or "I have been reading that your company is really growing fast. I want to work for your company because the future looks promising."

5. *"Why did you leave your last job?"*

The employer is trying to find out if you had any problems on your last job. Never say anything negative about yourself or your previous employer. If you did have problems, think of a way to explain without being negative. Don't use the word "fired". Use words such as "laid off" or "position was cut." If you were fired and are not on good terms with your previous employer, maybe you should explain. Try to show that you learned something from the situation. Tell the employer that the former problem (if it is personal) will not effect your work. Common reasons for leaving: general layoff, job was temporary, moved to a new area, company went out of business, no room for advancement, wanted a job more aligned with your skills.

6. *"What are your future plans?"*

The interviewer wants to know if you are ambitious, plan ahead, and set goals for yourself. The interviewer may also want to know if, after you complete your co-op or other work experience there, you might potentially work for them full-time after graduation. Often, this question concerns students who are considering graduate study in the future, because they don't know how much to reveal. Usually an employer does not expect you to know exactly where you hope to go in the future, but your answer should communicate an awareness of where the position for which you are interviewing might lead. Example: "I know that your company has hired co-op students full-time after they graduate, and I would look forward to that possibility and to the opportunity to be a full-time member of your engineering research team. I would also consider graduate study in environmental engineering in the future. My goals will become clearer as I gain experience and have the opportunity to learn more about what it takes to be successful in research and the field of engineering." If you choose to mention graduate study plans, keep the time frame and your plans open-ended. Even if you believe you definitely will go straight into a graduate program after you graduate, that plan could change if you have a co-op job that you really enjoy and the company offers you a full-time position. So don't jeopardize your opportunity to get that job by alerting the employer to your interest in only a short-term work experience. Also, remember to keep your answer to this question professionally-oriented (i.e., you don't need to mention personal/family goals).

Behavioral Interviewing & the “STAR” Technique

What is behavioral interviewing?

Behavioral interviewing is based on the premise that a person’s recent, relevant past performance is the best predictor of future performance. Instead of asking how you *would* behave in a particular situation, a behavioral interviewer will ask how you *did* behave. You will be asked to provide a specific example of a past situation or task to demonstrate the way you performed in that specific situation or task.

How do I answer a behavioral question?

First of all, prepare for an interview by recalling recent situations that show favorable behaviors or actions involving coursework, work experience, leadership, teamwork, or customer service. Be sure that each story has a beginning, middle, and end. *Be specific*. Don’t generalize about several events; give a detailed account of one event. Use the STAR technique described below to structure your answer. Expect the interviewer to question and probe; for example, *What did you say? What were you thinking? What was your role?*

Sample Question:

A behavioral interviewer might ask: *Tell me about a time when you were on a team, and one of the members wasn’t carrying his or her weight.*

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Situation or Task: Describe a specific situation or task you have encountered that will make a point about one of your skills or strengths. Be ready to describe details, if asked.

Example: I was assigned to build a concrete toboggan for one of my classes. One of our team members wasn’t showing up for our lab sessions or doing his assignments. His behavior was affecting the performance and morale of the entire group.

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Action: Describe the specific action you took to remedy the task or situation.

Example: I decided to meet with the student in private, and explained the frustration of the rest of the team, and asked him if there was anything I could do to help. He told me that he was preoccupied with another class that he wasn’t passing, so I found someone to help him with the other course.

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R

Result: Explain the result of your action. Make sure that the outcome reflects positively on you (even if the result itself was not favorable).

Example: After I found someone to help the student with his other course, he was not only able to spend more time on our project, but he was also grateful to me for helping him out. We finished our project on time, and got a "B" on it.

The STAR technique can be utilized effectively to discuss a wide range of experiences, including classroom projects, work situations, extracurricular activities, and leadership experiences.

Sample Behavioral Interview Questions

Practice answering these questions out loud to yourself or to another person:

1. Give me a specific example of a time when you used good judgment and logic in solving a problem.
2. By providing examples, convince me that you can adapt to a wide variety of people, situations, and environments.
3. Describe a time on any job that you held in which you were faced with problems or stresses that tested your coping skills. How did you respond? What was the outcome? Looking back, what could you have done better?
4. Give me an example of an important goal that you had set in the past and tell me about your success in reaching it.
5. Tell me about a time when you had to go above and beyond the call of duty in order to get a job done.
6. Describe a situation where your decisions were challenged by your supervisor/professor. How did you react? What was the outcome?
7. Describe a situation where you made a compromise for the overall good of the team. Why was compromising the right thing to do? What was the outcome?
8. Tell me about a time when you learned a valuable lesson from a success or a failure. How did this event shape your approach to problem solving?
9. Describe a time when you “went the extra mile” to help someone? Why did you assist them? What was the outcome?
10. What was one of the most difficult technical problems you have solved? Tell me about it in detail.
11. When have you felt overwhelmed? Tell me about it.
12. Let's say your manager gave you ten things to do by 5:00 p.m. and you realized that you couldn't finish them all. What would you do? How would you prioritize them?

Technical Interviews

What is a technical interview?

Technical interviews are designed to gauge your problem-solving skills, your ability to think under pressure, and your technical knowledge in your chosen field. In a technical interview, the interviewer wants to see how you think through a problem to reach a solution.

How do I know if an interview will be technical in nature?

The best way to find this out is to ask the recruiter what to expect in the interview. This will allow you to prepare appropriately.

What types of technical questions can I expect?

Technical interviews may include general problem-solving questions or logic puzzles as well as focused technical questions that are specific to the job you are applying for.

General Problem-Solving Questions

General problem-solving questions test your analytical thinking skills rather than specific knowledge of your field. These questions take a variety of forms. They may be very open-ended with a variety of possible answers (for example, “How would you improve the design of this pen?”), or they may be more precise, requiring a definite answer (for example, “Why are manhole covers round?”). Some employers may ask you to solve logic puzzles. For example:

“Four people need to cross a rickety rope bridge to get back to their camp at night. Unfortunately, they only have one flashlight and it only has enough light left for seventeen minutes. The bridge is too dangerous to cross without a flashlight, and it’s only strong enough to support two people at any given time. Each camper walks at a different speed. One can cross the bridge in 1 minute, another in 2 minutes, the third in 5 minutes, and the slow poke takes 10 minutes to cross. How do the campers make it across in 17 minutes?” *For solution see: www.techinterview.org*

You can prepare for these types of questions by working through logic puzzles out loud with a friend.

Focused Technical Questions

These questions focus on the knowledge and skills required to perform the job. For example, a mechanical engineer entering the aerospace industry might be asked, “How does a gas turbine engine work?” A software engineer might be asked to write or debug a program. To prepare for these questions, familiarize yourself with the job description and the technical skills required, and then brush up on those skills.

How do I answer a technical question?

* **Think out loud.** According to recruiters, the most important thing to remember when answering technical questions is to verbalize your thought process. The interviewer is as interested in your problem-solving approach as they are in your solution.

“We’re interested in more than your answer. We want to know how you got there, and whether you can explain clearly how you did so.” – *Microsoft*

* **Ask clarifying questions** to make sure that you understand the question and have all the information you need to solve the problem. Some questions may be intentionally ambiguous to gauge your confidence in asking questions and gathering data to tackle problems that are not clearly defined.

* **Don’t bluff your way through an answer.** If you don’t know the answer, take some time to think it through. Think out loud as you consider possible approaches. If you have absolutely no idea, admit that you don’t know. Admitting that you don’t know is better than attempting to bluff your way through an answer.

Questions You May Want To Ask Interviewers

The most effective questions to ask are ones that come from your employer research or show interest in the position or organization. You want to show what you can do for the company, not what the company can do for you.

1. Can you describe the organizational structure of your company/agency/organization?
2. How does the area I would be working in fit into the overall organizational structure?
3. Can you describe the corporate culture or atmosphere of your company?
4. What kind of supervision and training would I receive?
5. Would I be working on my own or on a team? Can I meet my team members?
6. Would I be working with people outside of the company? Clients? Vendors?
7. Would my responsibilities progressively increase throughout my work terms?
8. Would I have the opportunity to travel?
9. Have you ever hired a University of Maryland (or other university) student before? Are they currently working for you? May I speak to them at some point?
10. How would you describe the ideal candidate for this job?
11. What do you enjoy most about working here? What would you change if you could?
12. How would you describe a typical day in this position?
13. What specific projects do you see me starting first?
14. What are the prospects for advancement beyond this level?
15. How many people have you hired as co-ops in the past and where have they gone after they graduated?
16. In which location would I work?
17. Your annual reports show a steady growth over the last three years. How rapidly do you plan to grow over the next three years?
18. What particular computer equipment and software do you use?
19. How much opportunity is there to see the end result of my efforts?
20. What are the next steps in the interview process? How do you like to be contacted for follow up?

Thank You Letters

A thank you letter is a very important step following an interview, and it is probably the most overlooked tool used by job seekers. Thank you letters give you an opportunity to thank the interviewer(s) for his/her time, restate your interest in the position, and include any information about yourself that you may not have mentioned during the interview. ***Remember that thank you letters are most effective if they are received 1-2 days after your interview.*** You may mail, fax, or e-mail a thank you letter, though be sure not to lose the “formality” of the letter if you choose to send it by e-mail.

1234 Street Avenue
City, State 54321

April 3, 2005

Ms. Emily Employer
Big Business, Inc.
4321 Street Lane
City, State 54322

Dear Ms. Employer:

I would like to thank you for the opportunity to interview for a co-op position with Big Business Inc. As you may recall, we met while you were visiting the University of Maryland yesterday morning.

The interview was extremely informative, and I especially enjoyed hearing the details about your cooperative education program and what my role would be if I were to work with you. As a result of our conversation, I am very interested in working for Big Business, Inc. so that I might gain professional experience and learn more about my chosen field. In exchange for this invaluable experience, I am confident that I would be a productive and reliable employee.

Please do not hesitate to contact me at (301) 555-1212, if you would like to arrange an on-site interview or if you need further information. Thank you for your consideration. I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Sincerely,

(Signature here)

Jane Doe