Interviewing

Handle the Tough Questions
The Interview Process

1. Preparation
2. The Interview
3. Follow-up

also see workshop

Interview • 1
Prepare to Ace the Interview

see workshop

Interview • 3
Ace the Interview
Who are You?

What skills, assets and experience do you offer?

Are you a good ‘Fit’?

Will you fit with our team and culture? Are you right for this company & industry?

How will you Perform?

What have you done in the past that demonstrates how you will do in future?
To prepare for the interview * take inventory of your skills and experience in terms of these 3 categories of skills:

- **Content Skills**
  knowledge that is job-specific such as: classroom teaching, accounting, copy editing, financial analysis, etc. (expressed as **nouns**)

- **Functional or Transferable Skills**
  work that you do with people, information or things, such as: organizing, managing, developing, communicating, etc. (expressed as **verbs**)

- **Adaptive (Self-Management) Skills**
  personal characteristics such as: dependable, team-player, self-directed, creative, etc. (expressed as **adjectives**)

For each category write a list of your skills, experience and accomplishments. Give this exercise considerable time and thought - this will be the base from which you articulate your 'story' and prepare responses to interview questions about your qualifications.

* for more tips on how to prepare for the interview, see workshop: Interviewing1- Prepare to Ace the Interview
The interview generally flows in the following sequence; although stages #1 and 2 can often loop back and forth into the other:

1. **Getting to Know You**

2. **Are You a Good ‘Fit’?**

3. **The Closing**
Predictable Interview Questions

Prepare Your Responses *

Questions about Yourself
1. Tell me about yourself.
2. What are your greatest strengths? weaknesses?
3. What are your best qualities?
4. Why should we hire you?
5. What qualifications do you have that make you feel you will be successful in this job?
6. What accomplishment are you most proud of?
7. What type of personalities do you work with best? Which do you work with least well?
8. How do you define success?
9. How would you describe your personality?
10. What motivates you?

Questions about Your Education (recent grad)
1. Why did you decide to attend Middlebury?
2. How did your liberal arts education prepare you for a career in this field?
3. Which classes did you enjoy the most? the least?
4. Why did you choose your particular major in college?
5. What was your GPA?
6. Describe your most rewarding college experience.
7. What college activities did you participate in at Middlebury?

Questions about Your Career Goals
1. Why did you choose this field/career?
2. Where do you hope to be in 5 years?
3. What do you think determines an individual's success in this field/job?
4. What are your career goals?

* for more tips on how to prepare for the interview, see workshop: Interviewing1- Prepare to Ace the Interview
Predictable Interview Questions

Prepare Your Responses *

Questions about Your Experience / Personality
1. Tell me about your job at X company?
2. What did you like most about that job? Least?
3. If I were to contact your former boss, what would she/he say about you?
4. What is your greatest strength?
5. Which of your accomplishments are you most proud of?
6. What is one of your greatest weaknesses?
7. Give me an example of a problem you encountered in your last job, and how you dealt with it.
8. Tell me about a time when you disagreed with your manager about how to handle something. What did you do? What was the outcome?
9. How would your co-workers describe you?
10. How would the people who report to you describe your management style?
11. How do you resolve conflicts?
12. Tell me about a time when you had to give negative performance feedback to a direct report. How did you approach that?
13. Have you ever received negative performance feedback? How did you respond?
14. Why do you think you are a ‘team player’?
15. What were your responsibilities in X job?
16. Why did you stay such a short time at X company?
17. Why are you leaving your current job?

Questions Specific to the Job & Company
1. What about this job appeals to you? (why are you interested in this position?)
2. Why do you want to work for us?
3. What do you know about our company?
4. How much direction do you need?
5. What contribution do you believe you can make to our company?
6. What do you expect from a supervisor?
7. Why do you think you’re a good fit for this job?
8. Tell me about a time when you led a team of peers on a project. What was the biggest challenge and how did you handle it?
9. Describe the ideal job for you.
10. Are you willing to relocate and/or travel?

* for more tips on how to prepare for the interview, see workshop: Interviewing1- Prepare to Ace the Interview
In any given interview you will be asked some variation of the question…
“*What is one of your biggest weaknesses?*”

To answer this effectively, you must understand what the interviewer is *really* looking for when asking this question.

The interviewer is actually hoping that your answer will reveal whether you possess key qualities (adaptive skills) such as:

- Self-awareness and Self-reflection
- Humility and Maturity
- Confidence
- Sincerity
- Initiative and Skill in managing shortcomings and mistakes
POOR responses to the ‘Weakness’ question

Well, I have a hard time getting to work on time, and I’m difficult to work with.

I work too hard, and my boss literally has to force me to go home at the end of the day.

I’m a perfectionist and I care too much about the quality of the work I produce.

Too brutally honest. This self-indictment is not what the interviewer expects or needs. Doesn’t reflect a high level of maturity or self-development.

An obvious ‘fake’ weakness. These are transparently ‘canned’ responses that can appear disingenuous. Will annoy most interviewers.
POOR responses to the ‘Weakness’ question

Actually, I don’t think I have any major weaknesses.

I can’t think of any mistakes that I’ve made.

A conversation stopper. Shows lack of self-awareness of professional strengths and weaknesses. Indicates lack of professional maturity – or, at best, shows lack of preparation for the interview.
Remember, the interviewer is asking this question to find out whether you are a self-aware individual who recognizes his strengths and weaknesses and has learned how to manage or improve your weaknesses. The interviewer wants to know that you’re aware of your shortcomings and have taken action for your own professional development. This tells the interviewer a great deal about what kind of employee you will be.

See the following slides for some examples of great responses to the ‘weakness’ question.
Early on in my last job, I underestimated the importance of keeping my boss apprised of the status of my projects. I now make it a point to give her regular updates. This has really strengthened communications, and has also helped her to provide me with the support and resources I need.

My presentation skills were not as strong as I’d like, so I signed up for a weekend presentation skills class and also joined a local Toastmasters club.

GREAT responses to the ‘Weakness’ question
GREAT responses to the ‘Weakness’ question

When assigned to a project, I’ve had a tendency to jump right into the project and get working on the details, without understanding the broader picture. I’ve learned now to get a good understanding of the larger goals first, so that I can adapt when needed during the course of the project.

At times in the past, I set expectations for my staff that made sense to me, but not always to each of them. A mentor once pointed out to me that not everyone is motivated by the same things that I am, and that insight has helped me become a better manager.
In the past, I tended to avoid delegating tasks to others - but I've come to understand that building the team and capitalizing on everyone's strengths is a much more effective way to get the job done. This approach also helps my staff to grow professionally and makes their jobs more gratifying.

In our editing process, I'm stronger in the writing components than the technical software components. So, for the last 2 months I've been doing extra study in my off-time on these programs. It's really helped me round out the skills I need for any project that we take on.
The ‘Weakness’ Question

GREAT responses to the question

Your response to the ‘weakness’ question should:

1. Identify the weakness
2. Explain how you overcame, improved, or managed the weakness
3. Indicate that you now operate effectively, having addressed the weakness

- Be concise. Don’t ramble or give a ‘list’ of weaknesses.
- Be prepared in advance. Don’t try to ‘wing it’.
- Be sincere and honest; not cliché or canned.
- Show that you are self-aware and have the humility and maturity to reflect on your professional strengths and shortcomings.
- Explain how you have addressed the weakness; what steps you’ve taken to improve.
- Indicate that you now work effectively in that area, as a result of addressing the weakness.

**Caution:** the weakness you choose to discuss should **not** be related to any of the key requirements or skills of the job. (i.e., for an office manager position – do not cite ‘lack of organization’ as a weakness that you have addressed or are working on)
If you were terminated from your previous job, this may be an uncomfortable question to answer. All the more reason to prepare your response in advance and be ready for the question.

Don't lie about it, and don't sidestep it. It's a fair question – and, if you put yourself in the interviewer’s shoes, you realize that it’s her responsibility to be thorough. That said, answer the question honestly but don’t dwell on it. Remain professional at all times, both in your demeanor and in how you explain the circumstances of your termination. Never ‘bad-mouth’ or disparage your former employer. Avoid making excuses.

If it applies, you could explain that you and the company were not a good fit; or that you and your supervisor had differing viewpoints. Or, simply, that the job required skills that were beyond your training. Emphasize what you learned from the experience and also emphasize your accomplishments while with the company.

Here’s an excellent informational resource for how to manage your job search after being fired:
http://www.quintcareers.com/getting_fired.html
Prepare Your Response

“Why Did You Leave Your Last Job?”

- **If You Were Laid-Off:**

  In the current economy, it is likely that most interviewers have been touched in some way by downsizing or layoffs. Either they have experienced layoffs in their own organization, or they have a friend or family member who has been laid-off. Remember, a lay-off is typically about the company’s financial performance, not about your personal performance.

  Do not use the term ‘fired’ or ‘terminated’ if you were laid-off. Instead, use the term ‘laid-off’ or ‘downsized’. When referring to being laid-off, always include information about the scale of the lay-off, if the lay-off involved several positions or more than your sole position. Example:

  “The company had to downsize the print marketing division, and mine was one of 14 positions that were eliminated”.

  If the layoff was seniority-based (least senior, first to be laid-off) also be sure to include this in your response:

  “…and because I was one of the least senior people in the department, my position was one of those eliminated.”

  These explanations give the interviewer important context about your employment history.
Prepare Your Response

“Why Are You Leaving Your Job?”

Be honest and genuine in your response, but frame it in a positive light:

“I am ready to move to the next level of management responsibility” is better than… “I’m bored with my current job”

“There don’t appear to be any management opportunities on the horizon at my company” is better than… “They never promote internally at my company”

“I believe that I can better contribute my experience in the X field – as part of your company team, which is a known leader in the industry” is better than… “I don’t think my company has much of a future in this industry”

These positive responses explain your job change in the context of your career goals. You have a plan for your career and it’s time (or “you’re ready”) to take the next step.
Perhaps your reasons may have less to do with leaving your current employer, and more to do with a desire to work for a particular new employer. Or you may have a personal or professional interest in making a career change to a particular field or industry. If this is the case, then be clear about what it is that draws you. Example:

“For several years, I have wanted to make the transition from the for-profit sector to the non-profit sector, and I believe that I’m now ready to make that move and bring with me the considerable skills that I’ve honed over the last X years.”

There are as many reasons for changing jobs as there are people. Your reason is personal to you, and is valid. But be sure that you are prepared for the question and are able to clearly and confidently articulate your reason when asked in the interview. Don’t try to ‘wing it’!
You can predict that you will be asked some variation of this question in the interview: “Where do you see yourself in X years?”; or “What are your long/short-term career goals?”

In responding to this question, try to strike a balance between:

- Honesty
- Ambition
- Desire to work for this company

Examples:

- “In 5 years, I hope to be working for this company, contributing to its success, and making a difference in the company’s future. I would also hope to grow and advance in the organization by taking on higher level responsibilities (or projects)”

- “Long-term I hope to earn my X degree, hone my X skills, and continue to advance within the company.

- “My goal is to become the very best X your company has.”

- “Over the next few years, my goal is to further develop my skills and earn an assignment as project leader on a major project.”
Prepare for the Predictable

This workshop has covered some of the ‘tough’ questions that are predictably asked in most job interviews. There are more. Slides #11 and 12 highlight those questions that are particularly ‘sticky’ or that require considerable thought and care in preparing your response in advance. It would be to your great benefit to tackle these in advance to think about and prepare your responses.

Preparing your response in advance does not necessarily mean that you’ll come across as robotic or scripted in the interview. It simply means that you have a firm grasp on what you want to say, what you want to highlight and emphasize, and what you want to be sure to avoid in your answer. It helps you to be able to give a complete and articulate response – confidently and clearly.

Also see the resources listed on the next final slides for more help on how to handle the tough interview questions.
More Middlebury Resources re: Interviewing

- **Individual Career Counseling**
  - practice your Elevator Speech or your Networking Interview
  - help with optimizing MiddNet, and with planning your networking campaign
  - review your Resume and Cover Letters
  - practice Job Interviews
  - career counseling and help with career direction
  - Contact Career Services to schedule a phone counseling appt: 802-443-5100; careerservices@middlebury.edu

- **5-Minute Career Clips (online workshops)** [www.middlebury.edu/studentlife/cci/alumni/services](http://www.middlebury.edu/studentlife/cci/alumni/services)
  - series of brief online workshops with ‘How To’ tips on Networking, Resumes, Cover Letters, and Interviewing

- **Online Tips / Information for Conducting a Job Search** [www.middlebury.edu/studentlife/cci/alumni/services](http://www.middlebury.edu/studentlife/cci/alumni/services)
  - articles, videos, online workshops, website links - including subscription websites free to Midd alumni with ID#

- **MiddNet** [www.alumniconnections.com/olc/membersonly/MDR/networking/networking.cgi](http://www.alumniconnections.com/olc/membersonly/MDR/networking/networking.cgi)
  - searchable online networking database of over 7,500 Midd alumni who have volunteered to offer career advice and information to fellow alumni and students. Search by industry/career area, location, etc.
Additional Resources re: Interviewing

- AceTheInterview.com
- Best-Interview-Strategies.com
- Job-Interview.net
- Interview Questions
  www.quintcareers.com/interview_questions.html
- 10 Sticky Job Interview Situations and How to Handle Them
  www.quintcareers.com/sticky_job_interview_situations.html
- STAR Interviewing Response Technique for Success in Behavioral Job Interviews
  www.quintcareers.com/STAR_interviewing.html
- Mastering the Case Interview
  www.quintcareers.com/case_interviews.html
- Six Interview Tips for Career Changers
  http://career-advice.monster.com/job-interview/Interview-Preparation/6-Interview-Tips-Career-Changers/article.aspx
- For a range of job search tips and techniques: www.quintcareers.com/networking.html
- For career-changers, or those re-starting their careers: www.irelaunch.com/index.asp
Check out all the career clips in the ‘Job Search’ series

Networking

Networking • 1
Your Elevator Speech

Networking • 2
The Networking Interview

The Resume

Resume
Make Your Resume Count

Cover Letter
The Right Introduction

Interviewing

Interviewing • 1
Prepare to Ace the Interview

Interviewing • 2
Handle the Tough Questions

Interviewing • 3
Ace the Interview
Interviewing

Handle the Tough Questions