

## VII. INTERVIEW SKILLS

Basically, an interview is a conversation during which the participants exchange information, ask and answer questions, and form opinions about each other and about whether a long-term relationship is likely to develop. And just as you would during any good conversation, you must pay attention to what the other person is saying, look at them while they are speaking, and respond appropriately. Remember, employers hire people that they like.

Generally speaking, first interviews, especially those held during on-campus interviews, are between 15 and 30 minutes long. The purpose of these "screening" interviews is to identify students who the interviewer feels have the potential to succeed at the firm and to eliminate those who the interviewer feels are not a good match. Remember, not being chosen for a second interview is not a personal rejection, it just means that the firm does not feel that you are a good fit for that firm.

Those students who are invited to the firm's offices for a call-back or second interviews usually meet with several of the firm's hiring committee members, either individually or in a group, depending on the firm's policy. Second interviews generally last between one and four hours and may include lunch with associates or with members of the firm's hiring committee. Remember that the lunch is still part of the interview. Some firms will send you to lunch with several young associates to see if you will "let your guard down" and make inappropriate comments or behave unprofessionally by ordering alcohol, etc.

Smaller and medium sized firms that do not interview on campus may choose to interview students at their offices and may only conduct one round of interviews. During this interview, students will meet with several of the firm's attorneys and a hiring decision may be made based upon this initial meeting.

Being prepared before you go on an interview is one of the keys to a successful interview. There are several steps that you must take before an interview to ensure that you make a good first impression. And remember, always be nice to the secretary/receptionist!

**a. Know the Employer** - just as it is crucial to research an employer before you send out a cover letter and resume, it is imperative that you research a potential employer to learn all that you can about the firm or corporation before you go on an interview. This is just one more way for you to display your initiative, enthusiasm, and genuine interest in working for that particular employer. Besides, a student who has obviously done his/her research about a particular employer will certainly impress and flatter an interviewer.

Besides the obvious points about an employer's areas of practice, location of its offices, and number of attorneys, you should also be aware of and be prepared to discuss any significant lawsuits or legal matters in which the firm is currently involved, clients that the firm represents, and the presence of infamous lawyers at the firm. You should also know a little bit about the person who will be interviewing you, including where they went to law school and college, any awards they have won, articles they have published and, naturally, the type of law they practice.

Locating the information you need to prepare for an interview is really relatively simple. There are several sources that you should consult. They are:

**i. Employer websites** - currently, most medium and large firms maintain websites that include information about the firms offices, practice areas, and attorneys. Website addresses may be available from the CSO or by running a search of the firm's name in one of the more popular search engines. A small firm directory is available in the CSO.

**ii. On-Line Information from LEXIS and/or Westlaw** - students at Duquesne Law School have easy access to both of these on-line services that provide a wealth of information about a large number of legal employers. LEXIS contains the information available from Martindale-Hubbell (see below) and NALP, whereas Westlaw maintains its own database, which lawyers may be included in for free. Because a Westlaw listing is free, some smaller firms and sole practitioners not included in the LEXIS database may be located in Westlaw, so search both.

**iii. Employer's NALP Form** - most larger law firms, corporations, government agencies and public interest organizations fill out the National Association for Law Placement form which provides all kinds of basic information, including size of firm, practice areas, starting salary, benefits, recent hires, and number of minority lawyers at the firm. Some employers also include a brief description of their firm, its practice and the criteria they use in making hiring decisions. These forms are available on LEXIS and from the CSO.

**iv. Martindale-Hubbell** - this is a comprehensive directory with biographical information on many practicing attorneys. It includes information on individual attorneys, including when and where the attorney was born, where they went to law school and college, the awards they won in law school, their area(s) of practice, as well as information on the firm, including location of their offices, and representative clients. The Career Services Office stocks the complete Martindale-Hubbell Directory, a copy is also available in the Law Library, and a searchable database is available on-line at [www.martindale.com](http://www.martindale.com).

**iv. Employer's Own Literature** - brochures, firm resumes and annual reports. Many law firms and corporations, especially the larger ones, distribute literature about themselves to the CSO. Firm brochures usually include information about the firm's size, office locations, practice areas, types of clients they represent, and, sometimes, information about the individual lawyers. When reading a firm's biography, take note of the tone of the language and the manner in which the firm presents itself. This can tell you a lot about the atmosphere at the firm and about the personality of the lawyers who work there.

**v. Other Published Sources** - The American Lawyer and The National Law Journal may provide some interesting tidbits of information about very large law firms. These publications are available in the Duquesne Law Library.

**vi. Inside Scoop** - there is no better way to find out what it's really like to work for a particular employer than to talk to someone who has either worked there or knows someone who has. This would include professors, fellow students, alumni of Duquesne Law School, local attorneys, and the staff of the Career Services Office. Talk to as many people as you can to get as much information as you can. This will help you get a realistic picture of the place and the expectations that the hiring committee has of potential employees.

**b. Know Yourself** - before going on an interview, you must come up with points about yourself that you definitely want to make during your interview. These points are the things you want employers to know about you and should include your most outstanding accomplishments and the transferable skills that these accomplishments indicate that you have. *In Guerilla Tactics for Getting the Legal Job of Your Dreams*, Kimm Walton suggests that all law students create an "infomercial" about themselves. The purpose of creating an infomercial is to have something about yourself that you feel comfortable saying. The infomercial should convince a legal employer that you'll be a great employee. Walton says that "it's got to be short, and it has to say the most crucial things about you - the things you want employers to know about you, whether they ask you questions that elicit those assets or not." According to Ms. Walton, coming up with an infomercial has five basic steps. These steps are:

**i** - Go through your background and make a short list of your accomplishments (either personal accomplishments or the results of non-legal or legal jobs). They should be the things you are most proud of and should be accomplishments that are as interesting and unique as possible.

**ii** - Based upon your list of accomplishments, select the three to five job-related strengths that those accomplishments demonstrate that you have. These are the transferable skills that employers are most interested in. Your accomplishments are only of interest to employers to the extent that you can relate how they are examples of assets that will benefit the employer. Generally speaking, the job-related skills that are most important to employers are things like solid writing ability, strong work ethic, good judgment, thoroughness, persistence, superior analytical skills, the ability to take the initiative on new projects, etc.

**iii** - If your skills and accomplishments are all job-related, come up with one personal achievement that you want to mention. This is important because besides wanting to hire someone who has wonderful job-related skills, employers also want to like the people who they hire.

**iv** - Assemble and memorize your infomercial. In assembling your infomercial, you should cite your job-related skills and then use your accomplishments as support for those skills. Come up with the actual language that you will use during the interview. Sit in front of a mirror to practice making your speech and memorize it. Memorizing your infomercial will help you to appear calm and confident during your interview. Just be sure that your infomercial does not appear stiff and rehearsed - be as natural as possible.

**v** - Tailor your infomercial to the particular employer based upon your research of them. If through your research you learned that a particular employer is very conservative and also values hard work and initiative, and you have these traits and an accomplishment that backs them up, you will want to say "I'm very ambitious and a self-starter. During my senior year of college, I established my college's Young Republican's Club. This involved petitioning the student government for approval of a new organization and soliciting 20 new members as required by the college's rules governing student clubs." Not only does this show initiative, and conservatism, but also the potential and ability to solicit new business for the firm.

**c. Dress for Success** - before you even open up your mouth to say "Hello, my name is William Clinton," the interviewer will have an impression of you based upon your appearance. Remember, you never get a second chance to make a good first impression. Therefore, "dress for where you're going (or hope to be going) and not for where you've already been!" In other words, if you hope to land a job with a large conservative law firm, dress the part. Don't show up at the interview wearing denim or even an out-of-date suit. Appearance is very important - it shows that you care enough about the job to get dressed up and to make a good impression. Here are some simple rules for men and women to follow when selecting their interview wardrobe:

**i - Rules for Men:** Wear a conservative, good quality, single-breasted navy or gray suit, white shirt, conservative tie, and shined shoes. Leave the flashy jewelry (if that's your style) and earring at home and be careful of overpowering cologne.

**ii - Rules for Women:** Wear a conservative, good quality suit. Your suit doesn't have to be gray or navy. A muted red or purple suit or even a plaid jacket and coordinating solid skirt are fine. Otherwise boring suits can be dressed up with a nice scarf or pin. Wear shoes with low to medium heels and a conservative pantyhose color such as black, taupe, or nude. In order to enhance your professional appearance, women with long hair should consider wearing their hair pinned up or back. Also, tone down the makeup and perfume and wear simple, tasteful jewelry.

With the increasing number of firms having a business casual policy, you should know what this means. Generally, you should still be dressed professionally. As a lawyer, denim is still not appropriate so don't think of business casual as cloths you wear around the house on weekends. You should still wear a jacket, but it need not match your pants or skirt.

The Career Services Office has resources to help you determine how to dress appropriately. These include descriptions of business casual, charts showing men which shirt to wear with which tie and showing women what color shoes/hose to wear depending on the hemline, etc.

Each year the CSO conducts seminars on appropriate dress and professional etiquette. These programs are conducted by professional image consultants who present seminars at major companies. Don't overestimate your own knowledge on this subject, avail yourself of these valuable programs. Recently, a major New York law firm, the majority of whose clerks come from Ivy League schools, brought in an image consultant and had the summer associates participate in a program on dining etiquette.

**d. The Interview.** The most important thing to remember about an interview is that the employer is trying to determine whether you are somebody with whom they would like to work. The best interviews are usually great conversations. Of course, you must also be able to convince the employer that you would be a great employee and that you can do the work satisfactorily. Most students are able to convince employers that they can do the work, but in order to make yourself stand out from the crowd, the interviewer must believe they would like to work with you. In order to accomplish that, you must establish a rapport with the interviewer and do it quickly. To do so:

**1. The First 5 Minutes.** First impressions count a great deal and that is why the first five minutes of an interview are so crucial. They set the tone for the rest of your meeting. First, greet the interviewer by name and with a warm, friendly smile. Shake the interviewer's hand firmly and make eye contact. During the first five minutes or so of the interview, the interviewer will usually engage in small talk in an attempt to break the ice and set you at ease. Go along with whatever the interviewer is talking about - be sure you are up on the current events for that week so that you can talk intelligently about whatever topic the interviewer brings up.

**2. The Rest Of The Interview.** Throughout the rest of the interview, it is critical that you maintain a positive and enthusiastic attitude. Convey in your tone of voice, your body language and the words you use, that you really want this job. Don't wait for the interviewer to ask you questions about why they should be interested in you rather than the next person. Now is the time to use the infomercial or "sales pitch" that you have prepared about yourself. Show the interviewer why they should be interested in you. In other words, sell yourself.

**3. Questions That You Should Expect To Be Asked.** Although no one can ever predict all of the questions that you will be asked on an interview, you should be prepared to answer some or all of the following types of questions:

- Tell me about yourself. In other words, tell me things about yourself that will make me want to hire you. Use your infomercial here!
- What are your long and short range goals and objectives?
- When and how did you establish these goals?
- How are you preparing yourself to achieve these goals?
- What do you see yourself doing in five years? Ten years?
- Why did you go to law school?
- Why did you choose Duquesne Law School?
- How would you describe yourself?
- How has law school prepared you for the practice of law?
- Why should we hire you?
- Why do you think you'll be a successful lawyer?
- What have you liked most about law school? What has been your favorite law school course? Why?
- Are your grades a good indication of your academic achievement?
- Why are you interested in our firm?
- What areas of practice interest you?
- What do you know about this firm?
- What two things are most important to you in a job?
- What are you looking for in a law firm?
- What have you learned from your participation in Law Review?/Moot Court?/Legal Clinic?
- How do you spend your free time?
- What is your greatest strength?
- What is your greatest weakness?

The best way to respond is to highlight a past negative and tell how you've taken steps to correct it.

- What achievements do you look back on with pride and why?
- If you could do it all over, would you still choose to go to law school?
- You may also get behavioral questions that ask you to describe major challenges in your life and how you faced them, whether you ever had to lead others and how you did it, etc.

**4. Questions You Should Ask.** Perhaps even more important than the questions an interviewer asks you are the questions you ask the interviewer. Hiring partners consistently say that they are looking for people who are genuinely interested in their organizations and that people who are genuinely interested usually ask lots of questions. Intelligent, well thought-out questions are one more way that you can distinguish yourself from the rest of the crowd. Be careful, however, not to sound like you are quickly trying to think up a few questions to ask on the spur of the moment. This is one more area in which you should be thoroughly prepared. Kimm Walton, author of *Guerrilla Tactics*, writes that there are five basic categories of questions that interviewees should ask the interviewer. The five categories and some sample questions from each category follow. Another great tip is to use the very questions that you find difficult, and ask them. For example, as the employer where they see the firm in 5 years, or "What is the most challenging aspect of this position," etc.

**Category 1:** Questions that show off your research into the firm and the interviewer.

- If the firm just added a department to work on a different area of the law, you may want to ask: How did the firm make the decision to add this department? Does the firm have plans to expand into other areas?
- If the firm has recently added a large number of attorneys, you may want to ask: Does the firm expect to grow more in the next five years? If so, what type of growth does the firm anticipate?

**Category 2:** Questions about what your own job experience at the firm would be like.

- How is your summer associate program structured?
- What types of projects do summer associates work on?
- How are summer associates evaluated?
- How many offers did you make to summer associates last year?
- How many of those students accepted the firm's offer?
- What kind of training is provided to new associates?
- What kind of responsibility would I have?
- How do attorneys get channeled into different practice groups?
- Are associates assigned to one partner or are they part of a pool of associates available to work with a number of different partners?
- How long does it normally take for a new associate to be able to participate in a trial?
- How much client contact can I expect to have during my first year? Second year?
- How is work assigned?
- How are associates evaluated?
- What types of pro bono activities are the firm's attorneys involved with?
- What is expected in terms of participation in professional activities?
- What are the firm's expectations of associates concerning bringing in new business?

**Category 3:** Questions that depend on the size of the employer and the age of the interviewer.

1. Questions to ask depending on the size of the employer

- a. For large firms: Does your firm have a mentor program? How often are associates evaluated?
- b. For smaller firms: How quickly are associates expected to take part in new business development? Will I be able to attend depositions and court hearings?

Savvy interviewees will also ask questions about the viability of the firm as a business: the impact of market changes on major clients, etc. Remember, law firms are for-profit entities, and your ultimate goal is usually becoming a shareholder in that business.

## 2. Questions to ask depending on the age of the interviewer

a. For interviewees with less legal experience (those who have been out of law school for 4 years or less): What is a typical day like for you? Were you a summer clerk with this firm? Did you work for this firm during law school?

b. For interviewees with more legal experience at this firm: How has the practice changed over the past 5 years? Where do you see the partnership heading in the next five years?

### **Category 4:** Personalized questions designed to evoke an emotional response from the interviewer.

- What do you like about working for this firm?
- How did you choose this firm?
- If there was one thing that you could change about this firm, what would it be?
- If you had to choose an employer again, would you choose this one? Why? Why not?
- How is your job different than what you expected it to be?
- What is the most interesting case you've worked on?
- What have you learned as a result of working here?
- What do you find most challenging about working here?

**Category 5:** Questions involving bad news and firm scandals. Although you need to be very careful how you phrase questions involving these very sensitive subjects, the consensus is that interviewees need to ask about them. Anyone who is genuinely interested in an employer will want to know how such scandals impact on the future of the employer and its reputation.

**5. Questions You Should Never Ask.** No matter how much you may want to know the answers to certain questions, there are some questions that you should just never ask. Again, there are several categories of these questions:

**Category 1:** Any questions that have a "What's-In It-For-Me" tone. Questions in this category include:

- What are the hours?
- How much vacation time do I get?
- What is the salary?
- What type of benefits do you offer?

**Category 2:** Questions with a Negative Tone, including:

- I read that your firm lost a big case last year. Is the firm still doing alright?

**Category 3:** Things that are vague or hard to describe:

- What is the firm atmosphere like?

**Category 4:** Any question that you could have answered yourself through simple research. Asking a question about the number of attorneys at the firm or the firm's practice areas shows that you have not done even basic research prior to your interview. Kimm Walton also suggests avoiding questions about things like the firm's rotation program or its associate review process since these are very boring, meaningless questions that every other job candidate has probably already asked.

**Category 5:** Any question that indicates that you haven't been paying attention during the interview. Although you will be nervous during your interview, it is crucial that you pay close attention to what has already been said and keep track of whether some of your questions have already been answered during your conversation with the interviewer.

**6. Illegal/Suspect/Offensive Questions.** Although it doesn't happen very often, an interviewer may occasionally ask a question that is illegal. An illegal question is a question that is asked only of a certain group of candidates, defined by race, color, gender, religion, sex, age, national origin, handicap or economic status and it is a question that has nothing to do with your ability to effectively perform the job for which you are interviewing. Illegal questions include:

- How old are you?
- Are you married/single/divorced/engaged/dating anyone?
- Do you have or plan to have children?
- Do you attend church?
- Do you own or rent your home?
- Are you in debt?
- Are you a member of any social or political organizations?
- What do your parents/spouse do for a living?
- How has the AIDS epidemic affected you?
- What does your spouse think of your career?

If you are confronted with an illegal question, don't panic. Stay calm, objective and dispassionate. The interviewer probably doesn't intend to offend you. More often than not, there is a non-discriminatory motive behind the question. If you can determine what that motive is, respond to it. For example, if the interviewer asks if you plan to have children, he/she may really be interested in your commitment to your career. An appropriate response may be "It is natural for firms to be concerned about any new associate's commitment to the practice of law. I have demonstrated my commitment by clerking during the summer, working part-time while in school, participating in moot court, and working for a judge as an extern."

If you are unable to decipher any innocent motive behind a suspect question, you may then want to ask "How is that question job-related?" or "Why do you ask?" Or if you prefer not to confront the interviewer in that way, you may choose to simply answer the question. If asked "How many children do you have?" and you have one child, simply say "One. How about you?" Certainly, if you are too offended, you may not be able to proceed with the interview and may just need to leave at that time.

**Finally, please report any illegal interview activity to the Career Services Office so that we can work to halt such interview practices in the future.**

## **7. Interview Advice Wrap-Up**

- Be positive: focus on your accomplishments and successes
- Be enthusiastic: show enthusiasm for the job
- Be energetic: goes along with the enthusiasm
- Be punctual: don't be late for your interview
- Smile: everyone wants to work with pleasant, happy people
- Shake hands: shows you're confident in the business world
- Make eye contact: sends the signal that you are honest
- Be attentive: listen and respond suitably to the interviewer
- Be yourself: don't act like someone you're not
- Be honest: always tell the truth
- Bring extra copies of resume, writing sample, transcript, and references - don't assume that the interviewer already has all of these things

## **8. Qualities Interviewers Look for in a Candidate:**

- Appears comfortable and relaxed
- Proper professional appearance and demeanor
- Normal voice level and mannerisms
- Makes eye contact
- Responds directly to questions
- Presents information in a logical/organized manner
- Has defined career goals
- Understands own strengths and weaknesses
- Demonstrates problem solving skills
- Can explain relevance of background to career goals
- Demonstrates potential for professional excellence
- Has leadership qualities
- Specifies interest in size of firm and practice areas
- Indicates an interest in the location/has a tie to the region
- Gives reasons for applying to that employer
- Relates experience and goals to the employer/position.

Below is a sample of an evaluation form that an employer may complete following an interview.

**CANDIDATE EVALUATION FORM**

Interviewee \_\_\_\_\_ Date of Interview \_\_\_\_\_

School/Firm/Agency \_\_\_\_\_

Position \_\_\_\_\_

**Section I:** Please complete this section based on the following 5-point scale:

5 - Outstanding   4 - Above Average   3 - Average   2 - Below Average   1 Unacceptable   x - unable to evaluate from interview

- 1. Verbal Ability \_\_\_\_\_
- 2. Confidence and poise \_\_\_\_\_
- 3. Personality \_\_\_\_\_
- 4. Motivation \_\_\_\_\_
- 5. Demeanor \_\_\_\_\_
- 6. Long-term commitment to Pittsburgh area \_\_\_\_\_
- 7. Valuable experience \_\_\_\_\_
- 8. Intellectual ability \_\_\_\_\_

**Section II:** Please check below.

I recommend for immediate hiring. \_\_\_\_\_

I have no reservations regarding hiring. \_\_\_\_\_

I have reservations regarding hiring. \_\_\_\_\_  
(Please comment below).

This candidate should not be considered further for hiring. \_\_\_\_\_  
(Please comment below.)

**Section III:** Please comment.

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