

Making the Most of Your Upcoming Interview

The interview is the most important part of the hiring process. You will be granted an interview after your application or resume have been reviewed by the hiring department and it is determined that you have the potential of employment. The interview is typically the final gateway to pass through before receiving a job offer (not including background checks or other security clearance processes). [Here](#) is a simple diagram of a standard hiring process.

In addition, the interview is also that part that you, as the applicant, have the most control over. Most managers are taught to allow the interviewee to speak at least three-quarters of the time: this means, with proper preparation, you can control three-quarters of the conversation! A study conducted by the United States Merit Systems Protection Board found that 95% of federal supervisors rely on the information obtained from a interview “a great” or “moderate extent” when making hiring decisions. Not only are interviews used in hiring decisions, but 61% of federal supervisors believe that they predict job performance to “a great extent.” Interviewing is a skill that takes practice and dedication, but the payoff is certainly worth it. It is usually the last step in the hiring process and a good interview will often make the difference between receiving a job offer or not.

As you begin to plan and prepare for your interview, this guide will offer some helpful tips and suggestions including:

- The [objectives](#) of the interview process
- Some basic “[do’s](#) and [don’ts](#)” of interviewing
- [Descriptions of the types of questions you may be asked](#): [standard](#), [behavioral](#), [situational](#)
- [Types of interviews](#): [structured](#), [panel](#), [non-traditional](#)
- Methods for success in any interview situation, including [the STAR method](#)
- A brief overview on interviewing for [Senior Executive Service](#) positions
- [Helpful Resources](#)

Objectives of the Interview Process

Both the interviewer and the interviewee have specific objectives in the interview. Your objective is, of course, to get a job.

On the other hand, the interviewers/hiring officials want to:

- Confirm everything on your resume (after all, this is what got you the interview in the first place!). Do you have the skills, experience and knowledge that you claimed to have on your resume?
- Determine your fit for the office and how you will contribute to the team and the office’s mission.
- Figure out if you have the proper work behavior for the job.

- Determine what kind of person you are and find out whether or not they will like having you work in their office.

Basic Do's and Don'ts

Since you have been hired by a federal agency you may already have a great deal of interviewing experience and expertise- however, it is always helpful to review the basics.

Do's

- Give yourself ample time to get to the interview and arrive 10-15 minutes early. Some federal agencies may have strict security requirements which will add to your time getting to the interview. Factor this in and ask your interviewer about any necessary IDs or paperwork that you need to bring.
- Dress conservatively and overdress if you are unsure how formal the dress code is.
- Stay up to date on the agency: any recent headlines, new hires, etc. So much information about federal agencies makes it to the newspapers that you should be well-versed on what is going on.
- Know everything on your resume and be prepared to discuss it in detail.
- Prepare thoughtful questions for the interviewer. This is an easy way to further indicate your interest in the position, show that you've done your homework and demonstrate interpersonal skills. Some types of questions you can ask can be about the position itself, the agency that you will be working for or the field as a whole.
- Practice, practice, practice!
- Send a thank you note to the interviewer within two days of your interview. Most businesses will accept an emailed thank-you letter. Examples of thank you letters can be found [here](#).

Don'ts

- Consider any question to be a throwaway. Even simple questions such as “Tell me about yourself...” or “What are some hobbies?” are easy ways to sell yourself and showcase your interpersonal skills. In their [webinar on interviewing](#), the Harvard Career Center advises that you tailor your response to “So tell me about yourself...” specifically to the job that you are applying to: what past relevant experiences you have had, where your interests lie and why you are applying today.
- Lie. Instead, turn a weak point into a learning experience. Honesty is the best policy.
- Neglect the importance of knowing your long-term goals and how the job you are interviewing for fits into this trajectory.

Types of Interview Questions and How to Prepare

There are three primary types of interview questions: the standard question, the behavioral question and the situational question. The type of questions you are asked may depend on the level of the job for which you are applying. Most managerial and supervisory positions will rely more heavily on behavioral questions, as the interviewer is most interested in what you have previously accomplished in these types of positions. For lower level positions, more of the questions may be situational, since the interviewer understands that you do not have the same level of practical experience.

Standard Questions

These are the archetypal interview questions that you are probably very familiar with by this point. These questions, and their appropriate answers, may include:

- What are your strengths and weaknesses?
 - Be specific when you answer about your strengths and be able to back up any strength you have with an example. Your strength should also relate to a skill that the job requires.
 - There are few different strategies when it comes to answering the greatest weakness question. You can mention a weakness that is unrelated to the job requirements. You can also mention a weakness that you have improved upon. Again, this shouldn't be a weakness that is directly related to the skills that the job requires. Finally, you can state a weakness that isn't really a weakness: for example hyper attention to detail. In any case, your answer about your weakness should still have a positive spin to it.
- Where do you see yourself in ____ years?
 - This is an opportunity to show off how much you know about the agency, department or organization that you are interviewing for. Perhaps there is a particular office that you eventually want to work in. You can outline a career path, as long as you emphasize your interest in this initial job that you are applying for. Just make sure that you don't tell your interviewer that you expect to have their job in a few years! That may come across as braggart or even threatening.
- Tell me about yourself.
 - This should be a focused answer which connects your skills and experiences to the job that you are interviewing for. This isn't the time to delve into personal interests or hobbies unless they directly relate to the position. This answer is truly your time to sell yourself as you can lay out all your skills and professional interests on the table and connect them to the position as is appropriate, and it is almost guaranteed to be asked, so make sure you practice.
- Do you consider yourself to be organized?
- Do you work well in teams?

- Why are you interested in this position?
- Describe your work style.
- How do you handle pressure?

If you are interested in learning more about common interview questions and their best answers, About.com's Job Searching portal has a database full of this kind of information, found [here](#).

Behavioral Questions

Behavioral interview questions are more in-depth than a traditional interview question and are also known as *experience-based interview questions*. They cannot be answered by a simple yes or no and are often very vague. The reason that many employers use these kinds of questions is to find out about a candidate's past behavior in specific situations; after all, past behavior is a reliable indicator of a candidate's ability to make a good decision. A good way to think of behavioral interview questions is less of a question with a direct answer but instead a prompt for discussion. Oftentimes the interviewer will take notes of the candidate's responses to these types of questions.

Examples of Behavioral Interview Questions (courtesy of Virginia Tech's Career Services Office)

- Give an example of a time when you had to be quick in coming to a decision.
- Give an example of an important goal you had to set and describe your progress in reaching that goal.
- Describe a situation when you had deal with a difficult supervisor or co-worker.

How to Succeed in Behavioral Interviews: the STAR Method

Now that you have a clear understanding of what the behavioral interview looks like, there are a few specific techniques to learn in order to prepare for it. The mnemonic for behavioral interview responses is: STAR, or Situation, Task, Action, Result. STAR is a way to structure your response to behavioral questions for maximum clarity and effectiveness.

The nature of behavioral interviewing calls upon your ability to recall a past situation and explain what you did in it, all the while showcasing a specific ability that you possess. The most effective answer to a behavioral interview question is a very specific one. A great way to prepare for behavioral interviews in government jobs is to look at the KSAs required for that position and prepare STAR responses that directly relate to the KSAs.

Suppose you are prompted by your interviewer with this statement: "Describe a time when you were forced to make an unpopular decision." How could you use the STAR method to respond to this? First, describe the *situation* in which you had to make the unpopular decision. Give enough background information so that the interviewer understands why this decision needed to be made. The situation could be from a past job, volunteer experience or other

leadership position. Then, describe the *task* at hand. Perhaps the *task* was what required this unpopular decision to be made. Then, detail the *action* that you took. For this question, the *action* is listed in the prompt itself: making the unpopular decision. You may also include the different policies and processes required by this action, focusing on those that you spearheaded. Finally, describe the *result* of the *action* that you took. It is very important that you choose a *situation* that had positive *results*. You want to portray yourself in the best light possible. Keep in mind that you are telling a story and as such, it should have a clear beginning, middle and end.

Here is a more detailed example of how to use the STAR method in an interview, using the same prompt. Let's imagine that you are tasked with changing an office process that has become outdated and inefficient, however, the office staff is very resistant to change. First, describe the *situation* that the office was facing (why the process needed to be changed) and also the current office environment that created an issue for implementation. Then, discuss what you were *tasked* with doing: perhaps your supervisor demanded that the current office process be changed within a certain amount of time in order to meet a specific productivity goal. Elaborate on what *actions* you undertook in order to fulfill your *task*. Be specific: what programs did you implement, what meetings did you hold, etc. In this situation, ensure that you cover what you did to encourage the office's adoption of the new practice despite their misgivings. Make sure to emphasize the *actions* that you specifically oversaw. Finally, discuss the positive *results* of your *actions*. Perhaps you held an extremely effective training session for your entire staff which led to a 100% participation rate in the new office process and in addition, the staff reported increased efficiency, fulfilling the *task* that your supervisor had mandated.

Situational Interview Questions:

Most often, *situational* interview questions are described as the hypothetical version of *behavioral* interview questions. So, instead of asking you to recall a past occurrence using the STAR method, the interviewer wants to know what you *would* do in a particular situation. Often the questions are similar in content to behavioral questions. Some sources consider *situational* and *behavioral* interview questions to be the same.

Examples of Situational Interview Questions

- Your supervisor is very upset with you and a co-worker for a project both of you worked on. However, the mistake that upset your supervisor is in the portion that your co-worker produced. What would you do?
 - Above all, it is important that you would not throw your co-worker under the bus in a team project. Telling an interviewer that you would shove all the blame onto your co-worker shows that you are not a team player: a definite no-go in almost

every office. This question is an opportunity to show off your teamwork and interpersonal skills.

- Please give us an idea of what you will do during your first three months if you are selected for this position. For example, how will you get up to speed on the organizations you support? How will you deal with your new employees and the upper management? What will be your approach to managing this transition?
- How would you handle a situation when someone asks you to do something that goes against this agency's policy or regulation?

Types of Interviews: The Structured Interview, the Panel Interview, the Non-Traditional Interview

These types of interviews are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Most panel interviews will be structured and non-traditional interviews may also be structured. You are most likely to have a panel interview if you are applying for a higher-level position (in the federal government, above a GS-9).

The Structured Interview

According to research performed by the U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, structured interviews have high levels of reliability (defined as consistency among interviewers) and validity (defined by how well the interview measures what it is supposed to measure). Structured interviews are also less vulnerable to bias or other unfairness. Every candidate will have the same interview experience and are usually evaluated on a pre-set numerical scale. As such, the Office of Personnel Management recommends the use of the structured interview when making hiring decisions and has published specific guidelines to help supervisors create these interviews. We are able to examine these guidelines and infer ways to best prepare for the structured interview.

Components of a Structured Interview

A structured interview is designed around the competencies that a specific job requires. It may include *standard*, *behavioral* and *situational* interview questions. These questions are all specifically written to uncover whether the candidate possesses the necessary competencies for the position. Typically, the interview assesses four to six primary competencies.

An Example of Structured Interview Questions Based on A Competency

Competencies may be listed as KSAs or in the "qualifications required" section of the USAJOBS announcement. The designer of the interview will refer to these when creating the questions for the interview. Let's say that the job announcement lists, among others, interpersonal skills as a necessary competency. OPM defines interpersonal skills embodied by

someone who “shows understanding...tact...and politeness to others, relates well to people from varied backgrounds [and] is sensitive to cultural diversity.” So, to determine a candidate’s interpersonal skills, the interviewer could ask one of these questions:

- *(standard)* Are you comfortable interacting with people of different backgrounds than yourself?
- *(behavioral)* Tell us about a time when you had to work in a diverse team to accomplish a project. What kinds of issues arose and how did you address them?
- *(situational)* If you had to work in a diverse group of people, how would you handle the situation?

How to Prepare for the Structured Interview

To prepare for a structured interview, it is extremely important that you are familiar with the competencies required of you for the job, beyond specific educational or experience requirements. This is similar to the first step of preparation for behavioral interview questions; after all, structured interviews will usually include behavioral questions. If “communication skills”, “organizational ability,” and “research experience” are three primary competencies for the position that you are applying for, ensure that you have STAR answers for questions about all three of them. Because the structured interview is scored by a predetermined scale, it is important that your answers are as clear and relevant as possible so as to achieve the maximum possible score. It is also unlikely that there will be much small talk in a structure interview scenario since one of its guiding aims is a lack of bias.

Panel Interviews

Panel interviews are recommended whenever possible, so don’t be taken aback if you have more than one interviewer! For higher level positions, you should assume that you will have a panel interview and prepare yourself as such. Panel interviews allow for more opinions on your interview which results in less bias risk as well as a more conclusive view of your abilities. If you are nervous about speaking to multiple people at once, you can politely ask your point of contact at the department where you are interviewing whether or not you should be expecting a panel interview or not so that you can prepare accordingly. Don’t be intimidated by a panel interview as they tend to actually be more effective than a one-person interview. Perhaps one person didn’t understand the point you were trying to make but the other two did: this keeps you in the running for the position.

On the whole, you should prepare for a structured panel interview as you would for any other interview, making sure that your answers are clear enough for several people to understand. Make sure you properly introduce yourself to each member on the panel and make sure that you remember their names. As in any interview situation, social graces and maintaining proper eye contact are very important in the panel interview. Always focus your attention on the person who is speaking to you. If it is a short question, you can maintain eye contact with them for the

entirety of the response. If it is a longer question, however, make sure you scan the panel and engage proper eye contact with each of the interviewers. Give equal attention to each interviewer and, as always, be polite and amiable.

Non-Traditional Interviews

While phone interviews have long been the norm and sometimes serve as the first step in the interview process, Skype and other videoconferencing systems have become popular for interviews. While the content of these types of interviews will be the same as a standard face-to-face interview, there are certain additional things you should do to prepare for them. Make sure your Internet connection is reliable. If it's not working properly, go somewhere with a stronger connection so as to avoid any technical difficulties.

- Dress up as you would for an in-person interview. Just because the interview may be taking place at your home does not mean that you should wear lounge clothes.
- Conduct the interview in a place as private as possible so as to avoid any distractions or interruptions.
- If you are being interviewed in your home, be mindful of anything you have hanging on the walls or anything else that is visible in the background.
- Choose a flattering camera angle and make sure that the area you are sitting in is well lit.
- When you are speaking, look into the camera and not at the screen. Looking at the screen will come across as if you are avoiding eye contact, even though you are not trying to do so.
- If you have a username on whichever videoconferencing system you are using, make sure that it is professional and appropriate.

The Senior Executive Service

After an SES candidate has passed the Rating Panel stage of the application process, they will face an interview, which is typically a *panel interview* and is always *structured*, as all SES candidates must be asked the same questions to ensure maximum fairness. The interviewer or interviewers will be at the SES level as well. There are two primary possibilities for SES interviews: it can be a single supervisor who interviews all the candidates or a panel that then refers the top candidates to the supervisor.

Since any SES position ties back to the 5 Executive Core Qualifications (ECQ's), you must be intimately familiar with the ECQ statements you wrote when applying for the job. Much of the interview will focus around these qualifications. You will be assessed on each ECQ throughout the hiring process, so expect them to come up in the interview as well. You must also be able to talk about your leadership capabilities concisely and effectively, as you are applying for a

leadership position. The Navy has published a very helpful guide on how to prepare for the SES application process, including the interview, found [here](#).

Conclusion and Helpful Resources:

Should you have further questions the Internet has a breadth of resources that may be of further assistance. I have included links to [fact sheets and articles](#), [federal publications](#) and [videos and webinars](#). Please contact David Rosenmarkle at david.rosenmarkle@hq.doe.gov if you find that any of these links have stopped working!

Fact Sheets and Articles

[About.com's Top 50 Interview Questions and Their Best Answers](#)

[Army Corps of Engineers Fact Sheet on Situational Interview Questions](#)

[Department of Veterans Affairs Information on Performance Based Interviewing](#)

[Dominican College's Fact Sheet on Different Types of Interview Questions](#)

[Drexel Fact Sheet on the STAR Technique](#)

[Harvard Extension School's Module on Interviewing \(includes information on the private sector\)](#)

[Martineau Recruiting Sample Behavioral Interview Questions and Explanation of STAR Technique](#)

[Monster's Portal of Interview Advice Articles](#) (almost 200 articles!)

[Monster's Master List of 100 Potential Interview Questions](#)

[NASA's List of Interview Questions for Supervisory Positions](#)

[Northeastern University's Guide to Thank You Letter Etiquette](#)

[OPM's Practical Guide to the Structured Interview](#)

[TSA's Article on "Preparing for a Competency-Based Interview"](#)

[TSA's Article on "Navigating the Competency-Based Interview"](#)

[U.S. Navy's Guide on "How to Prepare for the Senior Executive Service"](#)

[The University of Delaware's Guide to Group and Panel Interviews](#)

[VA's Publication on Interviewing Technique Guides](#) (written specifically for veterans, but others may find this useful)

[Virginia Tech Career Services Fact Sheet on Behavioral Interviewing](#)

Federal Agency Publications

[Army Corps of Engineers Fact Sheet on Situational Interview Questions](#)

[Department of Veterans Affairs Information on Performance Based Interviewing](#)

[NASA's List of Interview Questions for Supervisory Positions](#)

[OPM's Practical Guide to the Structured Interview](#)

[TSA's Article on "Preparing for a Competency-Based Interview"](#)

[TSA's Article on "Navigating the Competency-Based Interview"](#)

[U.S. Navy's Guide on "How to Prepare for the Senior Executive Service"](#)

[VA's Publication on Interviewing Technique Guides](#) (written specifically for veterans, but others may find this useful)

Videos and Webinars

Bryn Mawr College and Haverford College's Career Development Office's Webinar: ["The Successful Interview"](#)

Dartmouth University's Career Services' Webinar: ["The Basics of Interviewing"](#)

[Denham Resources' YouTube Channel](#) features many possible interview questions and their respective [good answers](#), [bad answers](#) and [ugly answers](#).

Georgetown University Alumni Career Services' Webinar: ["7 Tips for Nailing Your Next Interview"](#) (Via YouTube)

Georgetown University Alumni Career Services' Webinar: ["Interview like a Talk Show Host-Land the Job"](#) (Via YouTube)

Georgetown University Alumni Career Services' Webinar: ["Interviewing Skills: How to Land That Job"](#) (Via YouTube)

Georgetown University Alumni Career Services' Webinar: [“Resumes and Interviewing for Advanced Professionals”](#) (Via YouTube)

George Washington University Career Center's Webinar: [“Ace Your Interview”](#)

[Harvard Career Center Webinar](#)

MIT's Career Center's Webinar: [“Effective Interviewing”](#)

University of Texas's Cockrell School of Engineering's Career Center's Webinar: [“Behavioral Interview”](#) (requires Microsoft Silverlight plug in)

University of Texas's Cockrell School of Engineering's Career Center's Webinar: [“Interview Tips”](#) (requires Microsoft Silverlight plug in)

[YouTube Video on How to Answer “Tell Me about Yourself”](#)

[YouTube Video on “Interview Do's and Don'ts”](#)

[YouTube Video on “Interview Questions That You Might Be Asked”](#)

[YouTube Video on “Interview Tips”](#)

[YouTube Video on “Interview Tips—Body Language”](#)

[YouTube Video on “Pre-Interview Preparation”](#)

[YouTube Video on “The Worst Interview Ever”](#)