

Preparing for the Interview

Before the Interview

- Prepare a study guide and study at least one hour the day before the interview
- Develop at least five questions to ask the interviewers
- Research the company and add notes about the company to your study guide
- Have a friend or family member help you practice by role-playing the interview with you
- Prepare and practice answering questions about your criminal history or gaps in work
- Practice in a mirror, listening to how you represent yourself and watching your facial expressions
- Deep breathing exercises on the way to the interview and while waiting can calm the nerves

Dressing for the Interview

- Dark colored conservative clothing
- Neat and professional hairstyle
- Use sparingly: perfume, aftershave and light make-up
- Try on clothing the night before to check for cleanliness and fit
- Avoid smoking before an interview
- Little or no jewelry

What to Bring to an Interview

- Yourself! Come alone!
- A positive attitude and a smile
- Study notes and questions to ask the employer
- Copies of your resume
- A completed application with all information, dates, names and spelling correct
- References with up-to-date contact information and permission from references
- Two pens of the same color
- Transportation money or tokens
- Work samples or copies of licenses and certifications
- A folder to hold the materials

First Impressions are Lasting Impressions

- Be positive and polite to everyone you come in contact with
- Turn off your cell phone
- Dress the part
- Take your coat off while waiting for the interview
- Address the interviewer by a salutation and their last name
- Look the interviewer in the eye, state your full name and offer a handshake
- Be attentive, avoid emotional or defensive responses
- Make eye contact with the interviewers throughout the interview
- Notice non-verbal cues of the interviewer
- No gum chewing

Most Asked Interview Questions Fact Sheet

Here are four of the most common questions you're likely to encounter in a job interview. They have been chosen because they're the ones that job candidates may provide weak answers for precisely because they seem so common and routine.

1. “Can you tell me about yourself?” The common mistake in answering this question is thinking that the interviewer is asking for your life story. As fascinating as it may be, the interviewer is less interested in where you went to kindergarten and how you won the second grade spelling bee as he or she is in how your experience in your last job directly relates to this position. Limit your answer to work-related aspects of your background. Assuming that you've studied the job posting thoroughly and researched the company, tie your background and experience to the prospective employer's needs.

2. “Why do you want to work here?” If you’ve done your research, you should have some sense of what the company does, what the corporate culture is and how your skill set fits into the picture. Your answer should be something along the lines of “Your mission statement and corporate vision are consistent with my professional goals, and I believe my skills in the areas of [insert examples] will allow me to contribute to the success of [insert name of a specific program or a challenge the company faces]. The potential is very exciting to me.”

3. “What do you know about our firm?” Once again, research, research, research! If you can't tell the interviewer much about what the company makes and sells or what its biggest challenges are, the interviewer may assume you have little genuine interest in the company or the position for which you are applying. Today, internet access makes research relatively easy. Chances are you found the job posting at a company Website, so be sure to explore the site in more depth to find out about the firm's products, plant locations, financial performance and any other information that might be useful. If you're applying in the nonprofit world, many agencies have Websites that can provide information about the organization's mission, active programs, and funding.

4. “What are your goals?” When posed with this question, it's not a good time to share that your long-range plan is to own a sheep ranch in West Virginia. Your answer should relate to the job in question and perhaps how you see yourself within the organization three to five years down the road. Give some thought as to what the logical career path is for someone in your field and tailor your answer to reflect that. Maybe that means aspiring to be a supervisor or manager within the department that hires you or taking advantage of educational opportunities to enhance your value to the employer. It can't be stressed enough: do your research so you have some idea what's expected for an employee entering the company at your level.

Sample Script: Tell Me about Yourself

We have discussed how important it is to tell the truth. Now we are going to practice how you would answer the statement, “Tell me about yourself.” Remember you have been invited to an interview because the employer is interested in hiring you. They are not hiring your background, your criminal history or your recovery. They are interested in what you can do for them.

Divide into pairs. Imagine that you are preparing for an interview for the job announcement we handed out in the beginning of class and your partner is the interviewer.

Prepare your script by answering the following questions in the space below. Use at least two sentences for each question:

What is it you can do for me?

Why should I hire you?

Decide who will read their answers first. After you have read your script, ask your partner:

- What impression did my script make on you?
- What other questions did it raise?
- How would you rate my answers on a scale of 1 to 10 with 10 being the best?
- How could I improve my response?

Switch roles and let your partner read their answer and ask the same above questions.

Handling the Big Question

Applications: Applications ask about felonies verses misdemeanors; convictions verses arrests; or convictions within the last seven years. Answer questions carefully and honestly but do not offer more information than the question is asking. Make sure you are 100% sure that you have a felony. Contact the police department where the offense took place or an agency to confirm.

Reason's why an employer might hire someone with a criminal record: (from page 107 "From Prison to Paycheck: What No One Ever Tells You About Getting a Job")

- The offense didn't happen recently.
- The offense was nonviolent like drug possession.
- You have used an agency or organization whose job is to help people who are incarcerated.
- You can show that you are improving your life.
- You have had meaningful work since your release.

Preparing for this subject and the language you use during the interview will make a difference with the employer. Use a decade or half a decade to paint a picture of distant past. Count your time from the time you were arrested, not the time you were sentenced. Referring to your conviction as a mistake conjures an image that everyone can relate to, including the employer.

Ways to frame your response: (from page 107-112 "From Prison to Paycheck: What No One Ever Tells You About Getting a Job")

A few opening lines you could use:

- I'm glad you asked because I want you to be comfortable hiring me.
- To be honest, during that time I was paying a debt to society for a mistake I made.

Look at your offense through the employer's eyes. Develop your answers ahead of time using the following suggestions:

1. It was an isolated incident. (Use if this was your only offense. In contrast, using words like "first" makes someone wonder if there was a second.)
2. It was an unfortunate time in my life that is behind me now. (Use if you have several convictions.)
3. It was a misdirected time in my youth. (Implies a long time ago and a stupid thing we did when we were young, something the employer can relate to.)
4. That young person does not even resemble the person I am today. (Similar to the reasons in the above sentence, said in a different way.)
5. That regrettable time in my life is very far removed from the clean and sober person I am today. (Use if your offense involved drugs and you have been clean for awhile).

Handling the Big Question

When to Say More or Less

The types of language to use, when to use it and how much to say will be a trial and error process for most recoverees. In general, there are certain offenses when you should say less and others when you can disclose more.

When filling out applications or interviewing, always answer questions about your criminal background honestly. While you may worry that disclosing your convictions will land your application in the trash, it looks better than lying and having the employer find out while conducting a background check. An employer can legally refuse to hire you if he finds out you lied on your application about your criminal record.

Violent Offense

Companies are usually worried about liability. Therefore, the best response is to discuss the incident with as few details as possible. Frame your response so the employer understands that his business and employees are not in jeopardy by hiring you. Example:

My mistake occurred half a decade ago and it was like another lifetime ago. That lack of judgment had everything to do with a poor set of priorities at that time and nothing to do with employer, co-worker, or place of employment.

Drug Offense

This is a category when providing a few details may help you because employers are usually more willing to take a chance on someone with a drug charge. Example: *My mistake was a non-violent drug offense. It was a regrettable time in my life that's so far removed from the clean and sober person I've become and the clean and sober life I live today that it feels like I'm talking about someone else.*

Theft

Theft is a serious issue for most companies; therefore, any comments should be at a minimum.

Example: *I'll be the first one to call that mistake down-right stupid. Almost a decade ago my life was off-track and I made some poor decisions. I can assure you that my mistake did not involve my previous workplace or employer. A lot has changed since then – I have direction now, I have focus, and I'm in possession of a healthy lawful life that I value a great deal. I have no intention of ever jeopardizing that.*

Once you have answered the big question:

- Present the interviewer with a letter of recommendation.
- Become knowledgeable about the working opportunity tax credit.
- Ask what a company's policy is on hiring someone with a criminal record.
- Attitude is everything. Embrace lawful living with your heart, body and soul and the interviewer will sense it.

Sample Script: Answering the Big Question

Now we are going to practice how you would explain your criminal history or gaps in work history based on the information we learned in last week's training and reviewed this week. That information is in the resource section of your manual on pages 7 and 8. Using the handouts as a guide, prepare a sample script below.

Answer the questions below in no more than four sentences. Remember to use language that an employer will understand. We will be practicing your answers during the mini-interview role play.

Question One: I see you have gaps in your work history. What were you doing during that time?

Question Two: I see you answered yes to the question about having a felony. Why were you arrested?

Mock Interview Script Samples

Interviewer	Job Seeker
I see you checked that you have a conviction...been arrested...have a felony on your record. Why should I hire someone with a criminal record?	What positive and personal strengths can you include here that can turn the conversation around? What opportunities have you taken advantage of while in prison and since your release?
I see you checked that you have a conviction or been arrested or have a felony on your record. Can you tell me about that?	<i>This seems like a good time to give you a letter of recommendation from my previous employer.</i>
We don't have an official policy but we do want someone who is a hard worker and dependable. We will not hire someone who has been arrested for stealing. OR We have government contracts and cannot hire anyone with a criminal record.	<i>What's the company's policy on hiring people with criminal records?</i>
The next step we take for applicants that we are seriously considering is a round of background checks. Would that present a problem?	Be honest. <i>Does this automatically disqualify me from being considered for the position?</i>
Yes, I'm sorry but the company has a strict policy on hiring people with a criminal record due to our government contracts or liability when working with money.	How should you respond? Suggestion: Stay professional; you never know if the interviewer may know of other positions. How might you find out?
Were you ever incarcerated?	<i>Yes. I would like to explain the situation and the changes I've made in my life to make sure it never happens again.</i> Give examples of how you have changed the situation that led up to incarceration. Remember these examples are a form of self-advocacy.
I see from your application that you've changed jobs a lot. How do I know you will stay if we hire you?	How would you respond to this question?
I noticed that you have a six month gap between your last two jobs. What were you doing during that time?	How would you respond to this question?

Thank You Letter Template

At the top: Your contact information should follow the format of your resume.

Spell out date (month, day, year)

Person's Name

Job Title

Company Name

Street Address or PO Box

City, State, and Zip Code

Dear _____ (*Mr. or Ms. and interviewer's last name.*)

First Paragraph: I enjoyed our interview and discussion on _____ (**day and date**) regarding _____ (**name of company**) history and future along with the role of the _____ (**name of position you interviewed for**) position. (**Include a sentence that says something positive you learned about the company during the interview**)

Second Paragraph: As we discussed in the interview, I have exceptional skills and experience in (insert two or three sentences that remind the interviewer of the skills you spoke about at the interview, other skills you forgot to mention, or skills that you learned you needed by asking questions. Don't forget to use examples.)

Final Paragraph: Thank you for the opportunity to meet with you. I am very interested in working for _____ (**name of company**) and look forward to your decision.

Sincerely,

Sign your name