

Interviewing Skills for Chemical Professionals

Preface

Your résumé is simply a tool to obtain an interview with a potential employer. The purpose of an interview is to get you a job offer or, in the case of a preliminary interview, a second interview.

An interview gives you and the interviewer an opportunity to exchange information about the job opening. The interviewer's task is to determine whether you have the skills and motivation to do the job and whether you'll fit into the organization. Your goal is to use the job interview to showcase your skills, knowledge and experience to convince the employer you are someone who will add value to the organization.

Many candidates mistakenly believe their work ends once they get an interview. However, preparing for an interview begins long before you even sit down with the interviewer. If you are well-prepared and can communicate what you have to offer, you can set yourself apart from the competition. Therefore, you'll want to invest the time and energy in a positive interview outcome.

This publication will address the following:

- The Interview process
- The Behavioral Interview format
- Handling difficult questions
- Preparing for an interview
- The research talk
- Managing your job decisions

A good job interview is a two-way conversation that explores the fit between a candidate and a given position. The interviewer is primarily interested in just three questions: Can you do the job? Are you motivated to do the job? And, can you work with the manager and team? As the candidate, your goal is to gather information to help you make an informed decision: What does the job require? What is the potential career path? How well will you fit with the manager, the team and the organization?



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Preparing for an Interview

A lot of job seekers go into interviews expecting an interrogation. They prepare for the usual interview techniques and rehearse their answers to all the usual interview questions. They have their talking points lined up and ready to go.

But what job seekers overlook is that often a good interview is simply a conversation. More important, it's your opportunity to showcase your skills, knowledge and experience. The problem is that the interview is often a high-pressure environment in which to do the showcasing. In the job interview, as in most other areas, the more prepared we are, the more successful we will be.

As in any other conversation, the discussion moves back and forth between the parties. Employers will be evaluating your answers to questions about your technical competence, your scientific fit, what motivates you, and whether you will fit in with the general corporate culture. As the candidate, you're looking for answers to questions about what the job responsibilities are, the various career paths, and how well you think you'll fit in with the corporate culture, supervisor and co-workers.

The Interview Process

Before we get into more detail about the interview itself, let's step back to look at the larger context. The interview process as a whole typically involves three main steps—the screening interview, the preliminary interview, and the on-site interview.

The Screening Interview

The first person-to-person contact a candidate often has with a potential employer is the screening interview. This interview is often done not by the hiring manager but rather by someone in the human resources (HR) department. It can be done in person—campus interviews and career fair interviews at American Chemical Society national meetings, for example-- or over the phone. The conversation may last from 30 minutes for B.S. and M.S. candidates to 60 minutes for Ph.D. candidates.

This interview is a business conversation to determine the mutual levels of interest on the part of both the candidate and the company. The interviewer, looking for a candidate with a solid background, will ask about the experience listed on your résumé and other information. In a screening interview, the interviewer usually doesn't have the power to make a hiring decision; determining your qualifications is uppermost in their mind. The purpose of this interview is to eliminate all but the top 10% to 15% candidates.

The phone interview is a type of screening interview that can be planned or occur unannounced. If an unannounced interview comes when you're unable to talk freely, ask to reschedule it.



During the interview, have a copy of your résumé and other pertinent information at hand, and find a place where you can talk undisturbed.

Although it may seem that a screening interview benefits only the organization, it's also an opportunity for you to confirm your interest in proceeding to the on-site interview if you're selected. Ask only general questions about the position and the employer, and don't try to control the interview; the time to ask more in-depth questions is during the on-site interview. Although this interviewer may not have the power to hire you, they do have the power to screen you out, so proceed carefully. Your goal is to convince the interviewer to recommend you for the next step.

The Preliminary Interview

When you get through the screening interview, you may move on to the second step, the preliminary interview. The preliminary interview is often conducted by the hiring manager (who is likely to be a scientist), typically on the phone. The purpose of this interview is to qualify a candidate for an on-site interview. It also gives the candidate a better understanding of the job. Finally, it can help both parties arrange logistics of an on-site interview, if that will be the next step.

What's the difference between an interview done by an HR person and one done by a hiring manager? The hiring manager has a personal stake in hiring the best possible candidate. The hiring manager also has inside information about the nature of the job and can answer questions that the HR person could not answer.

Even though this is a telephone conversation, stay totally focused. Even though the interviewer can't see you, stand and smile to convey as much enthusiasm as you would in person. Your goal is to sound professional, upbeat, positive and prepared. Have the appropriate version of your résumé handy for reference. Again, if the call is inconvenient, get a call-back number and reschedule.

The On-Site Interview

Once you make it through the first two stages, you are in a select group of candidates who are invited to the on-site interview. The purpose of the on-site interview is to determine the candidate's suitability for a job offer. The interview is typically a series of face-to-face interviews conducted by the hiring manager, the department manager, and HR manager, even potential co-workers. As the name suggests, the on-site interview is typically conducted in connection with a visit to one of the hiring company's facilities.



The interview is arranged by the organization to determine whether to extend an offer of employment to you. It also should give you enough information to know whether you'd like to accept the job. The site interview will focus on your qualifications, skills and accomplishments, as well as your motivation to do the job well, and how well you will fit with the culture.

At this stage, you are a viable candidate, so impress the interviewer with both your questions and your responses. Also take the opportunity to observe and determine whether you could contribute, grow, and enjoy working in the organization.

You may spend part of your interview with a human resources department representative. They're responsible for giving you information about policies, working conditions, benefits, typical career progression, and similar details. Remember this person, too, will be assessing your personality and behavior to determine your fit for the culture.

At the end of this interview, you may be told when to expect a decision. If not, ask what the time frame is to make a decision, or what the next step will be. If you don't hear by the specified date, call to ask about the status of your application.

The Behavioral Interview

In the preliminary interview or on-site interview, you will be talking to someone who represents the hiring company. More and more people involved in hiring decisions are using an interview format known as the behavioral interview. The more familiar you are with this format, the more successful you can be answering the interviewer's questions.

The underlying principle of the behavioral interview is that the best predictor of future behavior is past behavior. The types of questions that are asked are directed to find out how and what you did in the past and the skill sets you used in the process —if you did it before you can do it again.

The behavioral interview provides a standardized format that different interviewers can use to compare notes among themselves and to compare one candidate with another. The questions are very specific and often start with: "Tell me about a time when. . . ?" or "Have you ever. . . ?" This answer calls for a specific example of an event and the interviewer will assess your future performance from the examples.

Answering Behavioral Interview Questions

Interviewers often meet in advance to decide who will ask what questions. Interviewers typically use these questions to explore a candidate's non-technical skills. Aside from providing a self-

portrait, this technique can bring out points or questions that the interviewer otherwise might not have considered. Using this format all candidates can be evaluated equally, as opposed to

- relying solely on a candidate's résumé, which is designed to present the candidate in the most favorable light;
- using psychological and intelligence tests, which do not tell the whole story, especially about technical background and communication skills; or
- conducting non-structured interviews, which make it difficult to compare candidates since the interviewers aren't asking the same questions.

Questions in a behavioral interview will, of course, vary depending on the position in question. But in general, the responses all tend to have the same three-part structure: C-A-R.

- Context: Candidate describes a job-related context or situation similar to the one in question.
- Action: Candidate describes what he or she did in that situation.
- Result: Candidate describes the outcome of his or her action.

First, describe the context of the situation in enough detail so that the interviewer fully understands your role. Then, describe the action you took and discuss the results, quantifying them with examples whenever possible.

In part, this information allows the interviewer to make a hiring decision based on facts, not feelings. The quality of what you say — rather than how much you say or how long it takes you — determines the effectiveness of your response.

This technique has a few potential pitfalls:

- An over-reliance on the past instead of the present and future.
- An interviewer's assumption that people never change.
- An applicant's tendency to talk too much.

If you understand the theory behind behavioral interviews and prepare for them, you can be more confident and better equipped to convince interviewers you're the best choice for the job:

- Provide enough information to convince the interviewer you're the right person for the job; don't just say what you think they want to hear. Take the time to develop an answer, and then support it with quantifiable examples and facts.

- Don't turn the response on its head. You may be tempted to twist your answers to avoid saying anything negative about yourself. But if you really can't think of an example, say so, then give a hypothetical example of how you might behave.
- Answer all the questions the interviewer asks, not just those you prepared for — do not evade any questions.

The C-A-R response is also useful if you find yourself in a panel interview. In this format, interviewers don't have to rely on the memory of individuals or the quality of note taking; they all hear the same answer. Also, you don't have to answer the same question again and again for different individual interviewers. Panels can vary in size, but will generally consist of three to four interviewers. It may be a formal meeting in a conference room or it could occur informally during a meal. The questions are likely to be the same as in a one-on-one interview, but may be efficiently divided among several individuals who are responsible for a particular line of questioning such as technical, communications, or leadership. Panel interviews are not designed to be stress interviews but they can be stressful if you're not prepared for the process. It can be unsettling to enter a room and encounter several people seated around a table, ready to ask you questions. The best preparation is to know the company, review your skills and accomplishments, and be certain you can give examples using the C-A-R approach.

Here is an example of a behavioral interview question and a possible response:

Can you tell me about a time when you failed to meet a deadline?

Context: I guess we all have one or two stories that would fall under that heading. I take deadlines very seriously, so I've given a lot of thought to the time when I missed one.

I was the leader of a team responsible for testing several different compounds that we were looking at as candidates for the basis of a new product that the company was developing. We completed the testing of four of the five compounds on time or even early, but the fifth one we were late on. The reason for the delay was a delivery problem from one of our suppliers.

Action: As a team, we launched into damage control mode as soon as we saw that there would be a problem with this supplier.

We lined up an alternative supplier, notified the customer, and reworked our overall project plan to accommodate the delay.

Result: Because of these measures and because we found what we needed elsewhere, we delivered this test only one day late.

But that taught me a lot about contingency planning, and also about tapping into other members of a team to figure out how to deal with problems as they come up.

Here are examples of other behavioral questions you could be asked in an interview:

1. Give me a specific example of a time when you sold your supervisor or professor on an idea or concept. How did you proceed? What was the result?
2. Tell me about a time when you came up with an innovative solution to a challenge your company or class was facing. What was the challenge? What role did others play?
3. Describe a time when you got co-workers or classmates who dislike each other to work together. How did you accomplish this? What was the outcome?
4. Describe a specific problem you solved for your employer or professor. How did you approach the problem? What role did others play? What was the outcome?
5. Describe two specific goals you set for yourself and how successful you were in meeting them. What factors led to your success in meeting your goals?
6. Tell me about a time when you failed to meet a deadline. What things did you fail to do? What were the repercussions? What did you learn?

Before an interview, it's a good idea to prepare examples of situations in which you demonstrated various qualities, such as problem solving, risk taking, leadership and collaborating. Examples send powerful messages. Should you be nervous, write your examples before your interview. Review them on the plane and in your hotel room.

Behaviorally Anchored Rating Scales

As the candidate answers, the interviewer calibrates the responses against a behaviorally anchored rating scale (BARS). The scale is one way that different interviewers can come to a consensus about evaluation. In essence, BARS help take the opinion out of evaluation by providing a framework for interviewers to evaluate candidates against behavioral statements.

Here's an example of BARS for problem solving skills:

Competency	1	2	3	4	5
Problem Solving	Unable to formulate a	Able to identify	Able to develop but	Able to develop and	Able to develop and

	problem or identify causes	causes, but not solutions	not implement solutions to problems	implement solutions to problems	implement solutions to unusual problems
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Here's an example of BARS for business acumen:

Competency	1	2	3	4	5
Business Acumen	Shows little grasp of how a business operates	Demonstrates basic grasp of how a business makes money	Demonstrates understanding of components of profit and loss	Understands the roles and responsibilities of different functional areas	Understands higher-level business processes (budgeting, funding, etc.)

After the interviews, the interviewers compare notes and consolidate their evaluations.

Key Performance Factors

Interviewers using the behavioral interview format typically focus their questions on a set of areas that are crucial to success in a given job. These factors are referred to by several different names but for present purposes we'll use key performance factors (KPF). Here's a list of some typical key performance factors:

- Sub-field mastery
- Problem solver
- Innovator
- Risk taker
- Collaborator
- Pursuer of excellence
- Leadership
- Business acumen

Other KPFs that might be associated with a job include communication or project management skills. KPFs and BARS for each job are typically determined in advance of the behavioral interview itself. The factors associated with a given job often are derived by the HR representative from interviews with job incumbents and from job descriptions. Different KPFs would, of course, have different BARS.

Knowing the C-A-R format of the behavioral interview makes it easier for you to answer interviewers' questions. Nevertheless, you will get some tough questions from time to time, and that's the subject we'll look at next.

Difficult Interview Questions

Some people look at the job interview as a trial by fire for a job candidate. Part of this trial by fire is to see how well a candidate handles difficult questions. Let's look at a couple of questions you might expect in a job interview, and discuss how you might formulate an answer.

Some examples of difficult questions and strategies for responding are:

"Tell me about yourself." - Keep the focus on your job objective. This is where you would deliver a 30-second "elevator speech" about yourself. Do not recite your entire biography to the interviewer.

"Are you married? Do you have any kids?" - Perhaps the questions that most stump candidates — and cause the most stress — are questions that probe into personal lives and backgrounds. These questions are rarely intentional; it's more likely the interviewer is inexperienced or unfamiliar with the laws governing employment interviews. Rather than assume the worst, you need to decide what the question is behind the question, and respond accordingly.

Federal and state laws prohibit prospective employers from asking certain questions that are not related to the job they are hiring for. Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibits discrimination against any person based on race, sex, age, national origin, or religion. Title I of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 covers employment of persons with disabilities. Many states, such as New York and California, have additional laws that protect people against discrimination in interviews.

"What kind of salary package are you looking for?" - Do not go into specifics about salary during the interview. "I would expect a compensation package that's competitive with other highly qualified candidates, but money is not my main concern. Opportunity and growth are far more important. What I'd rather do, if you don't mind, is explore if I'm right for the position, and then talk about money. Would that be okay?"



“Why do you think you’re the best person for this job?” - Repeat why you are uniquely well qualified for the position.

“What would you say was your greatest weakness?” - The standard ploy is to name what is in fact a strength—willingness to work hard, for example—and call it a weakness. That’s kind of transparent. Better strategy is to think back to a past weakness of yours that you have corrected and describe how you identified the problem, the steps you took to improve the situation, and that it is no longer a problem for you. It demonstrates that you’re willing to think critically about your own skills and are open to constructive feedback and self-improvement.

Answering Difficult Interview Questions

Prepare an answer for each of the previous questions, just as you would for any other question. Take a breath and think for a second to gather your thoughts before you answer.

Ask for clarification, if appropriate, or restate the question. Also, you may ask for the “question behind the question.” Perhaps the interviewer is trying to communicate a concern by asking about your family situation if the job involves late hours or a lot of travel, for example.

Support your assertions with evidence, stories, and specific examples. Always tell the truth (it’s easier to keep track of what you say).

This sounds obvious, but avoid the temptation to embellish your accomplishments. False information can cost you the interview or the job. Your behavior is likely to give you away, anyway. If you stammer or appear hesitant or anxious, an observant interviewer probably will ask follow-up questions. If you’re asked whether you can perform a certain task and you dishonestly say yes, it will be very embarrassing to admit you can’t once you’re on the job. If your credibility is damaged there’s little you can do to recover, and you’re likely to lose the job even after you get it.

No matter how much you want the job, go about it honestly. If you’ve reviewed your résumé and other materials, you can be clear about your skills and accomplishments without having to exaggerate.

Preparing for the Interview

As we’ve seen, one of the most important factors in handling tough questions is preparing your answers in advance and will serve you in any interview with any company. Another aspect of preparation involves getting up to speed on the background of a specific company. When you go for an interview, the potential employer expects you to know about the company and the

industry. Not knowing puts you at a disadvantage because other job seekers will have made the effort.

There are four steps in preparing for an interview with a specific company--conducting due diligence, anticipating questions and preparing answers, preparing your questions for the interviewer, and practice.

Doing Due Diligence

Due diligence involves gathering information about the company and the industry. Studying the industry includes identifying trends, problems, and challenges; the industry structure and who are main competitors; and compiling important industry statistics (Chemical & Engineering News' annual "Facts and Figures" and "Global Top 50" issues are good sources).

At the company level, you want to look at strategy (what the company counts on to prevail over its competitors); the structure and how it is organized; its main product lines; profitability profiles and stock price trends; and its main challenges in the marketplace.

Doing a background investigation before the interview is essential; gather as much information as possible about the employer, so you can intelligently propose how you will contribute. Current data says less than 10% of candidates take time to do this, so it will certainly make you stand out above other candidates.

Here are a few suggestions:

- Your first stop should be the organization's Web site. Take time to navigate the site, especially sections like company news to read news about the company's officers, recent mergers or acquisitions, various divisions and subsidiaries, and product lines, and the employment section, where you may find information about the different career paths and job openings available. Some companies have posted video interviews with current employees who talk about why they enjoy working there.
- For a publicly held company, obtain a copy of the most recent annual and 10-K reports. Again, many companies have these posted on their Web sites, usually under a heading such as "Investor Information." You'll find a mission statement, goals for the coming year, highlights from the preceding year, milestones, and financial statements. The 10-K is an annual report required by the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission that gives a comprehensive summary of a public company's performance. The 10-K includes company history, organizational structure, executive compensation, equity, subsidiaries, and audited financial statements, among other information.
- Google the company using Google News (link is right above the basic search box) where you'll find coverage of the company and its key executives in the business press. Also, try Google Finance for insights into the company's financial performance.



- Ask chambers of commerce for information sources.
- Get to know your local reference librarian — a valuable resource for information sources. Some general references include Standard & Poor's Register of Corporations, Directors, and Executives; Directory of American Research and Technology; The Thomas Register of American Manufacturers; and the manufacturing directory for your state. See also the resource list.
- There are lots of online resources available that will help you get the answers to questions about the industry and company: Hoover's, BNET, the Wall Street Journal, Fidelity and other investment Web sites.
- Contact any current or former employees, vendors, or consultants you may know. Faculty members, who may have former students now in that organization, also could be helpful. Try to set up an informational interview with one of these contacts.
- Search LinkedIn.com or the ACS Network for employees at the organization.

Arriving for your interview after doing some research enables you to:

- Search the names of your interviewers to find things that you have in common as well as to familiarize yourself with their research.
- Create a favorable impression by showing you made the effort to acquaint yourself with the organization
- Set yourself apart from the competition, because few candidates bother to do this
- Communicate a certain degree of respect for the employer (and the interviewer).
- You'll never have to say "Gee, I'm really not that familiar with what you do."

Anticipate Their Questions

Part of the job of preparing is to find out as much about the job in question as you can before going in for the interview. The job description is a good source to help you prepare for questions. You might also call the HR department to get a copy of the description, if you don't have one.

Here's an example:

PhD Medicinal/Synthetic Organic Chemist

Major responsibilities will include the design, synthesis, purification and characterization of novel chemical entities. The qualified individual must be proficient in identifying structure activity relationships (SAR) to address lead optimization, potency, selectivity, pharmacokinetics and in vivo efficacy. The qualified individual is expected to contribute to pre-clinical research projects as a project team member. Additionally, the qualified individual will be expected to supervise the professional development and mentoring of junior-level scientific staff. The individual will collaborate / interact with a broad group of scientists within the company and with external collaborators. These scientists will include biologists, medicinal chemists, pharmacologists and a variety of personnel in Discovery Technology.

The job description details the skills the hiring manager is looking for, such as “design, synthesis, purification and characterization,” “identifying structure activity relationships,” and “supervise...junior-level scientific staff.” This particular job description also tells you that you’ll be working with non-chemists inside as well as outside the company. Pull specific examples from your work performance of how you demonstrated those skills. Be able to describe how your skills would advance the company’s strategy or help meet its challenges. Practice your responses aloud as well as with a friend to get some feedback.

Will you have every skill listed in a job description? Perhaps not; you’ll need to determine from your interview questions how important each skill is or how to get it. Generally if your skills match about 70% of the job description, then you should feel comfortable applying if you really want the job. The bottom line is interviewers want to know that you feel qualified, knowledgeable, and confident about your own abilities.

Finally, realize that talking about yourself is okay—it’s essential in a job interview. Self-promotion is not typically a part of the scientific laboratory culture where you’re probably used to saying “our group did this” or “in the Jensen lab we did that.” The interviewer wants to know what you did so be comfortable promoting your qualifications and accomplishments.

With this information as a background, you can move on to the next step of your preparation.

Preparing Your Questions

You can be confident that as a part of the interview process, the interviewer will give you an opportunity to ask him or her any questions you might have. You need to have several good questions to ask when this happens.

What characterizes a “good question”? It’s a question that indicates that you’ve done your homework about the company. This is an opportunity for you to differentiate yourself from other applicants. Your due diligence should uncover a number of questions. Here are some other ideas:

- How does your company differ from its competitors? Why do customers choose this company?
- What can you tell me about the corporate culture of this organization? What are the key qualities it takes to succeed here?
- Can you tell me about how this group is structured? Who reports to whom?
- How does this work group contribute to the company's strategic plan?
- How did this vacancy occur?
- How do you evaluate an employee's job performance?
- What are the biggest challenges facing this group and why are they challenging?
- What is the turnover in the group?
- What is the focus of the team now compared to a year ago?
- How long have you managed the team?

Save questions about salary, vacation, and benefits for the negotiation process, once you have an offer in hand. If you bring up these topics too early in the interview, you risk giving the impression you're interested in only what you can get from the employer. Besides, without an offer, you have nothing to negotiate.

Being An Observer

Pay attention to what is said and how — be sure you understand what's being asked before starting to answer a question. If you are not sure, ask the interviewer for clarification. The interview is a conversation, not an interrogation, so strive to spend 50% of your time listening and 50% talking. Interviewers often will drop cues about the organization through what they say during an interview.

Also note how people act and interact with each other. Are they formal or informal, friendly or reserved? Would you enjoy working there? If you see a bulletin board, stop and look at it. Are job openings posted? If so, what kinds? Are there any flyers announcing activities, such as a softball team or internal training? Try to be alert to any clues about the work environment.

Ask for business cards from all the individuals you meet, so you can remember who they are, and to use when writing thank you notes after the interview. Make a brief note on the back of each card to remind you of topics that you can address in thank-you notes after the interview is complete.

Interviewing for Academic Positions

The academic interview requires some additional preparation. Of course, you must do your homework just as you would for an industrial interview— know the faculty members, the department, and the institution:

- Read any available literature, the institution's catalog, and the ACS Directory of Graduate Research to become familiar with each faculty member's research interests. Typically, departmental websites will list faculty with descriptions of their research, contact information and photos.
- Be ready to ask questions and to present your research, both formally and informally.
- Bring to the interview reprints and preprints of your work.
- Prepare your technical presentation or seminar remembering that in an academic environment, the interview also will evaluate your teaching abilities. You may actually be asked to teach a class as well. In either case, a well rehearsed, well organized presentation is essential.

In addition to a formal research seminar, most university departments will request an informal overview of your proposed research. Bring copies of your research proposals, including an estimate of start-up costs. The university will want to know what you need to get results within the first three years so you can write a grant proposal that will fund your future research.

When you receive your onsite interview invitation, ask if you are expected to give a presentation on your research. If so, determine length of your presentation, approximate size and technical background of the audience, and availability of audio-visual equipment. Prepare a well-organized presentation and rehearse it.

If possible, practice in front of an audience before leaving for your interview; this is when you'll get your best determination of whether your presentation is the desired length. You want to stay within the time limit without being too brief. You'll also get feedback on your oral presentation techniques.

You're not expected to disclose confidential or proprietary information; it is acceptable to present your research in general terms or to use nonproprietary examples, as long as you say so at the beginning of the presentation.

Your proposal should address each of the following points:

- The time needed to complete the work, as well as whether the research would be suitable for undergraduates or graduate students.

- Which agencies you would approach for support — with a realistic budget for necessary equipment, supplies and expendables, student support (usually in the form of guaranteed teaching assistantships), and possibly a summer salary.
- A focus on originality, relevance, and fundability.
- Statement of teaching philosophy, listing courses you're qualified to teach (undergraduate and graduate), special topics of interest and expertise, and innovative approaches (such as interdisciplinary courses or multimedia methods).
- Emphasis on projects of manageable size so there will be a reasonable chance of completion within an academic year or in a summer of research with undergraduates.
- Be especially realistic about industrial support; junior faculty rarely obtain support from industry.

Your Research Talk

Whether you're a graduate student, post-doctoral researcher or experienced chemist, you will likely be asked to give a technical presentation or seminar about your recent work as part of the interview process. A typical technical presentation or seminar lasts about 45 minutes, with another 15 minutes for questions from the audience, but make sure to ask your host ahead of time how long you will have.

The seminar is a key means of judging your technical competence. The employer's goal for the research seminar is to learn how you solve interesting, challenging problems, and your goal is to demonstrate these skills.

The employer also uses the research seminar to evaluate your oral presentation skills, your organization skills—how well you organized your presentation and how well you organized your research—and if you can think on your feet.

Your audience will be evaluating you on your science, logic, communication skills, personality, and ability to handle pressure. This last item is determined by how you respond to questions from the audience.

This presentation is vitally important to your candidacy. It may be the group's only opportunity to form a collective opinion of you and, for some, to gain their first impressions. The seminar shows how you communicate, approach problems, and think on your feet. You need to be professional and persuasive — if your presentation is mediocre or if you try to bluff your way through, your credibility will suffer.

Research Talk Format

The typical format for a research seminar looks like this:

- Concise statement of the problem
- Background material
- Description of your approach
- Experimental design
- Techniques used and reasons for choices
- Major findings
- Conclusions
- Future work
- Acknowledgments

Research Talk Tips

- Ask your host in advance about the audience. Will students be present? What is the size of the audience? What is the composition of the audience?
- Ask yourself what part of your experience and research will be important to most of your audience and to the organization by reviewing your research. Think about the presentation as telling a story. Teach them about your area of research.
- Prepare concise, uncluttered visual aids — don't overload the audience with tables of data, and use key words or phrases instead of rambling explanations. Find out what audio-visual equipment will be available (overhead projector, computer, LCD projector...). Bring your presentation in the appropriate form, and have a backup.
- Focus your presentation on three to five primary topics, highlighting your accomplishments related to each of these main points. Know the literature in your sub-field and be aware of recent breakthroughs.
- When possible, tie your achievements to the organization's needs, strategic mission, products, and other information you turned up in your due diligence.
- Practice, practice, practice your presentation in advance, particularly the opening, closing and transitions from one slide or topic to another, and be mindful of the time. Ask friends or

colleagues to help you by being your audience. Ask them to be critical and try to put you on the spot with tough questions.

- Have handouts available if you think they will reinforce your concepts.
- Talk to your audience, not to your visual aids; face your audience as much as possible. If you have a pointer, use it only to make a quick visual reference on a chart or to trace the relationship of data on a graph.
- Summarize your main points and give credit to your coworkers. If you're a graduate student or postdoctoral fellow, acknowledge your adviser and any funding agencies that supported your work.
- Anticipate the questions you may receive, and practice your answers. To ensure everyone in the audience hears a question, repeat it (this also helps you stay calm and allows a few extra seconds to formulate your answer). Focus about a quarter of your eye contact on the person who asked the question and the rest on others in the audience to keep everyone involved. Answer thoughtfully and honestly.
- Do not try to bluff. If you do not know the answer to a question, admit that. Then tell the person you will find out, and get their contact information so you can follow up with the answer later.
- Thank the audience when your time is over. For the rest of the site visit, reinforce the impression that you would be a valuable colleague by asking perceptive questions, and listening intently to everyone you meet.

For an industrial interview, in addition to your technical seminar, be prepared to give a 10–15 minute summary to senior management, which may include scientists from disciplines other than your own. In this short presentation, cover your experience—subject background, project goal, research performed, conclusions, implications, and future plans. This is a good opportunity to show you can clearly communicate to people outside your field and relate your research to different disciplines.

Special Circumstances — Video Interviews

Video interviews are becoming more popular, mainly as a way to save travel expenses. Preparing for a video interview is much like preparing for any other kind of interview — review your résumé and accomplishments, make sure you understand the logistics, and so on. There are a few special issues when you will not be in the same room as the interviewer.

Start by arriving early, and checking out the setup. Make sure the camera is at eye level and that you are seated close enough to appear approachable, but not too close. If there is anything inappropriate or distracting in the camera's field of view, remove it. During the interview, check

the monitor occasionally, and make sure you are not slouching. You may need to be slightly more animated than you would be in person, since the camera will tone your actions down. Study TV personalities for on-camera presentation styles.

If there is a time lag on the audio portion of the feed, make sure to wait until the interviewer is completely finished speaking before you start. It is much better to have a few seconds of silence (which you can use to think about your answer) than to talk over the interviewer.

If you're using a commercial conference center, the time may be tightly controlled. The interviewer may want to get right down to business, and you should be sure to leave plenty of time for your questions.

Putting Your Best Foot Forward

You know that putting your best foot forward requires professional and personal preparation. But you also have to keep track of logistical details and also look your best at the interview to make the optimum impression.

The Week Before

- Practice interviewing by role playing — a great tool. Talk aloud about your skills and accomplishments as well as your possible responses to behavioral-type questions. Have a friend — preferably someone who's been through the process—ask you questions and listen to your answers. If possible, have someone videotape a practice interview and critique it. You can also practice in front of a mirror.
- Request if any forms could be sent to you in advance. Take your time to review and fill them out neatly and completely, without having to rush.
- Request, also, a copy of the agenda for the interview. This should list the people you will be talking to as well as how long you'll be meeting with them. Learn about their research, their publications and any patents or other professional accomplishments they have—it will make your meeting with them more productive.
- Study your résumé — and make sure it's the version you sent to that employer. No matter how many times you've read it before, read it again. Dates and achievements must be fresh in your mind so you can be ready to tell the interviewer all about them and how they match the organization's needs. See the ACS guide, *Résumé Preparation—Tips for Chemical Professionals*, for assistance with your résumé.
- If your interview is out of town, confirm all transportation arrangements. Ask about procedures for submitting your expenses.

- Check the outfit you plan to wear, and make sure it's dry-cleaned or neatly pressed. If it's a brand-new outfit, make sure to wear it at least once before the interview. For more advice about clothing, ask at a reputable clothing store or consult a placement office counselor at your college/university.
- Prepare your list of job-related questions.
- Fine tune your presentation and materials.

The Day Before

- Verify the meeting details. Who will be there? When will it start? How long will the meeting last? Where will it be held?
- Confirm the directions. Make sure you know how long it will take you to get there and what time you'll have to leave. Jot down the time and place (including floor and suite number) so, even if you're a little nervous, you will still arrive at the right place at the right time. Make a note of the interviewer's phone number so you can call if you're delayed.
- Pack the essentials. In your briefcase or folder, place the information you've assembled about the organization, the questions you have prepared, extra copies of your résumé, your publication list, a list of references, a pad of paper, and a couple of pens or pencils. Bring enough change for subway fare, parking, tolls, and telephone calls. Listen to the weather forecast to determine whether you need an umbrella or raincoat.
- Get a good night's sleep. And don't forget to set the alarm to leave you plenty of time to get ready.

A Good First Impression

You never get a second chance to make a first impression, so get it right. Arrive on time; there are no acceptable excuses for being late to an interview. What you wear is part of how you sell yourself to an employer; those who pay attention to how they dress are perceived to be more professional. Even though you don't need to spend more than you can afford on business attire, dress appropriately. It's better to err on the side of being overdressed than underdressed.

Before you step through the door at the interview facility, take a moment to turn off or silence your cell phone. Texting or talking on a cell phone during or between interviews will likely be interpreted unfavorably by an interviewer.

The first few minutes of the interview are the most important; that's when your interviewer will form a lasting impression of you. How you look and behave will set the tone for the rest of your

meeting. If you've adequately prepared for the interview, you should do well. The more interviews you have, the more comfortable you will feel with the process. Your goal is to sell yourself to a prospective employer by demonstrating belief and confidence in your work, sincerity in your purpose, courtesy in your dealings with others, and tact in difficult situations.

Following Up

During the wrap-up discussion, ask when you can expect to hear back from the company. There are several ways to stay on the company's radar screen:

- Follow-up phone calls
- Personalized thank you notes
- Ask when a decision will be made and call back on the agreed-upon day
- Update your network on your progress

Send thank-you notes to those with whom you talked as soon as you get home. What you say and how you say it are perhaps more important than whether you send it by e-mail or by the postal service. Your letter could break the tie between you and the other candidates so put some thought into what you say. A standard thank-you note should:

- Thank the person for the opportunity to interview.
- Recap some of the conversational highlights.
- Clarify any information you needed to check on for the interviewer.
- Most importantly, plug your skills. Use the letter to say more than "thank you for the interview." It is one more chance for you to sell yourself and to tell them what you can do for them.

If you conclude that you are not really interested in the position, send a thank-you letter anyway. You want to leave a good impression; in the future you may want to apply for another job with the same organization or you may end up working for another company that does business with this organization.

If your interview was out of town and the organization is covering your expenses, be sure to submit your expense account and receipts separately from your thank-you letter. Keep copies of receipts for your own records.

Managing Your Job Decisions

Once you've gotten a job offer, you're not quite finished. You need to be sure to conclude the process as professionally as you have conducted it thus far.

Be Clear About Wants vs. Needs

A need is something that is essential and non-negotiable: Challenging, meaningful work. Career growth and advancement. A congenial, supportive workplace. Stable employment and financial security.

A want is something that is desirable, but not essential: A particular climate or a location with opportunities for cultural pursuits. An office with windows. Superior compensation. Early opportunities to lead others.

Compensation and the Art of Negotiating

Before you make your decision, there is the issue of compensation and benefits. If you're an entry-level candidate, the salary probably is not negotiable. If you are accepting a high-level position, however, you may have some room to bargain.

Salary Requirements

You'll want to think about your salary requirements before the interview — considering what you've achieved, what you have to offer, and what you are worth to an employer. Keep in mind that many factors affect how much the organization might offer. If they've had a difficult time finding the right person, for example, the perfect candidate could probably negotiate a higher salary than originally offered. However, if they know many other qualified candidates are available and willing to take the offered salary, the employer may not want to budge from a lower offer.

The importance of filling the position and how long it's been vacant are other elements in the negotiation — as are the organization's interest in you and your interest in the job. You also have to factor in the potential for personal/professional growth and promotion.

Before beginning any discussion about salary, estimate your minimum monthly financial requirements: rent or mortgage, utilities, car payments, gas, insurance, student loan payments, groceries, credit cards, etc. One important factor is the cost of living in a particular location. Seventy thousand dollars in Colorado buys a lot more than \$70,000 in California. Subtract those amounts to derive your minimum acceptable pay. You do not have to discuss this amount with anyone, but it gives you a place to start.



However, remember that the employer is not concerned with your expenses, but with the value of your skills in the marketplace. ACS Careers conducts annual salary surveys of members and annual starting salary surveys of new graduates in chemistry and chemical engineering. Salary information is available through the Salary Comparator on the ACS Web site at www.acs.org/careers. The surveys present data by highest degree, employer type, employer size, work function, and other demographic data. Once you identify your requirements and market value, you can come up with a figure that would make you happy. Don't be outrageous; keep it within reality.

Do not be misled by the gross salary figure — you're likely to lose 30%–40% of that total to federal and state taxes. Add to that pretax deductions, such as your contributions to health insurance premiums. Also take into account your monthly living expenses. Figure out what you will have to spend in after-tax dollars, because that's what you'll have to live on.

You should now have three amounts in front of you: The minimum you need to earn, an average based on the market, and your ideal figure. Negotiate down if necessary from your ideal, but not below your minimum.

Talking About Money

Salary questions are ordinarily raised once you're under serious consideration; don't knock yourself out of the running by revealing too early what amount you have in mind. For the same reason, never indicate your salary requirements on the application; write "open" or "negotiable." If the question is raised early, postpone the topic until you have more facts and are sure the organization considers you a serious contender. Let the interviewer know you still have some questions about responsibilities of the job and that you'd prefer not to talk about pay until you have a full understanding.

An interviewer who asks about your salary history is looking for the frequency and percent of your raises — indicators of your performance as well as the relative value of their offer. Your goal is to negotiate a salary based on the job you're applying for, not based on your previous salary. You could reply that because this is different from your current job, your existing pay wouldn't be very useful in evaluating your worth for the new position.

Once the interviewer asks, "What are your salary requirements?" you have several ways to respond; here are a few options:

- Itemize what you would be doing daily as well as the scope of your responsibilities, and then ask the interviewer what figure they had in mind for someone with your experience or, better still, what salary range has been authorized for the position.

- State that you're certain the organization will make you a fair offer, because you believe your credentials demonstrate you are well qualified, and then ask the interviewer about the range.
- Let the interviewer know you expect a salary appropriate to your experience and ability to do the job well, and then ask what range the interviewer had in mind.

Your objective, of course, is for the interviewer to reveal the salary range first. Once you have that information, you can adjust your range so that the minimum overlaps the offered maximum. For example, if the interviewer's range is \$55,000–\$60,000 a year, you can respond with \$58,000–\$62,000. Now you and the interviewer have something to talk about. If you ask for too much, you risk pricing yourself out of the job; if you ask for too little, you don't know how much you are worth. The last thing you want to do is to give a specific dollar figure because then you have no room to negotiate.

Getting What You're Worth

You like the job, you know you will be successful, you're prepared to give it your best efforts, but the initial offer is lower than you expected — is there some room for negotiation? Most employers operate in one of these modes:

- Take-it-or-leave-it deal: They say there's no room for negotiation.
- Set salary range: They've set a predetermined range for the position, and placement is determined by your experience. The top of the range is rarely offered to a new hire, but is reached by a series of raises over the years. To increase the salary significantly, the job would have to be upgraded to the next range. (If the employer has underestimated the necessary skills to perform the job well, this might be possible.)
- Flexible salary: They have flexibility to adjust the salary. This is the best position for bargaining; however, if there are other candidates who are equally qualified, and the employer would be happy with any of them, your power to negotiate is reduced.

Another option is to agree to a performance review after six months that would include a salary adjustment. Lump-sum signing bonuses are nice, but that money isn't added to your base salary or figured in for your review. Because future raises will be based on your actual salary, you want to come into the job with as high a salary as you can negotiate.

Once the salary question is settled, you will need to address the benefit package.

Benefit Packages

Although benefits vary widely across employers, larger organizations usually have more comprehensive packages. Think about what types of benefits you will need. Some organizations have flexible plans that allow you to select the benefits you value most. Benefits are considered part of total compensation, adding a value of up to 30%–40% to your salary.

Typical benefits may include:

- Health (medical, dental, vision, hearing, pharmacy, long-term care)
- Life, disability, and accident coverage
- Profit sharing
- Stock options
- Paid time off (sick leave, vacation, holidays, bereavement, jury duty)
- Transportation benefits (parking, company cars, or subsidies)
- Retirement (company paid, employee paid, or a combination)
- Work-Life Balance (childcare, flexible hours, telecommuting)
- Continuing education (tuition reimbursement, professional conferences).

Many times benefits and working conditions are more open to negotiation than salary. Ask the company what it's willing to negotiate.

Evaluating an Offer

Once you have an offer in hand, you need to evaluate it. You don't have to give an answer on the spot; ask for a reasonable period to think it over. Use the time to talk with your family and others whose advice you value. Be careful not to consult with too many people, though — if you ask eight or 10 people you're likely to get just as many different viewpoints, making it difficult to weigh so much advice along with your own judgment.

For each job you have considered, you need to compare what you need and want with what the job might offer. To do this, you assemble your job search data.

Regarding you

- Your stated goals and values

- A list of your skills and strengths
- Your resume or CV

Regarding the employer

- The job description in its full context
- Your interview notes and impressions
- Correspondence and employer information
- What your network is telling you

Ask yourself what skills are needed to do the job well based on the job description, as well as from your interview notes and impressions. What are your feelings and judgment about the values and culture of the work group? Your future supervisor's communication style? How, specifically, will this job help to advance your professional success and personal happiness?

Perhaps the best thing to do with your advice is to put it on paper. Draw a line down the middle of a page; label the left side "Pros" (reasons to accept the job) and the other side "Cons" (reasons to reject it). List your reasons in each column, and then analyze your results. If you're lucky, one column will be much longer than the other. If not, rank your reasons, giving more decision weight to the higher-priority items.

As you consider the offer, think about the base salary and salary potential, future career prospects, benefits, commuting time, the people you'll be working with and reporting to, job responsibilities, and all the other intangible variables. Questions you should consider:

- Do I like the work?
- Can I be trained in a reasonable time, giving me a realistic chance of success on the job?
- Are my responsibilities likely to be challenging?
- Is the opportunity for growth in the job compatible with my needs and desires?
- Are the organization's location, stability, and reputation in line with my needs?
- Is the atmosphere or culture of the organization conducive to enjoying the work?
- Can I get along with my new manager and immediate work group?
- Are the salary offer and total compensation package the best I can get?

Remember, money is only part of the evaluation process; salary is no substitute for job satisfaction. Nothing is worse than waking up every Monday morning dreading the coming week. Gratification from your daily work can be more valuable than a few extra dollars.

Rank your alternatives

- What are your options besides this job offer?
- Other employment offers
- Continue in your current job
- Pursue additional education and (or) training
- Take a temporary job

What are the consequences of each?

- Better (or worse) fit with your values
- More productive use of your talents
- Greater compensation (salary and benefits)
- Better location (geography, opportunities)
- More agreeable boss and coworkers

One alternative you should consider is continuing with the status quo, if the position in question is less than desirable for whatever reason. You should also decide at what point you will not negotiate any further. If you have an offer from one company, what is your best alternative? If it's unemployment then you might want to take the offer. If you have three other offers, you're in a stronger position to negotiate a better package.

Make Your Decision

Evaluate your options carefully; talk them over with those directly affected by your decision. After you've decided, telephone your chosen employer to accept the job offer, and follow up in writing. If you have other interviews pending, promptly call the other employers to inform them that you have accepted elsewhere and terminate plans for any remaining interviews.

Conclude the Process Professionally

Inform your network and thank them. For those people who went above and beyond the call to help, you might want to mail them a thank-you card along with a small token of your appreciation.

If you are a student or post-doc, review your remaining obligations with your advisor and negotiate a date for completion. Consult with your new employer about your expected starting date, and keep him or her informed of your progress. Complete and file your thesis before leaving.

Accepting an Offer

You may accept an offer verbally on the condition that you receive it in writing. Make sure the letter covers salary, starting date, benefits, and any other details you have negotiated. If you are currently employed, make it clear you want to give your employer sufficient notice before starting the new job. If you receive a counter offer from your current employer, resist it — for these reasons:

- The factors that prompted you to look for another position in the first place have not changed.
- If you accept the counter offer, your current employer now has reason to doubt your loyalty.
- The prospective employer may conclude you were trying to gain leverage with your current employer and were never a serious candidate, which could damage any future opportunities.

Call other employers where you've had interviews and explain you have a firm offer with a certain period for a response. Ask about your status with them. If you are not their first-choice candidate, they will likely tell you; if you have the luxury of choosing offers, use the Pros and Cons exercise to decide, and then negotiate the best terms you can get.

Staying Marketable

Once you've landed your job, it's still essential to maintain your marketability. With today's job market, job security is best defined as your ability to find another job.

A few suggestions follow:

- **Maintain Your Network**—Keep in touch with your former colleagues and professional associates, and continue to cultivate as many contacts as you can. Collect business cards from

everyone you meet, at conventions and seminars, for example. Note on the back of the card where you met, for future reference. Touch base periodically to see how things are going. Look for opportunities to help others in your network, both professionally and personally. It is not only whom you know but also who knows you.

- Take advantage of social networking sites such as LinkedIn.com and the ACS Network, which are fantastic tools for making professional connections. LinkedIn.com is a popular social networking site that can help you find, be introduced to, and collaborate with other qualified professionals. LinkedIn can help you maximize your presence and leverage the potential to grow your networks. The ACS Network, hosted by ACS, is a professional networking platform for the global chemistry community that is open to all ACS members and those who are interested in chemistry and the chemical enterprise. As with all social networks, the purpose is to build a strong network that can help you in getting your message out to appropriate contacts.
- Expand Your Knowledge and Skills Base—An old saying applies here: “The broader the base, the higher the tower.” By all means, develop your expertise, but don’t specialize to the extent that you become too narrow and jeopardize your future employability. Stay current in your field and with what’s happening in chemistry and science in general. Continue to refine your communication and interpersonal skills, ability to work as part of a team, and business knowledge. Learn another language. Study a related discipline, such as biology, materials science, or engineering. In some way you’ll always want to continue your education.
- Make Yourself Visible—To make you and your abilities visible, take every opportunity to publish and present. Participate actively in professional associations such as the American Chemical Society. Make the effort to communicate with and learn from your peers.
- Be Flexible—Expand the responsibilities in your current job by making a lateral move, taking a short-term assignment, participating in a task force, or doing anything that gives you a chance to see opportunities elsewhere in the organization — even if it means relocating.

Appendix A

Sample Interviewing Questions

Here are sample questions an interviewer might ask and suggested responses—for both recent graduates and experienced candidates. They're to increase your confidence, not to memorize; remember, you may be asked a totally different set of questions! We also include ideas for questions you might ask.

For Recent Graduates

If you're a new graduate just entering the workforce, you probably don't have work experience for the interviewer to evaluate. Therefore, they will tend to focus on your performance in school, how open you are to learning, and how well you can translate what you've learned to apply it at work. As always, your goal is to stand out from all the other graduates. This means avoiding ordinary responses such as, "I'm a people person" or "I'll do anything."

Q. Would you tell me something about yourself?

A. The interviewer doesn't want to hear a long, rambling answer. You will need their help in narrowing the scope of this broad question so you can give a satisfactory response. Ask, "What area of my background are you most interested in?" so the interviewer can be more specific and help you avoid giving irrelevant information. You are virtually guaranteed to get this question, so make sure to have a 30 second to 1 minute answer prepared.

Q. Why did you choose chemistry as a field of study? Why did you select (name of college) to obtain your degree?

A. These questions are attempts to determine how you reason. Therefore, you should say you went into chemistry because it was your favorite subject, for example — not because all your friends majored in chemistry. Likewise, you want to emphasize that you chose a certain institution because of the quality of the program or the presence of a particular faculty member — not that your parents wanted you to or that your friend was going there. Your responses should emphasize that these decisions involved careful thought.

Q. Have you had a chance to work on any group projects?

A. This question is an invitation to talk about what you learned in school that could be used on the job. You could say you learned about teamwork and interacting with others, or describe a project you did from start to finish and what you assimilated in the process. Concentrate on what you got out of the experience that has prepared you for real-world situations. Refer to the C-A-R

analogy—Context, Action, Result-- in the section on “Answering Behavioral Interview Questions.”

Q. Have your career plans changed since you began your studies?

A. An interviewer may ask this question to determine how focused you are and whether you're drifting along without a game plan. If your career plans did change, be prepared to provide an acceptable reason, for example, “I really liked being in a lab — hands-on work was my greatest strength, and I never thought about working anywhere but in the lab. Still, I like to read and enjoy being in libraries. In school, I had a great senior seminar that involved library research. Then I talked to someone who's working in chemical information science and decided to give it a try; I've been happy ever since.”

Q. If I were to call your references, how do you think they would describe you?

A. The interviewer is looking for clues to what kind of person you are. Your answer will reflect how you feel about yourself and what it would be like to work with you. Don't rattle off a list of adjectives; select 1–2 traits, and be ready to back up your answer with concrete examples. Stick with positive characteristics, such as “goal oriented,” “enthusiastic,” “able to speak and write effectively,” “team leader,” “goes the extra mile to get things done,” or “someone who likes challenges.”

Q. What are your short-term goals? Long-term goals?

A. The interviewer wants to see whether you've thought about what you want to do with your life. Your short-term goal might be “To learn everything you can about the organization and the industry, to identify the opportunities.” By that time, you should have a better feeling for your long-range goals. It's difficult to form true long-term goals before you have some work experience as a basis. You can be honest about that.

Q. We have many people applying for this position. What makes you more qualified than the other applicants?

A. In one sense, this question seems unfair; the interviewer is asking you to compare yourself with the competition, which you know nothing about. Don't let that tactic intimidate you; instead, consider this an opportunity for you to sell yourself and your skills. Stress your positive personality traits (drive, motivation, and communication skills), your desire to learn, and your ambition. Summarize the job description, and match each point with your skills.

Q. Tell me about your research.

A. This is not an invitation to launch into a seminar. The interviewer is looking for a short (probably 5 minutes) overview of what you have done. Hit the highlights of your undergraduate research, thesis work, or summer/co-op experience. Provide sufficient detail so the interviewer can understand your personal contributions and results — where you added value — but don't

go into excessive descriptions. Bring a 1–2 page handout to help get your points across quickly and leave with the interviewer for recalling the details. Focus on outcomes from your research. In addition to what you did, you should be able to explain the value of the project.

For Experienced Candidates

If you are an experienced candidate, you already have a track record for the interviewer to evaluate. You'll be asked in-depth questions about your professional experience and career successes. Give some thought to the questions, and frame your responses in a way that stresses your attributes.

Q. What did you like (or dislike) about your last job?

A. Never, under any circumstances, criticize your former employer. It's a red flag that you might be a problem employee. Make your answer short and positive, and then state your goals for future positions. Focus on opportunities gained through new employment. If you worked for a large company, for example, you might be looking for a job in a smaller company, where you can make a greater contribution. If you worked for a small employer, you might be looking for a job with a large organization, so you can focus on a few major areas.

Q. What have been some of your more significant contributions or accomplishments in your current job?

A. If you've thought carefully about your skills and accomplishments, several examples should come to mind. Emphasize that you anticipate making significant contributions to your future employer as well based on your past performance; don't leave the impression that your greatest achievements are behind you.

Q. What skills would you like to improve or develop?

A. With this question, the interviewer may be trying to uncover your weaknesses. Avoid admitting something that could damage your candidacy. One approach is to put any issue into a developmental perspective: "I haven't had an opportunity to use that particular software package, but given my proficiency in the others we've discussed, I anticipate no problems in picking it up." You may also want to give an example of a challenge that you have overcome. This strategy will establish your record of personal improvement.

Q. Where do you relate best — up a level, down, or with your peers?

A. In answering this question, your goal is to come across as a team player — indicating you interact well with all levels and kinds of people. For example, you:

- Keep your supervisors updated regularly, seek their input, and get them to support you

- Motivate those who work for you and delegate based on their strengths and weaknesses
- Coordinate projects with your peers and work together to meet deadlines.

Q. Do you prefer to work in teams or alone?

A. Again, the interviewer wants to determine whether you're a team player. If your résumé highlights positions where you did most of your work on your own, don't say you prefer to work in teams. Instead, confirm you can work independently when necessary, without a lot of direction or reassurance, yet can be part of a team because of the feeling of accomplishment when people pull together on a project. Adding a brief example from your experience where you successfully worked on a group project can strengthen your answer for this question.

Q. What are you looking for in a new job?

A. Be careful with this question, emphasizing what you can do for the organization. Talk about the contributions you anticipate making to the employer.

Q. Why were you unemployed?

A. If there are any gaps in your résumé, be prepared to explain them. Don't complain about the tight job market or how you feel you were a victim of discrimination. Such comments alert the interviewer that you may be a disruptive employee who acts as if your situation is everybody else's fault. Emphasize that you're looking for a place where you can make a long-term contribution, not for just another paycheck.

Questions You Might Ask

This opportunity is your invitation to demonstrate you've done your homework on the organization. It also will help you understand the position's responsibilities and clarify your feelings about whether you want the job. Don't ask a question just for the sake of asking one; an astute interviewer may ask why you're interested in that information and what it has to do with whether or not you take the job. Here are some suggestions:

- How long has the position existed?
- How long has the position been open?
- Why is the position open now?
- What is the time frame for filling the position?
- What do you consider the most important daily responsibilities of this job, and why?



- Who would be my coworkers?
- What are the department's goals over the next few years?
- What are the department's strengths?
- What are the reporting channels?
- Who would be my supervisor? Would I have more than one boss?
- What are my potential career paths within the organization?
- How much overtime is involved?
- How much travel is involved?
- How does the performance appraisal and reward system work?
- Do you have an orientation program for new employees?
- Does the organization encourage outside professional development and training? What portion of costs do you cover?
- Would there be opportunities for increased responsibility and broader experience?