



American Chemical Society

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# Effective Interviewing

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## Learner Application Guide

Version 2.0

## Effective Interviewing: Introduction

*“Doing well at interview is not nearly as difficult as many people think. With correct preparation and a little practice, most people who dread interviews can learn to excel. The important thing to note is that performing well at interviews is a learned process.”*

—Michael Spiropoulos, *Interview Skills that Win the Job*

You've focused your job search on the two or three areas that match your skills and values with the job market, and you've crafted a resume that got you the appointment for an interview. The only thing that stands between you and the job of your dreams is that one last hurdle—the job interview.

### What's This Learning Component For?

You've already viewed the short video segment that provides you an overview of this part of your job search process. The purpose of this Learner Application Guide (LAG) is to provide you with additional information about some of the principles introduced in the video, and to provide you with a framework for applying those principles to your own job search.

### What Will I Learn?

Performing well in a job interview and acing an exam in school have one thing in common: the more prepared you are, the more successful you will be. Getting prepared for an interview will involve three main tracks or dimensions:

- First, you need to get familiar with the questioning format used by many interviewers in industrial settings. This format is commonly referred to as the behavioral interview, and you can use this format as a way to highlight the ways in which your background and strengths match the job requirements.
- Second, you need to prepare your responses to some typical “tough” interview questions. Interviewers do not typically want to trip you up, but you can expect them to ask a question or two that might catch you flatfooted if you have not thought out your answer in advance.
- Third, you need to do your “due diligence” research on the company or organization. You can use the interview as an opportunity to demonstrate that you understand the company's strategy, structure, and business priorities, and to explain how your abilities and experience can advance the company's business agenda.

In short, by preparing for an interview along all three of these tracks, you can highlight your unique strengths and the special ways you can contribute to the hiring organization without being boastful or appearing to “brag on” yourself.

## Part 1: The Behavioral Interview Format

In some respects, the job interview is a dance between the candidate and the interviewer—a dance in which the interviewer typically takes the lead. But the more familiar you are with the steps of the dance, the more graceful you'll be as you move around the floor.

The interview format most commonly used in business today is called the behavioral interview.

### What Is a Behavioral Interview?

The point of an interview is to get a sense of how the candidate will perform in a given job, and the behavioral interview is based on the principle that the best predictor of future performance is past behavior. In a nutshell, the interviewer uses a behavioral interview question to invite a candidate to describe what he or she did in a previous experience.

Another advantage of this format is that it reduces “inter-rater variability” (the purely subjective differences between the impressions of different interviewers), and increases the ability of a group of interviewers to compare one candidate with another.

### How Is a Behavioral Interview Question Structured?

You can recognize a behavioral question because it will typically begin with the interviewer asking you to “Tell me about a time when. . . .” In other words, the interviewer starts by describing a job-related context or situation similar to something the candidate might experience on the job.

Your answer to that question should be in three main parts:

- **Context:** You start by describing briefly the work situation that is similar to the one the interviewer described. You need to go into enough detail so that the interviewer has a good context to understand the other parts of your answer, the action, and the result.
- **Action:** You then describe what you did in this situation, again, in enough detail that the interviewer gets a sense of how you approached the problem or situation in question.
- **Result:** Finally, you describe what happened in the situation as a consequence of your action. You should describe both the business outcomes as well as what you and your team learned as a result of the experience, and what changes you might have made to prevent the problem from recurring in the future.

## What Does a Behavioral Question Sound Like?

The following is an example of how a candidate might respond to a behavioral question about failing to meet a deadline.

<b>Interviewer's Question</b>
Can you tell me about a time when you failed to meet a deadline? What did you learn from that experience?
<b>Context (The situation)</b>
<p>I guess we all have one or two stories that would fall under that heading. I take deadlines very seriously.</p> <p>I was the leader of a team responsible for testing several different compounds that we were looking at as 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.</p>
<b>Action (What I did)</b>
I noticed the problem, and notified the team in an email. 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, and reworked our overall project plan to accommodate the delay.
<b>Result (What happened)</b>
Because of these measures and because we found what we needed elsewhere, we delivered this test only one day late. This experience confirmed how important it is to tap into other members of a team to figure out how to deal with problems as they come up.

Note how the candidate shapes the question to highlight how seriously she takes deadlines, and what she learned from the experience.

## Practicing an Answer in the Behavioral Format

Pick one of the questions below, and develop an answer using the format of the behavioral interview. Take notes in the table below.

## Questions

- 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?
- 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?
- 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?
- 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?
- 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?

<b>Interviewer's Question</b>
<b>Context (The situation)</b>
<b>Action (What I did)</b>
<b>Result (What happened)</b>

## Part 2: Handling Tough Questions

Knowing the behavioral interview format can make the process of being interviewed less stressful. However kind and professional the interview might be, you should always be prepared for a category of interview questions that might be called “tough.” Here again, preparation is the key to success.

### What Are Some “Tough” Questions?

Here’s a short list of some typical tough questions you might encounter in an interview. Some thoughts on how you might respond are included in italics after each:

- “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 inflict your entire biography on the interviewer.*
- “Are you married? Do you have any kids?” *It’s not legal to ask about marital status or children in the United States. You need to decide what the question is behind the question, and respond accordingly.*
- “What kind of salary package are you looking for?” *This and Question 4 would come up only at the end of an interview (if at all). 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. I’m evaluating the full package including opportunity and growth. 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 the headlines of why you are uniquely well qualified for the position.*
- “What would you say was your greatest weakness?” *One approach is to name what is in fact a strength—willingness to work hard, for example—and call it a weakness (sometimes I work too hard and my spouse feels that I should spend more time with the family). A better strategy is to pick out what was in fact a real weakness and describe with specifics how you overcame it, or are working to overcome it.*
- “Have you ever had a conflict with a boss or team member? How was that resolved?” *This is a behavioral interview format, so you could use the behavioral interview format to address it.*

This is just a set of examples, not a comprehensive list. For more examples, you can do a web search for “tough interview questions.” One useful website is [www.hrinterviews.com](http://www.hrinterviews.com).

## How Do I Handle Tough Questions?

Here is a set of guidelines about how to think about answering one of these during an interview: The most important point is to stay focused on the main messages you want to convey (your unique skills, what you bring to the table, etc.)

- Prepare an answer for each of the previous.
- Take a breath and think for a second before you answer.
- Ask for clarification, if appropriate, or restate the question. In the middle of your response, check to see that you're answering the question.
- Support your assertions with evidence, stories, and examples (get specific).
- Always tell the truth (it's easier to keep track of).

## Practicing Handling Tough Questions

Pick one of the questions below, and develop a strategy for answering it. In addition to writing out your response, practice articulating your answer aloud and listen to how it sounds.

### Questions

- Why should I hire you?
- Why are you leaving your current position?
- Tell me about a situation when your work was criticized.
- Where would you see yourself in five years?
- Can you work under pressure?
- Would you lie for the company?
- Aren't you over/under qualified for this position?
- What changes would you make if you came onboard?

<b>Tough question</b>
<b>Your response</b>

## Part 3: Doing Your “Due Diligence” Research

The first two tracks of your preparation for an interview—getting familiar with the behavioral format and preparing answers for tough questions—both focus on yourself, your background and experiences. The third track focuses on becoming more familiar with the hiring organization—its industry context, its business structure and its business priorities.

### What Do I Need to Find Out about the Hiring Company?

The first step in your preparation is to do “due diligence” on the hiring company. This typically involves doing research using tools available on the Internet, especially the company’s own website.

#### Industry research

- Industry trends, issues, challenges
- Industry structure, main competitors
- Industry statistics

#### Company research

- Strategy (what the company counts on to win vs its competitors)
- Structure (how it is organized)
- Main product lines
- Profitability profiles and stock price trends
- Main challenges in the marketplace

### How Do I Anticipate the Questions They Might Ask?

After you’ve done your due diligence, you should anticipate the questions an interviewer might ask. One good source of insight is the job description itself. Review whatever you can find about the job description and job requirements, and try to identify some of the key behavioral factors that would contribute to success in the job. In addition, you can:

- Identify your main strengths and prepare a behavioral example for each.
- Identify your main weaknesses or gaps and prepare an answer for each.
- Be able to describe how your skills would advance their strategy or help them meet their challenges.
- Practice your responses aloud.

## How Do I Prepare My Own Questions?

You can expect that an interviewer will invite you to ask your own questions toward the end of your interview. You will be judged on the quality of your questions at this point as much as the earlier quality of your answers. Some questions you might ask include:

- How does your company differ from its competitors? Why do customers choose this company?
- Can you tell me about how this group is structured? Who reports to whom?
- What does the company count on to win? How does this work group contribute to that objective?
- What can you tell me about the corporate culture of this organization? What are the key qualities it takes to succeed here?

## Practicing Doing Due Diligence

Imagine that you are scheduled for an interview with PharmChem, Inc. a leading player in the pharmaceutical industry. You reviewed the PharmChem website, where you found the President's Letter to Shareholders in the Annual Report (reproduced on the next page). Read the Letter to Shareholders, and ask yourself the following questions, taking notes about your answers in the spaces below:

### Focusing Questions



What does the Letter indicate about the job market for chemists in this company?



What kinds of qualities or characteristics might the company be especially interested in hiring to?



What questions could you ask that would indicate to your interviewer that you'd read this Letter and had done your due diligence on PharmChem?

## Letter to Shareholders

The success of value-based family-owned companies is also confirmed by various surveys and indices comparing family-owned companies with listed ones. It is borne out by our own success as well. PharmChem's sales growth this past financial year exceeded the market average for the seventh year in a row, allowing us to improve our world market share yet again. Benchmarking operating margins also show PharmChem to be well positioned. That our commercial success has also allowed the corporation to take on more employees is particularly gratifying. Over the past ten years, PharmChem has increased its personnel capacity by 5 % per annum on average.

The guiding principles in our strategy give top priority to the development of innovative medicines for the benefit of patients worldwide. The same applies to our endeavors in animal health as well. Innovation and the quality of our products drive our success and materialize many years of research and development. The development of innovative substances with an efficacy superior to those already available will be crucial to our success in the future.

The market demands that productivity be constantly raised throughout the value chain. Our employees are the driving force behind the innovations required at any one stage of our complex processes. We rely on their integrity and commitment. It is also important for us to remain an employer of choice for our own employees and for people outside the company. That PharmChem, as numerous external comparisons have shown, is one of the most interesting and desirable employers in many countries is a source of great pride. PharmChem certainly has the corporate culture, the size and the structure to enable us to identify with a common strategy and to help shape it, too. Such an environment is essential to innovation and excellence. We believe that our corporate culture, with its focus on how we work together in a 'great team', is a significant prerequisite for motivating our employees to achieve still more innovative solutions for patients, progress and economic success. Last year was again one of market consolidation in the pharmaceutical industry. And this trend with mergers and acquisitions is most likely to continue. The main reason for this is a very simple one: lack of productivity in R & D.

PharmChem's shareholders have set the course for the future in such a way that we can continue to build on the successful development of recent years as an independent company. This applies not only to the corporate strategy decided jointly with the Board of Managing Directors, but also to the make-up of both the Board and the Shareholders' Committee. We are confident of the continued motivation and loyalty of our employees, the expertise and experience of the Board and constructive commitment of our Advisory Board in the future.

On behalf of the shareholders of PharmChem, allow me to congratulate all those I have mentioned on the very successful financial year. Thank you all for your tremendous efforts. We look forward to continuing to work closely with our employees, the Board of Managing Directors and the Advisory Board for the good of PharmChem as a whole. Despite what is sometimes a difficult economic and political environment, and some highly competitive markets, we are confident that we are set to remain one of the world's leading pharmaceutical companies.

Chris Farma, Chairman of the Shareholders' Committee