Preparing for the Interview

The most important part of the interview process takes place before you ever shake hands with your interviewer. Preparation and research are what make your interview a success. Two specific elements that need to be addressed while preparing and conducting your research are first, knowing yourself, and second, knowing the company you will be interviewing with. The art of the interview lies in successfully demonstrating how and why these two specific elements provide convincing proof that you are indeed a good fit for the company.

Knowing Yourself
You’d be surprised how many people freeze up when they are asked to talk about themselves. Do you know what the five most valuable attributes you bring to a company are? Do you know what makes you an effective team player? Can you give an example where you have demonstrated both leadership and creativity in a team setting? Do you know what your peers or boss would say are the weak areas of your people skills? In 30 seconds or less, can you explain your short, medium, and long-term career goals? If you can’t, then you don’t know yourself well enough to interview — yet. But, don’t worry, here are several things you can do to get yourself ready.

It Starts With Passion
The key to the job search process is discovering what you are passionate about and then finding a job that allows you to act on that passion. Passion is not reserved for those students who want to save the world. You can be passionate about anything — revenue management, seeing those around you succeed, winning, or building things. It doesn’t matter what it is, but you need to take the time to figure it out. Why? Because passion is your single greatest ally in an interview. When you talk about things you are passionate about, it shows. Your eyes light up. Your body language is more pronounced and poignant. The timbre in your voice changes. You may not notice this, but everyone around you does — including your interviewer. In a situation where two people being interviewed for the same position possess roughly the same qualifications, the one who appears more passionate gets the job. In some cases passion can even trump qualifications. Employers can develop your skills. They can’t develop your passion. They know this and take it into account in their selection process.

In preparing for interviews you should be looking for every opportunity to talk about things you are genuinely excited about. If you interview for a job you are not truly excited about, it doesn’t mean you can’t discuss things relevant to the job that you are passionate about. The trick is knowing what these are ahead of time and having them in mind so that you don’t wind up spending 30 – 40 minutes boring your interviewer to tears.

Interviews, essentially composed of questions and answers, provide you with an unequaled opportunity to convey your passion in the form of stories about past experiences. An interviewer can readily detect sincere passion, which often leads them to have confidence in your ability to perform a specific job. Passion, as well, often helps the interviewer determine whether or not you are a suitable fit for the company.

Elevator Pitch
Your elevator pitch is a 30-second story that tells who you are and what you’re about. If you got on an elevator with the head of an organization you want to work for and had only the time it took to get to the top floor to talk with him/her, what would you say to be noticed and remembered? This is your mission statement — how and for what you want to be remembered. Although your elevator pitch can be difficult to develop, once you have one, everything flows from it. Spend a great deal of time communicating your elevator pitch to others, practicing with friends, other students, alumni, faculty, the mirror, or anyone that will listen. In short, the pitch should concisely communicate where you want your career to go, why, and how you plan to get there.
Inevitably you will receive clever questions that you simply can’t prepare for; however, there are several standard questions you will inevitably be asked and will need to be able to answer efficiently. Developing and refining your responses to these questions, in advance, will pay huge dividends in your interviews. This type of pre-preparation is also an excellent way to get a handle on your strengths and weaknesses and enable you to readily, and successfully, convey them (review the longer list of questions at the end of this chapter). Although the core content of your answers to these questions, or requests, should be much the same from one interview to the next, you will want to revisit each before every interview to make sure that the response you have prepared is appropriate.

**Take me through your resume.**
This request provides you with a tremendous opportunity to frame your resume to show why you are a perfect fit for the position available in their organization. Don’t simply explain what you did in each position you held; rather, share how these experiences impacted you. Your response to “take me through your resume” should sound like an elongated version of your elevator spiel: What did you learn in certain roles? How did these affect your career direction? Why, based upon these past experiences, is this potential position right for you? Although your response will change from interview to interview, the essence of the response should remain the same and should communicate who you are, where you hope to go, and why.

**What are your short-term, medium-term, and long-term career goals?**
The main dilemma to this question is figuring out the answer – no small feat. Spend time developing a brief answer (no more than 30 seconds).

**What are your three greatest strengths?**
Figure out what they are, and have five ready to offer. Give some thought to the connection between your elevator spiel and your strengths. If your elevator spiel has you out forging relationships and you don’t have good communication skills, there is probably a problem. Everything should fit together.

**What are your three greatest weaknesses?**
Obviously, this is a difficult question to answer. You want to be genuine without actually revealing any serious weakness you may have. An effective approach is to highlight three areas where you have successfully improved over time. The idea is, rather than focusing on weak areas, you develop an answer where you focus on areas of improvement. This shows that you are positive, self-aware, and pro-active. An example might be that you were having trouble with time management; therefore, you took a class, got some coaching, and are now managing your time much more effectively.

**Give an example of when you were an effective leader.**
You should have at least three of these stories developed and, ideally, offered in different contexts. For instance, in one example you may have demonstrated leadership by identifying an opportunity and convincing a group of people of its value. In another you may have exercised leadership through a more formal managerial role. It is helpful to have several diverse effective leader stories so that you are prepared for any situation.

**Give an example of when you came up with a creative solution to a problem.**
This is similar to providing examples of leadership; you should have at least three and they should be different. It’s okay if they overlap with your leadership stories; however, be sure to prepare multiple stories because, if the interviewer hears an amazing story that encompasses both leadership and creativity, they will invariably ask for a second example. This request also provides an excellent opportunity for you to tell a memorable story that will allow your interviewer to easily recall you. Push the envelope and have some fun. The interview is, among other things, a competition for attention, and a particularly creative experience is apt to have staying power in an interviewer’s mind.
**Give an example of when you failed.**
There is nothing wrong with failure. In fact, failure is widely thought to be the most effective form of learning. However, there is something wrong with **not learning** from your failures and that is the point of this request. Have a few examples of failures, but be sure to concentrate on the analysis of what went wrong and what you learned from the experience.

**What makes you unique?**
Contrary to popular belief, this is not the same as “what are your strengths?” Good communication and analytical skills, as well as being a fast learner, don’t make you unique – they make you a MMH graduate. Everyone interviewing for a job out of graduate school either has, or will claim to have, these skills. You need to find those two or three things that give you a different perspective, or skill set, from the other thirty people you are being compared with; maybe this is time spent in an industry; maybe it is a perspective from another industry (good for career switchers); maybe it is an unusual skill or life experience. Whatever it is, figure it out and make sure it is consistent with your elevator pitch.

**Your Resume and PARs**
Every item on your resume is fair game during an Interview and you should be prepared with at least one compelling story for every bullet point. Essentially, your resume should serve as cliff notes for the stories you have prepared in order to address the essential questions or requests mentioned earlier. A helpful way for you to hone your stories for each bullet point is to use the PAR method. **PAR stands for Problem, Action, and Results.** You should be able to approach every bullet point on your resume as if it were a story that contains a problem, an action you undertook to address the problem, and the results of that action. Using PAR helps you to remember the important aspects of your various stories and also serves to keep you focused.

One way to be certain you are covered on this front is to interview yourself. It’s easy and goes something like this; go through every point on your resume and, pretending to be the interviewer, ask yourself, “I see you accomplished ‘X’ while at ‘Y’; tell me about this.” For each point you should be able to provide a PAR in less than 90 seconds and also have enough background detail prepared to answer five minutes of questions on the topic. The important part here, though, is to make sure that you can convey the problem (how you identified it), the action, and the results in 90 seconds. Interviewers rank students, among other things, on the basis of good, clear examples. This takes practice.

Another way to become very familiar with your resume is to develop and use a matrix to help pick apart each job you held. A matrix provides an inventory of your previous experiences while helping you view these past positions in a new light. It works like this: list every job you have had on the left side of the matrix; then list the relevant traits you deem important to the job you are interviewing for across the top. It should look something like this:

<table>
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<th></th>
<th>Leadership</th>
<th>Creativity</th>
<th>Failure</th>
<th>Other Trait</th>
<th>Other Trait</th>
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<tr>
<td>Job 1</td>
<td>Story</td>
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<td>Job 2</td>
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<td>Job 3</td>
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Rather than asking yourself to come up with three overall examples of leadership, force yourself to come up with a couple for **each job** you have had. You may be surprised at what you discover. You will also be prepared when the interviewer asks you for a certain type of example from a certain job. It happens. Be prepared for it.
Practice
Once you have your stories honed you will need to practice delivering them. Practice at every opportunity. The best time and place to practice is during a practice interview session with a fellow student or a member of the OSS staff, but if no one else is available, practice in front of the mirror. Practice is the single most important thing you can do!

Knowing the Company
Knowing the company you are interviewing with entails knowing the division or group within the company you are interviewing with, knowing the company as a whole, and knowing the industry in which it competes. A visit to the company’s web site is not sufficient. Begin with the industry and work your way back to the specific division or group. Your research should be thorough enough so that you feel comfortable making a strategic recommendation to your interviewer concerning his/her group. You may be asked to do this in an interview. Here are some suggestions for beginning your research:

Industry

- Most industries have trade associations that offer a wealth of information. Find them out and obtain as much information as possible.
- Publicly traded companies will be covered by analysts who often provide summaries of trends in relevant industries.
- Read the company’s competitors annual reports. You should be able to list all of the company’s competitors and their respective strengths and weaknesses.
- Consult Nestlé Librarians – they are your best resource!

Company

- Review the most recent annual report.
- Do a Lexis/Nexus search back one year for company/industry related articles.
- Read and understand recent analysts’ reports on the company. Do not stop at one analyst’s report. Read enough to know not only the analysts’ consensus about the company, but also the key drivers of any contention between analysts’ recommendations.
- Visit the company web site regularly and follow all press releases. NOTE: companies constantly release information, some of which does not receive press coverage. You need to know this, too. You can find this uncovered information in the company web site’s media section.
- Consult Nestlé Librarians – they are your best resource!

Division/Group

- Contact alumni who work at the company you are interviewing with and ask for updated information (management wise, etc.). The important thing is to get a sense of how this division fits into the rest of the company. Recruiters expect that you have networked with alumni who work in the company.
- Try to find bios on senior managers within the group. The managers’ backgrounds can be insightful into both the culture and direction of the group.
Find out if any of your classmates have worked at this company and can lend any insight or put you in contact with folks who can.

The Interview
The day of the interview is challenging, but, if you have prepared well, you are 95 percent on your way to success. Here are some things to keep in mind:

The morning of:

- Read *The Wall Street Journal* and, ideally, another newspaper before your interview. Don’t just skim for stories about the company you are interviewing with; know what is going on in the markets and in the world.

- Check the company’s web site to see if any news was released. Again, you will find this in the media section of the web site.

Attire
Read “Dressing for Interview Success” in Martin Yate’s *Knock ‘Em Dead: The Ultimate Job Seeker’s Handbook* for an overview of the Hotel School’s definition of proper attire. Generally, the darker the suit, the more authority it carries. For men, solid colors and pinstripes are both acceptable, so long as the stripes themselves are muted and very narrow. Women have more creativity in this area than men do, but also more room for mistakes. While men are usually limited to solids or pinstripes, a woman can add plaids to this list. The more understated the plaid, the safer the choice. The colors most suitable for women’s interview suits include charcoal, medium gray, steel gray, black, and navy blue. “Separates” are not recommended for interviews. Both men and women should wear dark, polished leather shoes. Men’s shoes should be black leather whereas women’s most accepted choices are black and navy. High heels are not recommended. The pump, with its closed toe and heel, is perhaps the safest and most conservative look.

Remember, when you interact with interviewers, you may be talking with a future employer. Also, you are representing the Hotel School and your classmates. Take pride in your appearance, your body language, and your conversation.

Introductions
When you first meet your interviewer shake hands and make eye contact. It is acceptable to make small talk, but be sensitive to the fact that the interviewer is in charge and has limited time. Don’t drag out introductions. Also, some people tend to get sweaty hands when they get nervous. A tip for helping with this is to wash your hands with hot water right before your interview.

Have a Mission
Even if you are never asked, have your elevator pitch in the back of your mind at all times. Your goal is to have the interviewer remember the two or three things that make you, you. Don’t be passive! You need to be proactive and use every opportunity to drive home not only your strengths, but also how they fit into the organization for which you would like to work. Let your passion shine through!

During the Interview

Every Question is an Opportunity
With your mission in mind answer every question with two goals: 1) show the interviewer that you understood and are capable of answering the question; and 2) use the answer to showcase something unique about yourself that fits closely with your mission. This is where preparation is key. By having many stories on hand, covering different types of situations and skill sets, you will be prepared to give the interviewer a solid answer to his/her questions, and you will move your agenda forward at the same time.
Staying Relaxed
Staying relaxed is sometimes easier said than done, but there are a number of things you can do to help accomplish this:

- Preparation is the most effective means of controlling nerves and practice interviews, are great for alleviating nervous stress. If you know what you are talking about and are conveying your passion for the subject you will be more relaxed. Have confidence in your preparation and abilities.

- Although it seems fairly obvious that you should breathe during an interview, be aware that nerves affect everything, including your breathing. Before you answer a difficult question take a deep breath. It helps clear the mind and buys you time to think about your answer.

- Slow down. Most people naturally speed up their speech when they are in a stressful situation and can come across as either nervous or rushed. It helps to consciously slow down the pace of your speech.

- If you are asked a question that stumps you it is okay to ask for some time to think about it or to come back to it so long as you actually do. Ideally, you would answer every question, but passing (if allowed) is better than a bad answer. Don’t make this a habit, however.

Communicating With the Interviewer
Occasionally, the interviewer will ask a question and, after answering at length, you begin wondering whether you are indeed answering the question posed. Don’t be afraid to ask him/her if you are on track. In general, it is better to provide concise rather than lengthy answers. In short, avoid rambling. If the interviewer wants more information he/she will ask for it. With that said, it is perfectly acceptable to ask, “Did I answer your question adequately?” or “Am I addressing the issue you raised?” Both inquiries show that you are paying attention to the dynamics of the interview.

Ask Questions!
The interview does not end when the interviewer stops asking questions; it ends when the interviewer stops you from asking questions. One of the best ways to impress an interviewer is through the questions you ask. Prepare enough intelligent questions about the company to generate at least an hour’s worth of conversation; however, you should not ask questions that could have been answered from reading their web site. Also, questions don’t have to be reserved for the end of the interview. If one of your responses to a question raises an issue in your mind, don’t be afraid to inquire about it at that time. If the interviewer does not want to address your question at this point in the interview, he/she will inform you and you can attempt to ask it later.

After the Interview
Immediately Following
Find a quiet place to sit and reflect on your meeting. Jot down notes. Answer some pertinent questions such as: What did you discuss? What were the high points? What were the low points? What questions took you by surprise? How could you improve your response if asked again during another interview? What impressed you about the organization and its representatives? How does this company compare to others with which you have spoken? Make sure you record what happens next, when you should follow up, and with whom.

Within Twenty-Four Hours
Send a thank you letter to each person with whom you met within twenty-four hours of the interview. Refer to your notes and use your letter to highlight points of discussion or to tie up loose ends. Reinforce your interest. Remember that, at this stage, your goal is to get an offer. Even if the job is not currently your ideal, it might well be an excellent choice in the long run. Keep an open mind. Your priorities will probably shift as you progress in your job search.
Follow-Up
Most companies will tell you when and how you can expect to hear from them. If they do not offer this information in your interview, be sure to ask. Do not contact the representative prior to the time indicated. Once the time has passed, it is appropriate to follow-up with a telephone call to the person who committed to getting back to you. Reinforce your interest, ask about your status, and find out when the employer expects to make a decision about second interviews. Be courteous; they could be making a decision that day and every interaction you have with an employer reinforces their impression of you.

Second Interviews
Second interviews vary from a follow-up interview the same day in the Hotel School to a site visit several weeks or months later. Second interviews can be additional screening meetings, or they can be the decision interview. Decisions are rarely made before you have had a second interview. However, be prepared to discuss your salary requirements if the employer asks.

When you receive a second interview you need to follow directions provided by the company. Generally, companies will explain when and where the meeting will occur, and how you are to arrange your visit. If they are not explicit in the details, however, be sure to ask. When companies invite you to their offices, often they pay travel expenses. Often they work closely with travel agents and arrangements may be made through this vendor. Second interviews vary by industry and company - talk with your classmates to learn about the process.

On-Campus Interviews
Most on-campus interviews are basic behavioral interviews. This style of interviewing is based on the concept that past behaviors predict future behaviors. Companies have determined that there are four or five behaviors they think are keys to success in their companies. Their interview questions are designed to determine the extent to which you have demonstrated these behaviors in the past.

Interview Performance Feedback
It is highly recommended that you continually assess what you are doing well and where you can improve. The OSS asks all interviewers for feedback regarding their interviews. If a student is perceived by recruiters to be unprepared, the student will be asked to meet with an advisor in the OSS.

Additional Questions for Preparation
Use these questions to develop a logical story that leads the interviewer through your resume to the position he/she is seeking to fill:

General Questions:
- What three words would your best friend/colleague use to describe you?
- What three words would you choose to best describe yourself?
- What are the Hotel School’s greatest strengths?
- What is one of the Hotel School’s weaknesses and how would you address it?
- What did you learn from your last job?
- What have you read lately?
- Who are your heroes/heroines?
- What do you do outside of school/work?
- How did you get your winter externship? Last job?

Knowledge About The Function/Company/Industry; Ability To Link Experience/Personal Traits To The Job:
- Tell me about yourself.
Why should we select you?
What are your strengths?
Why do you want this job?
Why do you want to work for this company?
Why do you want to work in Revenue Management? Consulting? Operations?
Who is our competition and what do you see as our competitive advantage? Disadvantage?
What do you like about our product(s)? What suggestions would you make to improve it/them?
Where do you see the greatest opportunities in our industry?
What do you expect from this job? This company?

Leadership Skills:

To what activity outside of school/work have you made the greatest contribution? Please describe.
How do you motivate people?
Give me an example of your leadership skills. Give me another example.
Tell me about when you have championed an idea/a cause/a project, and describe what you accomplished and how.

Accomplishments:

What is your greatest accomplishment? Tell me about another accomplishment.
How long will it take you to make a contribution to our company?
What is the most significant problem you’ve faced in your life so far and how did you address it?
Give me an example of a tough decision you faced. How did you tackle it?

Team Skills/Interpersonal Skills:

Give me an example of how you work in a team. Give me another example.
With what kinds of people do you work best?
Give me an example of when you didn’t get along with a co-worker and how you resolved it.
Did you ever have to fire someone? How did you feel about it?

Work Environment/Corporate Culture:

What did you like/dislike about your last job?
What do you like about work?
Describe your ideal boss.
In what type of work environment do you flourish?

Analytical/Problem-Solving Skills:

Give me an example of your problem-solving abilities/analytical skills. Give me another example.
Why are manhole covers round?
How would you determine the number of basketball courts in the U.S.?
Describe as many uses for Ping-Pong balls as you can.
What’s your favorite commercial? Why?
Career Goals:

- Why did you choose the Hotel School?
- Why did you pursue an MMH?
- If you had to make this decision again, (i.e., get your MMH, accept your last job) would you make the same choice? Why or why not?
- Where do you want to be in five years?
- What other companies are you pursuing?
- If you had a choice between companies “X” and “Z,” how would you choose?
- What’s the difference between a job and a career?
- Explain the transitions between the items on your resume.

Challenges:

- For someone with little work experience: How does your previous experience prepare you for a managerial position?
- What do you know about our company?
- We only recruit MBAs. Why should I hire you?
- I’ve interviewed over 10,000 people in 20+ years. What’s so special about you?
- I’m going to start talking and you interrupt me when you have something to say. By the time you leave I want you to convince me you’re special.
- I’m interested in brainpower/horsepower. Convince me you have it.
- Analyze the five interviewers you have had prior to me. Pick two, and compare and contrast them.
- Which would you rather have, more creativity or more intelligence, and why?
- If you could ask one question of the CEO of this company, what would it be?
- What is your life purpose?
- Based on your resume, why are you here in this interview?

Wrap Up:

- What questions do you have?
- Is there anything that you’d like to add that we didn’t cover in the interview?