

Interviewing for an International Job

When Does the Interview Begin?

It starts with the very first contact you have with the employer. You will be judged by your first phone call, the envelope label on a mailed resume, the wording of an e-mail inquiry. Be professional from the start.

Interview Styles

- **Structured Interview:** The preferred format for government institutions and NGOs is a formal interview with a three-person selection panel, usually lasting an hour. You should answer each question directly without rambling as your answers are scored against a rating guide.
- **The Informal Interview:** The informal interview is the most popular interview style. In this setting the candidate is expected to play an active role with the interviewer in leading the discussion. Despite their personal and friendly tone, remember the interviewer is probing for facts that will enable him or her to assess your suitability for the job. Present yourself in the best possible light by steering the discussion to focus on your skills.

When and How Do You Negotiate Terms?

- **For entry-level jobs you don't have much leverage to negotiate.** You are just starting out, so experience is more important than contract terms.
- **If your employer is asking you to travel and live elsewhere, discuss the nature of the work and living arrangements during the first interview.**
- **Financial terms and contract elements are generally only discussed in the final stages** of the interview process.
- **If requested to state salary expectations, give a range:** *"With a Master's and two years experience, I am expecting to be in the \$55,000 to \$65,000 range."* or *"For positions in this line of work I feel that my experience will be valued in the top end of a \$45k to \$55k range."*

Create a Good First Impression

- **Arrive 15 minutes early.** Familiarize yourself with your surroundings and read company newsletters, bulletin boards, or something of interest to mention during the interview.
- **Double-check your appearance.** Hang your coat, have your arms free when you enter the interview room.
- **Use a firm handshake when introducing yourself;** *"Hello, my name is Francis Drummond."* If there is an interview team, extend your hand to each member. As simple as all of this may seem, experience has shown that many candidates are unable to do this with confidence.
- **Sit with your pad and pen ready to make notes** (but don't be too obvious about this). Even if you don't make use of the pen and paper, you are signaling to the employer that you are prepared.
- **Be conscious of your non-verbal communication.** Lean forward a little when listening and back when speaking. Make eye contact with each interviewer. Be dynamic and project enthusiasm through your voice.

Preparation Before the Interview

- **Run through a practice interview with a (professional) friend,** from the first greeting to your departure. Have your friend ask questions from your resume and suggest improvements.
- **Carry out a "profile analysis"** by matching your skills to those specified in the job description. Match your profile to the employer's ideal profile.
- **Practice reciting your personal and professional qualifications** and experience out loud.

- **Carefully research the organization:** Know the mandate and types of programs, organizational structure, budget, and number of employees.
- **Contact managers beforehand to find out more about the job or speak to someone who has worked in a similar position abroad.** To open a conversation: *"I'm calling to find out more about a job for which I'm scheduled to be interviewed. I am doing a little research prior to my interview to ensure that I have a good understanding of what the job entails."*
- **Try to learn something about your interviewer beforehand,** such as his or her name and job title. Find out if it will be a structured interview and how long it is likely to last. This information can probably be obtained from a secretary.
- **Write down at least 10 questions you would like to ask.** They should pertain to the company's major projects and your possible contribution to the company.
- **During the interview, plan to show caution and demonstrate that you are careful.** Even a seasoned professional will face challenges when moving into a new international environment. Ask candid questions about the work environment, the main challenges, and the living conditions.
- **Dress professionally.** Males should wear a suit and tie. Women should dress conservatively. If two candidates are equal in ability (and this often happens), the final choice can rest on appearance.
- **Look organized and prepared.** Carry a briefcase containing a pen, a notepad, a typed list of references, two extra copies of your resume and cover letter packaged in envelopes, and two or more examples of your past work, such as reports or publications.

Things to Do During the Interview

- **Approach the job interview as a meeting ground in which both parties interview each other.** Make the recruiter's job easier by talking about yourself in a logical and organized way. Speak in terms of skill sets.
- **Allow the recruitment officer to set the pace.** Always ask how long the interview will last; if two-thirds of the interview time has elapsed and you feel the interview team has not covered your important skills (some interviewers are not great at their jobs), this is the time to take the initiative: *"I would like to elaborate on some relevant job experience that will allow you to better analyze my skills."* or *"I would like to mention a few more factors in my background that could help you assess my qualifications."*
- **At the end of the interview, thank your interviewers by name while shaking hands firmly:** *"Thank you for your time and consideration. I appreciated this opportunity to learn more about your organization. You have an interesting program and I look forward to hearing from you."*

What Employers Are Looking For

- **Major emphasis is placed on the character of the recruit.** In a different cultural environment, you are not only exposed to unforeseen hardships, but must work and live in close proximity to your colleagues. One of the recruiter's tasks is to explore your feelings about these situations and judge your ability to survive in a different, and perhaps difficult, setting.
- **Team effort is an important consideration** in assessing your suitability for a post abroad. How will you respond to subordinates or superiors of different nationalities?
- **In the interview, more emphasis will be placed on character evaluation than on technical competence.** If you have been invited to an interview, you can usually assume that your professional credentials have passed the test.

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Two Very Important Sets of Skills

- Organizational Skills:** North American employers place great importance on efficiency, regardless of the field of work. Therefore, it is important to convey to employers that you can organize your work and manage your time. Elaborate on your work day: Do you compile a list of things to do? How do you establish priorities? Explain the process you use to accomplish your tasks; for example: *"In every job there is conflict between the things you would like to do and the time it takes to do them. That's why I keep a running list of things to do. By continually prioritizing jobs and assessing time available, I'm able to juggle my tasks without missing deadlines."*
- Interpersonal Skills:** Employers are interested in knowing how you deal with people in different situations: Do you have problems with authority figures? How would you cope with a request for information that you couldn't fulfill? How do you handle rejection? Could you continue to work with someone who had disappointed or insulted you? Interpersonal skills are better demonstrated through statements of opinion; for example: *"In an overseas situation, I would be particularly attentive to the role played by different authority figures in influencing the success or failure of projects. Communities abroad seem to have a more developed local leadership structure than our highly mobile, unstructured society. I think it would be important to recognize this hierarchy by getting community leaders to endorse new projects."*

Tactics for Answering Questions

The interview is one of the few times in your life when you are asked to speak about yourself: your accomplishments, skills, and strengths. You may feel uncomfortable "boasting." Here are a few suggestions to help make the task easier:

- Discuss your skills through a third party:** *"My colleagues tell me the reasons they like working with me are..."* *"All my past employers have mentioned my enthusiasm..."* *"If my friends had to describe three important character traits I possess, they would probably say..."*
- Mention the reasons for your success:** *"In my previous job I was particularly well-known for... I always try to understand a situation from a different point of view... The reasons I have been successful in developing new programs are..."*
- Develop an opening theme:** QUESTION: *"What qualifications and skills do you possess that would make you effective abroad?"* ANSWER: *"Throughout my career, both with the International Red Cross and with my numerous volunteer jobs, I have seen myself as a grassroots organizer. Planning, making lists, and communicating with the other people are my priorities. These attributes have made me effective in my work. Other skills which have helped me in my career are..."* or *"I have a standard approach which allows me to identify important facts quickly, I am enthusiastic about work and I encourage others by helping them clarify their ideas. This allows me to assess situations and it makes me approachable."*

Questions an Interviewer May Ask

- General Interview Questions:** *"Tell me about yourself. What are your major strengths/weaknesses? What would your colleagues say if they had to describe your working style?"*
- Knowledge of the Employer:** *"What do you know about this organization? Why do you want to work with us and not another NGO (the government, a private firm, or as a consultant)?"*
- Working Conditions Abroad:** *"Why do you want to work abroad? What qualifications/skills do you possess that will make you effective abroad? What working conditions do you anticipate will be different in another culture? Tell us about your previous international experience."*

- Living Conditions Abroad:** *"Have you ever lived through a difficult situation? How did you cope? Have you been separated from your family or your loved ones for extended periods of time? Have you ever had to cope with loneliness? How would you occupy your spare time? How important is privacy for you? Have you ever lived in situations where you have not had a lot of privacy?"*

Open-ended Enquiries

Most international interviews use open-ended enquiries such as, *"tell me about yourself,"* or *"what do you think of development?"* There is no right or wrong answer. Interviewers are really probing for bits of information they might not get from specific questions. It is therefore to your advantage to use these open-ended enquiries to emphasize your most important international, administrative, and interpersonal skills.

Situational Questions

One of the most interesting and challenging tactics used by international recruitment officers is the situational question. These usually concern a predicament you might encounter abroad. There is usually no clear right answer. The recruitment officer is looking for sound judgment and analytical ability. Your worst mistake would be to make a hasty final analysis, without first demonstrating that you had considered the situation carefully.

- Demonstrate your thinking process by thinking out loud:** Outline important facts for consideration. *"In this situation it would be important to give serious consideration to (these factors). One would have to weigh the importance of (this fact) and see if it were crucial to the assessment. It is only after considering all of these factors that I would be able to make a proper decision."*
- State your assumptions prior to giving your assessment:** *"If one were to assume that (this situation) were true, and that the cultural traits of the society were (these), then the best approach to this problem would be to..."*
- Prioritize the items for consideration:** *"It is clear that the major limiting factors in this situation are... and must be considered before looking at less important factors such as..."*
- State your limitations, and how you would react in light of them:** *"Since I have never traveled to Southeast Asia and am unfamiliar with the social norms, I might be more cautious and sit and wait until my guide/interpreter returned before making a final decision."*
- If uncertain of the situation, make a comparison with a more familiar one.** *"While I am unfamiliar with the ethical standards binding a United Nations employee, I know that as an NGO employee I would pay a small bribe rather than have ten volunteers spend the night sleeping at the border."*
- In some situations the best answer is that you would seek someone else's advice.** *"If I were a new arrival in the country and was not yet aware of the social customs, I would seek out another expatriate who has had more experience with the situation."*

Things to Do After the Interview

- Follow up your interview with a fax or e-mail within four hours.** Thank the interview team for their time and consideration of your candidacy. Re-state your interest in applying your skills to the job. Elaborate (with one sentence) on one of the issues discussed during the interview.
- If you are not hired, it is appropriate to ask why:** *"I'm calling to discuss my interview and was wondering if you would have a few moments to discuss the reasons I did not get the job and how I could improve my performance in the future."*

A Last Word

Be prepared. Be confident. Relax, and go for the job you've always wanted!



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