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NOVA SCOTIA WORKS

# Interview Tips

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# Interview Tips – Outline

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## PURPOSE OF THE INTERVIEW

The purpose of the interview is to give you, the job seeker, the opportunity to present qualifications, experience, skills and abilities that relate to the job being filled, in the most positive way possible.

The interview allows the employer to assess the candidate's suitability for the position, and form opinions on his / her potential fit within the organization.

The interview allows the candidate to showcase his/her strengths and to assess the organization's potential suitability as an employment opportunity. This is also the candidate's opportunity to assess the interviewer and the company for fit; is this a place you could see yourself working? It is worth remembering that the interview is a **Two-Way Street**.

## STYLES OF INTERVIEWS

### STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS:

All candidates are asked the same set of questions. In some cases responses are "graded", with the candidate(s) who score the highest being invited for the next round of interviews. Studying the job description and preparing carefully will help you present your skills and qualifications more completely, even if they are not covered directly in the prepared questions.



<http://love-ur-job.com/the-interview/the-interview-types/>

### UNSTRUCTURED INTERVIEWS:

This interview may have no specific agenda set by the interviewer, and can often feel like a conversation. You will likely have a better opportunity to say what you want to say, but like the structured interviews, preparation will help you ensure that you make all the points you want to make. Be ready for some occasionally unorthodox questions!

### IMPROMPTU INTERVIEWS:

This unscheduled interview may happen during an informational meeting or when you drop in to submit your résumé to an employer. It pays to be prepared to sell yourself at all times so that you always make a strong first impression!

## TYPES OF INTERVIEWS

### ONE-ON-ONE

This is the most common interview format, where one interviewer speaks with one candidate. Make and maintain eye contact, smile.

### PANEL/BOARD INTERVIEW

More than one interviewer is present, often notes are taken. Make eye contact with every member of the board to include everyone in each question you answer. Begin and end by making eye contact with the person asking the question.

### TELEPHONE INTERVIEW

How you dress and carry yourself affects your voice. Dress professionally for a telephone interview (even though they can't see you), including your shoes. Stand up. Have your résumé and the job description handy so you can refer to them, but do not read straight from them. Smile!

### VIDEO CONFERENCING

Use the same strategies as you would for a face-to-face interview (dress, body language, etc.) but be aware of what is behind you in the room you are using, and the lighting. Also, sometimes there can be transmission delays to consider. When answering the questions, look into the camera, not at the screen.

### COMPUTER INTERVIEW

Sometimes you will be asked to do computer screening prior to meeting in person. **READ ALL INSTRUCTIONS CAREFULLY**, make sure you understand completely. Know that you may be timed. Be as complete with your answers as possible, using the industry key words you learned during your research.

## PREPARING FOR THE INTERVIEW

### PRACTICE THE THREE R'S:

Think about the 3 R's when preparing for your interview – **RESEARCH | REVIEW | REHEARSE !**

- 1) **Research** the job description, the names of the people who will be doing the interviewing, the company and their products & services. The more you know about the job and about the organization, the easier it will be to tailor your skills to match them. Research the industry and the market; learn as much as you can about the competition and how different companies position themselves to be competitive.
- 2) **Review** the job qualifications carefully. Know your skills and assets as outlined in your résumé and be prepared to demonstrate how your skills match the needs of the position.
- 3) **Rehearse** your answers out loud. This will help you feel more confident and sure that you are saying everything you want to say. **Practice makes perfect!**



<http://www.autorecruit.com.au/dressing-for-a-job-interview/>

#### **DRESS APPROPRIATELY:**

“Appropriate” for a job interview means consider what you might wear on the job at that particular organization, and dress one notch better than that. Think conservative in your choices; stay away from flashy or chunky jewelry and loud distracting colours. Clothing, hair and skin should be clean and neat. As many workplaces are scent free, avoid heavily fragranced products.

#### **WHAT TO BRING:**

Come prepared with everything you may need:

- a) Bring a pen and paper
- b) Bring copies of your résumé, cover letter, recommendation letters and references (have one for each of the people who will be interviewing you)
- c) Bring your portfolio so you can show certificates or samples of your work
- d) Bring anything you can think of that will showcase you in a positive light!

#### **DURING THE INTERVIEW**

- a) Arrive on time! This means no more than 10 minutes early
- b) Smile! Maintain a positive attitude throughout the interview
- c) Be attentive to the interviewer; be ready to shake hands. Maintain eye contact throughout the interview. Watch for nonverbal cues and be aware of your own body language. Sit straight, try to be conscious of your nervous habits
- d) Listen carefully to the questions; make sure you fully understand what they are asking before you answer
- e) Keep answers focused. Think about your **S A R** while you are telling your stories.
- f) Do not smoke prior to the interview. Don't chew gum during the interview, this can be distracting. Also, no alcohol prior to an interview.
- g) Have some questions ready to ask the interviewer
- h) Thank the interviewer for the opportunity

## STRATEGIES FOR INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

- a) The easiest and most effective way to demonstrate your abilities is to tell a story from your experiences in which you have successfully performed what the interviewer is asking.

Whenever you can, answer questions using the **S A R** formula:

**Situation** (explain the setting, the event, details of what happened)

**Action** (what specific steps did you take to solve the problem?)

**Result** (what was the positive outcome or the lesson learned from this experience?)

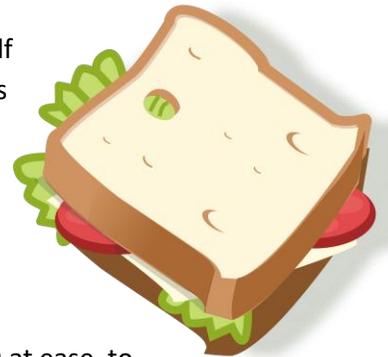
- b) When you are answering a negative question, frame your answer in a positive “sandwich”;

**Positive** (state a strength or something positive from the situation)

**Negative** (spend no more than the minimum time needed to explain the negative)

**Positive** (finish on a strong positive; how did you overcome the problem? What good came from the experience? What lesson did you learn?)

We all have weaknesses; the employer wants to know that you know yourself well enough to recognize yours and have taken (or are currently taking) steps towards self-improvement.



## POPULAR INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

### “TELL ME ABOUT YOURSELF”

**Purpose:** (This is your sales pitch!) The purpose of this question is to put you at ease, to assess why they should / should not hire you, and to learn a bit more about your background.

**Suggestions:** Prepare and rehearse this well in advance; your response should be fluid and natural. Briefly touch on three areas; your **Education** (as it relates to the position), your **Qualifications, Experience, Skills and / or Attributes** (as they relate to the position), and some appropriate **Personal Interests** which will show that you have a stable, well-rounded character.

**Example:** “I have been in the customer service industry for the past 5 years, most recently in a call centre environment, handling incoming customer inquiries of a technical nature. I particularly enjoy this sort of work because it affords me the opportunity to connect with people. My strengths in building strong professional relationships won me Employee of the Month awards on 7 separate occasions during those 5 years, and the status of top branch performer in 2012. When I am not at work I enjoy keeping active by teaching a beach-front yoga class every other weekend during the summer.”

## “WHAT IS YOUR GREATEST ACHIEVEMENT?”

**Purpose:** to see if you are able to recognize and talk about specific achievements. Also, why you consider a specific accomplishment to be your “greatest” gives the interviewer insights into your values and priorities, which are some of the criteria used to determine how you will perform with their team.

**Suggestions:** Using the **SAR** formula, try to choose a work-related achievement which highlights your knowledge and expertise. Give specifics about the story. If you are new to the industry or re-entering the work force, think about how the skills you use can transfer to the position for which you are interviewing, and point out the relevance of your achievement to the job.

**Example:** “My greatest achievement has been overcoming my shyness. When I was in school my shyness made it difficult to talk to teachers, to give presentations, and to make friends. I decided that I needed to change this, so I signed up for a course on public speaking, joined a book club in which we talk about the books we read, and I joined Toastmasters. I accepted a job in a busy retail store where the main part of my job was to talk to strangers and recommend our products. With every customer I talked to and every speech I gave, my confidence improved a little bit and it got a bit easier for me. At my last performance review my manager said that my customer service skills had improved so much that he hardly recognized me from the shy girl who first walked into her store! Confidence and being assertive are things I will have to continue to work on, but I have already proven to myself that I can overcome my shyness, and if I can do that, I can do anything.”

## “WHAT IS YOUR GREATEST STRENGTH?”

**Purpose:** To discover reasons for hiring you, to find out how well you know yourself, to find out if you are confident and believe in yourself.

**Suggestions:** Briefly summarize some of the skills / training / experience that you have which qualify you for the job, then say something like “besides this...” and mention your top skill. Think of the **SAR** formula and give an example of a situation demonstrating you using this key skill. \*If the employer asks for one strength (singular), don’t give them three; listen to the question and answer specifically what they ask!

**Example:** “When I’m working on a project, I don’t want just to meet deadlines. Rather, I prefer to complete the project well ahead of schedule. I have exceeded my sales goals every quarter and I’ve earned a bonus each year since I started with my current employer. My time management skills are excellent and I’m organized, efficient, and take pride in excelling at my work.”



<http://career.guru99.com/top-50-leadership-interview-questions/>

## “WHAT IS YOUR GREATEST WEAKNESS?”

**Purpose:** To find out if you are honest about yourself and what you do to improve. Employers also use this to look for “red flags”, reasons they should not hire you.

**Suggestions:** Think of your weakness as the “flip side” of one of your strengths. For example, if your weakness is accuracy in data entry, your strength is your speed or the volume of work you can produce. Be sure to answer this question using the **Positive/Negative/Positive** “Sandwich” approach, and finish with how you overcame this weakness, what you are currently doing to improve, or a lesson you have learned. \*Your weakness should **NOT** be a key skill required in the job for which you are applying.

**Example:** “I tend to be a very enthusiastic person, and when faced with a new project, I want to do 100 things at once. So, I’ve learned that I have to sit down and make a list of priorities and plan a schedule. That always works well with me”.

*The only man who never makes a mistake  
is the man who never does anything.*

*- Theodore Roosevelt*

## “WHAT IS THE BIGGEST FAILURE OR ERROR IN JUDGEMENT YOU HAVE MADE IN A PREVIOUS JOB?”

**Purpose:** To see if you learn from your mistakes. To see how well you know yourself, your shortcomings and your assets. To look for potential “red flags” in your work habits.

**Suggestions:** Use both the **SAR** formula and the **Positive/Negative/Positive** sandwich when answering this question. If you were able to resolve the problem, focus on the solution. If this situation did not end well, focus on the lesson you learned and what you would do differently.

**Example:** “As the purchaser for a residential construction project I was responsible for sourcing the equipment and materials needed to complete the job. Our site foreman gave me a list of materials including the rebar needed to complete the basement. The requisition form had asked for 15 lengths of rebar, but the print on the form was faint, and I misread it and ordered only 5 lengths. This shortage of materials delayed the rest of the project, since the rebar was needed for the foundation before any other work on the basement could be done. As soon as I realized the error, I contacted both the foreman and my manager to explain what had happened. I then called the supplier to see how quickly we could get the remaining lengths on site. The supplier did not have the materials to fill our order, so I called 2 other suppliers to fill in the missing lengths. With some negotiations with our regular freight carriers, I was able to bring in the rebar with other materials, saving some freight charges, and the project was only delayed by 2 days, which were able to make up in other areas of the construction project.”

## “WHY DID YOU LEAVE YOUR LAST JOB?”

**Purpose:** To discover any “red flags” or problems which might be a reason to not hire you, also to assess your attitude towards employers, supervisors, or difficult situations.

**Suggestion:** Keep your answer as brief and simple as possible. If you left on good terms, say so. Say something positive about the company or your previous manager. If you left on bad terms, still find something positive to say, but use the “**Positive/Negative/Positive**” sandwich to frame your answer. Note that you are seeking the opportunity for new challenges and career growth. Sometimes simple is best.

**Examples:** “The company went out of business”. “The contract ended”. “I moved from British Columbia to Nova Scotia”. “The company was taking a new direction and this offered me an opportunity to re-evaluate my own career goals and development”.

## “DESCRIBE A TIME WHEN YOU HAD TO USE YOUR WRITTEN COMMUNICATION SKILLS TO GET AN IMPORTANT POINT ACROSS”.

**Purpose:** This is an example of a behaviour-based question. Since past **behaviour dictates future performance**, these kinds of questions are popular among interviewers. They are intended to give an indication of how you will perform on the job, to find out about your work strengths, to look for areas for concern on the job.

**Suggestions:** Use the **SAR** formula to answer these questions, using a story from your professional history which illustrates the question being asked. Pay attention to the **Result**, making sure it is a strong, positive finish to your story.

**Example:** “As an Administrative Coordinator, I had a staff of 27 students. Having such a large student staff all working different shifts and having varying class schedules meant that meetings could not be held with everyone at one time. I needed to communicate with everyone about important policies and information often, so I came up with the idea of designing a Web page for my staff with written announcements. Each Desk Assistant was required to check the Web page daily at the beginning of his/her shift. I also sent email communications by a distribution list that allowed each Desk Assistant to keep informed about anything. The one situation that stands out in my mind is a last-minute summer camp that decided to come in a day early with only one day's notice. I had no staff scheduled to check in the camps or to organize the keys. I posted an update to the Web page and sent an email. Within four hours, I had the following day completely staffed and desk assistants there to organize room keys for the campers that night.”



## ”DESCRIBE A SITUATION WHERE YOU FOUND YOURSELF DEALING WITH SOMEONE WHO DIDN'T LIKE YOU. HOW DID YOU HANDLE IT?”

**Purpose:** This is another behaviour based question. The interviewer is assessing your interpersonal skills to make judgments about how you will interact with his/her team and/or clients.

**Suggestion:** Once again, use **SAR** formula. Since this is really a negative question, frame your questions using the **Positive/Negative/Positive Sandwich** and focus on the positive outcome.

**Example:** “One thing I pride myself on is my strong work ethic. When I first began working at the YMCA, I was the youngest member of the staff. An older woman really “knew the ropes” of the place. When I first got there she barely acknowledged my presence, and through word of mouth I discovered that she thought that I was too young to successfully fulfill my duties because I was so inexperienced. She assumed I was immature. I did my job and took every opportunity to make a good impression. I was a very diligent worker and behaved in a highly professional manner at all times, learning quickly the best way to do things. After about two weeks of the silent treatment from her, she came up to me and told me how impressed she was with me. She told me that I had done an excellent job and was the fastest learner that she had ever seen. She apologized to me for ignoring me and took me under her wing and shared what she knew with me.”



## “WHY DO YOU WANT TO WORK HERE / WHY SHOULD WE HIRE YOU?”

**Purpose:** To find out what you know about the company and determine if you will stay. To see if your qualifications and values fit the job description and the corporate “climate”. Think of this question as a sales question and you are the product; why should they buy you?

**Suggestions:** Talk about what you know about the company and relate it to your own experiences. Use “you” and “your” statements, which demonstrate the value to the company. Use this opportunity to show what you have to offer beyond the scope of the immediate job requirements. Don’t underestimate your personal traits that make you unique and a good fit for the job.

**Example:** “From our discussion so far, it sounds as though you are looking for someone to come in and take charge straight away. Also, you appear to be looking for ways to improve some of your database systems. With my 5 years’ experience working with financial databases, I have saved companies thousands of dollars by streamlining their systems. My enthusiasm and ability to learn quickly allow me to analyze problems very quickly. My co-workers would tell you that I have a positive attitude and am a good team player. I have the ability to remain focused and provide solutions to problems in fast-paced and stressful environments and can be counted on when things get difficult. I’m confident I would be asset to your team.”

## “WHAT ARE YOUR SALARY EXPECTATIONS?”

**Purpose:** To find out how close you come to what they are willing to pay and if you are realistic about current salary ranges and rates. To find out if you know your own self-worth.

**Suggestions and Examples:** Do your research prior to the interview to ensure you know what the market will bear for this position. You might politely request more information; “Could you please help me by giving me an indication of the salary range you are willing to offer a person with my qualifications?” (Sometimes they will be willing to share this information). Express an interest in working for them and try to find out more details about the job (if you need to). Know your worth and your bottom line and offer a range that you feel is fair and that you would be content with. “I know that the average wage for a similar position in Halifax right now is between \$35 and \$50 per year. With my education and 7 years of experience, I would fall near the higher range, however I am very flexible.”

## “DO YOU HAVE ANY QUESTIONS FOR ME OR FOR THE COMPANY?”

**Purpose:** This is used as a signal that the interview is almost over. Also, it is a way for the interviewer to assess your true interest in the job.

**Suggestions:** Your answer to this question will always be “yes I do”. Keep your questions brief and watch for nonverbal cues that the interviewer is getting anxious to end the interview. Be confident but not demanding or self-seeking. Demonstrate that you have listened to the interviewer and researched the company.

**Examples:** “When will you be making your final decision?” “What do you see as the greatest challenge facing someone in this position” (this gives you an opportunity to respond with your skills) “I noticed on your web site that your company has an eco-friendly policy. Can you please tell me more about the initiative you have taken so far?”

