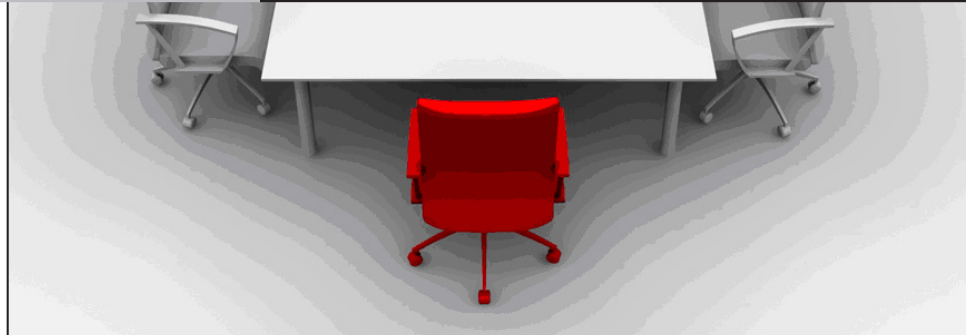




OCS

INTERVIEWING



***Undergraduate Resource Series***

Office of Career Services | 54 Dunster Street  
Harvard University | Faculty of Arts and Sciences  
[ocsrecep@fas.harvard.edu](mailto:ocsrecep@fas.harvard.edu) | [www.ocs.fas.harvard.edu](http://www.ocs.fas.harvard.edu)

© 2021 President and Fellows of Harvard College  
All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced in any way without the express written permission of the Harvard University Faculty of Arts & Sciences Office of Career Services.  
07/21

Office of Career Services  
Harvard University Faculty  
of Arts & Sciences  
Cambridge, MA 02138  
[ocsrecep@fas.harvard.edu](mailto:ocsrecep@fas.harvard.edu)  
[www.ocs.fas.harvard.edu](http://www.ocs.fas.harvard.edu)

## ACE THE INTERVIEW

**D**uring an interview, potential employers try to assess the following:

- Your qualifications for the position.
- Your "fit" with the employer or organization.
- How well you have considered your reasons for applying.
- How clearly you can express your potential contributions to the organization.
- Your "transferable skills" such as communication and professionalism.
- Your knowledge of the organization and level of interest in the position.

In essence, the interviewer wants to know: Why should we hire you?

Employers are looking for applicants who are focused and mature, understand the work the company is doing and the requirements of the position for which they're interviewing, and can communicate how their skills can be used to meet those requirements. They want to hire people who are cooperative, organized, and hard-working. Therefore, it's important to be as prepared as possible before your interview.

Below are some suggestions for improving your interviewing skills:

**Research the company, field, and position**— Before the interview, read the employer's website and review any online material relevant to the role and position or (when applicable) print material you may have previously picked up at career fairs or other hiring events. Be sure to stay current on industry news by reading daily news sources. Conduct a Google search on the organization the day of the interview to be current on any new developments. Utilize Harvard online subscriptions such as Vault (which can be found on the OCS website) for additional industry and company information. Whenever possible, attend any networking and information sessions the employer is having or connect with someone who works there to increase your visibility and to gather additional information. Use the Harvard Alumni Association alumni database and LinkedIn to identify alumni to reach out to.

**Know your resume**—Be prepared to discuss everything on your resume. Remember that your resume is the only information most employers will have about you. Expect questions about your choice of activities, professional experiences, concentration, and thesis (if applicable). Employers and organizations are interested in knowing how

you've chosen to spend your time and energy, and why. Help your interviewer get to know you and differentiate you from other students. Don't be too brief when answering "what and why" questions, but don't ramble, either. Expand on your experience and skills. **Focus your responses on how these relate to the position for which you're interviewing.**

### **From a recent employer:**

**"All Harvard candidates are capable of doing the job. What distinguishes the candidates is the level of interest."**

**Practice answering interview questions**—The old saying, "practice makes perfect" certainly applies to the interviewing process. Practice doesn't imply that you are memorizing answers to questions, but are instead assessing *how* you answer questions, whether you're making eye-contact and seem interested, seeing if your explanations are clear, and understanding the reasoning behind

certain questions as well as how to connect your experience to them. You can practice with roommates, family, friends, tutors, and by appointment with advisers at OCS. The more experience you have articulating your thoughts and highlighting your skills, the more effective and polished you will be.

There are a variety of resources available that offer helpful strategies. Many of these resources are available through the OCS website, including InterviewStream. Additionally, OCS offers a number of interviewing workshops. Refer to the “Events” section of the OCS website for dates and times.

**Prepare some questions to ask an employer**—These questions will help you obtain the information needed to make an informed decision and also reiterate your interest in the position. Make sure you know the next step in the process before you leave. Ask, “When might I expect to hear from you?” and, if applicable, indicate your continued interest in the position.

**Make sure your attire is appropriate**—A well-groomed, professional appearance is essential. Anything else will detract from the best possible presentation you can make. Decide what to wear well before the day of the interview. A good way to determine suitable attire is to look at what people typically wear in the organization or industry for which you’re interviewing. Generally plan to wear a fairly formal outfit in a dark color. In some creative and technical fields you may have more leeway in terms of formal vs. casual attire, but it’s always safe to err on the formal side. Avoid: wild ties, attention-grabbing jewelry, strong scents, and bold colors.

| Attire   |   |
|--|---|
| <b>Corporate Dress<br/>(for interviews)</b>      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• dark suit with a light shirt or tailored dress</li><li>• conservative tie/simple jewelry</li><li>• dark/polished closed-toe shoes</li></ul> |
| <b>Business Casual<br/>(for employer events)</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• khakis, dress pants, or skirt</li><li>• button-down long-sleeve shirt, sweater set, or blouse</li><li>• have a blazer handy</li></ul>       |

See the OCS “Dress for Success” web page for ideas on interview attire at <https://ocs.fas.harvard.edu/dress-success>.

**Map out the location or test your technology**— Confirm your day, time, and method of communication. For virtual interviews, check your tech and internet connection. If traveling, plan your trip ahead of time, especially if you are in a major urban area or interviewing at a time when traffic may delay your travel. Plan to arrive 10-15 minutes early so that you can relax and compose yourself. If you arrive earlier, wait, and review your notes. For virtual interviews you can show up 1-2 minutes early.

**Have a good attitude**—Project enthusiasm, confidence, and a positive attitude! Convey the message that you are the best candidate for the position, and that this is the employer for whom you want to work. A job interview is not the place to be “laid-back;” it’s up to you to “sell” yourself for the position. Market your skills and experience to fit the job requirements, which you would know from careful and extensive research of the employer. Be professional, polished, and confident.

**What to bring with you to an interview:**

- Extra copies of your resume
- Pen and paper or padfolio

- Writing samples (if appropriate for the industry)

When invited to a full day of interviews, bring a bottle of water and a snack such as a granola bar. Often the employer will provide refreshments but just in case they don't, these will come in handy. Take a moment between interviews to "recharge" out of sight of your interviewers.

### **Don't Forget To:**

- **Confirm the location of the interview or virtual link**
- **Arrive to an in-person interview 10-15 minutes early**
- **Bring extra copies of your resume**
- **Smile and make eye contact**
- **Send a thank-you note or email after the interview within 24-48 hours**

**TIP: Turn off your cell phone before the interview begins!** Interruptions from a phone call, text, or notification can be very disruptive and seem unprofessional. For virtual interviews, close all tabs and silence email/text alerts on your computer.

## **Behavioral/Fit Interviews**

Many employers use a "Behavioral Interview" to assess candidates' skills and fit with their organization. The principle behind this type of interview is that past behavior is a good predictor of future behavior.

In most cases, the employer has predetermined a specific set of characteristics, often referred to as "competencies," that are required to be successful in the available position. Some examples of competencies include problem-solving, teamwork, communication, writing skills, and leadership. The employer then designs open-ended questions that ask you to refer back to a particular situation and describe how you responded.

**Many employers believe that past behavior predicts future behavior.**

**INSIDER TIP:** When you are asked a behavioral interview question, think about the situation you want to describe. What action(s) did you take related to the question asked and what was the result based on that action?

For example, an interviewer may ask, "Tell me about a time when you were on a team that wasn't working well together." The expectation is that you will cite a specific situation from your own experience. Unless the interviewer indicates otherwise, this example can come from your work, school, extra-curricular activity, or volunteer experience. It's important that you have something specific to say and that you can describe your own role and what you learned from the particular situation you cite. Be aware that the interviewer is expecting to ask you multiple questions, so be as concise as possible while getting your point across.

This type of interview is a great way for you to tell the story behind your resume. Rather than merely presenting a list of your achievements, you have the opportunity to elaborate on some

accomplishments that you may be particularly proud of. But like a good story, it's best to keep a few guidelines in mind:

- **1. Situation, 2. Action, 3. Result**—follow this framework to answer behavioral questions
- **Show, don't tell**—use a specific example and only include relevant details
- **Stay on topic**—remember the question you're trying to answer; don't get sidetracked
- **Have a conclusion**—be sure to include the outcome or what you learned from the situation
- **Make it resonate**—touch upon why your behavior or response would be useful to the employer or in the position

The qualities listed below are sought by many employers, and you'll want to continue to develop these across your career. To prepare for interviews, identify and practice telling stories for each of these eight competencies, demonstrating at least one of the related qualities in your example.

|   |   |
|---|---|
| <p><b>Critical Thinking</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Deal with complexity</li> <li>• Handle ambiguity</li> <li>• See issues from multiple perspectives</li> <li>• Uncover flaws in arguments</li> <li>• Ask informed questions</li> </ul>   | <p><b>Learning Orientation</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Intellectual curiosity</li> <li>• Quick learner</li> <li>• Flexible and adaptable</li> <li>• Open to new ideas</li> <li>• Innovative</li> <li>• Reflect on mistakes, able to make improvements</li> </ul>                 |
| <p><b>Leadership</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Demonstrate initiative</li> <li>• Justify decisions</li> <li>• Advocate</li> <li>• Motivate/empower</li> <li>• Conviction</li> <li>• Good judgment and integrity</li> <li>• Resolve differences</li> </ul>                              | <p><b>Problem Solving</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• See multiple possibilities</li> <li>• Evaluate options</li> <li>• Synthesize/integrate information</li> <li>• Multidisciplinary approach</li> <li>• Entrepreneurial</li> <li>• Think on feet</li> <li>• Resourceful</li> </ul> |
| <p><b>Teamwork</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consensus builder</li> <li>• Listen to others</li> <li>• Collaborative</li> <li>• Ability to work in diverse teams</li> <li>• Aware of diverse/global perspectives</li> <li>• Can build professional relationships and network</li> </ul> | <p><b>Communication</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strong writing skills</li> <li>• Public speaking and presentation skills</li> <li>• Influence and persuade effectively</li> <li>• Communicate globally—culturally sensitive/aware</li> </ul>                                     |
| <p><b>Concrete/Technical Skills</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Research skills</li> <li>• Analysis of large data sets</li> <li>• Tech/social media savvy</li> <li>• Qualitative/Quantitative analysis</li> <li>• Coding Languages: Java, C++, Python, etc.</li> </ul>                   | <p><b>Professionalism</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Demonstrate a strong work ethic</li> <li>• Time management skills/punctuality</li> <li>• Take accountability for work</li> <li>• Learn from feedback and mistakes</li> <li>• Ethical and responsible</li> </ul>                |

**Be sure to practice your interview skills using InterviewStream** which records mock interviews for you to assess. See <https://ocs.fas.harvard.edu/interview-stream>.

In addition to determining how your interests and skills “fit” with the position and organization, the interviewer is also assessing how you might fit with the company or team culture. Sometimes fit questions are simply about whether you can connect with the interviewer on some other topic apart from your work or Harvard experience. Consider how you want to discuss another interest that you have, whether it be art, current events, gaming, etc., should an interviewer ask you about them – especially if you’ve referenced these interests on your resume!

Many interviewers also apply what is colloquially referred to as the “airport test,” especially in fields where people work for long hours in teams. While listening to your responses, the interviewer is mentally asking him or herself, “Is this someone I could be stuck with at an airport for 12 hours?” It’s important to keep in mind that this question is *not* a social question about friendship – this question is in a professional context to encapsulate other questions like: “Can you make the most out of a bad situation?” and, “Can you get along with your colleagues for long periods of time under less than ideal circumstances?” You may consider applying this test yourself as you evaluate whether this is an organization or field where you want to work.

## **Answering Negatively Framed Questions**

Interviewers will often ask negatively framed questions as part of a behavioral/fit interview. These questions, such as “Tell me about a time you made a mistake” or “What is your greatest weakness” can be the most difficult to answer, and it is important to prepare for them. These questions are being asked in order to understand how you handle challenging and tough situations, and to gauge how much insight you have into yourself and areas where you need improvement. Be honest and truthful in your answers, take responsibility for mistakes you have made, and be accountable for areas in which you need improvement. Try to focus on behaviors, not personality traits, and talk about ways in which you are working to improve upon weaknesses. Know that everyone has weaknesses, and everyone has made mistakes. If you are thoughtful and strategic in your answers, you will provide the interviewer with the information they need to have a full picture of you as a candidate.

## **Phone Interviews**

The phone interview has traditionally been used to screen a candidate’s communications skills, interest in the position, salary requirements, and other qualifications. This method also helps minimize the cost of bringing in an applicant from a distant location by first determining whether they are a strong candidate.

It is becoming common practice for employers to use the phone (and video) interview more comprehensively beyond a general pre-screen. In light of this, we encourage you to prepare as you would for any interview. Be ready to answer challenging questions and provide feedback on a variety of issues related to the field and the organization.

The main difference between a phone interview and a face-to-face interview is the absence of non-verbal cues. There is a certain amount of energy shared between the interviewer and interviewee that is somewhat lost in a phone interview. Make sure you compensate for this by being prepared, focused, and able to communicate clearly. A few tips:

- Enunciate slowly, clearly, and with adequate volume.
- Convey, through your voice, enthusiasm, passion, and competence. Avoid “up-talk”—the verbal punctuation of each sentence with a question mark.
- If possible, use a landline instead of a cell phone. If you’re using a cell phone in a crowded place, the background noise and possibility of static could easily undermine your interview.
- Plan the time and place of your phone interview so that you know you’ll have privacy, a quiet space, and a good connection.
- Dress as you would for a real interview. Dressing the part will help you focus on the importance and purpose of the conversation.
- Have plenty of notes in front of you as reminders of questions to ask, background information about the employer, and perhaps even strategies for answering tough questions.
- Use your time wisely to earn a chance to meet the employer in person for a follow-up interview.
- Don’t be afraid of silence. If you’ve given a strong answer and there is no response, the interviewer is most likely taking notes. Don’t ruin a great response by rambling on with more details!

## **Video Interviews**

For similar reasons to those described for phone interviews, employers are increasingly using technology to make a long-distance interview seem as close to a face-to-face interview as possible. Zoom, Webex, FaceTime, Google Hangouts, and other video conferencing technologies have made it possible for employers to interview candidates in a more efficient and cost-effective way. In addition, these technologies have made it easier for employers to interview students when they’re studying abroad or otherwise off campus.

Prepare for a video interview as thoroughly as you would for any interview. However, there are some additional things to keep in mind:

- Become familiar with the technology. Ask what product or service will be used and practice with your friends and family if you can. This will make you more comfortable in the interview, allowing you to focus on the conversation.
- Remember that the interviewer will be able to see you AND the things that surround you. Items in the background can reflect on you as a candidate. Find a location with a neutral background or consider using a virtual background.
- Maintain eye contact. Many technologies allow you to view yourself simultaneously, and it is tempting to monitor yourself rather than stay focused on the interviewer.
- Consider writing down the names of those who attend your virtual interview, as you may not have an opportunity to receive business cards or follow-up contact info.
- As with an in-person interview, dress appropriately for the position and organization.
- As with a phone interview, make sure that you have privacy, a quiet space, and a good connection.

## **On-Demand/Recorded Video Interviews**

While the video interviews described above are intended to mirror the real-time, back-and-forth dynamic of a face-to-face interview, there is another type of video interview. In an on-demand or recorded video interview, employers use cloud-based software to relay written or pre-recorded questions, and the student uses the same software and their webcam to record and submit responses in the allotted time. Some examples of the tools being used include HireVue, InterviewStream, WePow, and Yello. An advantage of this method for both the employer and the



interviewee is that an organization can share the candidate's video across a wider team or different units to find a good fit without needing to schedule multiple interviews. While some students have complained that this process feels impersonal and does not allow for them to ask questions, please note that you will most likely have at least one real-time interview before receiving an offer. For this reason, some employers consider the recorded interview to be a way of augmenting the resume or application as opposed to thinking of it as replacing one of the interview rounds. Either way, it is still a critical evaluation tool for the employers who use it, and students should take time to prepare accordingly. A few tips to prepare for recorded interviews in addition to the video interview tips offered above include:

- Practice by using a tool like InterviewStream (available for free through the OCS website). Record yourself answering interview prompts and use the self-assessment check-lists in InterviewStream to evaluate your responses.
- Schedule plenty of time. Typically you will need to complete the interview in one sitting and cannot pause and come back to it later. Each interview response will have a time limit (e.g. three minutes), but some employers will allow you multiple attempts at a given question. Make sure you allow enough time to take advantage of this without rushing the end of your interview.
- Pick a time to interview when you will be at your best. Just because you can complete the recorded interview at 2 a.m. does not mean that it is a good idea to do so.
- As with any video interview, make sure you have a quiet, private space with a neutral background. Dress in interview attire, make eye contact, and practice with the specific software in advance whenever possible.
- Accept any help offered by the employer. Most employers understand that this is a new process and are working on tip sheets and other preparation tools specific to their organization.

## **Technical and Finance Interviews**

Technical interviews are often used in fields such as finance and technology. They seek to assess two things in a candidate:

- (1) fit for the job and the organization, and
- (2) technical knowledge.

Assessing “fit” for a position usually involves questions you’re familiar with such as “Tell me about yourself,” and “Why are you interested in working for our organization?” It may also include behavioral questions such as “Tell me about a time when you had to work with people who were different from you.”

The technical questions will be specific to the area for which you’re interviewing. For example, technology companies, such as Google or Facebook, will likely require those applying for technical roles (e.g. software engineer, data scientist, product manager) to spend time writing code via a whiteboard or an online tool and will evaluate and assess your work. There are many websites that offer coding practice questions such as LeetCode.com, but you may also consider reading *Cracking the Coding Interview* by Gayle Laakmann McDowell.

Finance is another industry that is likely to have more technical interviews. For example, common questions for investment management positions might include: “Tell me about your dream stock portfolio. What is your investment strategy? If you’re given a market or an industry, what would be the steps to evaluate them?” Employers aren’t looking for a deep mastery of technical concepts, but rather a basic understanding of finance concepts related to the area of finance you are interviewing for (e.g. investment banking). Make sure that you keep up to date on the literature, terminology, and news in the field. **It is especially important to review the industry news on the day of the interview.**

Finance interviews may also use case questions as part of their general interview format. Although the use of case questions in finance interviews varies depending on the employer, it’s important to be prepared.

## Case Interviews

The case question, inherent in many consulting interviews, is one way of determining whether or not the candidate has an aptitude for handling complex business problems. How a candidate answers a case question can reveal their ability to think like a consultant and perhaps even desire to do the job.

Case questions most often illustrate the nature of the employer’s work. Questions are sometimes drawn directly from the employer’s experience or can be crafted on the spot from news of the day. Most employers don’t expect in-depth business knowledge or high-level business terminology (there are exceptions, usually on the individual interviewer level). What they’re looking for is whether the student has the analytical or problem-solving ability and the business sense to know what matters in a specific situation and can clearly explain it.

Most often, the employer verbally presents a business challenge to the candidate and asks how they would approach the problem. Sometimes, most notably in later round interviews, some employers will present the candidate with a case study in print and allow the candidate a designated period of time to analyze the data either alone or in a group. If the case question is presented verbally, make sure you understand what’s being asked of you. Reiterating the question is an effective way of confirming that you’re on the right track to begin with, and it gives you a moment to think about the situation with which you’re faced.

Once you’re sure you understand what has been presented, don’t be afraid to ask a few questions. A few clarifying questions may well save you from launching into an elaborate analysis that lacks focus and misses the point.

### Case interviews step by step:

- **Repeat the question**
- **Ask clarifying questions**
- **Organize your thoughts**
- **Share your thoughts on how you are solving the problem with the interviewer**
- **Suggest solutions**

In preparing to answer the case question, don't feel that you need to dive headfirst into immediate solutions. Remember that it's not the solutions they're looking for, it's the analysis. They want to hear how you're thinking about this problem. Organize your thoughts. Think of a systematic way to look at the evidence that has been presented to you. The guidebooks to answering case questions offer a variety of frameworks and strategies that can be useful tools for organizing your thoughts, but none take the place of common sense. You may not have taken business courses at Harvard, but you most certainly learned how to think analytically and use reasoning.

Begin by talking about how you "might" want to look at the situation. Share your thoughts with the interviewer to illustrate that you're thinking about the broadest dimensions of the problem before you begin suggesting potential paths that you might follow in pursuit of a solution.

Taking the time to introduce your approach allows the employer to see that you get the "big picture." In a first-round interview it's unlikely that you'll have time to proceed through all of the necessary analysis. Upon demonstrating an understanding of the scope of the problem and developing a strategy, the employer may very likely suggest that you spend the rest of your time on one area of the analysis. For example, "Let's talk about the customer. How would you carry out that analysis?" The case interview is not something you want to try without careful preparation and practice.

**Case Interview Tip:** Don't make things overly complicated. For example, if you need to know population sizes and quick math is needed, round the numbers to make them easily divisible.

For more resources to prepare for case interviews, see: [ocs.fas.harvard.edu/consulting-more](https://ocs.fas.harvard.edu/consulting-more).

**OCS offers a number of opportunities to learn more about interviewing and to practice. Refer to the “Events” section of the OCS website for dates and times.**

**Resources include:**

- **Mock interview guides and practice resources**
- **OCS interview workshops**
- **Employer interview and case workshops**
- **Online interview tutorial**
- **InterviewStream online interview practice tool**
- **OCS Firsthand Advisers (connect with Harvard alumni)**

***Preparation is the key! Plan to spend time each week preparing for interviews and continue doing so until you get an offer for a job or internship.***

## **COMMONLY ASKED QUESTIONS**

### **General Introduction Questions**

- Tell me about yourself.
- How would a friend or professor who knows you well describe you?
- What strengths would you bring to this position?
- In what ways do you think you can make a contribution to our organization?
- What are your long/short-term goals and objectives? How will this job help you achieve them?
- Why did you choose Harvard? Your concentration?
- What class has had the greatest impact on your thinking?
- If you could change something at Harvard, what would it be and why?
- How do you choose your extracurricular activities? Or, why did you choose those you're currently involved in?
- What do you think it takes to be successful in this position/organization/field? In what ways does this fit you?
- What about this organization impresses you in comparison with others in the field?
- What do you believe are the key issues and problems in the field/industry today?
- Why do you want to work here?
- Why should we hire you?

### **Behavior-Themed Questions**

- Describe a situation in which you were required to work with people different from you.
- Describe a time/activity when you were highly motivated to complete a task.
- Tell me about a time when you were tolerant of an opinion that was different from yours.
- Tell me about a time when you worked effectively under pressure.
- Tell me about a time when you handled a difficult situation with a co-worker.
- Tell me about a time when you were creative in solving a problem.
- Describe a time when you were a leader. What is your leadership style?
- Tell me about a time you made a mistake or failed at something.

### **Questions to Ask Employers**

- What is your timeline for the interview process?
- What do you see as the challenges for the person taking this job?

- Do you have new initiatives planned for the next year?
- What role will this position play in addressing these new initiatives?
- Can you tell me how your career has developed at the organization?
- I read on your website that you have a new office in Mumbai. Could you tell me more about what you're working on there?
- Describe your ideal candidate to fill this position.
- What do you enjoy most about working here?
- Can you tell me about your career path?

## **Questions the Interviewer Should Not Ask**

(You are legally not required to answer these questions so feel free to politely decline to answer by saying "I would prefer not to answer this" or "I'd like to keep the focus to my qualifications for this role.")

- What is your age? What is your date of birth? Were you born in the U.S.? Are you a citizen?
- What is your race, religion, national origin, gender identity, or sexual identity?
- Do you have disabilities of any kind?
- Have you ever been treated by a psychologist or a psychiatrist?
- Are you taking any prescription medications?
- Have you ever been treated for drug addiction or alcoholism?
- Are you married, single, or divorced?
- When do you plan to start a family?
- Do you observe the Sabbath or any days that would interfere with this job schedule?