



# ON-SITE INTERVIEWING

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## WHAT IS THE ON-SITE INTERVIEW?

Most organizations which recruit college students will include an on-site interview as a major part of the hiring process. The on-site visit is generally a **full day** of interviewing and related activities, at the organization's site. After the visit is completed and an evaluation conducted, an offer may be made.

**The on-site interview is given many names. It can also be referred to as a company visit, plant trip, second interview, or office visit.**

Just as the on-site interview has many names, it also has a variety of faces. There is no way to describe every aspect of what you can expect in an on-site visit because employers vary greatly in how they arrange them. The length of the trip, number of people involved, levels of people interviewed, types of tests conducted, and degree of formality can differ from one organization to the next.

As a result, this publication focuses upon information that is fairly consistent for most organizations. We have tried to present information that will help you to understand the nature of the on-site visit, how to prepare for it, and how to conduct yourself most effectively during the visit. We hope you find the information helpful.

## THE PURPOSE OF THE ON-SITE INTERVIEW

The on-site interview serves two primary purposes:

- 1) **Allows the organization to get a more in-depth assessment of the candidate prior to making a job offer.** The on-site interview is time-consuming and expensive for employers, so they screen a large number of applicants down to a few who are invited to visit. The on-site interview is generally the last step in the selection process before an offer is made. The organization is confident that the candidate who is invited to visit for a day has the technical skills and intelligence to do the job. The on-site interview becomes their opportunity to confirm that there is a good match between the candidate's goals and the career opportunity. They also attempt to see that there is good "chemistry" between the candidate and the organization's culture.
- 2) **Allows the candidate an opportunity to see the organization and some of its people first hand in order to make a wiser decision if an offer is made.** The on-site interview provides an opportunity to learn more about the position, long-term career opportunities, the organization's employees, the organization itself, and the local community. The organization itself will usually be doing as much "selling" as evaluating because this is the information the candidate will use in deciding whether to accept or decline an offer. The candidate, like the organization, is trying to determine whether or not there is a good fit between the two.

## **PREPARING FOR THE VISIT**

Considering the importance and purpose of the on-site interview, it is imperative to prepare for the day. Preparation for the visit should not be taken lightly since this visit is the **final step** for most organizations in deciding whether to make a job offer. Candidates should attempt to learn as much about the organization as possible. Items of preparation should include:

- Notes taken after the initial (campus) interview
- Organization website and other web resources
- Annual report
- Promotional material on the organization
- Industry and business publications containing information about the organization
- Talking with former students who are now employed by the organization
- Talking with current employees in the line of work for which one is interviewing
- Talking to people who have had direct dealings with the organization or its products

Candidates should prepare so they are able to present themselves as being knowledgeable about the firm, its products or services, and the career opportunity being discussed. The better prepared the candidate, the more probable it is that the organization will recognize enthusiasm, drive, motivation, maturity, and thoroughness as assets possessed by the candidate.

The candidate should use the information obtained to develop **insightful questions** designed to show interest in the organization and the position. These questions should demonstrate thorough preparation for the visit, but should also provide the types of information that will support an informed decision to accept or decline an offer. In order for the candidate to prepare these insightful questions, they should investigate the following organizational characteristics:

- The business in which they operate
- Their mission and long-range goals
- Their business philosophy and management style
- The community in which they are located

The questions should be well positioned during the interview process. Recent hires of the organization might be asked about training, promotion, performance evaluation and community life. More experienced interviewers can be asked about organizational culture, long-term plans, organization history and other topics where experience enhances the value of a response. Good questions will cover a wide range of **topics** including:

- Corporate goals and direction
- Career enhancement
- Market growth opportunities
- Organization's competitive environment
- Research and development
- Evaluation system
- Career paths of recent hires
- Commitment to training
- Community lifestyle

Questions such as: “So what do you all do?” or “What are the benefits?” do not sit well with most interviewers. These questions show shallowness and a lack of concern for the key criteria which are being judged during the visit. The first type of question begs information that should have already been discovered, and the second reflects an overemphasis on matters that will be explained in good time.

Candidates frequently overlook personal preparation. While knowledge, good insightful questions and a sharp organizational outlook will go a long way toward succeeding in the on-site interview, a lack of personal preparation can detract from a candidate’s positive image.

What factors constitute good **personal preparation**? They include:

- Leaving personal problems at home
- Taking appropriate business dress (for the type of organization involved)
- Having a well-groomed appearance (hair, face, skin, nails, etc.)

These are some areas of personal preparation often overlooked by the candidate, yet extremely important. Candidates often put themselves at a disadvantage by packing carelessly, neglecting to take grooming aids, leaving for the visit with pressures from school deadlines, etc. These all can contribute to a poor on-site interview.

## **ARRANGING THE TRIP**

An invitation to an on-site interview will usually come from a **contact person** at the organization. Any questions prior to the trip can be addressed to this person. **This includes finding out who will be responsible for making travel arrangements and if you should keep track of your expenses.** This is important because travel plans are usually handled one of three ways:

- 1) The employer will make all of the travel arrangements (flights, hotel, ground transportation & meals) and cover all of your expenses.
- 2) You will make your travel and/or hotel arrangements and the employer will reimburse you for your expenses after the interview.
- 3) The on-site interview will be completely at your expense

Expense handling and reimbursement vary from organization to organization but nearly all will handle this part of the process with a sensitive eye toward the candidate’s need. If possible, both for the organization interviewing and later business travel, it is a good idea for the candidate to secure a **major credit card**. This will provide the ability to pay expenses when the need arises and will help to avoid any potentially embarrassing situations. If a major credit card is not an option, and cash flow is low, many organizations are willing to **prepay expenses**. A candidate should never turn down an on-site interview because his or her funds are low! By talking to the contact person in the organization, she or he may find that they can help. Organizations can assist students in such ways as:

- Prepay airline tickets
- Prepay the hotel room.
- Provide cash up front for use by the student in travel.
- Arrange for ground transportation.

Generally, most major expenses (travel and lodging) will either be prepaid by the organization or put on a credit card by the student and reimbursed by the organization at a later date. Incidental expenses paid by the candidate and reimbursed later include:

- Parking
- Business phone calls
- Tips
- Cab fares
- Meals en route

Other incidental expenses **fully borne** by the candidate include:

- Room service snacks
- Newspapers
- Personal phone calls
- Gifts
- In room movies
- Other personal items

The candidate should always collect **receipts** for expenses. She or he should also have resources to pay hotel expenses, even when prepayment has been agreed upon. Mistakes are sometimes made.

While not an overriding issue, it is important that the candidate use *common sense and good judgment* regarding expenses. Organizations will see an expense report and receipts after a visit, and unusually high costs for ordinary items or unnecessary expenses are generally frowned upon. Meals need not be at a fast-food restaurant, but should be reasonable and items such as expensive wine or appetizer should be avoided. The hotel's own restaurant (or comparable prices) is usually a good measure of how much to spend. The organization usually wants the candidate to enjoy the visit but not to be extravagant.

After receiving confirmation of travel arrangements, the candidates should call or **send a note** to his or her contact in the organization, confirming reservations and travel plans. It is important that the candidate contact the organization regarding travel plans to avoid any last minute mix-ups or confusion. The candidate should get all **directions** ahead of time. If anything at all is unclear (dates, times, locations) she or he should call the organization contact person prior to departure to confirm the details. The candidate should leave knowing how to get from airport to hotel to interview site, and how he or she will get to the first meeting of the day.

## **ARRIVAL**

It is usually a good idea for the candidate to plan to arrive in the city the night before the on-site interview. The wise candidate tries to avoid very late flights or the last flight into the city. This will help avoid the problems that can arise from airline delays, cancellations or related difficulties.

Once in town, the candidate goes to the hotel and checks in. Many hotels have **courtesy vans** from the airport. In other cases, the candidate may take a taxi. In any case, receipts should be kept for later reimbursement.

When checking into the hotel the candidate should ask for any **messages** (the organization may have left information) and verify any prepayment agreement. Most hotels will ask to imprint a credit card for any charges not covered by the organization.

Some items the candidate should be aware of include the following:

- Schedule a morning **wake-up call** with the front desk allowing plenty of time to get ready.
- If the initial room is unsatisfactory for any reason, particularly in a noisy location, don't hesitate to ask the hotel to change it.
- Non-smoking rooms are often available for non-smokers.
- Local calls are **not** free. They often cost anywhere from 25 to 75 cents per call. (Also, some hotels charge a fee for long-distance calls even when you call collect or use a calling card.)
- **Do not** bill any long distance calls to the room. Call collect or use a credit card.
- **Review the bill** upon check-out to ensure its accuracy.

### **EVENING BEFORE THE INTERVIEW**

Many organizations arrange for an employee to meet the candidate for **dinner** on the evening of arrival. The dinner is designed as an opportunity for the candidate to relax and meet an employee while getting a casual flavor for the next day's schedule, the organization, the city and any other pertinent topics.

The **dinner companion** might be a line manager, the candidate's key contact, a recent hire at the organization, or an alumnus of the candidate's school. The degree of informality and nature of conversation at dinner can vary but they are usually quite relaxed. Any dinner companion can serve as an evaluator so the candidate should always reflect maturity and professionalism.

To a degree, the candidate is being interviewed during this dinner. The dinner host may be evaluating the candidate's:

- Social graces
- Manner of speech
- Contemporary ideas/views
- Ability to converse
- Ability to mix business/pleasure
- Maturity

The candidate is advised to **dress** appropriately for dinner. He or she should eat moderately, avoid alcoholic beverages (except for possibly a single glass of wine, beer, or mixed drink with dinner, but **ONLY** if he/she is of legal drinking age and **ONLY** if the host also orders an alcoholic beverage), ask good penetrating questions revolving around the particular topic of discussion, and relax. The dinner is generally very social in nature and the candidate should be her- or himself, although it should be a professional self that comes through.

The candidate should schedule a **wake-up call** for the morning, use a travel alarm clock, and have a parent or friend call in the morning to make sure he or she wakes up with plenty of time to prepare. No mistake is worse than tardiness.

The candidate should **check out** of the hotel upon leaving for the organization site. If this is forgotten, it can result in the organization being charged for an extra night. The candidate should take any baggage as it may be out of the way to return to the hotel at the end of the day.

## INTERVIEW DAY

The day of the interview is generally a very busy one. It is impossible to write exactly what to expect because different organizations set up different types of schedules.

Many organizations will schedule *three to five hour-long interviews* with various levels of management in a one-on-one setting. These interviews may, however, be shorter or longer, fewer or more numerous. In the **one-on-one** setting, candidates will speak with department managers and first line supervisors of the area in which the position is available. Additionally, the candidate may meet with a second or third level manager who has had experience in many different areas of the organization. Finally, the vice president of human resources or a director level manager may meet with the candidate to round out his or her exposure to the organization's personnel.

Some employers schedule **group interviews** with four to twelve candidates visiting at one time. The candidates engage in some group sessions, and at other times are involved in one-on-one interviews. The group visit is more difficult for the organization to arrange but allows them the opportunity to see each candidate among his or her peers. It permits the candidates a chance to see some of those who might be a part of her or his training group.

Most employers are well prepared for on-site interviews by candidates. Many organizations conduct formal interview training for their managers and these organizations usually provide very good interview sessions with candidates.

Interviewers have scanned the resumes of their visitors and will be familiar with the backgrounds of the candidates. The interviewers attempt to assess the motivation and drive of the candidates - to see what makes them strive for success. Each interviewer knows what she or he is looking for in a candidate and will probe for strengths and weaknesses.

Candidates may be asked the **same questions** by three or four different people during the day, yet must give as good an answer to the fourth as the first. This can be tiring, but that may indicate an area of particular concern to the organization.

Some employers, however, may not be well-prepared. Candidates are sometimes called upon to carry the interview with their own questions and observations.

If the candidate is interviewing at a plant-trip location, it is probable that an employment manager or plant manager will conduct a **tour** of the plant at some time during the day. While this is usually a relaxed tour, the candidate should be aware that she or he is still being interviewed, even in this setting.

Organizations will usually try to structure the itineraries to meet the candidate's schedule, and many will design the day so as to provide a friendly and relaxed atmosphere for the candidate. It is important to the organization that the candidate feels as comfortable as possible about the visit so that she or he may accurately assess her or his feelings about the job, organization, location, etc. A **host/guest relationship** is fostered to afford the optimal opportunity for proper selection techniques on the part of both the organization and the candidate. Remember, the organization is selling itself to the candidate as much as the reverse is taking place.

Anyone the candidate meets for even a few minutes is a potential evaluator. Considering this, the candidate must remain sharp and confident at all times. At no time can the successful candidate reflect a lack of professionalism and expect a positive response. It is recommended that you ask for business card from each person that you interview with during your on-site interview so that you may send a thank you note after you return home.

## DEPARTURE

The **last meeting** of the day will often be with the contact person or personnel manager. This session is to answer any final candidate questions, explain follow-up procedures, discuss reimbursements and take care of any similar details. After the visit the candidate will be directed back to the airport for the flight home. Most organizations will structure the day to allow the candidate to depart the facility between 3:00 and 5:00 p.m.

Candidates should be sure that **all** their questions have been answered prior to leaving. They need to understand both their and the organization's responsibility regarding follow-up. These should be discussed during the last session of the day.

## INTERVIEW INSIGHTS

As mentioned earlier, most day long on-site interviews are packed with interviews. Under the pressure of numerous back-to-back interviews it is easy for the candidate to grow weary and ignore some points which are important to survival in the process.

The candidate will be speaking with a variety of managers at differing levels of the corporate hierarchy. It is important that the candidate be him- or herself, maintain a positive attitude, and relax as much as possible.

The wise candidate takes the opportunity to ask a lot of questions and to get a feel for the organization's operating environment. She or he relishes the opportunity to speak with as many workers as possible at the organization location. This gives the candidate a better understanding of the people and environment in which he or she might eventually be employed. Candidates sometimes obtain **valuable information** in unexpected settings such as:

- Waiting for an interviewer to pick up the candidate at a reception area
- In the organization cafeteria during lunch
- Speaking with a secretary in a manager's office

Most interview questions are geared toward assessment of candidates' communication skills, aggressiveness, leadership capabilities, personal skills and desires as they relate to the position open and to long range career goals.

It is very important for candidates to understand that they are being probed during the on-site interview. Candidates must take a **long range view** when preparing their responses and assessing their qualifications prior to a visit.

In some instances, organizations will assign each interviewer a **specific quality** or skill to probe during the interview. One interviewer will probe for leadership ability, another for analytical ability, still another for communication skills, and so on. After the process is complete, all the interviewers will meet to discuss the candidate and a decision will be reached.

In other organizations, each interviewer will determine independently the nature of her or his questions. This approach might appear less coordinated to the candidate. Again, the interviewers will share the impressions they have reached after the candidate's departure.

## SALARY

This is a touchy topic and students are often caught off guard when the topic comes up in an interview. If questioned about salary expectations the candidate can respond in one of two ways:

- Give a **broad range**: “I would hope with my background and qualifications to be making between \$40,000 and \$46,000.” The range given should be realistic and based upon prior research of starting salaries in the industry and for the position being discussed. Use sites such as **salary.com** to help you develop a salary range.
- **Sidestep** the question: “I’m sure that if you make me an offer it will be commensurate with my qualifications and the current salary structure for you industry.”

The candidate should try to avoid giving an exact figure in response to this question. If pressed on the issue by the interviewer, one has to respond but it is still best to give a range. **Candidates are often tempted to bring up the salary issues themselves. As a general rule, it is best not to mention salary until the organization brings it up. Salary will usually not be a topic of conversation until an offer is made.**

## TESTING

Many organizations test candidates prior to extending offers to visit the organization or during the visit itself. This testing may consist of standard **mathematical and verbal tests** similar to the SAT or ACT, but much briefer. The candidate should be aware that no preparation is possible. The candidate should, however, get plenty of rest the evening before a test to aid clear thinking.

Some organizations administer **personality tests**. These tests involve numerous questions for which there are no right or wrong answers and candidates must answer them honestly or risk showing very unusual profiles. There is no benefit to trying to “psych out” a personality test.

A test instituted by many organizations over the last few years involves **drug testing**. This encompasses testing for all controlled substances and takes the form of a urine specimen analyzed for appearance of a substance. Candidates should be aware of the possibility that this test may occur and should be advised that failure to submit to a drug test may end further employment consideration.

## COMMUNITY

Candidates should also make an effort to learn about the organization’s **surrounding territory**. It is a good idea for the candidate to contact the local chamber of commerce or visitors’ bureau requesting information on the area. Additionally, an apartment guide or home guide is probably available through the chamber or the realty association for use in selecting a residence.

If an eventual offer is made and accepted, the candidate will be **relocating** to that city. During the on-site interview day the candidate should question people, particularly those closest in age, about housing entertainment, cost of living, and other personal concerns.

## **AFTER THE VISIT**

Following the visit the candidate should email or mail a personal **letter of thanks** to all the people met and talked with that day. While this may not affect the probability of getting an offer, it is a common courtesy and will definitely be remembered if he or she ends up working there.

Additionally, a letter of thanks to the main **contact person** is mandatory. This letter should reaffirm interest in the position, highlight qualifications one last time, or if applicable, indicate no further interest in the position. This short letter should reflect the candidate's aggressiveness, highlight her or his understanding of etiquette, and show continued interest. The letter provides the candidate one last opportunity to stand out above the competition and position him or herself for potential hiring.

Many organizations will get back to candidates within **two weeks** of the actual visit with an offer or rejection. This is an average. Some organizations offer jobs on the spot while others take up to a month to respond. It is, therefore, a good idea for candidates to find out how long they can expect to wait to hear from the organization regarding an employment decision. The candidate should feel free to contact the organization to check on delays if the estimated decision date passes with no response.

Finally, candidates are advised never to be afraid to **turn down** a job offer if, after careful consideration, they consider it not to be right for their future. After all, long term career satisfaction is the goal of the whole career process.