

Navigating Your Career: Interview Prep, Process, and Evaluation

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ABSTRACT

Looking for your first position, a new position, or seeking a promotion? With everything else you need to do, it can be easy to let intentional career development slip to the bottom of your to-do list. Takeaways from this session include checklists and suggestions for successfully navigating the entire interview process from preparation to evaluation. The session will also include recommendations from professionals currently in supervisory or hiring roles. Take charge of your future now!

INTRODUCTION

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), the unemployment rate is 4.3% and there are more than 8.2 million job openings available (BLS, 2024a; BLS, 2024b). There are multiple online job sites (GlassDoor, Indeed.com, ZipRecruiter, etc.) and it's easier than ever to apply through these online job postings, which is wonderful for job seekers. On the other hand ...

Over half of job openings are not publicly posted; companies use recruiters and/or internal/external networks to identify potential candidates. (Elmers, 2024). The ease of application means you are competing against many other candidates; according to a recent estimate, there are an average of 250 applicants for each posting (Mantis, 2024). Add in application software that eliminates nearly 75% of submitted resumes, and your chances of even getting the opportunity to start the interview process are slim indeed. Plus, it's not uncommon these days for there to be preliminary phone screenings before the actual interview process begins, adding another layer to the job search.

There's yet another obstacle for job seekers, particularly if they are young or looking to move up (Barton, 2024). Retirement isn't really retirement anymore. Older workers are often putting off retirement; this means there are currently five different generations in the workforce (Figure 1, p.2). While post-retirement workers (65 and up) constitute less than 10% of the overall workforce, they often occupy higher positions in their organizations. Throw in workers aged 55 – 64 and the overall percentage of older workers increases to almost 24%. No wonder the job search is exhausting and lasts an average of 5 months (Elmers, 2024).

If the following quote (Figure 2) feels like a perfect expression of your current job search, don't give up (Figure 3). Take a deep breath and focus on what you can do to maximize your potential as a job candidate.

"all hope abandon, ye that enter here!"

Figure 2. Dante's Divine Comedy, Inferno III (English Translation).

"Ambition is the path to success. Persistence is the vehicle you arrive in."

Figure 3. Bill Bradley, American Hall of Fame Basketball Player, Rhodes Scholar.

For ease of reading and usability, resources have been grouped together just before the conclusion section.

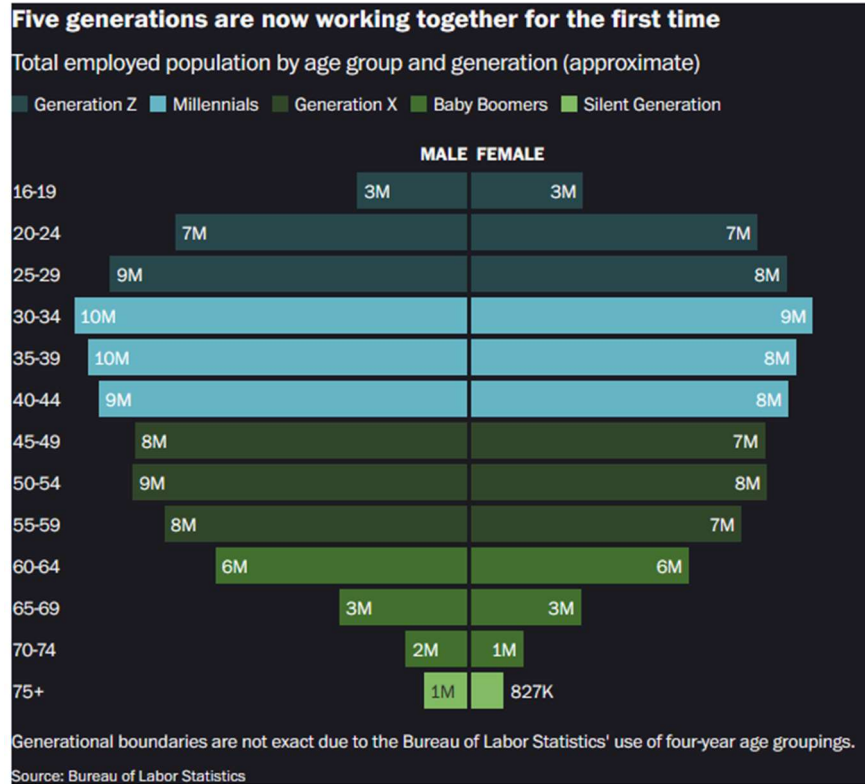


Figure 1. Diagram of workforce distribution across gender and age (Barton, 2024).

PREPARING FOR THE SEARCH

Even before you start perusing job openings, take a few moments to think about your history and future goals. Consider some of the following:

- Are my social media profiles (LinkedIn etc.) up to date?
- What have I accomplished so far? What am I proud of?
- What experience(s) have I learned from? How have I used this new knowledge or skill?
- What are some keywords (key terms) that describe the type of job I want? The type of work environment I prefer?
- What are some potential job titles that fit my interests / goals? What is a typical salary range?
- Am I willing to relocate? Where to? How does the cost of living compare to where I am now?
- What am I willing to compromise on (salary, working hours, environment ...)?
- What are my non-negotiables?

Now that you have a better understanding of what you want and relevant keywords, you can concentrate on appropriate job openings. However, don't limit yourself to openings where your knowledge and skills are a 100% match. We often underestimate our own abilities, and a new position is an opportunity to stretch and grow. Intrigued by a job title or description but not sure if you're a good fit? Go ahead and apply (Figure 4).

"Never underestimate opportunity's ability to disguise itself."

Figure 4. Meg Whitman, former President and CEO of eBay, Inc.

PREPARING TO APPLY

You've found several job openings of interest. It's tempting to try and create one resume that can match any job description but remember, only 25% of resumes make it through application software. This means your resume needs to fit each specific role. Yes, you'll end up with multiple versions of your resume but once you have a "library" of resumes, it will be much simpler to revise and submit. These steps will help you frame your resume to fit the role.

- Analyze the job posting for keywords, particularly those related to required knowledge, skills, or abilities.
- Incorporate these keywords into your resume where you can, but don't stretch the truth.
- Don't just list current / past job responsibilities; focus on what you **achieved** in each role.
- Use action verbs and when possible, turn your success / outcomes into numbers.

Some job postings will ask for cover letters, some won't. A cover letter is an opportunity to highlight particular skills or experiences that make you an ideal candidate for a position, and it provides a chance to display your passion or to provide information that may not be readily apparent in your resume. Many cover letters are one page or less but follow any instructions provided. In some instances, a cover letter can run several pages in length.

PREPARING FOR THE INTERVIEW

Congratulations! You have a phone screening or interview scheduled. You're now one step closer to that new role. To make it to the next level, you need a successful interview. The key to a successful interview is deliberate preparation (Figure 5).

"One important key to success is self-confidence.

An important key to self-confidence is preparation."

Figure 5. Arthur Ashe, champion professional tennis player and social activist.

RESEARCH

If you haven't done so already, research the organization. Why take the time and effort to do this? Understanding the current state and future goals of the organization will not only provide you with insight but also demonstrates your sincerity and interest to the interviewer. Some information to gather includes:

- Mission, vision, and values.
- Recent report(s) on organizational success and future goals.
- Social media presence.
- LinkedIn or other public profiles of leaders.
- LinkedIn or other public profile of your interviewer(s) if you know their name(s).

PRACTICE COMMON QUESTIONS

Preparation includes practice. Take time to familiarize yourself with common interview questions. Don't try to memorize a response but think about the key points you want to cover. You might find it useful to list these points on an index card or some other form of notetaking. The following list of common interview questions was collected from a variety of sources on LinkedIn, Instagram, and internet searches.

- How would your professional peers describe you?
- Tell me about yourself. (a story, not a recap of your resume, a defining moment that shows your passion)
- How do you keep yourself (or others) motivated during tough times?

- Where do you see yourself in 5 years?
- How do you establish priorities when managing multiple projects?
- Describe an instance where constructive feedback helped you grow professionally.
- Describe a time you effectively dealt with a difficult situation (or person).
- Describe your preferred working environment (solo, teams, hybrid, F2F).
- Why should we hire you? (what skills and experiences make you the best choice)
- What are your strengths? (use one related to the job)
- What is your greatest weakness? (how are you working to improve)
- What are your salary expectations?
- Describe a time you disagreed with a colleague. How did you handle the situation?
- Why are you interested in this position?
- Describe a time when you changed your mind after learning new information.
- What are your career goals?
- What are you most proud of? Why?
- Describe a time when you had to provide difficult feedback. How did you handle the situation?

Did you notice that none of these questions can be answered with a simple “yes” or “no”? Open-ended questions provide an opportunity for you to display your communication skills. Take care, however, not to run on and on and on. There’s a lot to cover during an interview and you want to showcase your entire self, not just one experience (no matter how vital to your life).

TOPIC SPECIFIC QUESTIONS

As a professional in a technical field, you can also expect specific questions about your skills. The following list is far from inclusive but provides a starting point for preparation.

- What certification(s) have you obtained?
- Describe the process you used to learn SAS® / R / Python / ...
- How do you approach a new project?
- When would you use “A” instead of “B”? Why? (e.g., PROC SQL vs. DATA)
- You receive an ERROR when running your code. What would you do next?
- How do you design your code so other people can use it in the future if you’re not around?

QUESTIONS FOR INTERVIEWER

We tend to focus on the questions we might receive during an interview, but interviews should run both ways. As much as the interviewer wants to learn more about you, you also want to learn more about the role and the organization. Be prepared for the question “*do you have any questions?*”

- What would be my top priorities? (their expectations)
- What does success look like? (their definition)
- How will success be measured? (relevant metrics)
- What are some potential challenges a new employee might encounter?

- Why do you enjoy working for the organization?
- What haven't I asked that would be important for me to know?
- What are the next steps in the process? (and potential timing)
- How would my work support organizational growth plans / goals?
- What does a typical week look like?
- How does this role fit in the company structure?
- How does the organization support employee growth and development?
- How does the work culture contribute to organizational success?
- How (when) will I receive feedback as an employee?
- How is information communicated within the organization?
- Is there anything else I can provide to support my application?

As the interview draws to a close, remember to thank the interviewer(s) for their time and to double-check their contact information.

AFTER THE INTERVIEW

There are several steps you can take after an interview. To solidify a positive impression, remember to send a timely thank-you note or email (preferably within 24 hours). Manners matter (Figures 6, 7).

"Good manners will open doors that the best education cannot."

Figure 6. Clarence Thomas, Associate Justice, U.S. Supreme Court.

"Being considerate of others will take your children further in life than any college degree."

Figure 7. Marian Wright Edelman, civil rights activist, founder and President of Children's Defense Fund.

Make time to reflect on the interview (Figures 8, 9). Which questions did you answer well? Are there questions you wish you had answered a different way? What would have been a better answer? What did you learn about the organization? Does it seem like a good fit for you?

"We do not learn from experience... we learn from reflecting on experience."

Figure 8. John Dewey, philosopher, educator, and pragmatist.

"Self-reflection is the secret of introspection, and introspection is the gateway to wisdom."

Figure 9. Richelle E. Goodrich, author, poet, and illustrator.

In some ways, the post-interview period is the hardest because you have no control. Try not to overthink while you wait to hear if you're moving forward. Contact your references and update them on your progress. Continue to explore other opportunities. Reach out only within the time and response framework provided by the interviewer. You will find the right role. It might not happen as quickly as you want, but it will happen.

SUGGESTED RESOURCES

There are many resources available to you. These are just a sampling.

USEFUL WEBSITES / BLOGS

Key Elements of a Cover Letter.

<https://www.washington.edu/doit/key-elements-cover-letter>

How and Why to Write a Great Cover Letter. <https://www.careereducation.columbia.edu/resources/how-and-why-write-great-cover-letter>

Interview Advice.

<https://topinterview.com/interview-advice>

What to do After an Interview.

<https://www.indeed.com/career-advice/interviewing/what-to-do-after-an-interview>

3 Steps to take After your Interview.

<https://career.arizona.edu/resources/3-steps-to-take-after-your-interview/>

Work Smart & Start Smart: Salary Negotiation. (woman focused: addresses gender pay gap)

<https://www.aauw.org/resources/programs/salary/>

How to Negotiate Salary after a Job Offer (with 13 tips).

<https://www.indeed.com/career-advice/pay-salary/how-to-negotiate-salary>

How to Negotiate a Higher Salary after a Job Offer.

<https://www.pon.harvard.edu/daily/salary-negotiations/how-to-negotiate-a-higher-salary-after-a-job-offer/>

AI TOOLS

AI Apply	JobTracker AI
ChatGPT	My Interview Practice
Interview Igniter	Mya
Interview Prep AI	Skillora.ai
Interviewing.IO	VMock

Table 1. AI tools to help with a job search.

BOOKS

Know Your Value (Brzezinski, 2018). (woman focused)

The First 90 Days (Watkins, 2013).

SOCIAL MEDIA SOURCES

Adam Biddlecombe	Matt Village
Alex Brueckmann	Miro Bada
George Stern	Paul Storm
Jay Mount	Rob Dance
Jeremiah Teo	Victoria Repa
Justin Wright	ABI Bouhmaida

Table 2. Selected posting sources from LinkedIn and Instagram

CONCLUSION

Finding a job is a job. Careful preparation and hard work lead to success in a job search, just as in learning and/or your current role. Hopefully, the resources provided in this paper make your job search smoother, if not easier. Remember to get enough sleep, exercise as needed, and spend time with friends / family. Eventually, you will find the right role for you.

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CONTACT INFORMATION

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