

Section VII: Interviewing

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The interview is the most critical part of the recruiting process. Its purpose is to secure a job offer. Something in your previous contact with the employer—your résumé, cover letter, persistence, mutual friend, etc.—has given him or her the idea that you would be a good addition to the organization. The interview is where they confirm your academic credentials, gauge your level of interest, and decide whether you will work well in their organization and be a good “fit.”

No two interviews are alike and every employer has its own style and interviewing process. Accordingly, while we hope to provide generalized insight into interviewing, recognize that every interview will have its own element of the unexpected. Also, keep in mind that interviewing for law clerk positions while in school may vary greatly from interviewing for permanent legal positions following graduation. Disclaimers aside, most employers will interview a candidate several times before extending an offer of employment.

Typically, a first-round interview will last 20–30 minutes and is an initial opportunity for the employer to get to know you. In the first round, you will usually meet with one or two people at the same time, though some government employers have been known to have candidates meet with a panel of three or more interviewers. Second-round interviews, sometimes referred to as “callback” interviews, also vary in design and last a few hours or up to a full day. Second-round interviews typically consist of 20–30 minute interviews with different members of the employer’s office. They indicate that you have passed the first hurdle—you have impressed the initial interviewer—now it is time for others within the office to get to know you.

The thought of interviewing makes most people nervous. A little nervousness is okay; terror and being unprepared are not. Understanding the interviewing process and being prepared will help make your interview go as smoothly as possible. There are three things to remember in order to have a successful interview:

Be Prepared, Positive, and Professional

Being prepared means ALL of the following:

- Research the employer
- Research the interviewer
- Practice interviewing
- Prepare answers to frequently asked questions
- Draft questions to ask the interviewer

This will accomplish three things: (1) preparation will put you more at ease in the interview, (2) thorough preparation will give you an edge over other candidates, and (3) you will be able to make informed decisions prior to accepting any positions. Remember, you are interviewing them too.

Behavioral Interviewing

Many employers are beginning to use behavioral interviewing methods. This style of interviewing focuses on past behaviors as an indicator of future behaviors, and the questions often begin with the phrase “tell me about a time you...” To prepare for behavioral questions, use the “STAR” method:

Situation: Provide context for your story

Task: Describe the challenge or problem you faced

Action: Describe how you solved the problem

Result: Describe the outcome and what you learned

It is best to brainstorm experiences in different professional and academic settings, prepare some scenarios, and then tweak the stories to make sure you are answering the specific question.

For example, “Tell me about a time when you failed and how you fixed it” could be answered:

Situation: In college, I had an internship at a law firm.

Task: I took on a project that was too big for me to finish in the time allotted.

Action: I worked around the clock for days and I still didn’t finish.

Result: Now, when I receive an assignment, I ask how long the project should take. I also communicate with my supervisor to give status updates and ask questions. I learned that by planning ahead and having open communication with my supervisor ahead of time—rather than the day something is due—is a much better way to work because it is more efficient, less stressful, and results in a better product.

Research the Employer and Interviewer

You will be expected to have done your research on a potential employer prior to your interview. There are a variety of resources that you can use:

- Martindale directory: online at www.martindale.com
- John Marshall alumni lists
- Online resources (go to the CSO website and click **Career Links** for websites on **Employer Research**)
- LexisNexis and Westlaw
- Legal newspapers
- NALP Directory of Legal Employers: hard copy or online at www.nalpdirectory.com
- Sullivan’s Law Directory
- Firm literature, brochures, and websites
- Former law clerks
- Word of mouth (be careful to filter fact from rumor)
- Professors and previous employers
- Other attorneys
- A CSO counselor’s knowledge of the employer

Note: It may be difficult to find information on some employers, particularly small firms or solo practitioners; nonetheless, the more you can find out, the more prepared you will be for your interview.

What Information Do You Need?

You are looking for information that will help you in the interview, including answers to basic questions the employer will expect you to know prior to the interview:

- Areas of practice
- Size (total and by office)
- Location of offices
- Size of past summer/associate classes
- Salaries/benefits (usually only available for larger organizations)
- Diversity of employer
- Types of clients
- Backgrounds of attorneys
- Employer history
- Recent cases and articles
- Structure of organization
- Major clients
- John Marshall alumni at the organization

Interviewer Research

In addition to researching the employer, if you can find out with whom you will be meeting, you should also try to research the interviewer's:

- Undergraduate and law school
- Practice area
- Recent cases
- Publications
- Community involvement

Practice Interviewing

Prior to your interview, think about what it is that makes you unique from the other candidates. In particular, think about what you want the interviewer to know about you by the end of the interview. Try to come up with two to four talking points—stories about you that you want to be sure to relate during the interview. For example, if you once helped a former employer catch a crucial mistake that otherwise could have led to serious legal problems, you want the interviewer to know this.

The trick here is that the interviewer is unlikely to simply ask, “What two to four things about you do you want me to know?” This means that you need to be both prepared

and creative. Know your talking points in advance. Then, when an open-ended question is asked of you, answer the question, but also think about whether you can highlight your answer with one of your talking points. For example, if asked, “Why is it that you want to be a corporate lawyer?” You can begin with a general answer and then move into the example story from above: “While working for Company A, I helped find an accounting error that could have cost the corporation thousands of dollars in fines. It became apparent to me that small business owners can really benefit from the assistance of a knowledgeable and detail-oriented attorney.”

Not all talking points have to be about a career success. They can relate to how you helped turn around a failing volunteer organization, how your persistence in high school basketball resulted in you moving from a benchwarmer to a starter by the end of your senior season, or any other story that demonstrates the successful use of skills that will make you an excellent attorney.

Helpful Hints in Answering Questions

- Refresh your memory on prior accomplishments before the interview.
- Be prepared to discuss everything on your résumé in detail.
- Convey your enthusiasm for the employer, the position, and the opportunity to learn new things.
- Listen to the question, take a moment to reflect, if necessary, and then answer the question.
- Always maintain eye contact, appear interested, and reflect appropriate body language.
- Sarcasm is rarely appropriate. You may use humor if the interviewer sets the tone for humor, but be sure to use good judgment.
- Be cautious of becoming too comfortable in the interview. You should always be professional, even when you have a good rapport with the interviewer.
- Never speak poorly about a previous employer or your law school.
- Focus on your improvement or on what you learned from a negative experience.
- Find something positive to say in response to challenging questions, such as those concerning your weaknesses.
- Be honest and up front. Don't hedge, and when possible, show how you have learned and improved.

Remember: Practice is the only way to feel comfortable answering these questions. Make an appointment to talk about these issues with your CSO counselor. And if you need more practice, set up a mock interview in the CSO or use your family and friends.

Frequently Asked Interview Questions

1. Why are you interested in our organization?

What they really want to know: How much do you know about our organization?

How you should answer: This is a great opportunity to show your knowledge of the employer and your enthusiasm for working there. Be specific about what interests you and always explain why it interests you.

2. Why should we hire you?

What they really want to know: Are you confident in your abilities?

How you should answer: Explain the important information that is not on your résumé, and elaborate on what is on your résumé. This is your chance to share specific accomplishments you want them to know.

3. Tell me about yourself.

What they really want to know: They are looking for information not on your résumé. They would like to see your ability to organize a wide topic into a brief and well-organized answer.

How you should answer: Build a picture about yourself that embodies what you think they are seeking. Include relevant details of your history that led you to this interview.

4. What are your strengths?

What they really want to know: Do you understand what skills are necessary to be a successful attorney?

How you should answer: Be honest and realistic about your strengths, and be sure to relate them to the practice of law. The best answers will give concrete examples of skills necessary to do the job.

5. What are your weaknesses?

What they really want to know: What do you have to hide? Why shouldn't we hire you? How do you handle difficult questions?

How you should answer: This is a hard one. Be honest, without giving away too much personal information. This is not the time to discuss all the things you would like to change about yourself. For instance, you may want to talk about a weakness that is common amongst law students and then explain your strategy to overcome this weakness. An example would be "My greatest weakness is time management. I find it difficult to find time for family, friends, and

hobbies since I am working part-time and in school full-time. However, I'm working hard to find more time for myself by participating in an intramural football team this fall." Also, avoid cliché answers such as "I work too hard" or "I am too focused on being the best attorney I can be." The key is to be honest, while also demonstrating that you are already addressing your weakness.

6. Why are you interested in _____ kind of practice?

What they really want to know: How strong is your interest in a particular field? What areas of law do you want to practice? Are your interests and goals consistent with the employer's?

How you should answer: Demonstrate how your interests and goals match those of the employer and reflect an understanding of that actual area of law.

7. Where do you plan to be five years (or ten years) after graduation?

What they really want to know: What are your career goals? Are you going to stay here or leave?

How you should answer: Explain your career goals and how they match those of the employer.

8. What questions do you have about our firm?

What they really want to know: How interested are you in the firm?

How you should answer: Ask in-depth, thoughtful questions (*see* "Sample Questions to Ask the Interviewer" *later in this chapter*). Do not ask questions you could have answered on your own with better research.

9. Why did you decide to go to law school?

What they really want to know: What motivates you? Do you have realistic career expectations?

How you should answer: Your response will likely be personal in nature. Give specific examples instead of broad answers. Do not state "I want to help people, so I decided to go to law school." Instead, explain why you want to help people and your specific goals.

10. Tell me about your low grade in _____ class.

What they really want to know: They are looking to see if you can answer a difficult question as well as to literally find out why you received a low grade in a particular class.

How you should answer: Be honest and confident; do not be defensive. Remember, they have already

decided to interview you and have likely seen your GPA and/or transcripts. Take ownership of the grade. Do not blame it on a poor instructor, noisy test environment, etc. Instead, honestly address where you think you may have had difficulties (*e.g.*, not familiar with essay tests, misunderstood the material). Then—and this is essential—demonstrate your efforts to address your shortcomings (*e.g.*, “I spoke with my professor and...” or “I have worked with the Writing Resource Center...”). Finally, show successes in that area of the law in other contexts (in a job or continuation course).

The following questions are also common questions and may be asked depending on where you interview.

A. In General

1. Why did you decide to study law?
2. What law school courses interest you the most?
3. What qualities do you possess that lead you to believe you will make a good lawyer?
4. What is the most significant item on your résumé?
5. Why did you choose The John Marshall Law School?
6. How much significance do you think we should attach to your relatively high (low) GPA?
7. What recent Supreme Court decision seems to you the most significant?
8. Why do you work with the Law Journal? What was the topic of one of your recent articles?

B. Large and Mid-Size Firms

1. Is there anything particular about our firm that has interested you?
2. What part of our practice would be of special interest to you?
3. Do you have any experience that you think might be beneficial to our firm?
4. Would you have an interest in doing *pro bono* work at the same time?
5. What would your references tell me about your legal abilities and commitment to the profession?
6. At what other firms have you interviewed?
7. If we made you an offer, how soon would you be prepared to give us an answer?

C. The Small Firm

1. Do you have any ties to this community?
2. What familiarity do you have with the way a small firm operates?

3. Are you committed to working with a small firm and staying with it?
4. If we hired you, what are your salary expectations?
5. Do you consider yourself an easy person to get along with? Explain.
6. If hired, do you think you will need a lot of supervision and general help in getting started?
7. How much responsibility will you be prepared to assume right from the start? Explain.

D. Government Employers

1. Why are you interested in working for the government?
2. Why are you interested in this government agency? How much do you know about us?
4. Are you planning to make a career in government?
5. What experience have you had that you think might equip you for this job?
6. What are your feelings about government bureaucracy?
7. What training have you had in administrative law?
8. How much courtroom experience have you had? Are you eligible for a 711 license?

E. Public Interest Groups and Legal Aid

1. How committed are you to working with this population?
2. Why do you have an interest in this area?
3. Which of the following interests you and why: domestic relations cases, rights of consumers, landlord/tenant problems, environmental law, etc.?
4. What experiences have you had in public interest law?
5. How important to you is the matter of compensation? Are you willing to extern for class credit?
6. What do you see as the rewards/challenges of working in this area of the law?

F. Judicial Clerkships/Internships

1. Explain your interest in trying to secure a clerkship.
2. What is your specific interest in seeking such a job with me?
3. Do you think a one-year term is long enough to make a job worthwhile?
4. What are the particular aspects of a clerkship that you would value?
5. How far do you feel you have progressed in developing your writing skills?

6. How valuable do you consider Law Journal work in preparing you for a judicial clerkship? Explain.
7. While at law school, have you noted particular judges whose opinions you particularly admired, because of style, substance, or ideology?
8. How important to you are the political views of the judge?
9. What do you think of merit selection of the federal and state judiciary?
10. How conversant are you with the significant current decisions of the Supreme Court of the United States?

Sample Questions to Ask the Interviewer

“What questions do you have for me?” should be expected in every interview you have. Do not ask questions that could be answered simply by looking at firm websites, brochures, or Martindale. Please note that some questions may be more relevant for law clerks or for attorney positions.

Sample Questions to Ask

- What do you expect from your summer associates/clerks/interns?
- How much responsibility do you give summer associates/clerks/interns?
- How is the work distributed to the new associates/clerks/interns?
- In which sections of your organization do you anticipate the greatest need?
- To what degree do lawyers within your organization work on cases together?
- How is performance judged, and by whom? Is feedback provided? What are the criteria for advancement?
- What are the organization’s prevailing attitude and practices on such matters as pro bono work or community service?
- What is a typical day for [the interviewer]?
- What type of training/supervision is available?
- Will I have an opportunity to observe court proceedings?
- Will I work on a variety of areas of law or in a specialty?
- What is the next step in the hiring process?
- Tell me about your career path and how you began working here.
- Tell me about some of your most significant cases.
- What projects are you working on now?

The previous list of questions is not finite. Other types of questions may come up from your specific research on the employer or issues raised during the interview.

Dealing with Inappropriate Questions

Questions dealing with race, national origin, religion, marital status, sex (including pregnancy and children), age, and disability are generally inappropriate and may be illegal. Before responding or walking out, consider the following points:

- Most attorneys doing interviews are not trained at interviewing. Often inappropriate questions come from an interviewer’s attempt to break the ice, the interviewer’s own nervousness, or simple ignorance.
- Sometimes, an illegal question is a poorly phrased way of getting to another issue. For example, “Do you have or are you planning to have children?” may really mean “How flexible is your schedule?” or “What is the nature of your long-term plans?” In such a case, you can answer the underlying issue rather than the inappropriate question.
- In some cases, questions about age or disability status may relate to bona fide occupational qualifications and would be appropriate, or they may be for statistical purposes and are not a part of the hiring criteria.
- While you are free to discuss any of the above subjects with the interviewer, it should be on your initiative. The interviewer should not bring them up.
- Your response will vary according to the interview situation, your feelings as to the interviewer’s motivation, and your feelings as to the question posed.
- Anticipate possible questions and your responses based on your application materials. Is it obvious from your résumé that this is a second (or third) career and therefore you may be older than other law students? Are you heavily involved with religious activities? Please make an appointment with a CSO counselor to discuss specific concerns.
- Respond to the underlying issue rather than the inappropriate question as discussed above.
- Refuse to answer the inappropriate question, responding with, “I don’t see how that question relates to my ability to do this job,” or “I don’t think that question is appropriate for an interview.”
- End the interview.

Note: If you are faced with a situation where you feel the employer acted inappropriately, please contact the Director of Career Services or your CSO counselor.

Be Professional

Be professional in all your contacts with an employer. The interviewer will be sizing you up and getting an impression to report back to the employer. You need to convince the interviewer that you are a professional person who would be an asset to the employer.

- Be on time for an interview.
- Call in advance if you will be late or need to cancel an interview. Except for emergencies, it is inappropriate to cancel an interview less than 48 hours before the interview date.
- Be courteous to everyone you meet (including all support staff).
- Shake hands and address the interviewer by “Mr.” or “Ms.” unless told otherwise.
- Always bring extra copies of your résumé, transcript, references, and writing sample to the interview.

Attire

Trust your instincts. Law is a conservative profession, so when in doubt, be conservative. A suit is proper attire for all interviews unless you are specifically told otherwise by the interviewer.

Men: Men should wear a suit in a dark color—black, grey, or navy are most common. A sports coat with dress pants is not appropriate. Wear a pressed button-down shirt in a conservative color (white is always a safe bet). Keep the tie simple and conservative (you do not want to be remembered for having a comical or overly bold tie). Make sure you wear dress shoes that are well-polished and match your belt. Finally, it is recommended to keep jewelry to a minimum, and cover tattoos when possible.

Women: Like men, woman should wear a suit in a dark color, such as black, navy, or charcoal grey. A simple skirt and top is not adequate attire for an interview. Keep the style conservative and make sure the skirt isn’t too short (knee length or longer is best). Pants suits are as acceptable as more traditional skirted suits. Closed-toe shoes should be worn. Sandals are not acceptable. Finally, keep jewelry, makeup, and perfume subtle.

There are two basic guidelines: (1) be neat, clean, and professional and (2) be comfortable. If you have any questions about what is appropriate attire, please speak with a CSO counselor. These guidelines may seem archaic, but they are widely accepted guidelines for interview attire in the legal community.

After the Interview

Always send a thank you note within 24–48 hours of an interview to each person with whom you interviewed, or at minimum, to the main contact person. You may handwrite or type a thank you note, but only handwrite the thank you note if you have neat, clean penmanship, and use professional card stock. Please see the sample thank you note on page 51 for more information.

Interview Resources in the CSO

Individual Appointments

Students are welcome to make an appointment with their CSO counselor to go over interviewing techniques or to conduct a mock interview.

Alumni Mentor Program

To assist you in contacting someone who truly wants to help, the CSO has developed the Alumni Mentor Program. More than 100 John Marshall alumni volunteer to discuss their careers and provide information about the job market. They come from a variety of private and public sector practice areas in a variety of geographic locations, all to help our students! Please take advantage of this great opportunity.

CSO Library

Students are able to check out books from our library. There are several books that address interviewing, as well as other career topics. Stop by and take a look!