Preparing for a Co-op Interview

This guide is designed to help you understand, prepare, and succeed in the co-op interview process. It does not guarantee that you’ll “Ace” your interview, but it should give you
so that you will be more confident and hopefully less nervous when your turn comes.

This guide discusses traditional and behavioural interviews with more emphasis on the behavioural interview as that technique is the trend in today’s job market. Additional assistance can be received by contacting your Co-op Co-ordinator or Ryerson’s Career Centre.

**What is a Job Interview?**

A job interview involves an exchange of information between you and a company representative. In some cases the interviewer can be a Human Resources Representative, a Manager, or a Senior Employee, or Team Lead from a department or group in the organization. In some cases you may be interviewed by more than one person; either two people from the same group/department, or a human resource person and a manager from the group/department.

During the interview, you will have an opportunity to "sell yourself" to the employer, and equally important, to determine if the position and organization are right for you. Other purposes of the interview are to gather information about the job duties, the organization, and the working conditions. You may then use this information to decide whether or not you want the job.

Interviewers will use the interview to promote their organizations and to assess the appropriateness of your qualifications for the position. You will be evaluated on your skills, education and experience, and personal traits (self-expression, maturity, self-confidence, enthusiasm, interests, career direction) to determine "degree of fit" with the job and the organization.

In efforts to determine better degrees of “fit”, more and more companies are beginning to use **behavioral interviewing**; a technique in which the questions focus on your performance in past situations. (See Behavioural Interviews below). While not all interviews are of the behavioural type, we strongly suggest that you prepare for interviews using and understanding behavioural interviewing techniques as they are well suited to both behavioural and traditional interviews.
Preparing for the Interview

Analyze the occupational or job duties. There are three main areas in which you will be judged for "degree of fit."

Knowledge: the body of information necessary to perform the job tasks, based on your previous education and experience, or your demonstrated ability to learn.

Skill and Abilities: observable competencies and abilities (computer skills, communication skills etc.), often combined with ability to produce a product (projects, assignments, written reports).

Personal Characteristics: traits, values, behavior patterns, appearance. The importance of these three elements relative to each other will vary with the demands of the job.

By reviewing the job description, company/department web site, speaking to those working in the field, or by conducting research, determine what knowledge, skills, abilities, and personal characteristics are necessary to perform the job. Then:

1. Write the skills/attributes/characteristics down.

2. While reviewing the list, think of things you have done/are doing that demonstrates you have the knowledge, skills, abilities, and personal characteristics necessary. Plan to describe your background in relationship to the knowledge skills and abilities of the jobs.

3. Know and be yourself. Although you have analyzed what they want, you must relate this to who you are. This includes knowing your likes and dislikes, strengths and weaknesses, and career direction. You will be most persuasive about your ability to do the job if your career choice is based on a mature self-examination of your abilities and has been tested by some job experience. Be prepared to steer the conversation to important, relevant information about yourself even if it is not requested.

4. Find out as much as possible about the organization and position. Read career and employer literature, check the company web site, check the resources located in Career Centre, ask professors or alumni
for information; and speak anyone you may know who is an employee of the company.

6. Prior to your appointment, find out the names and titles of those who will interview you. During the interview, you may politely ask for each interviewer’s business card to better help you understand the reporting structure and to help with follow-up.

7. Be on time for the interview. Know where you’re going. Get good directions and allow extra time to reach your destination.

8. Wear clothing that is tasteful, conservative and appropriate for the organization and position. Select colors and styles that are flattering. Be neat and clean. Maintain good body posture.

9. Bring extra copies of your resume, and if appropriate, a portfolio (disk or CD-ROM acceptable) or samples of your work. Bring letters of recommendation to the interview, if requested. If not requested, bring the names, addresses and phone numbers of references with you (on a separate sheet). You may want to carry a note pad in a portfolio. Your resumes, list of references and paper should all be in one place.
During the Interviews

1. Make a positive impression and "sell yourself." Many interviewers make a judgment within the first four minutes. Try to project qualities such as enthusiasm, interest, flexibility and willingness to work. Initiative, honesty, sincerity and an ease of communication are respected and appreciated, and are "personal characteristics" that all employers value.

2. If the interview is at the company site, be aware that the receptionist and other staff may be as important to impress as the interviewer. Always be polite and professional when dealing with any other company employees in addition to the interviewers.

3. Shake hands before and after the meeting. Your handshake should be firm without crushing the other person’s hand, and look each person who is greeting you in the eye while shaking his/her hand. Believe it or not people remember limp or poor handshakes. In fact a contact of ours at HP told us that as a management trainee he attended special training sessions on business etiquette. In one session, participants had to practice their handshakes for an hour to get it done right. So if you don’t think this stuff doesn’t matter – think again. Remember the interviewer's name and use it.

4. Relax. Some initial anxiety is expected and acceptable, and sends the message that this is an important event to you. You'll become more comfortable as the interview proceeds.

5. Speak clearly, directly and to the point. Maintain eye contact.

6. Listen to the question, and answer what is asked. Don't make assumptions. If you do not understand a question, it is better to ask for clarification than to blunder along. However, do not always repeat the interviewer’s questions. That suggests that you do not understand any of the questions being asked of you.

7. Anticipate questions and prepare your responses. For example if you don’t have a high GPA, or you failed a course in your program be
prepared to answer the question, “I see you got an F in this course, can you tell me why?”. Practice your interview answers ahead of time, not at the interview. Try not to be thrown by surprise questions. Refrain from giving "yes" and "no" answers. One-liners are conversation stoppers. Elaborate on your experience and skills while emphasizing accomplishments, always keeping in mind your analysis of knowledge, skills/abilities, and personal characteristics.

8. Bring up positive points in response to the questions. Refrain from complaining or being overly critical. Don't discuss your personal difficulties. Be enthusiastic about the organization and position.

9. Make sure you have explained why you are interested in the position and what you have to offer. Know exactly what you want and don't want.

10. Prepare questions that you want to ask, however, be careful about the order in which you bring them up. Begin by asking about the job responsibilities. Don't ask about salary and benefits first.

11. If you are asked to offer any questions at the end of the interview, always take the opportunity to do so (if you have any). If you do not have questions, take the opportunity to make a summary statement of your interests, appropriate skills and background, and re-state your interest in working for that company.

For example:

Interviewer: “Do you have any questions that you’d like to ask? Or anything else you’d like to add before we finish?”

You: “Thank you. I think all of my questions have been answered in the interview, but in closing I’d just like to say that I am really interested in working for --------- I think this position would give me a great opportunity to learn, and I think my experience and education would make me a good fit. I’d also like to thank you once again for taking the time to interview me”

12. Before leaving, find out the next step in the process. When will decisions be made? Ask if additional information such as transcripts or references is necessary. Thank the interviewers for their time and the opportunity to meet them.
The following list of questions, although not comprehensive, will give you an idea of those frequently asked during interviews. Review the list and determine possible responses prior to interviewing. Write out your answers as if this were an essay test. Being able to provide concrete examples of past experience will greatly strengthen your answers. Read between the lines-- what is really being asked? Try practicing answers with friends, roommates or family. It is easier to practice with them rather than at the interview. Before interviewing be sure to think of those questions you would find most difficult to answer- those you hope the interviewer won't ask. List them with possible responses.

1. Tell me about yourself.
2. Why did you leave your last job? May we contact your former or present employer?
3. Can you work under pressure?
4. What are some of your weaknesses? strengths?
5. How long would you stay with us if this job were offered to you?
6. What can you offer us that someone else cannot?
7. Describe your experiences working with culturally diverse people?
8. What did you like least and most about your last job? What did you learn?
9. What position and salary do you expect to hold in two years? five years?
10. Why are you interested in working for us? Why should we hire you?
11. How long do you think it would take you to make a positive contribution to our organization?
12. What is your opinion of the organization you currently or previously worked for?
13. Describe a typical day in your current or most recent job.
14. What about the position under discussion interests you the least? the most?
15. What preparation have you had for this position/program?
16. Are you willing to be flexible in your work hours?
17. Do you prefer working with people? data? things? ideas?
18. What kind of supervisor or boss do you prefer?
19. What do you find satisfying about this kind of work?
20. Which is more important to you, money or job satisfaction?
21. Why did you choose to enroll at Ryerson? What is the best course you’ve had? Why did you select your major? this career area?
22. Describe an accomplishment that made you particularly proud of yourself.
23. What personal attributes do you feel are necessary to succeed in this field?
24. Describe your ideal job.
25. What does success mean to you?
26. Describe what you learned as an intern.
27. In what areas do you perceive a need for additional training?
28. Tell me about your program. What is your GPA? Do you think it is a good indicator of your academic ability?
29. In what community and/or college activities have you been involved?
30. Identify a major problem you've encountered and how you dealt with it.
31. What questions do you have for me?
32. What is your current boss's title and what are his or her duties?
Employers should only ask questions where there is a relationship to specific job requirements. Despite this, "illegal" types of questions sometimes come up and you must be prepared to handle them. Among the illegal areas of inquiry are age, marital status or plans, home ownership or financial status, religion, national origin or ethnicity, community or political memberships. Employers might ask an illegal question because:

- They don't realize that it is illegal.
- You are being tested to see what your response will be.
- They feel a right to have the information.

How do you handle an illegal question? It will be helpful to you to determine in advance how you will deal with illegal inquiries should they arise. Several ways for handling this situation include:

- Try to determine why the question was asked and then reassure the employer on that point. (e.g. If you are worried about my ability to be on time with my commute, I assure you that it will not been a problem for me.)
- Ask why the question was asked, explaining you are unsure how it relates to job duties.
- Answer the question, ignoring that it is illegal.
- Answer the question, stating that you don't think it relates to your qualifications for the position.
- Decline to answer the question, saying that you don't think it affects your qualifications for the position.
Sample Questions You May Ask

1. What are primary responsibilities of this position? What is a typical day like in the department?
2. What might the career path be for this position?
3. With whom would I be working? To whom would I be reporting? More than one person?
4. Is there a training or orientation program for the employees?
5. Are there any questions that you have about my background that I might clarify for you?
6. What is the next step in the hiring process?
7. What is this job's most important responsibility?
8. What is the background of my boss/team/department?
9. What are the job holder’s most important relationships- clients, customers, other employees?
10. Are there performance reviews? What is the job's salary range? What benefit package exists?
11. What are some of the departmental goals in the next two to five years?
12. Does this organization have a policy to hire from within?
13. What do you (the interviewer) like about the company?
14. What has your experience been like at ---------- company?
15. How did you (the interviewer – if it is a manager not a human resource person) get to your position in ---------- company?
1. Immediately following the interview, make notes on questions in order to improve future interviews. You may be able to ask for feedback from the interviewer. Do this according to their lead.
2. Thank the interviewer for the opportunity, stress your continued interest in the position and organization, highlight significant points made during the interview (your abilities, particular qualifications), and include pertinent follow-up details (address change, etc.).
3. Check on your status by following the interviewer's directions. If you are to call back in two weeks, be sure to do so.
4. If you don't get the position, try not to take it as a personal rejection. The position may not have been right for you, or the person selected may have been better qualified. Remember that you did not place last in the race. There were probably many applicants, and only a handful of well-qualified finalists were invited to interview. You were among this group. If you think this position or program was "just right" for you, continue your search. The most important variable in job search success is time spent in the search.
Behavioural interviewing asserts that the best way to predict future behavior is to determine past behavior. Behavioral interviewing is designed to minimize personal impressions that can affect the hiring decision. By focusing on the applicant's actions and behaviors, rather than subjective impressions that can sometimes be misleading, interviewers can make more accurate hiring decisions.

**Why should you prepare for a behavioral interview?**

1. Candidates who prepare for behavioral interviews are better prepared - even for traditional interviews.
2. Using behavioral answers works well with inexperienced interviewers.
3. Companies that invest the time and energy in developing behavioral interviews often attract top candidates. Top candidates, make the company a more desirable place to work.

Companies that employ behavioral interviewing have predetermined the skill sets they require for a particular position. These skill sets could include: decision making and problem solving, leadership, motivation, communication, interpersonal skills, planning and organization, critical thinking skills, team building and the ability to influence others. The company determines the skill sets by doing a detailed analysis of the position they are seeking to fill.

**Behavioral vs. Traditional Interviews**

If you have training or experience with traditional interviewing techniques, you may find the behavioral interview quite different in several ways:

- Instead of asking how you would behave in a particular situation, the interviewer will ask you to describe how you did behave.
- Expect the interviewer to question and probe (think of "peeling the layers from an onion").
• The interviewer will ask you to provide details, and will not allow you to theorize or generalize about several events.
• The interview will be a more structured process that will concentrate on areas that are important to the interviewer, rather than allowing you to concentrate on areas that you may feel are important.
• You may not get a chance to deliver any prepared stories.
• Most interviewers will be taking copious notes throughout the interview.

**How to Prepare for a Behavioral Interview**

• Recall recent situations that show favorable behaviors or actions, especially involving course work, work experience, leadership, teamwork, initiative, planning, and customer service.
• Prepare short descriptions of each situation; be ready to give details if asked.
• Be sure each story has a beginning, a middle, and an end, i.e., be ready to describe the situation, your action, and the outcome or result. The best way to accomplish this is to use the three-step STAR process:

  1. Situation or Task
  2. Action
  3. Result or outcome

• Be sure the outcome or result reflects positively on you (even if the result itself was not favorable).
• Be honest. Don't embellish or omit any part of the story. The interviewer will find out if your story is built on a weak foundation.
• Be specific. Don't generalize about several events; give a detailed accounting of one event.
• Practice your behavioral stories using real-life examples. It is very difficult to make up behavioral stories, which is why behavioral interviewing is becoming more popular. By practicing, you will be able to recall with confidence your past accomplishments.
Sample Behavioural Interview Questions

ADAPTABILITY

- Tell me about a situation in which you have had to adjust to changes over which you had no control. How did you handle it?
- Tell me about a time when you had to adjust to a classmate’s or colleague’s working style in order to complete a project or achieve your objectives.
- How was your transition from high school to university? Did you face any particular problems? How did you handle them?

ANALYTICAL SKILLS / PROBLEM SOLVING

- Describe the project or situation that best demonstrates your analytical abilities. What was your role?
- Tell me about a time when you had to analyze information and make a recommendation. To whom did you make the recommendation? What was your reasoning? What kind of thought process did you go through? Why? Was the recommendation accepted? If not, why?
- Tell me about a situation where you had to solve a difficult problem. What did you do? What was your thought process? What was the outcome? What do you wish you had done differently?
- What steps do you follow to study a problem before making a decision? Why?

COMMUNICATION

- Tell me about a recent successful experience in making a speech or presentation? How did you prepare? What obstacles did you face? How did you handle them?
- Have you ever had to "sell" an idea to your classmates or co-workers? How did you do it? Did they accept your idea?
- Give me an example of a time when you were able to successfully communicate with another person even when that individual may not have personally liked you (or vice versa). How did you handle the
situation? What obstacles or difficulties did you face? How did you deal with them?

• Tell me about a time in which you had to use your written communication skills in order to get an important point across.

CREATIVITY

• When was the last time you thought "outside the box" and how did you do it? Why?
• Tell me about a problem that you’ve solved in a unique or unusual way. What was the outcome? Were you happy or satisfied with it?
• Give me an example of when someone brought you a new idea that was odd or unusual. What did you do?

DECISION MAKING

• Tell me about a time when you had to make a decision without all the information you needed. How did you handle it? Why? Were you happy with the outcome?
• Give me an example of a time when you had to be quick in coming to a decision. What obstacles did you face? What did you do?
• What is the most difficult decision you’ve had to make? How did you arrive at your decision? What was the result?

GOAL SETTING

• Give me an example of an important goal which you have set and tell me how you reached it. What steps did you take? What obstacles did you encounter? How did you overcome the obstacles?
• Tell me about a goal that you set that you did not reach. What steps did you take? What obstacles did you encounter? How did it make you feel?

INITIATIVE

• Describe a project or idea (not necessarily your own) that was implemented primarily because of your efforts. What was your role? What was the outcome?
• Describe a situation in which you recognized a potential problem as an opportunity. What did you do? What was the result? What do you wish you had done differently?
• Tell me about a project you initiated. What did you do? Why? What was the outcome? Were you happy with the result?
• Tell me about a time when your initiative caused a change to occur.
• What was the best idea you came up with during your professional or college career? How did you apply it?

INTEGRITY/HONESTY

• Discuss a time when your integrity was challenged. How did you handle it?
• Tell me about a time when you experienced a loss for doing what is right. How did you react?
• Tell me about a business situation when you felt honesty was inappropriate. Why? What did you do?
• Give a specific example of a policy you conformed to with which you did not agree. Why?

INTERPERSONAL SKILLS

• Give an example of when you had to work with someone who was difficult to get along with. How/why was this person difficult? How did you handle it? How did the relationship progress?
• Describe a situation where you found yourself dealing with someone who didn’t like you. How did you handle it?
• Describe a recent unpopular decision you made. How was it received? How did you handle it?
• What, in your opinion, are the key ingredients in guiding and maintaining successful business relationships? Give me examples of how you have made this work for you.
• Give me an example of a time when you were able to successfully communicate with another person even when that individual may not have personally liked you (or vice versa). How did you handle the situation?
• Tell me about a time when you had to work on a team with someone you did not get along with. What happened?
• Describe a situation where you had a conflict with another individual, and how you dealt with it. What was the outcome? How did you feel about it?

LEADERSHIP
Tell me about a team project when you had to take the lead or take charge of the project? What did you do? How did you do it? What was the result?

Describe a leadership role of yours. Why did you commit your time to it? How did you feel about it?

What is the toughest group that you have had to get cooperation from? What were the obstacles? How did you handle the situation? What were the reactions of the group members? What was the end result?

**PLANNING AND ORGANIZATION / TIME MANAGEMENT**

Describe a situation that required you to do a number of things at the same time. How did you handle it? What was the result?

How do you prioritize projects and tasks when scheduling your time? Give me some examples.

Tell me about a project that you planned. How did your organize and schedule the tasks? Tell me about your action plan.

**TEAMWORK**

Describe a situation where others you were working with on a project disagreed with your ideas. What did you do?

Tell me about a time when you worked with a classmate or colleague who was not doing their share of the work. How did you handle it?

Describe a situation in which you had to arrive at a compromise or help others to compromise. What was your role? What steps did you take? What was the result?

Tell me about a time when you had to work on a team that did not get along. What happened? What role did you take? What was the result?