

BBJ Interview Guide

(Revised December 2003)

Homework

- Learn everything you can about the company (web site, publications, friends, employees, etc.).
- Develop a list of questions you want to ask the interviewer(s).
- Determine the skills/qualities they want. In addition to job-specific or technical skills, these usually include: communication, interpersonal, creativity/problem solving, leadership, initiative, goal setting.
- Identify at least two success stories for each skill/quality. (See attached material on success stories.)
Good success stories SOAR, describing *Situation, Obstacles, Action, Results* (in measurable terms).

Questions and Answers

- Prepare answers ahead of time to the most common questions (the 50 Questions).
- Gear answers to show what you can do for the company.
- Keep your answers brief—you can always ask if the interviewer would like to know more.
- Have non-technical answers for HR, senior managers, and other non-technical people, as well as technical answers for those who will understand what you are talking about and want to hear it.
- Your answers should include your leading qualities with the success stories that support them.
- Tell the truth, as positively as possible.
- Evaluate your resume and experience critically. Emphasize how you have addressed weaknesses.
- Anticipate concerns about your background, experience, age, etc. and address those in your answers.
- Practice your answers. Don't memorize word for word, but become confident of main points.
- Be prepared to ask questions as well as answer them.

Manner and Appearance

- Dress conservatively and appropriately. Clothes should be cleaned and pressed, shoes shined, and glasses clean. Trim hair and fingernails. Minimize jewelry and cologne/perfume. Use breath mints.
- Arrive on early. (On time is late!)
- Check your grooming (hair, tie, makeup). Dry sweaty palms and forehead.
- Do not smoke or chew gum.
- It is normal to be nervous, but seek to appear relaxed, friendly, confident, sincere.
- Give a firm, solid handshake.
- Sit up straight, alert, yet relaxed.
- Make eye contact (says you're credible) and smile (says you are a happy person).
- Match voice (volume, tempo) and manner to the interviewer, e.g., relaxed, thoughtful, excited.
- Be polite. Avoid slang, "um," "like," etc.
- Practice with a friend who can alert you to any poor habits, nervous mannerisms, etc.
- Remember, you only get one chance to make a first impression.

In the Interview

- Bring an extra resume. Have your references ready to produce at the appropriate time.
- Learn what the interviewer wants/needs. Show that your skills and experiences match. (Relate answers to the job you are seeking, even when questions are about your present/former job.)
- Seek early to develop rapport with the interviewer (common interests, etc.).
- Listen carefully to the interviewer's questions. In your answers, emphasize your strong points.
- Speak confidently, supporting your answers with relevant examples from your work.
- Don't bad-mouth your previous employer. Don't share too much about your personal life.
- Don't talk too much, but be an active participant, expressing enthusiasm and interest.
- Attitude speaks louder than words. So, keep a Positive Mental Attitude.
- Show that you have done your homework (but don't imply that you think you know everything).
- If necessary, guide the interview so that you can highlight your leading qualities.
- Summarize your key qualities at the end of the interview.

Success Stories

One of the most common weaknesses in interviewing is failing to provide good “success stories.” Success stories are concrete examples of the qualities, skills and attitudes you can bring to this job.

Why are success stories important?

1. *Success stories prove that you have the qualities, skills, attitudes and abilities they are looking for.* Employers want to know if you have the qualities they are looking for. You can tell them that you have the qualities the job requires, but they don't know whether they can trust your judgment or not. You can be more specific and tell them that you work hard, handle stress well, get along with others, are a leader, etc., but they'd prefer to see for themselves. So, “show them” with your success stories.
2. *Success stories help employers visualize your contribution to their company.* Employers are interested in results. Lots of employees have skills and work hard, but not everyone makes a difference. Good success stories describe the *results* your hard work has produced.
3. *Success stories make you memorable.* Abstract qualities are easily forgotten, but people remember stories. Everyone will claim to work hard and make a difference. Your success stories, however, are unique to you. *You saved your company \$100,000. You got that underperforming team member to contribute. You won that customer back.* After all the interviews are over, you want the employer to say, “The one who overcame that incredible obstacle and got the job done—that's the one I want.”

What makes a good success story? Good success stories SOAR.

- What was the **situation**? A goal? A job? An opportunity?
- What **obstacle** (or obstacles) did you face? A tight deadline? A difficult customer? An uncooperative team member? An entrenched way of doing things? Lack of information?
- What **action** did you take to overcome the obstacle and get the job done? Did you work extra hours? Offer an important suggestion? Develop a relationship with the customer? Do extra research?
- What was the **result**? Did you get the job done on time? Save the company money? Win the customer back? Achieve your goal? Increase sales? (State the results in measurable terms whenever possible.)

Normally, success stories will come from the workplace. However, if you have been out of the workplace for some time or you have had other relevant accomplishments, it is appropriate to include them.

Using your success stories effectively

- In every job search, the employer is looking for certain qualities, skills, attitudes and abilities. Some will be stated in the job notice (e.g., B.S. in accounting, takes initiative). Some may reflect company values (e.g., customer-service orientation). Others may be unstated (e.g., creative, flexible). Part of your research is finding out enough about the industry, company, job, and hiring manager that you can identify the 6–10 key qualities, skills, etc. that the hiring manager is probably looking for.
- Early in the interview, you want to find out which of your 6–10 qualities the interviewer is *most* interested in. Ask a question like, “Can you tell me what are the common denominators in people who have been top performers in this position?” These are the ones you want to emphasize most.
- Your job in the interview is to convince the interviewer that you have these qualities, skills, attitudes and abilities. How will you do that? By having at least two success stories for each skill or quality that you know they are looking for and/or that you want them to know you have. Employers will be more impressed if you can demonstrate that you have done it (whatever it is) more than once.
- Introduce your success stories into the interview as early as possible, preferably in your answer to the very first question. You want to start selling yourself from the very beginning of the interview.
- Work a success story into every answer you can. That way every answer backs up your claim that you have the qualities they are looking for and makes you memorable.

50 Tough Interview Questions (Revised 2003)

You and Your Accomplishments

1. Tell me a little about yourself.

Because this is often the opening question, be careful that you don't run off at the mouth. Keep your answer to a minute or two, and consider four topics:

Early Years

Education

Work History

Recent Career Experience

2. What can you do for us that some else can't?

Here you have every right and perhaps obligation to toot your own horn and be a bit egotistical. Talk about your record of getting things done.

Mention specifics from your resume or inventory of accomplishments

Say that your skills and interests, combined with history of getting things done, makes you valuable.

Mention ability to set priorities, identify problems, and use your experience and ability to solve them.

3. Why should we hire you?

Create your answer by thinking in terms of your ability, your experience, and your energy. See Question 2 for more detail.

4. What do you look for in a job?

Keep you answer oriented toward the opportunities at the organization.

Talk about desire to perform and be recognized for contributions

Orient your answer toward opportunities rather than personal security

5. How long would it take you to make a meaningful contribution to our firm?

Be realistic.

Say that, while you would expect to meet pressing demands and pull your own weight from the first day, it might take six months to a year before you could expect to know the organization and its needs enough to make a major contribution.

6. Tell me about a time you changed the nature of your job.

Tell how you improved it.

7. Describe a time you had to work under pressure and deal with deadlines.

Observe that both are facts of business life.

Take examples from your list of accomplishments to show how you have dealt successfully with pressure and deadlines in the past.

8. In your present (last) position, what problems did you identify that had previously been overlooked?

Be brief and don't brag. Indicate the positive changes your suggestions or leadership resulted in.

9. If you could start your career over again what would you do differently?

The best answer is, "Not a thing."

You should try to present yourself as a person who is happy with his or her life.

You've enjoyed its ups and learned from its downs.

You would not, as a result, want to change things that brought you to where you are today.

Mention that it is the past, after all, that has prepared you for this position.

10. What career options do you have at this moment?

You should try to identify three areas of interest, one of which includes this company and job. The other two should be in related fields.

Goals

11. How would you define success?

*Think in terms of a sense of well-being.
Consider opportunity and responsibility as components of success.*

12. How successful do you think you've been so far?

*Say that, all in all, you're happy with the way your career has progressed.
Given the normal ups and downs of life, you feel that you've done quite well and expect to continue to succeed in the future.
Present a positive and confident picture, but don't overstate your case. An answer like, "Everything is wonderful; I'm overjoyed!" is likely to make an interviewer wonder whether you're trying to fool him or yourself. The most convincing confidence is quiet confidence.*

13. What are your long-range goals?

*Refer back to the self-assessment phase of your career continuation efforts. Don't answer, "I want the job you've advertised."
Relate goals to the company you're interviewing with: "In a firm like yours, I would like to"*

14. Will you be out to take your boss's job?

Say that while you certainly hope to win additional responsibility in the organization, you've always focused on getting the current job done.

Strengths and Weaknesses

15. Please describe a few situations in which your work was criticized.

Be specific. Don't be emotional.

Think in terms of constructive criticism

Show that you responded positively and benefited from that criticism.

16. What are your strong points?

Present at least three.

Use concrete, work-related examples to illustrate them.

Try to relate your answer to the interviewing organization and the specific job opening.

17. What are your weak points?

Don't say you have none. But try to make a negative sound like a strength carried a bit too far.

"I sometimes get impatient and become deeply involved when a project is running late.

Don't offer a list of weaknesses

A good interviewer may press you a bit by saying, "Is there anything else?" You might answer

"No, I don't think so on that topic."

If the interviewer persists, come up with a second weakness, but only if you are asked for it. Don't offer negative information unnecessarily.

If the interviewer continues and asks for a third weakness, say politely that you really can't think of anything else.

Finally, show that you are working to correct your weaknesses.

18. If I spoke with your (former) boss, what would he or she say are your greatest strengths and weaknesses?

Name three or four strengths and only one weakness. Be honest but not negative.

Management

19. Do you prefer staff or line work?

Say that it depends of the job and its challenge.

20. What is your management style?

You should know enough about the company's style to know that your management style will compliment it. Possible styles include:

Task oriented (Problem solving)

Results oriented (Effect on bottom line)

Participative style (open-door method motivating people and delegating)

21. Are you a good manager? Can you give me some examples? Do you feel that you have top management potential?

Keep your answer achievement and task-oriented.

Rely on examples from your career to support your statements.

Stress your experience and your energy.

22. What do you think is the most difficult thing about being a manager or an executive?

Mention planning, execution, and cost control.

The most difficult task may be to motivate and manage employees to get tasks routinely planned and completed on time and within budget.

23. Do you consider yourself a leader?

Take examples from your work experience.

24. What do you look for when you hire people?

Think in terms of skills, initiative, and adaptability to work comfortably and productively with others. Mention that you like to hire people who appear capable of moving up in an organization.

25. Have you ever had to fire people? What were the reasons, and how did you handle the situation?

Admit that the situation wasn't easy, but say that it worked out well, both for the company and, you think for the individual or individuals involved.

Show that, like anyone else, you don't enjoy unpleasant tasks, but that you can resolve them efficiently and, in the case of firing someone, humanely.

Personality

26. Do you have any objection to psychological tests?

Say you would feel comfortable taking them.

27. Do you speak to others before they speak to you?

The interviewer is probably trying to determine your ability to deal with unstable or unanticipated situations.

Say that your actions depend on specific circumstances.

While you wouldn't normally start a conversation with a stranger on the street, for example, you feel comfortable initiating discussions with people you don't know in normal business or social settings.

28. What was the last book you read? Movie you saw? Sporting event you attended?

Try to show that you lead a balanced life when answering questions about outside activities.

29. Are you creative?

Be prepared with work related examples of creativity.

30. How would you describe your own personality?

It may be wise to say you are the proud owner of a balanced personality.

Reasons for Your Search (or Why You Are Out of Work)

31. Why are you leaving (did leave) your present (last) position?

Be brief, to the point, and as honest as you can without hurting yourself.

Refer back to the planning phase of your job search, where you considered this topic as you thought about reference statements.

If you were laid off in a staff reduction, say so

Otherwise indicate that the move was your decision, the result of your desire to advance your career.

Don't mention personality conflicts.

The interviewer may spend some time probing you on this issue, particularly if it's clear that you were terminated. Be as positive and honest as you can. The "We agreed to disagree" approach suggested earlier may be useful.

Don't fabricate a story for an interview; even in today's reference-shy climate, your story may be checked.

32. Why haven't you found a job before now?

Say that finding a job isn't difficult, but that finding the right job deserves time and demands careful planning.

33. (If you have been out of work) What have you been doing while you have been out of work?

Emphasize that you have kept busy.

Be sure to mention any things you have done that have enhanced your job skills.

You may wish to mention volunteer and service contributions.

Your Last Job

34. In your current (last) position, what features do (did) you like the most? The least?

Be careful and be positive. Describe more features that you liked than disliked.

Don't cite personality problems.

If you make your last job sound terrible, an interviewer may wonder why you've remained there until now, or whether you have an attitude problem that will show up on a new job, too.

35. In your current (last) position, what have been (were) your five most significant accomplishments?

Have specific examples ready.

If you are asked for five examples, don't cite ten.

If you want to show that you were responsible for more than five achievements, you can say, "I've given you five that seem the most important to me. There are others, if you'd like to hear about some other area of my work" Then if the interviewer asks for additional accomplishments, you can give them without appearing to boast.

36. Did you think of leaving your present position before? If so, what do you think held you there?

You might say that the challenge of the job held you in the past but, as that seemed to diminish, you reached the decision to investigate new opportunities.

37. What do you think of your (former) boss?

Be as positive as you can.

A potential boss will anticipate that you might talk about him or her in similar terms at some point in the future.

Industry Trends and Issues

38. What important trends or challenges do you see in our industry?

Be prepared with two or three trends that illustrate how well you understand your industry.

You might consider technological challenges or opportunities

Economic conditions

Current competitive situation

Regulatory demands related to the direction in which your business is heading.

A Particular Company and/or Position

39. What do you know about our organization?

You should be able to discuss the following:

Production Services

Revenues

Reputation

Image

Goals

Management Style

People

History and Philosophy

However, don't act as if you know everything about the place.

Let answers show that you have taken the time to do some research, but don't overwhelm the interviewer.

Make it clear that you wish to learn more.

Give answers in a positive tone. Don't say, "Well, everyone tells me the company's in a heap of trouble, and that's why I'm here" – even if it is why you're there.

40. What do you find most attractive about this position? What seems least attractive?

List three or four attractive features of the job, and mention a single, minor, unattractive item.

41. Please give me the definition of (the position for which you are being interviewed).

Keep your answers brief and task oriented.

Think in terms of responsibilities and accountability.

Make sure that you really do understand what the position involves before you answer.

If you aren't sure, ask the interviewer, he or she may answer the question for you.

42. Tell us why you want to work for us?

The deadliest answer you can give is “Because I like people.” What else would you like— animals? Here and throughout the interview, a good answer comes from having done your homework so you can speak in terms of the company’s need.

You might say your research has shown that the company is doing things you would like to be involved with, and that it’s been doing them in ways that interest you.

- If the company is known for strong management, your answer should be you would like to be part of that team.
- If the company puts a great deal of emphasis on research and development emphasize the fact that you want to create new things and you know this is a place where inventiveness is encouraged.
- If the organization stresses financial controls, your answer should mention a reverence for numbers.

If you feel that you have to concoct an answer to this question, then you probably shouldn’t be taking the interview, because you probably shouldn’t be considering a job with that organization. Your homework should include learning enough about the company to avoid approaching places where you wouldn’t be able or wouldn’t want to function.

43. Don’t you think you might be better suited for a different size company? To a different type company?

Tailor your answer to the job being discussed.

Say that your preferences for the size or type of company generally depend on the job in question. Note that your research has shown you that this organization and this job meet your criteria.

44. If you could choose any company, where would you go?

Talk about the job and the company for which you are being interviewed.

45. What other jobs are you considering?

Restrict your answer to fields similar to the one in which this company operates.

46. How long will you stay with us?

Say that you are interested in a career with the organization, but admit that you would have to continue to feel challenged to remain with an organization. Think in terms of, "As long as we both feel achievement oriented."

47. Your resume suggests that you may be overqualified or too experienced for this position. What do you think?

Emphasize your interest in establishing a long term association with the organization, and say that you assume if you perform well in this job, new opportunities will open up for you.

Mention that a strong company needs a strong staff.

Observe that individuals are always at a premium

Suggest that because you are so well qualified, the company will get a fast return on its investment.

Say that a growing, energetic company can never have too much talent.

Salary-Related Questions

48. Why aren't you earning more at your age?

Say that is one reason you're conducting this job search. Don't be defensive.

49. What do you feel this position should pay?

Salary is a delicate topic.

We suggest that you defer tying yourself to a precise figure for as long as you can do it politely. You might say, "I understand that the range for this job is between \$X and \$Y. That seems appropriate for the job as I understand it."

You might answer the question with a question. "Perhaps you can help me on this one. Can you tell me if there is a range for similar jobs in the organization?"

If you're asked the question during an initial screening interview, you might say that you feel you need to know more about the responsibilities involved before giving a meaningful answer. Here too, either by asking the interviewer or doing research during your investigation of the company, you can try to find out whether there is a salary grade attached to the job. If there is, and if you can live with it, say that the range seems right to you.

If the interviewer continues to probe, you might say, "You know I am making \$X now. Like everyone else, I'd like to improve on that figure, but my major interest is in the job itself."

Remember the act of taking a new job does not, in and of itself, make you worth more money.

If no price range is attached to the job, and the interviewer continues to press the subject, then you will have to respond with a number. You can't leave the impression that it doesn't really matter, that you'll accept what ever is offered. If you've been making \$96,000 annually, you can't say that a \$42,000 figure would be fine without sounding like you are giving up on yourself. (If you are making a radical career change, however, a substantial disparity may be more reasonable and understandable)

Don't sell yourself short, but continue to stress the fact that the job itself is the most important thing in your mind. The interviewer may be trying to determine just how much you want the job. Don't leave the impression that money is the only thing important to you. Link questions of salary to the work itself.

If a search firm is involved, your contact there may be able to help with the salary question. A search firm representative may even be able to run interference for you. If, for instance, this person tells you what the position pays, and you respond that you are earning that amount now and would like to do a bit better, he or she might go back to the employer and propose that you be offered an additional ten percent.

But, whenever possible, say as little as you can about salary until you reach the final stage of the interviewing process. At that point, you know the company is genuinely interested in you and is more likely to be flexible in salary negotiations.

“When Can You Start?”

50. When could you start?

Be prepared to give a date or commit to a time and date that you can commit to a start date.

“Are you offering the position to me now?” might be a good response if an offer has not yet been made.

Your Turn

51. What questions do you have for me/us?

This is an important opportunity to get additional information about the company, the job, and the boss. It is also important to show interest by asking questions. Be ready to ask questions like these: (If you have not found out already) What qualities are you looking for in the person who fills this position?

Is this a new position? If so, why has it been created?

If not, why is this position open now? What happened to the person who was in this position?

How often has it been open in the past five years? Why did they leave?

What are the most challenging aspects of this position?

What is the most pressing problem I would face in my first few weeks? Can it be solved?

What are your short- and long-term expectations for the person who next fills this position?

What is the single most important thing that the next person who fills this position must do?

How would I be evaluated?

How would I know that I am doing well? What will count as success in this position?

What kind of supervision should I expect? How frequent would it be?

What freedom will I have in determining objectives, deadlines, and methods of evaluation?

To whom would I report directly? Who will report to me?

(If the person interviewing you would be your boss) What is your management style?

What are the opportunities for advancement from this position?

Who has held it previously and where are they now?

In what way(s) or area(s) has this organization been most successful? Least successful?

What are the company's future plans and goals?

What significant changes do you foresee in the future?

What is the single biggest issue facing this company right now?

What do you like most about working for this company?

Closing

As you close the interview, you want to leave a strong positive impression.

Review your chief strengths (as they relate to this position).

List specific reasons why you want the job; the longer (within reason) and more specific the list the more compelling it will be.

You also want to find out where you stand, with questions like:

Based on my background, personality and accomplishments, do you have any concerns regarding my ability to fit into your organization and meet or exceed the expectations for this position?

[Seek calmly and non-defensively to address any concerns that are mentioned. Then ask: In light of the additional information I've provided, has that concern diminished?]

If you don't mind my asking, would you mind telling me how many other people you have spoken with about this position and how I compare to them? Are there any qualifications or skills that any of them have that I lack?

Finally, ask for a commitment.

If appropriate, ask for the job. This means, at the very least, to express your interest, excitement and enthusiasm and end the conversation on a high note. Whether it means specifically asking at that moment for the job or not is your call. (Certainly if the interviewer has let you know that the process includes additional steps, it would not be appropriate to ask for an offer.)

At the very least, say: Based on what I know so far about your company, the opportunity you have to offer, and my background and accomplishments, I am extremely interested in moving forward. What are the next steps? When would it be appropriate for me to follow up with you?

After the Interview

While It's Fresh ...

Right after the interview (ideally before you leave the parking lot), there are several things to do.

First, make some notes (there is a recommended form in the BBJ Green Book).

With whom did you speak?

What other people did you meet (include secretaries, receptionists, etc.)? What were their names?

What questions or issues came up?

What did you learn that is of value?

How did the interviewer respond to your presentation? What makes you think so?

What referrals or contacts did you get?

Who has the next move? When?

Evaluate the interview from your side.

How did you do?

What did you do well?

What do you wish you had known about the company or the job?

Could you have found it out before the interview? If so, how?

What do you wish you had done better or done differently?

What will you do before your next interview to do it better next time?

Were there questions you weren't well prepared for?

How will you answer them differently?

How will you prepare differently for your next interview?

Is there any additional information you could provide for the interviewer?

Follow Through

You still have the chance to further differentiate yourself from other candidates.

Send a thank-you note (handwritten or by email). Reiterate why you want the job; reiterate a concise success story.

Send a note about one of the questions you were asked: "During the interview you asked me a really good question. I've continued to think about it and I have some additional ideas how to address the problem you described..."

Send something that that would be of interest to the hiring manager: a news report, a business contact, or an idea that would be beneficial to the company.