

ACTIVITIES

SECTION 4

Mock Interviews

Students often have limited experience applying for and interviewing for jobs. A mock interview allows them to think about what they offer to prospective employers, how to present themselves and articulate their strengths, and how to make the case that they are right for the job.

What Is a Mock Interview?

A mock interview allows students to practice interview techniques and get feedback and coaching on their interviewing skills. Generally, mock interviews are an activity for older students (high school juniors and seniors) who are beginning to think more seriously about jobs and careers as they continue their education.

In a mock interview, the interviewer is a professional who plays the role of the prospective employer, and the interviewee plays the role of the job candidate. Staying “in character” is important for both participants; the more realistic the interview feels, the better learning experience it will be for the student.

Students prepare for mock interviews in the same way that job candidates prepare for real interviews—by researching the company and available jobs, weighing the strengths they offer as a job candidate, and making sure to dress appropriately. Interviewers can prepare by learning in advance about the student’s interests, academic qualifications and work experience and weighing key questions to guide the conversation.

The mock interview generally lasts from 25–45 minutes. Following the interview, the interviewer should provide feedback to the student on how it went.

The Benefits of Mock Interviews

Benefits for the student:

- Students gain valuable experience articulating the unique strengths and skills they offer a prospective employer.
- Students sharpen their understanding of where they need to develop and hone their strengths in preparation for the labor market.
- Students gain insights into the real-world process by which employers screen and select employees.
- Students get feedback on their presentation skills and pointers on how to conduct a strong interview.

Benefits for the employer:

- Employers have the opportunity to nurture student interest in jobs and careers with their company and in their industry.
- Employers can help students understand the education and skills they need to secure STEM jobs with their companies.
- Employers advance their reputation as supporters of education and community leaders among school leaders, teachers, parents, and students.

Benefits for the employee/presenter:

- Employees have an opportunity to forge personal connections with young people as they help them understand what it takes to find good jobs and careers in today's workforce.

Making It Effective and Educational

BEFORE THE MOCK INTERVIEW

Clarify the job opening. Let the school or teacher know what kind of job openings the company has and will be interviewing for and the skill requirements for those jobs. This gives the student an idea of how to approach the interview and what skills to emphasize.

Learn about the interviewee. Contact the school or teacher so you have some basic information about the students you will be interviewing. Encourage schools to have students send resumes or letters outlining their key skills, experiences and interests. Then you can use this information to tailor your questions appropriately, e.g. "I see you are part of the robotics club. Tell me what you have learned through that experience about what it takes to carry out a successful project."

Note that letters and resumes should not contain students' personal contact information, nor should you contact students directly. If you need to reach out to students for any reason, always do so through the teacher or school.

Send company information. Make sure the school and the student have information about the company so the student can prepare for the interview. Send links and/or print materials describing the company and its industry and workforce.

Prepare key questions. A good interview should flow like a conversation. If it is too scripted, it will seem uncomfortable for both participants. That said, you will want to have a basic set of questions prepared so you can make sure you cover key points and keep the conversation flowing. Core interview questions you might want to cover include:

- What is your strongest subject in school? Your favorite subject? Your most challenging subject? Why?
- What are your interests outside of school?
- What experiences—in or out of school—have prepared you for the STEM job in question?
- What are your personal strengths? Weaknesses? How do you address those weaknesses?
- Do you work better independently or in groups?
- How do you handle failures? Successes?
- How do you motivate yourself when you have to do something that might seem tedious?

- Have you ever had to work with someone whom you found it hard to work with? What did you do to try and improve the situation?
- What is your most significant accomplishment to date? How does that accomplishment prepare you for a career in STEM?
- Where do you see yourself professionally in five years? 10 years? How will you ensure that you meet those professional goals?

Pin down the logistics. If the informational interview is taking place at the company, you will have to resolve some logistical questions well in advance. For example:

- Does the student have transportation? If not, who will provide it?
- What company entrance should the student use?
- Where will you meet the student?
- Have you met all your companies' security procedures to bring a student on site?

Eliminate distractions. Make sure you prepare for the interview by blocking off your calendar so you can give the interviewee your full attention. Plan to turn off your cell phone, put your computer in sleep mode, and send all calls to voicemail.

DURING THE MOCK INTERVIEW

Stay in character. Be engaging and personable, but remember your role as an employer sizing up a prospective employee. Treat it like a normal interview by sticking to your core questions and probing for strong, detailed answers that help you understand who this person is, what skills and experience he or she would bring to a job, and his or her strengths as well as weaknesses.

Push past pat answers. Don't settle for "yes" or "no" answers. If a question you ask does not elicit the kind of answer that helps you understand the person's character and strengths, make sure to follow up. Keep the "why" question at the front of your thoughts as the interviewee is talking. If she says she likes a certain subject or class, for example, ask her why, and how it prepares her for the job. If she says she likes to work in teams with other students, ask what it is about working in teams that appeals to her. And be sure to press for examples or anecdotes. For example, if the interviewee says that "determination to finish a job" is a strength, ask for a specific example of a time when that strength came into play.

Keep STEM skills front and center. One critical aim of a mock interview for a STEM job is to help students understand the STEM skills and knowledge they will need to succeed in a STEM career. Be sure to ask students about their STEM experiences both in and out of school and how those experiences can prepare them for a job in the STEM fields. Remember not to become too specific. High school students still lack knowledge or experience to qualify for many STEM jobs at your company, but you can still ask general questions that get students thinking carefully about the education pathway that will lead them to a STEM career.

Make it a conversation. Try to remember that this is a conversation. If something the interviewee says is intriguing to you as a window on who he is and the qualifications he would bring to a job, don't worry about straying from your questions and taking the conversation on a temporary tangent. Maybe the interviewee will bring up an interesting life experience that isn't on his resume and that you were not prepared to discuss. Try to go with the flow even as you stay focused on eliciting good information and insights that would inform a hiring decision.

Ask if they have any questions. Close the interview by asking if the interviewee has any questions of you. These could be questions about job requirements, salaries, the key attributes the company is looking for in its employees, etc.

Conclude while still in character. End the conversation by thanking the interviewee for her time and noting that you will be contacting her regarding the next steps in the hiring process.

AFTER THE INTERVIEW

Take notes. While the interview is still fresh in your mind, take a few minutes to jot down notes so you remember some of your key evaluation points.

Offer candid feedback. The point of a mock interview is not just to give a student exposure to what an interview is like. It's also to offer feedback and coaching so students know how to do better. Whether you do it on the spot or in a follow-up communication, offer the student actionable pointers and insights on how it went and how to improve. See "Mock Interview Evaluation Questions," below, for ways to guide your feedback. Again, all outreach to students should go through school or teacher, so use them as a conduit for sending after-the-fact student evaluations.

Look for a thank you note. Interviewers should expect to receive a follow-up thank you note from interviewees. If you do not receive a note in a timely fashion, it may be worth contacting the school or teacher to remind them that a follow-up note is an important part of any interview process.

Following Up

Reach out and say thanks. Follow up with the school or teacher after the interview to offer feedback and additional resources for students, as appropriate.

Evaluate it. In your follow-up contacts with the school or teacher, evaluate whether the mock interview met the school's goals and your goals. For more ideas on evaluation, see "How Can You Put the 'Learning' in Work-Based Learning?" page 6.

Think about what's next. Speak with the school or teacher about offering follow-up activities to give students an even closer look at your company and jobs in your industry, such as job shadowing and other activities explored elsewhere in this guidebook.

Resources

Mock Interview Evaluation Questions

Here are some questions to guide your evaluation of a student's mock interview. Based on your evaluation, you can provide the student with helpful pointers for improvement:

Appearance and Poise

- Was the student on time?
- Was the student dressed professionally and appropriately?
- Did the student appear confident and poised?
- Did the student maintain good posture and eye contact?
- Did the student give an appropriate handshake?

Presentation and Answers

- Did the student appear knowledgeable about the company and the position he/she was interviewing for?
- Did the student answer your questions clearly and substantively?
- Did the student do a good job of articulating the unique skills and experience he/she would bring to a job?
- Did the student succeed in conveying his/her enthusiasm for STEM careers?
- Did the student demonstrate at least some fundamental knowledge of the skills and experience he/she would need to succeed in the STEM career?

- Did the student have stories and examples to share that shine a light on his/her unique abilities and experiences?
- Did the student express enthusiasm and genuine interest in the work of the company? If he/she asked questions, were they insightful and appropriate?

Delivery and Language

- Did the student use proper language and enunciate his/her responses?
- Did the student avoid using distracting mannerisms and phrases (“um,” “like,” tapping, hair twirling)?