

The Public Service Job Interview

The job interview is the occasion to answer the questions of the prospective employer and to highlight your strengths. Successful interviewers understand that an employment interview is not a one-way monologue in which your only role is to answer the questions asked. It is also an exercise in advocacy in which you must show how your skills and abilities relate to the skills required for the position. Before you walk into your interview, however, there are ways to prepare yourself to guarantee a successful interview.

A. Learn about the Organization and Identify Success Factors for the Position

Based on your research, you should be able to identify several “success factors” for the position you are seeking. Think as critically as you can about the type of person they are trying to hire. For example, some key success factors for public defenders are strong interpersonal skills, good writing and oral communication skills, and unflappability. If you are able to discern the position’s requisite skills, you will be able to focus your answers to reflect these skills. The NALP Guide to Legal Specialties 2 (available in the OCP library 210 HH), discusses skills needed in various areas of practice.

At the same time, learn as much as you can about your potential employer. Meeting practitioners in the field will provide you with valuable information about the organization. Try to find out if any alums work at the organization. Check OCP’ [Public Service Network](#) and [Martindale.com](#) for alums in your area of interest. Further, OCP counselors often know of alums in particular organizations. In addition, there are online resources that can assist you. Most organizations have web sites, so check them. Check LexisNexis and Westlaw for news articles that have been written about the organization and some of its cases. You might discover that the office recently won a big case – you might want to mention it in the interview. Indeed, some employers immediately eliminate candidates who are unaware of current developments.

B. Develop Your Pitch

After identifying the key success factors for the position, you must show that you possess them. Returning to the public defender example, it is not enough in an interview to claim that you possess strong interpersonal and communication skills. Be prepared to support each claim by at least one experience that demonstrates to the employer that you do indeed possess this skill or ability. For example, if you were selected to become a crisis intervention counselor in college or made


presentations for a previous employer, these experiences would obviously correspond to the above success factors.

At the same time, think about any questions you might have for someone with your resume/background, such as: any gaps, shifts in career path, why a dual degree, why are applying in Chicago when you are from NY, etc. You might want to address any of these weaknesses or holes during your answers, sometimes even if they do not ask you about them.

At the end of this process, you should hone your pitch into a “theory of the case,” or a couple of sentences that encapsulate why the organization should hire you instead of the other applicants they are considering. Ask yourself: if you were asked to describe yourself in five adjectives, what would they be? Why are you interested in the position? What should the employer know about you? What are your two or three best qualities? Turn your responses to these questions into a very short theme that can be weaved into your answers.

Finally, be sure to review EVERYTHING (cover letter, resume, writing sample) you have submitted to the employer and be able to talk intelligently about it. Reread all materials before the interview and bring some copies along. For any publications you list, reread them and be prepared to defend your position. For each job you list, be able to discuss:

- 1 project/case you worked on – think about the legal issue involved, how you resolved it, and what the counter-arguments were
- 1 thing you learned
- 1 thing you found challenging
- If you worked with clients, one story about a client

 **TIP:** *At the end of this process, you should create a list of several success factors for the position together with a list of the experiences that illustrate that you possess these factors.*

C. The Likely Questions

You are now ready to enter that final phase of preparation: determining likely questions and rehearsing (but not over rehearsing) responses. Each employer has a different interview style. Some do simulation exercises, some are all substantive, while some talk about who you are to get a sense of personality. If you are prepared to discuss effectively and specifically the questions below, using concrete examples from your experience, you should be able to present yourself as professionally fit. As you answer these questions, keep in mind the list of success factors and relevant personal experiences that you devised. Try to focus your answers on these factors

and experiences because they are the most relevant to the employer. Take opportunities to convey your “theory of the case” to the interviewer.

Most importantly, convey enthusiasm! Employers in the public sector are usually doing this work because they love it. And they will want to see the same feeling from you, so weave enthusiasm into your answers, your body language, and your face.

a. Tell me about yourself. This maddeningly open-ended question is asked frequently enough that you should have a ready answer. This is the perfect time to employ your “theory of the case” or pitch. Try to focus your answer on some of the success factors for the job. Keep your response limited to two minutes. And do not start with where you went to elementary school; skip ahead to the things relevant to the position.

b. Why did you decide to go to law school? Discuss previous academic or employment experiences in positive terms and how these led you to focus on law as a career.

c. How are you doing academically? While public service organizations are generally not as focused on grades as many law firms are, an interviewer may still inquire about your grades. Present them in positive terms. Don’t be defeatist or defensive. If your grade point average is not as you would like it to be, nonetheless stress the positive. Perhaps you succeeded in courses that are relevant to the position for which you are applying, or your grades have continued to improve since your first year. In any event, do not dwell on your grades: provide an answer and move on to another topic. If you can find nothing positive to say about your grades, simply acknowledge in one sentence that while you’re not happy with them, you feel that other factors in your background are more indicative of success in this position and go to those factors immediately. Many employers never ask this question, in which case there is no reason for you to bring it up.

d. Why are you interested in this position? This is a good opportunity to prove that your background positions you for this job by discussing what skills you’ve developed through your classes, student group participation, pro bono work and networking with other professionals in the field. Stress how these experiences have heightened your interest in pursuing this position and reinforced your conclusion that you would perform well in it.

e. Why do you want to work for our organization? Show that you know how the organization differs from others in the field. Here is where your research will come in handy. You might want to emphasize that you are interested in the topic they work on, or maybe you’ll emphasize that you are drawn to their work in a recent case, or maybe you’ll focus on the type of skills their

organization is particularly known for (e.g. litigation). Also, emphasize your desire to work with talented lawyers.

f. What are your strengths? Here is your opportunity to discuss in a more detailed fashion the skills you possess that fill the requirements of the position. Remember, illustrate these skills with experiences in which you used them successfully.

g. What three accomplishments are you most proud of? Use the experiences that illustrate your relevant skills.

h. What are your weaknesses? These must not be critical skills, such as stating that you are bad at researching or writing. Demonstrate your maturity by discussing areas that you want to strengthen and the steps you have taken to accomplish this. It is NOT a weakness to say that you are too much of a perfectionist or that you just care too much. Don't be a cliché, but think critically about something or things that you can mention and then pivot to what you have done to address those weaknesses.

i. Discuss a significant failure. What happened? How did you "grow" from this experience? Perhaps you may wish to discuss how the setback helped you acquire new skills or hone existing ones.

j. What questions do you have for me? Always be prepared to ask a few questions that show your insight into the employer's work and needs. For example, you may ask what qualifications the organization is looking for in a candidate. Listen carefully to the qualities the interviewer mentions, and then tell him or her how your skills and experiences meet those qualifications. Your questions should never be something you could have discovered on a Web site prior to an interview. Also refrain from asking any questions about compensation, benefits, vacation, or the like until you have an offer. For more discussion and sample questions geared to students read [To Ask or Not To Ask](#).

If the interviewer does not ask questions that allow you to show your skills related to the success factors of the position, then address this matter yourself, even if unprompted. For more possible questions, see the [More Information section](#) below.

D. Make an Impression

Much has been written about how to present oneself interpersonally in an interview. One truth stands out: employers want to hire persons who are self-confident but not arrogant. The most important impression to make in an interview is that of a prepared and confident lawyer. That doesn't mean you have to be gregarious or outspoken. A

person who is naturally reserved can evoke his or her confidence and abilities just as an outgoing person can. If you take the steps described above you will be prepared, and with preparation you will feel confident and your assets will manifest themselves.

Having mentioned the importance of being proactive and stating your case in an interview, we must also stress that it is vitally important to be a good listener. Listen to the interviewer's questions and gauge his or her responses. The questions that are posed to you can suggest concerns, and body language and facial expression can indicate that the interviewer is bored or confused. Be aware of these clues and modulate your presentation accordingly.

Quick Tips:

- Make eye contact.
- Be positive. Do not make negative comments about law school, prior employers, professors, grades, and the like, even if you are completely sure you were outrageously treated.
- Be cognizant about revealing client confidences.
- Be nice to EVERYONE in the office, from the assistant to the Executive Director/Person-in-charge.
- Be confident, but not arrogant.

E. Mock Interviews

Remember that an interview is both an exercise in advocacy and a conversation between professionals. Just as experienced lawyers have mock oral arguments to rehearse their presentation, you should have a friend do a mock interview for you. Be sure to participate in the mock interviewing programs run by OCP, and also feel free to ask the attorney advisors from either office to conduct a mock interview for you. The more practice you can obtain, the better. We've seen too many students forego mock interviews because they think their book smarts/personality/interviews prior to law school will carry them through. When they fail to impress the interview and land the job, they kick themselves for not taking the opportunity to do a mock interview.


F. Telephone Interviews


A few words about telephone interviews are in order. At some point in your job search an organization may want to interview you over the telephone or may be willing to do so because you are in another location. Don't panic. The ingredients of a successful telephone interview are largely the same as those of an in-person interview: research and preparation. With respect to telephone interviews, however, keep these additional thoughts in mind.

As an initial matter, you should have a telephone answering machine or voice mail with a professional-sounding message, so that you don't miss employers' calls. You will

usually have advance notice of the interview. In setting it up, make sure you will be in a quiet, comfortable location during the interview. A major advantage of a phone interview is that you can use notes. Have a list of common questions with outlined responses and notes about your success factor skills.

Perhaps the most unnerving aspect of a phone interview is the inability of the parties to read each other's facial expressions, gestures, and body language. Compensate for this by using your voice to convey your energy level and enthusiasm. At the same time, don't allow silence to make you uncomfortable. If the interviewer asks a tough question, it is perfectly acceptable to say, "I'd like to think about this for a minute." Please note that OCP provides free long distance telephone service for interviews and other job search-related uses in room 210 HH.

 **TIP:** Michigan Law's IT department provides free video-conferencing. Thus you can ask the organization if they would prefer to conduct a video interview. To set up a video conference submit an Event Reservation at <http://web.law.umich.edu/GenericWorkRequest/InputForms.asp>. Enter the Event Name, date and time then click on the "Request Audio Visual equipment/assistance" box. In the "Available AV equipment/services box choose "video conference." Now submit your request. You will receive an automatic confirmation email with the details of your request. Someone from Law AV will contact you via email to complete the request. Please allow at least 2 business days before contacting lawav@umich.edu to inquire about the status of your request.

 **BOOK REFERENCE:** If you would like a more in-depth discussion on the interview process, see Harvard Law School's Public Interest Job Search Guide; Stating Your Case, How to Interview for a Job as a Lawyer, Joseph West; Sweaty Palms, H. Anthony Medley; Knock 'Em Dead, 2000, Martin Yate; The Princeton Review's "Job Notes Interview; Information Interviewing", Martha Stoodley; NALP's Pamphlet, An Insider's Guide to Interviewing; and The Law Firm Interview, Katy Schubert. All are available in 210 HH.

G. Follow Up With a Thank You Letter

Thank you letters serve several purposes:

- i. They are an expression of professional courtesy;
- ii. They indicate to the employer your continued interest; and
- iii. They may help to influence an employer's continued interest in you.

Thank you letters should be written to all employers with whom you have had an interview. Some guidelines to follow when writing a thank you letter:

- i. They should be written as soon as possible after the interview.
- ii. Reference the date and location of the interview for the interviewer's recollection.
- iii. Use formal titles to address the interviewers (Mr. or Ms.) even if you were instructed to address them informally during the interview.

H. More Information/Sample Interview Questions

- For sample interview questions, review our [DOJ interview questions](#), the [OCP Career Guides](#), and [Yale Law School's Sample Interview Questions](#)
- For more on interviewing, review [Harvard Law School's Interviewing Tips](#)