

Interview Handbook

A preparation guide for candidates in interview.

How to Use This Handbook

Your recruiter is your best resource. Call before the interview, and call again the moment you walk out. This handbook is for everything in between, and for the questions that come up at nine o'clock the night before when you would rather not pick up the phone.

None of what follows is complicated. Most candidates lose out not because they lacked the background but because they did not prepare, could not answer a predictable question, or never said plainly that they wanted the job.

Read it once when you get it. Skim the relevant section again the day before each interview.

QUESTIONS AT ANY POINT

Call your recruiter. Before the interview, after the interview, and anywhere in between.

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1. Before the Interview

Know Your Own Story

Most candidates prepare to answer questions about the company and forget to prepare answers about themselves. Before anything else, get clear on these:

- **Why you are open to a move now.** You will be asked, and a vague answer reads as indecision.
- **What you want next that you cannot get where you are.** Be specific.
- **Your three or four strongest accomplishments,** with numbers attached wherever numbers exist.
- **The parts of your background that do not line up neatly,** and how you explain them. Gaps, short stints, a step backward.
- **Where you want to be in three to five years,** in terms of responsibility rather than title.

Write these down. The act of writing forces precision that thinking about it does not.

Research the Company

You are expected to arrive knowing what this company actually does. That means more than skimming the home page.

- **What they sell and to whom.** Products, services, and who the customer is. If you cannot explain it in a sentence, keep reading.
- **Size and ownership.** Public, private, family held, or backed by an investor? It changes how decisions get made and how the company is measured.
- **Recent news.** Search the company name for the last twelve months. Acquisitions, leadership changes, layoffs, funding, and new facilities all matter.
- **Competitors.** Know who they are up against and roughly how they are positioned.
- **The people.** Look up your interviewers on LinkedIn. Where did they come from, and how long have they been there?
- **Employee reviews, read carefully.** Sites like Glassdoor skew toward people who left unhappy. Look for patterns rather than individual complaints.

Ask your recruiter what they know that is not public. That is a large part of why you are working with one.

What to Bring

- **Several clean copies of the same resume your recruiter submitted.** Not an updated version. The same one.
- **A portfolio or folder and a pen.** Take notes.
- **Your prepared questions, written down.** Bringing them signals preparation rather than forgetfulness.

- **References:** three people who have supervised you or worked closely with you, with current contact information. Ask their permission first and tell them what the role is.
- **Work samples** if they are appropriate to your field, and only if they are yours to show.
- **The interviewer's name and phone number,** and your recruiter's number.

Do not bring anything proprietary. No customer lists, no internal reports, no confidential documents. Producing one in an interview tells the person across the table exactly what you would do to them on your way out.

2. Presentation and Logistics

Appearance

Dress norms vary widely by industry and company. Ask your recruiter what is appropriate for this employer. When in doubt, dress one level above what you expect the office to be wearing. The goal is that nobody remembers what you wore.

- **Clean, pressed, and well-fitted.** Try the outfit on before the day of.
- **Conservative colors for a first interview.** Polished, closed-toe shoes.
- **Hair neat, groomed, and professional.** Avoid unnatural colors and dramatic or attention-drawing styles for a first interview.
- **Jewelry minimal and understated.** Anything large or visually prominent pulls focus; smaller pieces, including those worn under a collar, do not.
- **Skip cologne and perfume entirely.** Some people are sensitive to it and you will not know until it is a problem.
- **Nails clean and trimmed.** Cover visible tattoos if you are unsure of the environment.
- **Phone silenced and out of sight.** Not face down on the table.

Arrival

- **Arrive in the area early.** Walk in 10 to 15 minutes before the interview, not thirty.
- **Check the location the day before if you do not know it.** Parking and building security have ended more than one interview badly.
- **Be courteous to everyone from the parking attendant on.** Receptionists are asked for their impression more often than candidates realize.
- **If you are running late, call the interviewer and your recruiter.** Do not just arrive late with an explanation.

Video Interviews

Most first rounds now happen on video. It is a different skill than sitting across a desk, and candidates who are strong in person routinely underperform on camera because they treated it as a phone call with a webcam.

SETUP

- **Test the platform the day before, not five minutes before.** Know whether it is Teams, Zoom, or something else and whether it needs an install.
- **Camera at eye level.** Stack books under the laptop if you have to. Shooting up at your ceiling fan is the single most common mistake.
- **Light in front of you, not behind.** A window behind you turns you into a silhouette.
- **Plain background.** A real wall beats a virtual background, which glitches around your head when you move.

- **Wired internet if you have it.** Ask anyone else in the house to stay off streaming for the hour.
- **Dress exactly as you would in person,** including below the frame. You may need to stand up.

ON CAMERA

- **Look at the camera when you speak,** not at their face on the screen. It reads as eye contact.
- **Pause a beat before answering.** Video lag makes people talk over each other, and whoever recovers gracefully looks better.
- **Keep notes just off camera or taped near the lens.** Do not read visibly from a screen.
- **Close every other application.** A notification sound mid-answer is avoidable.
- **If the connection fails, call in by phone and keep going.** Handling it calmly is itself a data point.

Phone Screens

A phone screen exists to decide whether you move forward. Your voice carries everything, so energy and clarity matter more than they do in person.

- **Take the call somewhere private.** Not from your desk at work, and not from the car if you can avoid it.
- **Stand up.** It opens your voice and keeps your energy up.
- **Have your resume, your notes, your questions, and a calendar in front of you.**
- **Confirm how long they have.** Thirty minutes is typical.
- **Slow down.** People speed up on the phone when they are nervous, and it reads as nervousness.
- **Smile while you talk.** It is audible.
- **Before you hang up, say plainly that you are interested and would like to meet in person.**

If they do not call at the scheduled time, wait ten minutes, then call your recruiter. Do not chase the hiring manager directly.

3. The Interview Itself

Processes vary, but most run some version of this. Ask your recruiter how many rounds to expect so you are not surprised.

- A screen with an internal recruiter or HR.
- An interview with the hiring manager, the person you would report to.
- Interviews with peers and people on the team you would join.
- A skip-level or executive conversation, particularly for senior roles.
- A panel interview, a technical assessment, a presentation, or a working session, depending on the field.
- A final conversation, often more about fit than capability.

Every round counts. Peers and junior team members are asked for their read more often than candidates expect, and treating them as less important than the hiring manager is noticed immediately.

How to Carry Yourself

At a senior level this is a conversation between peers, not an audition. You are evaluating them as seriously as they are evaluating you, and a candidate who behaves that way is more attractive, not less.

- **Firm handshake, direct eye contact, and sit up.**
- **Answer the question that was asked, then stop.** Long answers read as insecurity.
- **Never criticize your current employer, your boss, or a former colleague.** You can describe a limitation factually without making it personal.
- **Bring specifics.** Numbers, projects, outcomes. Generalities are forgettable.
- **If you do not know something, say so.** Interviewers can tell when someone is improvising, and it costs more than the gap would have.
- **Keep the objective in view:** the goal of the interview is an offer. You can decide later.

4. Questions You Will Be Asked

Prepare answers, not scripts. The goal is to have thought it through, not to recite something memorized.

General Questions

Tell me about yourself.

This means “walk me through your background as it relates to this job.” Take ninety seconds. Move chronologically, keep it professional, and land on why this conversation is happening now.

Why are you looking to make a move?

Be honest and forward-looking. Growth, scope, a different environment, and stability are all legitimate answers. Avoid making it about a person. If there is genuine friction, describe the structural problem rather than the individual.

What are your strengths?

Pick two or three that matter for this role and attach an example to each. “I am good with people” is not an answer. A specific instance where that changed an outcome is.

What is your biggest weakness?

Give a real one, then say what you do about it. Do not use the old trick of dressing up a strength as a flaw. Every hiring manager has heard it, and it signals that you were coached rather than candid.

Where do you see yourself in five years?

Answer in terms of responsibility rather than titles. Ambition is attractive; telling your prospective boss you intend to have their job is not.

Why do you want to work here?

This is where your research pays off. Name something specific about the company, the role, or the direction they are heading. A generic answer tells them you are applying everywhere.

Are you interviewing anywhere else?

You can acknowledge that you are being selective without listing names. Make clear that your search is focused rather than scattered.

Behavioral Questions

Anything that starts with “tell me about a time” is a behavioral question. They are the most common questions in modern interviewing and the ones candidates handle worst, because a good answer requires a real example and most people try to improvise one.

Structure every answer the same way:

- **The situation.** What was going on, briefly. Two sentences.
- **What you did.** The action you personally took. Say “I,” not “we.”
- **The result.** How it turned out, with a number if one exists.

Have an example ready for each of these:

- A time you solved a difficult problem.
- A time you disagreed with your manager or a colleague, and what happened.
- A time you failed, or a decision you got wrong.
- A time you led something, formally or otherwise.
- A time you had to deliver under a hard deadline or with too few resources.
- A time you had to work with someone difficult.

The failure question is the one most people fumble. Pick a real failure, own it plainly, and spend most of the answer on what you changed afterward. A candidate with no failures is not believable.

Questions About Your Work

Walk me through what you do day to day.

Be concrete. Describe the actual work, who you interact with, and what you are accountable for. Avoid reciting your job description.

How is your performance measured?

Know your numbers, whatever they are in your field. Output, revenue, quality, uptime, retention, safety record, project delivery. Have the last two or three years available and be ready to explain a down period.

What are you best known for?

This is an invitation. Answer it with the accomplishment you most want them to remember, not the one that happens to come to mind.

Why should we hire you over someone else?

Connect what you have done to what they need. This is not the moment for modesty, and it is also not the moment to disparage hypothetical competitors.

5. The Compensation Question

Be honest and open about compensation. Evasiveness reads as something to hide. That said, the negotiation itself is not yours to conduct in the room, and you are not helping yourself by opening it.

When you are asked about compensation, redirect it to your recruiter. That is what they are for.

WHEN THEY ASK ABOUT COMPENSATION

“As I told [recruiter], my target to make a move at this point in my career is [X]. I know that is something you and [recruiter] will work out, and that is their role, so I will let the two of you handle it.”

That answer is direct, gives them a real number to work with, and keeps you out of negotiating against yourself. If they press, repeat it once and move on.

Remember that compensation is more than base salary. Bonus structure, equity, overtime, shift differential, vehicle or per diem, retirement match, health coverage, and time off all belong in the conversation. Your recruiter should have those details before you need them.

Some states and cities restrict what an employer may ask about your salary history. You are never obligated to volunteer it, and the answer above keeps the conversation on what you are targeting instead.

6. Questions for You to Ask

An interview is a two-way conversation. Asking good questions demonstrates seriousness, and at a senior level, asking none is itself disqualifying. Bring a written list and take notes on the answers.

- **Ask open questions.** Anything answerable with yes or no stops the conversation.
- **Do not cross-examine.** You are having a discussion, not conducting due diligence out loud.
- **Ask different people different questions.** Peers will tell you things the hiring manager will not.

Questions About the Role

- Why is this seat open? Is it growth, a departure, or a replacement?
- What does success look like in the first ninety days, and in the first year?
- What are the biggest challenges facing whoever takes this job?
- Who would I report to, and who else is on the team?
- What resources and support would I have?

Questions About How Work Gets Done

These tell you what it is actually like to work there, which is harder to learn than what the company does.

- How are decisions made here, and how quickly?
- How much autonomy would I have in this role?
- How does the team handle disagreement?
- What does a typical week look like?
- How is performance reviewed, and how often?
- What has turnover on this team looked like over the last few years?

Questions About the Company

- Where is the company headed over the next three to five years?
- What is the biggest change the company has been through recently?
- How would you describe the culture to someone who does not work here?
- How did you get here, and what has kept you?

That last one is worth asking everyone you meet. The way people answer it tells you more about a company's culture than any answer about strategy.

7. Closing the Interview

If you want the job, say so before you leave. A surprising number of strong candidates do not, and the employer reads the silence as ambivalence.

- **State your interest plainly and say why**, referencing something specific from the conversation.
- **Ask whether they have any hesitation about your background**. This gives you the chance to address an objection before it becomes a decision.
- **Ask what the next step is and when you should expect to hear**.
- **Thank them for their time, shake hands, and leave**.

A REASONABLE CLOSE

“I have enjoyed this conversation and I am very interested. Based on what you have described about the role and the team, I think this is a strong fit. Is there anything about my background that gives you pause? And what does the next step look like?”

Ask about hesitations and then be quiet. Let them answer. What they say next is the most useful information you will get all day.

Do not ask how you rank against other candidates. It puts the interviewer in an awkward spot and rarely produces an honest answer.

8. After the Interview

Call Your Recruiter First

Call as soon as you are out, before you call anyone else. Your recruiter needs your read before they contact the employer, because the order matters. They will ask whether you want the job, what concerned you, what you forgot to ask, and how you thought it went.

Be candid, including about hesitations. A recruiter who knows your real concerns can address them with the employer. One who finds out at the offer stage cannot.

The Thank-You Note

Send an email the same day, or by the next morning at the latest. Send one to each person you met with, and make each one different. Identical notes to three people who sit near each other is worse than sending nothing.

Keep it short. Four sentences is plenty:

- Thank them for their time and name the role.
- Reference something specific you discussed. This is what proves the note is not a template.
- Restate your interest and, briefly, why you are a fit.
- Say you look forward to the next step.

EXAMPLE

Subject: Thank you, Operations Manager conversation

Dear Ms. Alvarez,

Thank you for the time yesterday. I appreciated your explanation of how the team rebuilt the scheduling process after the expansion, which is close to the problem I spent most of last year working through.

The role is a strong fit for what I do well, and I would welcome the chance to contribute here. I look forward to hearing about next steps.

Sincerely,

9. Offer Stage

Screening and Background Checks

Expect some combination of a criminal background check, employment and education verification, a reference check, and depending on the industry, a drug screening, a motor vehicle record check, a credit check, or a physical.

- **Tell your recruiter about anything in your history that could surface.** Do it at the start, not after the offer.
- **There is almost always a way to handle a disclosed issue.** There is rarely a way to handle a discovered one.
- **Verify that the dates and titles on your resume match what a former employer will confirm.** Small discrepancies cause real problems at this stage.
- **If a screening involves a medical component,** disclose current prescriptions to the examiner and ask the employer what the screening covers. Never stop or change medication because of a hiring process.

References

- **Call each reference before you list them.** Tell them the company, the role, and what you would like them to emphasize.
- **Choose people who managed you or worked directly with you.** A senior title who barely knows you is worth less than a direct supervisor who does.
- **Thank them afterward,** and tell them how it turned out.

Non-Competes and Non-Solicits

Many people have signed something and do not remember exactly what. Before you get to an offer, find your agreement and read it.

- **Locate the actual document.** Do not rely on memory or on what a colleague told you.
- **Note what it restricts,** for how long, and in what geography.
- **Tell your recruiter what it says as early as possible.**
- **If the terms are significant, have your own attorney review it.** Alpha Search is not a law firm and cannot advise you on enforceability.

Handle this well and it is usually a manageable detail. Handle it late and it can unwind an accepted offer.

10. Resignation

Resign in person, then follow with a short letter. Give standard notice, typically two weeks, and offer to help with the transition. If they ask where you are going, you are not obligated to say until your new employer has announced it internally.

Keep the letter brief and unemotional. It goes in your file, and most industries are smaller than they look.

SAMPLE RESIGNATION LETTER

[Date]

Dear [Name],

Please accept this letter as my formal resignation from [Company], effective [Date]. I have accepted a position with another organization.

I want to thank you for the opportunities I have had here over the past [time]. I have valued the support of you and the rest of the team, and I have learned a great deal.

I am committed to making this transition as smooth as possible and will do whatever I can over the coming weeks to hand off my work properly.

I leave with no ill will and wish you and the company continued success.

Sincerely,

Say nothing in the letter about counteroffers. Handle that conversation in person if it comes, and read the next section first.

11. Counteroffers

A counteroffer is an inducement from your current employer to keep you after you have announced you are leaving. They have become common, and they are more dangerous than they look.

Recruiters report that more than 80 percent of those who accept a counteroffer leave, resume looking, or are let go within six to twelve months.

Why They Happen

Replacing you is expensive and disruptive, and a resignation raises questions about the manager as much as the employee. A counteroffer is often a way to buy time rather than a genuine change of heart.

What You Will Hear

- “We were just about to give you a raise.”
- “The team cannot afford to lose you right now.”
- “I did not know you were unhappy. Why did you not come to me sooner?”

Ask Yourself

- Why did it take a resignation to get paid what you are worth?
- Where did the money come from? Is this next year's raise, given early?
- The reasons you started looking were usually not about money. Does the counteroffer fix any of them?
- Will your loyalty be questioned the next time promotions are discussed?
- Will you have to threaten to leave again to get the next increase?

If you seriously consider one, get it in writing, including any commitment on title, authority, or term. Roughly two-thirds of employers who make counteroffers will not put it in writing, and that refusal answers the question for you.

The cleanest test: look at your current job and the new one as if you were unemployed and choosing between them today. Which one would you take?

Tell your recruiter the moment a counteroffer is made. Not after you have decided.

12. Why Candidates Get Passed Over

In order of how often we see them:

- 1 **No questions.** Having nothing to ask reads as disinterest or as a lack of seriousness.
- 2 **No research.** Not knowing what the company does or where it is headed signals that this is one of several conversations rather than a real interest.
- 3 **Vagueness about why they are looking.** An answer that does not hold together suggests either indecision or something unsaid.
- 4 **No specifics.** Describing responsibilities instead of results. Anyone can list duties; the accomplishments are what separate candidates.
- 5 **Speaking poorly about a current employer.** The interviewer hears how you will talk about them one day.
- 6 **Unprepared for behavioral questions.** Improvising an example on the spot is obvious and produces a weak answer to a question everyone knew was coming.
- 7 **Handling compensation badly.** Naming a number too early, or refusing to engage at all, both cause problems.
- 8 **Too much humility.** Candidates conditioned not to brag often understate their accomplishments. If you will not say what you have done, nobody will say it for you.
- 9 **Rehearsed answers.** Canned responses to weakness or strength questions signal coaching rather than candor.
- 10 **Poor video presence.** Bad lighting, bad camera angle, and visible reading from a screen all cost more than candidates realize.
- 11 **No close.** Leaving without stating interest. Employers regularly pass on candidates they assumed were lukewarm.

13. Accomplishment Worksheet

The single best preparation you can do is to build a short inventory of accomplishments before you need them. Interviews reward specifics, and specifics are hard to produce under pressure. This is also what you will draw on for every behavioral question.

For each one, write three things:

- **The situation.** What was going on, factually. Where you were, what you were responsible for.
- **What you did.** The action you personally took, with numbers wherever they exist.
- **Why it mattered.** The result, and what it would mean for a new employer.

Aim for six to eight, drawn from across your career rather than only the most recent role.

EXAMPLE

Situation. Took over a team of six with high turnover and roughly four months of overdue work in the queue.

What I did. Rebuilt the scheduling process, cross-trained the team so no single job depended on one person, and cleared the backlog in four months without adding headcount. Turnover went from three departures in the prior year to none over the following two.

Why it mattered. The backlog had been costing the company in late penalties, and the process held after I moved on.

Prompts to Get You Started

- What did you deliver last year that you are proudest of?
- What did you improve, and by how much?
- What problem did you identify before anyone else did?
- What did you save the company, in money, time, or risk?
- Who have you trained, mentored, or hired?
- What did you take on that was not your responsibility?

Read them back and ask the honest question: if you were the hiring manager, would you interview this person?