



How to leave a job

Part 1: What to look for before, during, and after an interview

An interview is the only time during the hiring process when you and your interviewer can form a mutual relationship based on observation and communication. You're both on the same level: the interviewer wants to do his or her best to get to know you, answer your questions, and find out if you would be a good fit for the job and the company.

Despite its etiquette and formality, your interview can yield a wealth of information. The key to a successful interview is to bring some knowledge with you yet keep your eyes open for the intangibles, such as office culture and the staff's personalities. You also should know what kinds of questions to ask the interviewer, and how to interpret the answers.

Researching a potential company

Knowing your subject is as important as asking the right questions. Do enough research so that you can speak authoritatively about the company during the interview. Here's what to look at the day before.

- **Stock trends.** If the company's stock is publicly traded, you should research the stock price, the history of the stock, and how the company measures up against its competitors.
Has the stock value fluctuated significantly in the last year?
Has the stock's value improved from when it first went public, or has the price declined?
Has the stock's value changed noticeably, and if so, are there any economic or industry influences that may have affected the price, such as a rise in interest rates?
- **News.** Remember that companies are responsible for promoting their own good news, and the media often hypes the bad news. Has the company been in the news recently, and why?
- **Executive turnover.** You should know who is coming and who is leaving.
Has the company recently come under new management, and if so, why?
When was the last time the company hired an executive, and why?
What advantage might the new hire's credentials provide the company?
- **Mission/vision statement.** You can learn a company's values by reading its mission statement. You often can find this statement on the corporate website, at Hoovers.com, or by calling and requesting a copy of the company's annual report if the company is public.

Attitude and environment

Employees tend to thrive in certain work-style environments - relaxed, formal, or a combination of both. A company's environment indicates the team's personality styles and the way the company conducts business. This is a personal judgment call on your part.

- **Language.** If the interviewer shows you around the office, or you are able to see or hear employees talking and working together, be mindful of the language they use.
Is it formal, strict business language or do the workers speak openly and candidly?
How much talking takes place during your visit? Are people joking with one another?
What balance of the above language styles would you prefer?
- **Dress code.** You also should notice the way people are dressed, which will prepare you to understand a company's office etiquette.
Is everyone dressed formally or casually, or is there room for your own dress style?
What is your personal style of dress?

- **Diversity.** It's also important to notice and assess the company's openness to hiring a diverse workforce, which will give you an idea of how they feel about other ideas and cultures.

Training

Training programs help facilitate your transition into a new company and job. Look for companies willing to enhance your skill set and knowledge, regardless of your job level. Chances are, a company that trains workers also wants to retain and promote them.

The company should be willing to send every employee to at least one training session. You also should feel free to ask whether the company would send you to additional industry conferences, both local and long-distance, if you feel such an event could strengthen your knowledge and contribute to your performance. Listen to the response. Here's what you don't want to hear.

- **Funding.** "We don't have enough money to send employees to training programs."
- **Requirements.** "An employee has to be in the job for at least a year before attending a work-related program."
- **Perk status.** "We consider training a perk, not a requirement."

Management

You can gain a lot by learning what kinds of relationships workers have with senior management. A relatively collaborative organization respects and values all departments, and indicates that top management is willing to expend time and resources on developing each area of the company. Here's what you should learn.

- **Favorites.** You can find out whether senior staff holds one department in higher regard than another.
Is the boss part of your department's management team?
If not, does he or she meet regularly with the management team?
- **Advocacy.** Does your department have a leader who advocates your department's needs to senior management?

Time commitment

You should find out the time commitment the company expects from you. Ask, "How many hours do employees generally work per day and per week?" You also can ask to speak directly to some employees if you want a more representative response.

Knowing whether the company generally expects its workers to put in a certain amount of extra time is important, even if you already had planned to work more than 40 hours a week.

Travel and Relocation

Find out whether the company expects you to travel and whether they will reimburse for travel expenses such as overnight stays and gas mileage.

You also must realize your threshold for change. Ask the interviewer about the relocation history of the company, such as, "Do you change office space often?"

Also, if the company frequently moves people within the office, it could be a sign that they regard their employees' professional workspace as dispensable. If an interviewer tells you the company is expanding its staff, ask where they will be placing the new workers, and if this would affect your workspace.

Promotions and performance reviews

You'll be happiest when you know a company's promotion trends, especially if you consider yourself ambitious..

- **Promotions.** First, you should ask about promotion rates. Ask, "How often do people in the workplace generally see promotions?" A good answer is anywhere from 18 months to two years. A raise generally is included in the promotion.
- **Performance reviews.** Performance reviews, which may or may not include a raise, should take place once a year. These meetings give you and your employer a chance to talk about your accomplishments and the next year's objectives.
- **Merit increases.** These are based on performance and accomplishment and often are awarded during reviews.

Compensation and other pay

Find out the company's compensation philosophy.

- **Salary.** Does the company pay salaries that are competitive with other companies' pay? Does the company believe in being competitive when deciding upon compensation? Does the company pay what people will accept, regardless of their value or objective?

You also might be interested in learning the types of rewards the company offers. Ultimately, you'll have to decide whether you even value these gifts and rewards. In any case, giving out rewards implies that the company is good at searching for and recognizing positive performance in its employees, and that's always a plus. These can include the following.

- **On-the-spot cash bonuses.** These are unexpected payments.
What types of bonuses are offered?
Who is eligible?
When are the bonuses awarded?
What criteria are used to determine who actually receives a bonus?
How does the employer calculate the dollar value of each bonus?
- **Stock.** When discussing stock, you also should ask whether the company offers stock in lieu of cash bonuses. If the answer to this is yes, it's a bad sign if the stock has little monetary value, and a good sign if you are dealing with a top-performing company.
- **Non-compensatory gifts.** The company offers paid holidays; or beyond that, picks up the tab for lunches or dinners; or gives out gifts, tickets to performances, or tickets to sports events.

Turnover rate

This is perhaps the most important question you may want to ask. If employees are leaving in droves despite bonuses and perks, you know something is wrong. Workers may be dissatisfied with their pay or with management, or find their work culture unfulfilling or unproductive. Again, you can ask to talk to an employee. Here's what you need to be sure to ask.

- Has this job been open before and if yes, why is the company hiring someone else?
- How many people have held the position in the last two years?
- How many people have left the position in the last two years?
- How many people have left the department in the last two years?
- Are those employees still with the company? Ask to speak with them.

Acquisition and litigation

It also would be wise to ask whether the company is undergoing any talks concerning acquisitions or mergers, which could mean layoffs in the future. If negotiations for mergers or other partnerships are underway, you need to ask what kind of relationship the company will have with its partner, and whether this situation could affect your job. Will the company become a subsidiary, or will there be a total merger - where downsizing is almost certain? Ask whether your department will become a duplicate once the merger takes place.

You also may want to ask whether there are any current litigation proceedings, which could mean forced bankruptcy in the worst case. If the answer is yes, ask the basics: How long has the litigation been going on? What kind of monetary claim is being discussed? From your earlier research, you also may find that the company's recent stock price reflects investors' uneasiness with a lawsuit.

After the interview

An interviewer will contact you about the job if he or she is interested. You can ask how long you can expect before a telephone call. If you have any questions in the meantime, feel free to call and ask the interviewer.

You can send in additional materials or references if you think they would strengthen your candidacy. But the interviewer will weigh the decision mostly on what he or she saw and heard from you during the interview.

Do your best to leave a great impression.

Part 2: How to evaluate a job offer

Just like an interview, a job offer can tell you a great deal about a potential employer. An offer can reveal how serious the employer is about the offer, how valuable you are to the company, and most importantly, whether you should make the move.

You'd be wise to think over an offer carefully and negotiate if necessary. Your goal is to make sure the compensation and benefits in your job offer exceed or at least meet your current status.

Jobs are customarily offered over the telephone or in person. The employer should offer more than just, "Congratulations, you've got the job." He or she should explain the offer in detail and answer your questions.

It is appropriate to respond to a job offer within two to four days. Rarely would an employer expect you to accept a position on the spot. While you're thinking it over, here's what to look for.

Titles

The most basic information is your title. Titles are more than names; they are a short, strategic, and functional explanation of your job and its responsibilities. You need to be clear on your duties so that you know what is expected of you, which can help minimize surprises after you start working.

The names and titles of your immediate supervisors also should be mentioned in the offer. Most likely, you have already met your supervisors during your interview and have gotten acquainted with them. You'll be working with your supervisors every day, so it's important to feel comfortable around them. Knowing how many supervisors you have also will give you a better idea of the amount of work involved in your job.

Salary

Understanding the salary information - the most important piece of the job offer - can help you reach an educated career decision. Find out your base pay, which can be stated annually, monthly, or both. Make sure you know how frequently you will receive a paycheck. Most employers pay biweekly (26 times a year) or twice a month (24 times a year). If you are a nonexempt employee, you should be paid at least twice a month.

Be sure to ask about the timing of your salary review - in other words, when will you be eligible for a raise. Your salary review sometimes is tied to your performance review and is a chance for the

employer to recognize and reward you for your accomplishments. Generally, the review will take place one year from your start date. Some companies conduct six-month salary reviews as well.

Bonuses

Bonuses can add money to your total compensation package. Employers should tell you about the different bonuses offered, which can be based on personal performance or be relative to the company's profit. Sometimes a bonus simply will be a set percentage of your base pay. If you were offered a signing bonus, be sure to ask about the details, such as the date you will receive the pay.

If an employee referred you to the company, then he or she may receive a referral bonus, which is contingent upon your employment. This means you may have to be employed at the company for a specified period before the bonus is granted.

Benefits

Compensation isn't just the cash, it's also the benefits. The most important benefits are health and dental insurance. You should find out the name of the provider and the types of coverage you will receive. You should also be aware how much your insurance will cost each week, and how much your employer will cover. Companies offer different kinds of coverage, and if your company makes you pay more for health coverage, you have an incentive to negotiate.

Medical plans sometimes take more than a week to process, so find out whether your new medical plan will take effect on the day you start working. Your health insurance plan at your current job expires on the day you leave, but under federal COBRA laws you have the right to continue to purchase health insurance under your old plan for 18 or 36 months, depending on the plan.

If your new plan will not take effect right away and you elect to purchase your old plan, you may want to ask your new employer to pay part or all of the plan's costs until the new one kicks in.

Remember, you want an offer that matches your current employment status. A good starting point is to take the list of benefits from your current job and use them as a checklist for your new job. If you currently have short-term and long-term disability insurance coverage, find out whether the new employer offers comparable programs. Some other common financial benefits are pension plans, retirement plans, life insurance, travel insurance, and severance packages.

Some companies, both public and private, offer stock options as part of the compensation package. If you are offered stocks, find out how many shares you'll receive and when they vest. Vesting in this context is the period over which an employee has the right to realize the right to exercise options (purchase and sell shares of stock). Vesting schedules vary from company to company. Be sure to ask when the vesting period begins. You may, for example, become vested in 25 percent of your stock options after each six months of employment. It's also in your best interest to know your exercise price, the current price of public stock, and the number of shares outstanding to calculate the value of your options and get a better idea of your total package.

Perks

Traditionally, companies offer added perks to executives and some senior managers. With today's labor shortage and the emphasis on having a work-life balance, more companies are offering perks to some or all employees. These benefits include daycare, reimbursement for parking or commuting fees, and health club memberships. More creative perks such as personal concierges - someone to take care of your dry cleaning, walk your dog, and make dinner reservations so you can concentrate on work - are becoming popular among employers. Not all companies offer these services, and not all employees are granted these perks.

Employers also offer training programs, and often every employee is sent to at least one training session, regardless of industry or job title. An employer that values its staff wants to help them

grow and develop professionally. Ask about the types of training you would receive. Some companies also offer tuition reimbursement to encourage employees to pursue higher education.

Vacation time

Don't forget to ask about the all-important vacation time. Always ask when you are in doubt - and never assume - because policies differ from company to company. Generally, every employee receives two weeks of vacation time each year; the number is usually higher for senior-level positions. Vacation time also is negotiable if you are offered less time compared with what you have at your current job.

Two benefits often overlooked when evaluating a job offer are sick days and personal days (sometimes called floating holidays). These benefits should be stated in the offer letter, and you should clarify when you can access these benefits. Usually, you must wait three months before you can take a vacation day or a personal day, so if you know ahead of time about an upcoming engagement, negotiate now so that there will be no surprises later. Plus, this is proper business etiquette.

Start date

An employer will discuss your start date, which should be stated in the offer letter. If you are currently employed, the start date will be at least two weeks later, giving you enough time to notify your current employer. It could be as long as four weeks if you hold a management position or if it takes longer to find a replacement for your current position. Negotiate for more time if you feel it's necessary to help you make a smoother transition into your new career.

Part 3: How to prepare your references

If a job candidate is far enough in the interview process that the human resources professional is ready to ask for references, the candidate is close to being offered the job. For that reason, the references are crucial and have a significant impact on the final hiring decision. Any company that is going to hire you should ask for references, so be ready to give them at least three solid ones.

Choose references who will portray you favorably

When asking people to serve as a reference, choose people who are unquestionably ready to offer a glowing report. If you won't be using them immediately, you should choose people that you would naturally keep in contact with as you move along in your professional life.

You want people who have known you for a long time, and who can relay information about your proficiency, skill sets, attitudes, and behaviors. These would naturally be people you respect and care to keep in your network, so they will remain informed about the progression of your career or a trend in your working life.

For example, if they have seen the product of your most recent work, they can relay how you've built upon the skills you learned working together. Or if you have been working long hours with extraordinary endurance, they would be able to elaborate on your dedication.

If you need "professional references," consider the following.

- First, consider mentors, bosses, or coworkers who have had authority over you.
- Extend the list to include any authority figure - professor, coach, counselor, etc.
- Exclude family and friends from being references, as they aren't completely educated about your working habits.

The basic elements of every reference

When asked for a list of references, make it as concise as possible. Include only what is necessary: name, professional title, and telephone number.

The etiquette of establishing references

When to ask. If you are thinking about leaving a job, ask for references before you leave. If you can help it, don't ask after you've already left. Not only is it easier to get someone to be a reference that way, but it's also better business etiquette.

How to ask. Say something along the lines of, "In the event that I need a reference to speak about my work abilities, would you feel comfortable enough, knowing my background, to offer a positive recommendation?" The main idea is to get a glowing report. While you might think a well-rounded picture is more informative, it is not necessarily the best one to portray.

If there is any hesitation in your potential reference's response, don't use that person. Any apprehension might translate into a less-than-perfect report. Since you're looking for this discussion to propel you through the final phase and into the new company, hesitation is the last thing you need.

If the person is a solid mentor, you might also consider discussing what type of position you are looking for, or what you hope your new position will bring. Asking for advice is another opportunity to educate your references about your goals and engage them in your efforts.

How to communicate with your references

To maintain a polite communication with your references, do all their work for them, as follows.

- Deliver your updated resume to them and tell about the job: why you're good, challenges and goals of the company, and how you fit.
- Give them warning if you anticipate a potential employer might contact them (i.e., if you are asked for references).
- Tell them about the position you applied for. Detail the challenges the position might bring to you, and how you feel you can fulfill any expectations.
- Outline why you are the best possible candidate for the job.
- Ask them to tell you when they've spoken with the person, as a courtesy.

Trends in reference checking: what to expect from HR managers

Almost every HR manager asks for references when seriously considering someone as a potential hire. For liability reasons, if for no other, they will call each one, assuming you've given them a realistic number.

What you've portrayed in your interview will narrow what they ask your references. HR managers are looking for inconsistencies between what you've told them and what your references say. In that way, you and your references will validate each other.

In their conversations with your references, the HR professionals will ask questions concerning your work habits, including the following.

- whether you're consistently late,
- the nature of your interactions with coworkers,
- your attitude,
- your competency, and
- your weaknesses.