

Preparing for Jobs and Interviews

We know the job hunt can be scary... Here's what you can do

When should I start preparing or planning for internship or job interviews?

Notre Dame does a lot to help its students prepare for interviews and bolster resumes. It is your responsibility to seek out help early and often. Ideally once you have solidified your major, generally at the start of Sophomore year, you should begin compiling your accolades and building your resume. Thinking professionally about your achievements early is the best way to prepare for internships down the road.

As far as preparing for job interviews, that can be treated like studying for a big exam. Know your material, know your company, and spend time preparing so that you can give yourself the best possible chance to ace your interview. However, don't be so consumed with learning how to test that you forget to do the real learning.

How should I prepare for interview questions?

Different companies ask a wide variety of interview questions, so it's difficult to point to a specific list of questions. However, most interview questions fall into two categories, and you can easily prepare for both. These two categories are **behavioral** questions and **technical** questions.

Behavioral questions involve asking you about your past work. Did you ever work on a group project? Did you ever lead a group in accomplishing some task? The best advice for these type of questions is to plan out before-hand what experiences you want to talk about. Choose something you can speak passionately about. Employers want to see you get excited about past work you've done, so they will infer you will also be excited doing work for their company.

Technical questions are basically like computer science trivia. These questions, unlike behavioral ones, have objectively right and wrong answers. Employers want to know that you can actually do computer science-related work for them. They might ask you to write a small piece of pseudo-code to accomplish some small task. They also might ask you what a heap is, or what certain Linux commands do. I suggest studying up on Data Structures and Operating Systems before interviews, as most technical questions will be based on these subjects.

Also, consider using online resources like Glassdoor.com to find out what interviews at a specific company are like. Fellow interviewees often share some of the questions they are asked, and offer advice on how to ace your interview.

How should I dress for interviews?

"Dress for the job you want, not for the job you have."

You should always present yourself professionally for an interview. First impressions mean so much in a job interview, so right off the bat you want to show your interviewer that you belong at this company. Show them that because you dress professionally, if you work for them, you will perform professional work.

What extracurricular activities should I consider?

You should consider two different types of extracurricular activities: computer science specific activities, and non-computer science activities. Employers want to see that you have a diverse set of activities that you spend your time doing.

Also, consider taking roles of leadership in whatever activities you choose. College groups, clubs, and teams offer a tremendous opportunity for you to get leadership experience that will not only impress employers, but also train you for future leadership roles in your career.

But whatever activity you choose, make sure you're passionate about it! Many behavioral interviews include questions about group projects or a time you worked in a team. Extracurricular activities offer experiences you can talk about in your interviews, and you want to be passionate and excited when talking about these experiences.

It is easier to be passionate about an activity if you're more involved in that specific activity. Do not worry about trying to be part of everything, just choose something you enjoy and stay with it. Through commitment to the activity you may even end up in a leadership position down the road. This sort of commitment is exactly what companies are looking for in a potential candidate.

How should I approach negotiations or contracts?

There are a few things you should keep in mind when approaching the negotiation process. First, you should remember that you are a prized, intelligent, and valuable asset attempting to work for a legitimate, profitable, and worthwhile company. You should be respectful of your own talents, but also of the company's resources. You aren't entitled to a CEO's salary, but you should know your own value.

Next, always have a bottom line number prepared in your head. This is the number that you are willing to accept going into the negotiation process. Try asking for fifteen or twenty percent above your bottom line, and be ready to accept for anything above your bottom line.

You should watch out for coming across disrespectful or arrogant. You are trying to present your opinion on how valuable you feel your talents are. If negotiations simply aren't getting anywhere, be ready to either settle for your current offer, or walk away if you feel you can do better elsewhere.

When looking at contracts, be mindful of the long-term impacts of what you sign. There are a few questions you should keep in mind. How long do I plan to stay with this company? How well will my proficiencies in this job serve me in other companies? How important is flexibility to me? If you feel that the contract in front of you seriously infringes on any of these questions, you either need to rethink your values or be ready to turn down the offer. Don't box yourself into terms you don't want just for a paycheck!

What resources should I consider?

The first place every student should start is the Career Center. In fact, you do not even need to go in-person at first as they have plenty of resources to start with on their website careercenter.nd.edu. They have examples and guidelines for resumes, cover letters, and references as well as general tips for the interview process. You may think the resume is only important for getting your foot in the door before the interview process, but some interviews are very much based on your resume. For that reason, it is important to have a strong resume and be able to talk about everything on your resume extremely well. The website goes more in depth about the formats of different interviews along with example interview questions and overall how you should prepare. Beyond just reading about how interview, while still online you can even practice your interview skills. The career center is part of new service called Big Interview which is an online mock interview practice tool that can be used at nd.biginterview.com.

Beyond the website, the Career Center is still extremely useful. The Career Center hosts the campus career fairs, information sessions, and career development sessions, all of which are useful in their own right. Among the types of career development sessions, there are sessions that provide you with interview information and informal mock interviews. There are more professional, formal mock interviews that are also hosted by the Career Center. The information sessions are hosted by a specific company, and are useful to attend to find out more details on the specific company that is interviewing you. The career fairs are good for networking and giving you an initial connection to someone in the company, which gives you an advantage in the interview over someone who only applied online.

Even if your interview is unique and you need more specific forms of preparation, the Career Center is still the place to start. By either doing a walk-in or making an appointment, the employees there will guide you through the interview process making suggestions along the way. From all of the online resources to all of the in-person resources, the Career Center has a wealth of resources and students need not consider looking into much else in order to be successful in their interview.

Anything else you wish you knew before you went through the whole process?

The interview process can be intimidating, but does not need to be overwhelming. Probably the most anxious you will feel is the moment right before you walk into your interview. This is fine as being nervous is normal, but through proper preparation you can feel more relaxed as you ease your way into conversation with your interviewer. Also, most interviewers are not out there to make you look stupid. They are there interviewing you because they want to find someone to be a part of their company. They want the interview to go well just as much as you do and realizing that will help make your interview flow more smoothly. If you are struggling with a question, ask for more time. If you mess up, get right back to the conversation. Interviewers want to see how you deal with failure right there on the spot. They are not looking for you to be perfect, but they are looking for you to show a willingness to persevere and a passion for what you want to do. Not every interview is going to turn into a job offer and realizing that sooner rather than later will allow you to not be so hard on yourself. All it takes is the one right job offer for the entire interview process to be a success. Through proper preparation and taking advantage of your resources, there is no reason your interview process will not be a success.



How can I take advantage of networking and alumni relationships?

There are three things to keep in mind. Get involved in new circles, be disciplined in tracking and recording contact information, and then actually ask for help!

You do a lot already outside of school work to stay involved. Make sure that the extracurricular activities you do are with different groups of people, not just the same people from class. The more relationships you can establish in entirely different circles, the better.

Be disciplined in asking for and recording contact information for your peers and their mentors. Many times all it takes is an email or a phone call, but getting that information, or knowing which people know which contacts in industry, can be the real struggle. Don't be afraid to ask your peers if you could get in touch with one of their references. Very rarely are you directly competing with your friends for a single job.

It never hurts to send an email! Reach out to any and all contacts that you have in your intended career field. The worst that can happen is that your message goes ignored, and the best that can happen is that your distant contact just happens to be looking for a new, good hire.

Tell your peers, professors, and advisors about your goals and aspirations. You'd be surprised how many people are willing and able to help make your dreams become a reality. If you keep your ambitions to yourself, you're setting yourself up for failure. Many positives can come from alumni and other individuals in your network knowing your goals - it shows you're ambitious, have a long-term plan, and that you're not afraid to ask for help.