

# EFFECTIVE INTERVIEWING

Techniques for effective interviewing



MONTEREY COUNTY  
HUMAN RESOURCES



Monterey County Human Resources

Learning and  
Organizational Development

## Welcome!

Thank you for your interest in obtaining employment with the County of Monterey. In concert with the County's Strategic Plan Goal of Workforce Excellence, the Department of Human Resources has created this guide to provide you with information on how to prepare for your interview. Specifically, this guide will help you:

- + understand the function of the interview;
- + identify the qualifying requirements of the job;
- + identify your qualifications and match them to the job requirements;
- + formulate effective responses to interview questions;
- + practice and prepare for your interview; and
- + learn about the County's interview process and procedures.

### **Who should use this guide?**

This guide targets the entry- to mid-level job seeker. However, it may be useful to anyone who wishes to interview more effectively.

### **Why do we conduct interviews?**

If you have ever sought a job in the past, chances are you have gone through an interview. Like other employers, the County requires a face-to-face interview as part of our hiring process for most jobs. This is because the interview is an effective method for measuring a candidate's ability to successfully perform on the job.

### **Preparing for the Interview**

Although you may not know exactly what will be asked of you during the interview, how prepared you are for the interview is up to you! Adequate preparation will assist you in presenting your qualifications in the most favorable light and will help you to feel more confident in general. The following information is designed to help you *GET READY FOR SUCCESS!*

### **Learn about County government**

A job is more than a fixed set of responsibilities; rather, it must be viewed within the context of the entire organization. Taking the time to familiarize yourself with the County of Monterey will increase your understanding of the functions of the job and reflect well on you during the interview. You can visit the County's website (<http://www.co.monterey.ca.us>) to learn about our:

- + vision statement;
- + organizational structure/division of responsibilities;
- + programs and services;
- + client/customer base; and
- + promotional and training opportunities.

#### **Disclaimer**

Though this guide presents useful and practical information on this subject area, there is *no guarantee* that someone who reads this guide will be able to perform better on a County examination. By merely using this guide, you consent to understanding and agreeing with this disclaimer.

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## Learn about the job

To get ready for the interview, try to learn all you can about the job you are seeking. The County provides two important documents that can help you accomplish this:

	<u>Job Bulletin</u>	<u>Class Specification</u>
<i>Information provided:</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>+ Duties and responsibilities of the job</li> <li>+ Minimum requirements and desirable qualifications (e.g., education, experience, knowledge, skills, abilities, etc.)</li> <li>+ Examination components (i.e., written test, interview, performance test, etc.)</li> <li>+ Whom to call to request a reasonable accommodation, if needed.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>★ General description of the job</li> <li>★ Typical duties performed on the job</li> <li>★ Minimum requirements</li> </ul>
<i>How to access:</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>+ In Person: Department of Human Resources 168 W. Alisal Street, 3rd Floor Salinas CA 93901 (831) 755-5446</li> <li>+ Online: <a href="http://www.co.monterey.ca.us/personnel">www.co.monterey.ca.us/personnel</a> (click on “Job Information”)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>★ Online: <a href="http://www.co.monterey.ca.us/personnel">www.co.monterey.ca.us/personnel</a> (click on “Class Specifications”)</li> </ul>
<i>Available:</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>+ Only when applications are being accepted for the job</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>★ Always<sup>1</sup></li> </ul>

<sup>1</sup> If you find a job that interests you, but the County is not currently accepting applications for that job (i.e., a job bulletin is not available), you can complete a Job Interest Card (visit <https://www.governmentjobs.com/careers/montereycounty/jobInterestCards/categories>). By completing this card, you will receive an email when the County begins accepting applications for the job.

The information provided on the Job Bulletin and Class Specification will help to further direct your interview preparation and give you specific insight as to the areas that will be assessed during the interview.

The areas on which you will be assessed during the interview depend on the level of the job you are seeking. Interviews for entry-level jobs typically focus more on general skill and ability areas than on job-specific knowledge areas that you would likely have to acquire through job experience. Though not all inclusive, here are some examples of areas on which you may be assessed:

- + *Adaptability:* To readily adjust to changing circumstances and/or modify behavior appropriately to new or changing situations in order to reach an objective.
- + *Customer Service Skills:* To meet the needs of internal and external customers/clientele in a manner that is professional, courteous, helpful, timely, responsive, proactive, accurate, and knowledgeable.
- + *Dependability:* To attend work on time and as scheduled; to perform under minimal or intermittent supervision; and to maintain the confidentiality of information and materials where appropriate.

- + *Initiative*: To take action independent from external influence when recognizing or anticipating potential problems and identifying, developing, and implementing solutions.
- + *Interpersonal Communication Skills*: To establish and maintain effective working relationships with co-workers, supervisors, subordinates, customers, etc.
- + *Office Skills*: To utilize job-related equipment (e.g., personal computer, fax machine, photocopier, etc.) and software programs (e.g., MS Word, MS Excel, MS PowerPoint, etc.).
- + *Oral communication skills*: To explain information to individuals and understand oral information and instructions from individuals while communicating in person and/or by telephone.
- + *Problem-Solving/Decision-Making Ability*: To analyze relevant information and to make logical and effective decisions that are in line with organizational objectives.
- + *Work Skills*: To organize and prioritize a workload and to perform accurate and detailed work.

### **Assess your knowledge, skills, and abilities**

Once you have studied the job bulletin and/or class specification to learn about the job, you should think about your experiences that best match the duties, responsibilities, and requirements of the job. Develop a list of:

- + work and volunteer activities you have performed;
- + degrees, certificates, and awards or acknowledgements you have earned; and
- + coursework you have completed (such as a business or software class).

Then, take each item on your list and ask yourself:

- + What did I learn from this experience?
- + What problems did I encounter and how did I overcome them?
- + What were the most complex tasks and projects I completed?
- + What was my contribution to the organization or class?

Answering these kinds of questions will aid you in illustrating the knowledge, skills, and abilities you have developed or enhanced that could help you perform the job.

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## Case Example

Jane is applying for the job of Office Assistant. Her work experience consists of two years as a Sales Office Clerk for Shoreline Realty, Inc. Her duties at Shoreline consisted chiefly of maintaining client files using a hardcopy filing system; creating documents and correspondence using Microsoft Word; managing employee information using Microsoft Excel; and greeting and providing assistance to clients both in person and by telephone. While at Shoreline, Jane was commended for her exceptional customer service skills and for implementing an overhaul of the office filing system.

How would Jane best match her work experience to the duties of an Office Assistant?

Duties and responsibilities of an Office Assistant:	Jane's related work experience:	Some of the knowledge, skills, or abilities she demonstrated:
<p><b><i>Maintains files, records, logs, and other information resources.</i></b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>+ Filed hard copies using an alphanumeric system containing over 10,000 files;</li> <li>+ Maintained a client appointment log for approximately 30 office staff;</li> <li>+ Recommended and successfully designed and implemented a plan to overhaul the office's hardcopy filing procedures and structure.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>+ Adaptability</li> <li>+ Dependability</li> <li>+ Problem Solving/Decision-Making Ability</li> <li>+ Initiative</li> <li>+ Work Skills</li> </ul>
<p><b><i>Uses a personal computer and word processing software programs to create and maintain documents and forms.</i></b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>+ Used MS Word to design flyers and forms and produce correspondence;</li> <li>+ Used MS Excel to maintain employee work schedules and track sales and hours worked;</li> <li>+ Completed a certificate program in MS Word software training.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>+ Office Skills</li> </ul>
<p><b><i>Greets and assists callers and visitors to the office in person and by telephone.</i></b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>+ Provided lunch coverage for the office receptionist;</li> <li>+ Assisted clients over the telephone;</li> <li>+ Received three letters of commendation from clients for providing excellent customer service.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>+ Customer Service Skills</li> <li>+ Interpersonal Communication Skills</li> <li>+ Oral Communication Skills</li> </ul>

## Learn about the types of questions common to County structured interviews

At the County of Monterey, our structured interview questions are designed to assess the knowledge, skills, and abilities required to perform the job. Most structured interview questions can be classified into one of the following formats, illustrated by the examples that follow:

- \* **Experience-Based** interview questions inquire about the breadth and scope of your *application* job-related knowledge, skills, and abilities:
    - *“What office equipment have you used on-the-job and what kinds of routine tasks did you perform using this equipment?”*
    - *“Describe your experience classifying, cataloguing, reviewing, and evaluating books within a large-sized public library system.”*
  
  - + **Behavior-Based** interview questions require you to apply your knowledge, skills, and abilities in a job-related situation. The two types of behavior-based interview questions are **past behavior** and **situational**:
    - *“Tell me about a time when you provided exemplary customer service. What were the circumstances, what did you do, and what were the results?”* (past behavior)
    - *“An important client arrives at the office and demands to see your supervisor without an appointment. How would you handle this?”* (situational)
  
  - + **Knowledge-Based** interview questions ask you to demonstrate a level of familiarity with the terminology, practices, concepts, and theories related to the career field in question:
    - *“What accounting practices would you use to ensure that budget reporting obligations are fulfilled?”*
    - *“What are the most important factors for a Social Worker to consider when attempting to establish a working relationship with a client, and why?”*
  
  - + **Personal Perspective-Based** interview questions ask you to relate your viewpoint or perspective regarding a job-related variable:
    - *“Why do you think it would be important for a person to be able to function under minimal supervision?”*
    - *“What do you believe is the most important role for a consumer advocate in today’s marketplace, and why?”*
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## Study the S.T.A.R. method

Behavior-based interview questions are used with increasing frequency in organizations. This is because they are an effective way to determine whether a candidate is qualified for the job, while at the same time increasing the objectivity of the interviewing process by focusing on job-related accomplishments. **Past-behavior** questions, which ask how you *have performed* in a previous, job-related circumstance, are based on the premise that past behavior and performance are good predictors of future behavior and performance (i.e., how you have behaved in a past situation is a good indicator of how you are going to behave in the same or similar situation). **Situational** questions, which ask how you *would perform* in a job-related situation, are based on the premise that the behaviors that you say you would perform in a situation are the actual behaviors that you will perform in a similar situation.

Formulating effective responses to behavior-based interview questions that focus on past behaviors rests on being able to tell the interviewers a “story” that demonstrates the nature of the task or problem, the strategies you planned and implemented, and the results of your actions. As illustrated below, the S.T.A.R. method of responding will help you to form effective responses to behavior-based questions.



**Situation:** *What occurred or what was the assignment?*

- Clearly and concisely describe the situation so that the interviewers can place themselves in your place and understand the event, the circumstances surrounding the event, and the people involved.



**Tactics:** *What strategy did you develop to handle the situation?*

- Tell the interviewers about the plan you created to handle the problem, making sure that it adequately accounts for the details in the situation you described.



**Action:** *How did you implement your strategy?*

- After describing your plan, tell the interviewers the *specific* actions you took to resolve the problem.



**Results:** *What was the outcome?*

- Describe the results of your actions. Make sure to highlight the *specific* outcomes so the interviewers fully comprehend what you accomplished. If things did not turn out as you planned, focus on the positive by telling the interviewers what you learned from the experience and what you would do differently next time. This lets the interviewers know that you see mistakes or failures as opportunities for growth.

By following this response format, you will provide the interviewers with evidence that you can handle situations that may be faced by someone working in the job for which you are interviewing.

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## **S.T.A.R. method in action**

The two chief types of behavior-based interview questions are past behavior and situational (see pages 5-6 for more information). Remember, the difference between these two types of questions is that with past behavior questions, the focus is on “What *did* you do?” while with situational questions it is on “What *would* you do?” Note the following examples to see how the S.T.A.R. method can be applied to both question types:

### **Past Behavior Question:**

**Interviewer:** “Tell us about a time when you implemented a change in a process or system at your job that had a positive impact on your organization. In your response, please describe the situation, what you did to improve it, and the results.”

**Situation:** *What occurred or what was the assignment?*

**Response:** “When I worked at Generic Conglomerate, Inc. as an Office Assistant, I noticed that our electronic client database could hold a maximum of 300,000 records, and that we were already storing 290,000 records in the system. This meant that we would soon run out of available memory. This was due primarily to the numerous duplicate files in the system.”

**Tactics:** *What strategy did you develop to handle the situation?*

**Response:** “I informed my supervisor of the situation and asked her if I could devise a plan to clean the database. With her approval, I developed a plan to identify the duplicate records based on a client’s last name and address. I presented my plan to my supervisor, and she approved it.”

### **Situational Question:**

**Interviewer:** “You are working as an Office Assistant and one of your duties is to maintain an electronic database of client information. One day you notice that the database is running out of available memory, and that many of the files are unnecessary duplicates. How would you handle this problem?”

**Situation:** *What occurred or what was the assignment?*

**Response:**

(Does not apply. Situation provided by the interviewer.)

**Tactics:** *What strategy would you develop to handle the situation?*

**Response:** “I would inform my supervisor of the problem and obtain her approval to develop a plan to remove the duplicate records in the database. Next, I would determine a way to identify the duplicate records based on a unique identifier like a client’s last name and address. I would present my plan to my supervisor and gain her approval before putting it into action.”

(continued on the next page)



**Past Behavior Question:**

**Action:** *How did you implement your strategy?*

**Response:** “I ran a query to produce a report that identified records with the same last name and address. I then printed out a report of the duplicate records and compared them to ensure that I kept the one with the most complete and up-to-date information. After identifying all the duplicate records, I went into the system and carefully deleted them.”

**Results:** *What was the outcome?*

**Response:** “Input and retrieval of client information became considerably easier due to the cleaning and consolidation. The available memory increased by 20 percent, which saved the firm the expense of having to purchase additional memory prematurely. Also, I was approved to attend training on the advanced features of the database program.”

**Situational Question:**

**Action:** *How would you implement your strategy?*

**Response:** “I would run a query in the system according to a unique identifier like last name and address. From the query, I would produce a report of the duplicates and compare the records so that I retain the records with the most complete and up-to-date information. I would then go into the system and carefully remove the duplicate records.”

**Results:** *What would be the outcome?*

**Response:** I believe this plan would free additional memory and increase efficiency. It would probably also save the company the expense of prematurely purchasing additional memory for the system.”

**Practice, practice, practice!**

Rare is the person who is able to “ace” an interview without having practiced beforehand. Indeed, most successful job seekers have learned that the best strategy for demonstrating their qualifications during the actual interview is to have practiced responding to questions before the interview.

Practicing for your interview will help you to:

- + anticipate the types of questions you may be asked;
- + clarify your thoughts with respect to what you want to convey in responding;
- + identify areas of strength and weakness; and
- + develop a presentational style you feel at ease with.

Mock interviews provide an excellent opportunity for you to practice for your interview. Ask a friend to take on the role of “Interviewer” by asking you realistic questions related to the job for which you are applying. During the mock interview, be sure to practice the S.T.A.R. method and follow these general guidelines for interview success:

+ **WHEN LISTENING:**

- Be attentive. Lean forward slightly to indicate interest.
- Make sure you understand exactly what is being asked before you respond.
- Make good eye contact with the interviewers.

+ **WHEN RESPONDING:**

- Don't be afraid to allow a moment of silence to occur while you take the time to formulate your thoughts. Rushing can cause your response to be incomplete or disorganized, so be sure to take some time to organize a good response.
- Avoid speaking too quickly. Make sure your responses are clear, concise, and complete.
- Avoid the use of slang and phrases such as “um,” “ah,” “you know,” and “like” to fill in between your statements.
- Avoid using “impressive” words that you do not use in your daily conversations. You may use the word inappropriately, which will have the opposite effect of what you intended.
- Use technical jargon or acronyms related to your field only if you are required to do so in order to respond. Otherwise it is best to stick with easily understood language.
- If you worked as part of a team, focus on *your* specific role and what *you* specifically accomplished. Remember that the interviewers are evaluating you! To ensure that you speak about your contributions to a team, speak in the first person by saying, “I did” not “We did.”
- Keep your responses focused on what was actually asked. You want to discuss all relevant information, but don't get so caught up in the details that you forget what was asked.
- Be positive and enthusiastic. Frame your responses in a positive light. If the information is negative, think about what you learned from the situation and convey this to the interviewer. Never complain about past employers.
- You should be doing most of the talking. Interviewers can only evaluate you on what you say, so include all relevant information about your qualifications fully, and give examples from your experience with all of your answers. Avoid giving only “yes” or “no” answers.
- Make sure you are not conveying negative body language (such as slumping posture, crossed arms, leaning backward, etc.) which may send the wrong message about you.
- Manage your time and pace yourself so you have an opportunity to respond to each question. You should probably spend no more than 1-2 minutes responding to most questions (more time may be required for multi-part questions).
- Be honest!

+ **RELAX AND BE CONFIDENT!**

- Make sure you are comfortably seated in your chair before the interview begins so that all of your attention is focused on the questions you will be asked.
- Avoid excess body language such as gesturing with your hands; avoid displays of nervous mannerisms as well (e.g., nail biting, hair twisting, knuckle cracking, drumming fingers, etc.).

After the mock interview, ask your friend to critique your responses and general performance. Some questions to ask include: Did you provide enough information in your responses for him/her to make an accurate judgment of your qualifications? Did your poise and demeanor send the right message?

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## Dress for Success

You should dress in “business casual” to “traditional business” attire for the interview. Where your attire falls within this range should depend on the job for which you are interviewing. Choose your outfit at least a day in advance and make sure it is clean, pressed, and fits you well. You will want to minimize the use of make-up, jewelry, and cologne, as these things tend to draw focus away from you as the candidate.

## Plan your travel

Get directions at least a day in advance. Map the address of the interview site and choose an alternate route in case of traffic tie-ups. Generally, the County does not validate parking for job candidates, so bring a reasonable amount of cash to pay for parking. If possible, drive by the location ahead of time and note the parking location and rates.

## The Day of the Interview

On the day of the interview, you should allocate at least two hours to spend at the interview site. Interviews occasionally run later than scheduled, so be prepared to stay if necessary. Plan to arrive at least 15 minutes before your scheduled interview to allow time for parking and check-in. Have proper identification as indicated on your invitation letter, as well as anything else you have been advised to bring.

After entering the interview site, inform the receptionist of your arrival. He/she will let the interview coordinator know that you are waiting. While you wait to be called, take a moment to center your thoughts and get comfortable.

Turn **OFF** any portable audio or video devices (i.e., cell phones, pagers, Palm Pilots, etc.) prior to the start of the interview. Additionally, you should refrain from making or receiving any phone calls while you are waiting to be interviewed because this would disturb other candidates who are also waiting and/or being interviewed.

## During the Interview

The interview itself can last anywhere from 15 minutes to 1 hour, or as indicated on your invitation letter. Candidates are each given the same amount of time to interview. In order to get the most from your time, start it off like a winner. Offer a firm handshake and a pleasant smile when introducing yourself. Keep in mind that

- + there will most likely be two interviewers and you should direct your responses to each, not just to the one who asked the question.
- + the interviewers may be taking notes while you respond. Don't let this distract you.
- + the interviewers may ask follow-up questions to obtain more information about your response.

## After the Interview

Congratulations, you've made it through the interview! Once the interview has concluded, be sure and thank the interviewers for their time and offer each a firm handshake.

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## Ready for Success Checklist

This checklist was created to assist you in preparing for your interview. Here we have listed some of the activities you can do to help you perform your best.

### **Did you remember to...**

- ...familiarize yourself with the County's operations?
- ...research the duties and requirements of the job by obtaining the job bulletin and/or class specification?
- ...develop a list of:
  - + work and volunteer activities you have performed;
  - + degrees, certificates, and awards or acknowledgements you have earned; and
  - + coursework you have completed (such as a business or software class)?
- ...match your knowledge, skills, and abilities to the requirements of the job?
- ...review the different types of questions you may be asked during the interview?
  - ...read about the S.T.A.R. method and other general interview guidelines?
  - ...practice being interviewed by a friend?
  - ...seek additional resources, if needed?
  - ...choose an appropriate outfit to wear?
  - ...allocate at least two hours to spend at the interview site?
  - ...map the location of the interview and set aside money for parking?
  - ...congratulate yourself? You're on your way!



The County of Monterey wishes you well in your employment endeavors.