



This document will help you prepare for an interview and improve your chances of landing a great job in as a school district OT, SLP or PT. Please note, that while some of the advice offered here may seem obvious to you, it might not be obvious to everyone, and we would rather share things that sound basic rather than omit something that we assume you know.

BEFORE THE INTERVIEW

Research the school district in advance so that you may be as informed as possible about them. Nothing is more impressive or expresses your interest more dramatically than being knowledgeable about the organization with whom you are speaking. Even if you live in the town where the job is located, and think you know all there is to know about the employer and the area, you might do well to do some extra homework.

Here of some of the things you should research. Those items below that you can't find answers to ahead of time make perfect questions to ask during the interview. Most of this information can be found either by spending time on the school district website, or by "Googling" the district name and reading articles you find online. If you go through a recruiter like PediaStaff, they will be able to help you collect much of this information, but whatever else you can learn on your own will only serve to help you even more!

THE SCHOOL DISTRICT:

- District Size – the number of students served, number of schools,
- Recent awards and honors the district has received.
- Reputation - How is this district perceived in the city/town compared to neighboring districts
- Administration - a visit to the superintendent's page of the website will generally lead you to current news and information about the district.
- The makeup/census of the district – What are the economic, geographic, cultural and socioeconomic factors for the families that you will be serving. Is the district growing or shrinking?

THE SPECIAL EDUCATION DEPARTMENT

- How big is the department? Number of therapists? Number of administrators? Is there a supervisor over your area or will you report directly to the Director or Assistant Director?
- Number of Exception Children served – Is the department growing or is there attrition?
- How are the children served? Are the students served through a pullout model? Are therapy sessions done one on one or in groups?

SPECIFIC JOB QUESTIONS TO HAVE ANSWERED BEFORE THE INTERVIEW

(many of these things may be answerable by your recruiter if you are using one)

- Why is the job available?
- Exactly where is the position located and is it commutable to where you will be living? Is affordable housing available within a reasonable distance of where you will work? Is the location where you will have to live in a safe environment? Is the location of the job accessible to public transportation?
- What is the student population makeup and caseload
- What are the demographics of the students being served?
- What type of materials will I be provided with by the district
- Is paperwork done by computer or manually, and will I be provided with all the tools I need to succeed?
- Email address of the interviewer so you can send him/her a “thank you” note.

All of this will not only create a stronger image of you in the interview, but likewise will provide you with a better basis for evaluating the opportunity if an offer is made. In addition, there are some answers that if you have them ahead of time may cause you to decide that an interview is not desirable for you. Again, work with your recruiter if you have one to make sure you have all these answers before you decide to accept the interview. Your time and our client’s time are both quite valuable!

PHONE INTERVIEWS

As we have mentioned, a phone interview is very different from a face to face interview. There are plenty of interview preparedness documents available to job candidates getting ready to visit an organization on site, but very rarely, do candidates get an education on how to take a phone interview. In most cases, your phone interview will be your only opportunity to make a “splash.”

- 1) Be sure to schedule your interview for a time that you can give your potential employer *all* your attention. Phone interviews can be “anonymous” and as such there is a temptation to multi task – please don’t! An interviewer can hear you doing the dishes or picking up around the house. Especially, do not conduct the interview while driving or working on the computer. Find a quiet, private place to conduct the interview and alert others in your household to please refrain from disturbing you.

- 2) Keep it clinical. By clinical, we mean related to the specific therapy job you are interviewing for. Talk only about specific issues regarding the job duties, population, school placement etc. You should have answered most of your district and special education department oriented questions either through your online research or through conversations with your recruiter if you have one.
- 3) Don't talk about money. Before your interview was scheduled, your PediaStaff consultant should have discussed with you the range for this position. There will be plenty of time to talk about money after the client has decided that they want to hire you.
- 4) It is recommended that during the phone interview you let the interviewer ask all the questions he has and save any questions you might have until the interviewer specifically asks you if you have any. Even then, limit your questions to job related topics. Let me explain.

In general, an interviewer has maybe 30-45 minutes to devote to this phone interview that is either happening in between meetings, or at home on his/her own time. If during those minutes the interviewer learns all he needs to and decides to bring you on board that's great. If on the other hand, you start asking too many questions on the phone, the interviewer may not have enough time to collect all the details he needs during that short time. Afterwards, a decision might be made that you aren't what they are looking for. This decision may be arrived at, not because that is in fact true, but rather because the interviewer bases their decision on **what you got the chance to say you can do**, rather than **what you can REALLY do**. The only questions that are important for you to ask before the phone interview is concluded are major, job specific questions that are **critical** to whether you are interested in the job.

FACE TO FACE INTERVIEWS

Getting There

If you are driving, make sure you have good directions and allow extra time. Bring a road map along, just in case. The only thing worse than arriving to an interview late, is being so sweaty and stressed that you are thrown off your game for the rest of the day.

If you are going for a direct hire (permanent) position, find out if you will need to fill out any employment applications beforehand. Also allow plenty of time for parking and finding your way around the facility.

If by chance you are traveling to the interview by plane as part of a trip to the area, carry your bags on the plane instead of checking them. We had a candidate once show up for an interview unshaven and disheveled because his bags were lost by the airline. Try to arrange to fly in the night before so that you are fresh and rested for the interview.

If you are picking up a rental car, make sure that you have a credit card. Most major car rental agencies will not rent to you if you do not have a major credit card in your name. If

you are fresh out of college, make sure you are old enough to rent a car (this is most frequently 25 years but some of the agencies will rent between 21 and 25 and charge a surcharge) ... before you get to the rental counter.

Preparing Yourself

As a starting point, it is critical to understand that the impression you make in the first few minutes of the interview generally sets the tone for your success or failure for the entire interview. Be punctual (preferably ten minutes early); maintain eye contact as you speak; have a firm, friendly handshake; never smoke or chew gum.

We assume you know the basics of dressing appropriately. Men should wear a white shirt and tie. Women should wear a conservative blouse and skirt or slacks. Although most school positions will not require you to be quite so dressed up, once you get the job, you are there to make a serious impression. Be sure your hair is neat (for guys - beards or mustaches groomed). Tie back or wear up any long hair.

A final comment on appearance and grooming: A full beard on men (even one that is well trimmed and groomed) has, in our experience, killed more employment opportunities than we care to remember.

Obviously, you have to make the decision about how committed and interested you are in the position. And we can generally get feedback from the client on their attitude in this area. If you have a mustache or long hair, these should be conservatively trimmed. Women should avoid overly bright colors, heavy make-up, and wear a minimum of jewelry. Obviously, individualism is great, but the rules by which the business world and public sector operates establish the rites of passage that coincide with interviewing and making career transitions.

General Etiquette

Be especially courteous to the employer's receptionist and/or secretary, being honest, and not talking negatively about anyone--especially your current employer. Work at making a friend of the interviewer. If asked to lunch, stick with water, tea or soft drinks. Don't begin eating until everyone is served; you are still being judged.

INTERVIEW TIPS

SKILLS - ACHIEVEMENTS - ATTITUDE are three ingredients an employer is assessing. Virtually everything an interviewer is concerned about in a typical interview situation is which you as the candidate can be condensed to three questions:

- 1) Can you do the job?
- 2) Will you do the job?
- 3) Do you fit in with the organizational style?

At least two days before your interview review your accomplishments and skills. Try to be succinct and describe your accomplishments and skills in quantifiable terms. Be prepared to talk in specific accomplishments that relate to the job for which you are interviewing. If you are a new graduate, go over your clinical internships and think of what you have done as a therapist in training that will make the interviewer feel good about selecting you.

Now, some review. In your day-to-day work, you have an assortment of "mind sets" that are geared to the situations you encounter. An interview is a new game to be played. The following questions will help you obtain a new mental framework to handle the interview comfortably. We would strongly recommend that you go over them a number of times; drill them orally with a friend or spouse. Even if none of these questions are actually used, you'll find it easier to deal with what you do encounter. If you can't find a friend to drill with, get a notebook and write down your answers. Remember, from school – writing is often the best way to organize your thoughts for later.

General Questions You Should Be Prepared to Answer

The following questions are some of the less "clinical" questions that an interviewer may ask you. Unlike questions about your specific therapy experience, school training, and exposure to materials and methodologies, some of these below can trip you up if you haven't thought through some answers in advance.

1. *Tell me about yourself* - They are asking you to tell them about your qualifications--specifically, education and work experience with emphasis on knowledge, skills, and accomplishments/performance indicators that relate to the job at hand. You should preplan a two - to ten-minute answer depending on your amount of experience. Be concise and to the point on this and all your answers. Try not to be rigid or scripted. If you are interrupted by the interviewer, follow their lead.
2. *Why are you considering making a change?* - You definitely need a reasonable, logical answer that relates to items such as greater earning potential, limited authority, lack of opportunity for growth, lack of meaningful work, etc. Whatever you do, DO NOT bad-mouth your current employer! Lack of loyalty can kill the entire interview process.
3. *What do you consider your major strengths?* - Obviously, your answer would relate to the skills that are needed to effectively perform the therapy job for which you are interviewing. Before you depart for the interview, make sure that you understand the tasks and responsibilities of the position. This is where having a recruiter can come in handy as you might think of a question after you hang up from your phone

interview.

4. *What do you consider your major weaknesses?* - Play this safe--you're not in a "true confessions" session. The best answer is a weakness that could really be a strength – For example, "I'm impatient with people who don't work hard; sometimes I get too involved with my work;"
5. *What do/did you like best about your current/last job?* - A good answer is "the people." you got along well with them; they trusted your judgment, etc.
6. *What do you see yourself doing five years from now?* This may translate as - Are you going to stick with us? Your answer should be along the lines of "As long as I like what I'm doing and am growing, I feel that upward movement in responsibility will develop accordingly."
7. *What are your long-term goals?* Movement into a corporate management responsibility is a reasonable goal, but be cautious about putting rigid time limits on it with the interviewer. You especially need to be careful, because the only corporate management position might be held by the interviewer asking the question!
8. *Do you have any problems following district policy?* The interviewer wants to determine if you are ready to follow district rules and regulations (generally regarding services to be provided). Cite the fact, if true, that you've never had problems following policy.
9. *What do/did you like least about your Current/last job?* - Talk in generalities. Lack of challenge and growth are good, standard responses.
10. *What are your pay rate/salary expectations?* – Your best answer is to say offer what you were making in your past job and state that you are looking for a competitive offer. There will be plenty of time to negotiate and talk specifics after the interview is over and you are back at home. Your most important goal is to convince the employer to hire you. The terms of that employment should be discussed after they have decided to bring you on board.
11. *What do you like to do in your spare time?* - Although this may be an innocent question, it is sometimes a fishing expedition to determine whether your leisure pursuits could interfere with your commitment to work. Handle with care.
12. *I'm a little worried about your lack of XYZ experience or training.* - Don't be intimidated by the question, it's a good sign. It means the interviewer generally likes you, but has a reservation or two. Grant that you understand the concern he/she might have, and immediately give him/her something concrete to put his/her mind at ease.
13. *Why did you leave your last job?* - The fact may be that you were terminated and chances are the interviewer knows that and is simply interested in how you'll handle the question. NEVER make excuses. Don't paint yourself as a victim or scapegoat. You might say, "Things didn't work out after a while, I have no hard feelings. I learned a lot there."

17. *Of what are you proudest in terms of your accomplishments in your present or former positions?* - This question calls in the same category as "Tell me about yourself" and provides an opportunity for you to detail accomplishments that will "sell" you. Our only caution: Don't lose control of your ego. We have seen candidates give a 30-minute monologue about how great they are. Be factual, concise, and modest. Don't confuse confidence with ego. Limit your presentation to 3 to 5 minutes.

Questions You Should Consider Asking

(Especially whenever the interviewer asks, "Any questions?")

The following are questions that you should prepare to ask (at the appropriate time). The purpose is twofold: (1) to demonstrate your serious interest in the position; (2) to provide information that allows you to effectively evaluate the career development potential offered by the position.

1. Why is this position available?
2. What is your background (the interviewer's) and that of the top managers in the department? What attracted you to this district? Get your interviewer active in the conversation; this will go a long way in recalling you later in his evaluation.
3. What were the strengths and weaknesses of the person whose place I would be taking? (If applicable)
4. What would you say is the number one challenge for the person who accepts this position?
5. What would you say are the main strengths a person who gets this job needs to have?
6. How do you feel the school district is perceived around town, and why? What are its perceived strengths and weaknesses?

Rules for Asking Questions

1. Have a list (take notes when appropriate and batch your questions for the end/Q&A)
2. Don't cross-examine or interrupt
3. Focus your questions on the job
4. Ask questions that require explanation

AVOID questions relating to:

1. Days off
 2. Vacations/School District Schedule
 3. In-services
- until the job is offered.

Remember you are there to display and sell your ability to contribute. The perks and extra benefits of working there are totally irrelevant (assuming a reasonable match between your current earnings and what the job can pay) until you have an offer in hand.

THE FOLLOW-UP LETTER

This letter is often the deciding factor in choosing between two equally qualified candidates or winning the position when you are right on the edge of having sufficient experience or qualifications. Don't neglect it.

The key to a successful interview is in your hands. That key, simply stated, is that you must convince the school system that you can do the job better than others, and that you WANT the job. Being there is not enough to tell them you want the job. Don't assume...TELL them.

Remember: You are both there for a purpose. The interviewer's purpose is to determine in his/her mind that you are the most qualified person for this position. Your purpose is to convince him/her that you are...Sounds simple? It really is as long as you believe in yourself!

WRAPPING UP THE INTERVIEW IN YOUR FAVOR

Typically, don't expect to walk out of an interview with an offer in hand. Regardless of how strong an impression you've made, it is likely the interviewer(s) will need a little time to digest the information received and discuss your qualifications.

End the interview on a positive note. Tell the interviewer that you are interested and excited about the job (assuming you are, of course?), and that based on what you've learned, you feel confident that you could make a contribution to their district.

You might ask what the time frame will be for a decision to be made.

Thank the interviewer for his/her time and say how much you've enjoyed the talk, and how profitable you've found the interview. Make a graceful exit.

Immediately after the interview, do two things:

1. If you went on the interview through a recruiter, call them and give them an overview of how you perceived the interview went. He will serve as a crucial intermediary in clarifying any misunderstandings and assist in negotiation of the compensation package.

2. Within 24 hours of the initial interview, write a follow-up letter to the principal hiring authority. Mail copies to your personnel contact at the district and any other key decision makers with whom you may have talked. Thank them again, confirm your continuing interest in further discussions, and stress any major points that may have been covered during the interview that confirm your qualifications for the position. List three reasons why you are qualified for the position and three reasons why you want the job.

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