

INTERVIEWING FOR BUSINESS SCHOOL



If you want admissions officers hanging on your every word rather than sneak-checking their watches, take a look at this guide.

The business school interview presents an opportunity to make your candidacy stand out whether for better or worse depends on how prepared you are going in. Admissions insiders gave us the lowdown on the interview process, what they want to hear, and how best to prepare.

The Process

Most business schools just don't have the resources to require interviews for all candidates. Tulane University's A.B. Freeman School is one of the few that does, in part by interviewing blind before looking at a resume or application which allows them to spread their interviews over the course of the year. In general, however, B-schools have adopted one of two partial-pool interviewing policies.

Invitation only:

Pre-screening applications, then interviewing only a select portion, is the practice at many institutions, including Columbia Business School, Vanderbilt's Owen Graduate School of Management, and the University of Southern California's Marshall School. At Stanford, on the other hand, the switch several years ago to invitation only is actually an increase from no interviews at all. Stanford's purpose in instituting an interview process was twofold: to involve alumni with the business school, and to learn things about the applicants that don't necessarily come through on paper.

Receiving an invitation or not can have different implications at different schools. Being invited often means you've made the first cut, but at Stanford and some other invitation-only schools, not being asked to interview doesn't necessarily mean you won't be admitted. At Purdue's Krannert Graduate School of Management, interviews serve a variety of purposes (e.g., determining scholarship awards), which doesn't leave enough room on the calendar for all ultimately accepted applicants to be seen.

Interview optional:

Institutions such as the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School, Indiana University's Kelley School of Business, and Emory's Goizueta Business School offer an interview that is open but optional and "strongly recommended."

Schools without a formal interviewing process frequently offer an interview substitute that is "not a required thing at all," as University of Texas Austin admissions officer Jennifer Miller says of their admissions visits with students and alumni. Should you do it? "We encourage applicants to," says Thunderbird assistant dean of admissions. Their information meetings with admissions staff are a chance to favorably impact your application, he adds, although "not so much as an interview." Both schools plan to formalize their interviews within the next few years.

Who's asking the questions:

For some, like Penn State's Smeal College and Southern Methodist University's Cox School, only members of the admissions staff conduct interviews; but most B-schools involve alumni for out-of-towners and/or use second-year students on campus.

Length:

Interviews can last anywhere from 15 minutes with an overbooked admissions director to more than two hours with an overenthusiastic alum. The norm is generally somewhere between 30 minutes and an hour. Don't panic if you're out the door in less than that, though. Longer is not necessarily better: I've had some over in 20 minutes that have been wonderful, says a director of admissions at the University of Minnesota's Carlson School of Management.

Attire:

Interviews at Duke's Fuqua School went business casual years ago, but in general, always wear a suit. It's never wrong to look poised and professional. Alumni interviews can be more relaxed, but unless you're specifically advised to the contrary, it's best to button-down.

What They Want to Hear

At the majority of B-schools--from the University of Rochester's Simon Graduate School of Business Administration to Rice University's Jones Graduate School of Management--the preferred style of questioning is behavioral: asking you to refer to things you have accomplished and experiences you have had, and to discuss them in depth. This holds true whether, as at Harvard, they've read your entire application three times through or, as at Tulane and Northwestern, they've looked at only your resume and are hearing your story for the first time.

While approaches and questions vary from school to school and from interview to interview, there are generally three spheres of inquiry:

Why an MBA now?

Sometimes they have more of an entrepreneurial spirit, sometimes they've reached a dead end in their career, sometimes they need to have [an MBA] in order to be promoted; a variety of answers is acceptable. Rambling, undirected responses, however, are not.

The best response: Use specific experiences to delineate the arc of your life story, academically and professionally, and provide the rationale behind each step. Discuss your future goals in equal detail, tying them to the particular strengths the school has to offer, both short-term in serving your intended focus, and long-term how their MBA will help you realize post-degree plans. Why here? can be as critical as Why now?

The seriousness of your interest in the school is definitely on the minds of interviewers. And they have their ways of finding out: Some ask interviewees if they have any questions about the cost of living in the area, to discover whether or not they've researched the practicalities of living in the area. Interviewers can also get a sense of candidates' priorities by inquiring where else they're applying.

Asking informed, specific questions that show you've done your homework can score big points: Admissions officers are impressed by applicants who inquire about changes in the curriculum that they noticed in course catalogs. Some take note of applicants who are up-to-date on professors' research projects.

How will this person do here?

The focus is on the personality sitting across from us, and how good of a fit this is going to be with our program, says an assistant director of admissions at Owen. Fit is topmost on many admissions officers' minds: Most B-schools consider themselves small communities and are vitally concerned that they function smoothly. One across-the-board way to seem like a match: Play up your team experience. It's key in team-oriented course work, and outside the classroom as well. Be prepared to brag a little bit about yourself, not in a conceited sort of way but in a confident way, to tell us some of the times when you were successful in a team environment, or what you've learned from working on a team. It's very important that we get people into the program who are going to thrive in that type of atmosphere. While you're at it, also emphasize your critical thinking skills, interpersonal skills, and your capacity to add value to the school through your experience, and leadership qualities all are high on admissions committee wish lists.

How will this person do when he/she graduates?

Once you graduate, you go from being the university's student to becoming its latest product. One of the most effective ways schools can forecast how you'll

rare in the market is by assessing your interview skills up front. Confidence, a professional demeanor, and listening intently to questions before responding concisely and clearly all signal that you will be a stellar interviewee two years down the road.

How to Prepare

Familiarize yourself with the school:

Interviewers recommend that you go beyond the Web site and the literature. If possible, visit the campus, sit in on a class, speak with students, faculty, and alumni before the interview. Firsthand research will inspire not only impressive questions for the admissions office, but also pointedly useful ones for yourself, so that ultimately you can choose the best school for you.

Reread your application:

A school's on-paper questions usually indicate where its admissions department's interests lie. It's worth looking over your answers, too. Consistency between what you write and what you say is desirable; after all, what you've written is all they know of you. But adding new information that will expand their sense of you is equally important and best if done in a way that complements and builds upon what has come before.

Additional do's:

Make eye contact; arrive on time; bring your resume; and send a brief thank you note (by snail mail or e-mail) afterwards: It's an obvious opportunity for you to create another impression, and to get your name in front of the person who interviewed you. Don't overdo it, though.

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