How to Interview at a Call Back

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A. What is a Call Back Interview?

An initial screening interview is usually 20 to 30 minutes long, conducted by one interviewer, and held on campus. While this may vary (e.g., two interviewers may interview jointly or the screening interview may be held at the employer's office), the essence of the screening interview is that the employer is making its first cut among applicants based on their paper credentials and in-person presentation.

After the screening interview, the employer will choose the student(s) that it would like to "call back" to interview at its office. A call back, also known as a fly back interview, is not one interview, but rather a series of screening interviews strung together, sometimes broken up by a meal. You can expect to meet with anywhere from three to eight interviewers during a callback. They are almost always conducted at the employer's office. You may be interviewing for a few hours or an entire day. During the call back, the interviewers have two main tasks: (1) understanding your credentials and determining whether you will fit into the employer's culture; and (2) selling you on the employer.

B. Scheduling the Call Back

You may learn that you have been invited for a call back by phone, mail, or, increasingly, email. Therefore it is important that you check all three avenues of communication daily. With regard to telephonic contact, make sure that the phone number at which you may be contacted has an answering machine or answering function. Very importantly, your answering machine message should be professional, clear and concise.

Respond to the employer's call back invitation as soon as you can. If possible, schedule the earliest date offered, since many employers make offers on a rolling basis, and a later call back may hurt your chances. When you call to arrange the interview, ask how much time to allot for it and be prepared to stay as long as necessary to complete all scheduled interviews. Try not to schedule a call back for a time when you have an important appointment later in the day, because you don't want to feel or appear rushed. Once you have scheduled your call back, do not reschedule unless absolutely necessary. Remember, interview spots go quickly and if you cancel you may have to wait a long time for another opening.
Schedule call back interviews only with those employers in which you are seriously interested. While this may seem irrelevant in the beginning of your call back season, as you progress, you may receive more call back requests than your mental well being, class work, or physical health can endure.

C. A Marathon, Not a Sprint

Since the call back is merely a series of initial interviews strung together, all of the interviewing skills you used in the screening interview will apply again. To refresh yourself on the resume basics, visit the Detailed Initial Interview Information document. Don't forget to always bring extra copies of your transcript, resume, reference list and writing sample.

However, one of the major differences between an initial interview and a call back is its duration. This is a marathon, not a sprint. Instead of having to be intelligent, charming, and interesting for 20 to 30 minutes, you have to be intelligent, charming and interesting for several hours or even a whole day. You must make the same positive impression on the last interviewer as you did on the first. Further, you cannot let one lukewarm interview in the middle of the day throw off your stride for the rest of the interviews that day. In general, each interviewer only gets one vote, so it pays to shrug off the less than inspiring interviews and attack each interview as if it were the only one of the day.

How do you do this? First, don't hesitate to ask for a short break after every second or third interview. Take a trip to the restroom to, well, rest or fix your makeup or splash water on your face or whatever. A series of deep breaths may help you maintain your energy and calmness. Also, if you need a glass of water, don't be afraid to ask.

You can also conserve energy to go the distance once you recognize that you don't have to reconfigure your answers or dream up new questions for each interviewer. While they will compare notes on things like your abilities, demeanor, maturity, articulateness, etc., interviewers will not talk to each other about the substantive content of your answers or questions. In fact, you can collect important information by asking each interviewer the same question like, "What is it you like best about working here?" The cross-section of answers you receive, taken together, may tell you a lot about the employer's culture.

Also, because you will be seeing many, many people you've never met before, one after another, you are bound to forget who you talked to and what you talked about. Don't waste your memory space trying to remember who's who and what you said. If possible, ask each interviewer for his or her business card. Then, when you are taking one of your rest breaks or after your interviews are complete, jot down something about the interviewer and/or your conversation on the back of the card. Even if you don't get everyone's card, make notes as contemporaneously to the conversation as possible to help you remember the interviewer and the content of your interview. This information will help you draft original thank you letters and other correspondence with the firm.
D. The Home Court

Since most call backs are conducted at the employer's office, its "home court," there are a few things to keep in mind that you didn't have to think about at an on-campus screening interview. First, be patient with interruptions. Because the employer's main function is to practice law, not interview candidates, the employer's work may impinge on your interview. Should a client call, a secretary bring documents, or a colleague stop by to chat during your interview, remain cheerful and unperturbed by the interruption. Also, resist the temptation to become too interested in the substance of the interruption. For example, if the phone rings and the interviewer simply must take the call, refrain from listening attentively to the interviewer's side of the conversation. Even though you really can't help but hear what the interviewer is saying, you don't want to seem like you're eavesdropping. In such a situation, perhaps looking at the pictures in the interviewer's office or reviewing the documents you brought with you are the best ways to convey that you are trying not to listen to the call.

Second, pay attention to the home court. Look past the mahogany furniture to the people and their behavior. Are all of the office doors closed? Is there yelling emanating from behind them? Are doors open with colleagues sharing ideas inside? How are the support staff treated by attorneys? How do people address one another? Does the atmosphere seem formal or relaxed? Does the administration of your interview seem professional and smooth? Keeping your eyes and ears open to the employer's environment will help you ascertain the firm culture and whether you will feel comfortable in it.

This may seem elemental, but finally, do everything you can to be pleasant to every single person you meet in the course of your call back. From people in the elevator on the way up to the office, to the receptionist, to the messenger you pass in the hall, to secretaries - while support staff may not have an actual vote on the hiring committee, they can exert great influence on those who do. Also, you can never tell if that person you held the door for on the elevator is a powerful partner; don't make assumptions about anyone or anything. A note on recruiting coordinators: recognize that they are not merely "support" for the hiring committee. They too may help make hiring decisions and can affect the outcome of your call back, both positively and negatively.

E. The Fine Art of Eating

Many call backs will entail a lunch and/or dinner. This is a good thing because it gives you more of an opportunity to meet people and learn about the firm. However, this can be a bad thing if you don't understand just what is expected of you. While you will often dine with associates and you are encouraged to "relax," don't get too comfortable. These attorneys will be filling out an evaluation form after the meal is over and the hiring committee will learn of your behavior. So, while you should exhibit your ability to make small talk and converse in a less formal setting, you should not let your guard down too far. For example, this is not the time to ask questions about billable hours or problem supervisors. Also, be careful to stay away from topics like politics or religion; your differing opinion may not be welcomed by the interviewers.
A few tips on what to eat: choose something in the mid-price range on the menu. Often employers have limits as to the amount of money interviewers can spend on interview meals and you don't want to "blow the budget" for the attorneys or force them to forego dessert because you ordered the pheasant under glass. In addition, pick food that won't make a big mess. Sounds simple, but if you forget and order spaghetti, that stain on your tie or blouse can really make you self-conscious for the rest of the meal or day. Finally, avoid alcohol. Wine-induced relaxation can lead to regretful interviews.

**F. The Odds**

Students always want to know the odds of their getting an offer after a call back. The underlying question seems to be, "Is this mine to lose at this point or do I have to keep going after the offer?" Simply put, there's no way to predict the odds because there's no way to know how many students were called back and how many students the employer will hire. Since the odds are impossible to know, the applicant should do the best he or she can to actively pursue the offer. To do otherwise would be foolish, regardless of anyone's estimation of the odds.

**G. Expense Reimbursement**

Private law firms will reimburse you for your expenses associated with the call back. However, be sure to discuss reimbursement procedures before you travel to meet with the employer because each employer has its own guidelines and limits. Naturally the employer prefers that you take steps to save money when possible. Visiting several employers in one trip or booking your flight with a Saturday stay over may show the employer that you are sensitive to its financial resources. Always keep good records of your expenses and submit originals of all receipts for travel, lodging and food. NALP travel expense reimbursement forms are available in the Office of Career Planning and Professional Development.

**H. Private v. Public/Government Employers**

Much of the above description applies equally to private as well as public and government employers. However, recognize with public and government employers, budgetary constraints may require you to economize on your expenses; know the guidelines before you plan your call back. Also, some public/government employers may have different interviewing structures than private firms. Some may make hiring decisions after the screening interview, without a call back. Others may require several rounds of call backs with more and more senior attorneys.

**I. After the Interview**

After your call back, you should consider sending thank you letters. Read the discussion and sample thank you letter in the Detailed Initial Interview Information document.

If you decide after the call back that you do not wish to be considered for an offer, inform the employer promptly that you wish to withdraw from consideration. Weighing offers and making decisions can be difficult alone: please feel free to discuss your options with a member of the Office of Career Planning and Professional Development.