The Ultimate Guide to U.S. Interviews

As an international student, there are many cultural differences, nuances, and business etiquette to keep in mind when preparing for and executing a job interview in the U.S. The interview is your opportunity to show prospective employers your skills and strengths as a potential team member, and how your status as an international student will positively impact their organization.

This guide will give you a roadmap to understanding the types of interviews you may experience in the U.S., some interview tips and tricks, and common questions and situations you should prepare for as an international student.

The basic principles of interviewing can be remembered using the three P’s: Preparedness, Positioning, and Performance. To set yourself up for success, ask yourself the following questions before your next interview:

**Preparedness:**
- Have you practiced answers to commonly asked interview questions?
- Have you researched the company you are applying to?
- Do you know the background of the organization and its key players?
- Do you have a prepared list of questions to ask the interviewers?

**Positioning:**
- How well do your skills and experience align with the requirements of the position?
- What will you bring to the table that other candidates won’t?
Types of Interviews in the U.S.

There are many different types or “mediums” of interviews in the U.S. Though some are more casual or formal than others, it is important to prepare for them all the same.

1. Informational Interview:

An informational interview is an important networking conversation with someone who works in a position or field that is of interest to you. These can be helpful as you explore potential companies and their expectations, culture, and environment, especially when you are unsure if a role or company is right for you. It’s also a good way to gain visibility and showcase your due diligence as a potential applicant.

Interstride Tip: Take advantage of your university’s alumni networks to connect with international alumni working in the U.S. International alumni can give valuable advice on transitioning to the workforce as an international student and navigating a career in the U.S. You should also utilize platforms like LinkedIn, Glassdoor, and Interstride to research specific companies, find open job positions, and connect with alumni to request informational interviews.

Sample Email:

New Message

student@email.com

To contact

Dear [Name],

My name is [Your Name]. I am a [freshman, sophomore, junior, senior, graduate] at [University Name]. My home country is [home country] and I am studying in the U.S. as an international student. I noticed on LinkedIn, Twitter, the Alumni Network/Portal that you also studied at [University Name] as an international student, and are working in [field of interest or company].

I am interested in exploring job opportunities in [field of interest or company], because [insert one or two sentences on why you’re interested in that particular company or field].

Given your background and experience, I would welcome the opportunity to hear more about your career path, current role, and any advice you have for an international student preparing for a career in [field of interest].

Would you have the interest and/or availability for a 20 minute virtual coffee in the coming weeks?

Thank you for your time, [Name], and I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

[Your Name]
2. Mock Interview:

A mock interview is essentially a dress rehearsal for an actual job interview. It gives you the chance to practice your interview skills and questions with a peer, colleague, or friend. To fully prepare for the actual interview, make sure you simulate the mock interview as closely as possible. Look the part, prepare and practice, mirror the type of interview (video, in person, phone, etc.), and choose a good interviewer. Practicing with a fellow international student or alumni can help you bounce ideas and prepare for common questions. Conducting a mock interview with a native English speaker is crucial so they can point out any unfamiliar or incorrect usage of words, phrases, and examples.

**Interstride Tip:** Many career service offices host interview preparation workshops throughout the school year. These are great opportunities for international students to engage and network with career experts. These often include chances to do mock interviews with advisors or career service professionals.

3. Phone Interview (Screening Interview):

Before bringing you in for a traditional interview, employers may utilize phone interviews for a candidate “screening.” These are typically with Human Resources or Talent Management, and help employers to make sure you are a suitable candidate for the position. During these phone screenings, interviewers will typically ask more logistical questions, including salary expectations, qualifications, and start date availability. Remember that these are initial impressions and will set the tone in connecting you with the hiring manager.

**Interstride Tip:** Even though these are over the phone, preparation is still important! Have notes, research, or questions prepared in front of you for reference during the screening. Make sure you are in a quiet location with good connection and a fully charged phone.

4. Traditional Interview (Individual Interview):

Most common, the traditional interview is where you will meet with current employees, potential colleagues, and/or the hiring manager one on one, to officially discuss the position in detail. While in recent years these have taken many forms, they are traditionally in person. During these interviews, you are convincing the interviewer that you are the best candidate for the job, based on your qualifications, accomplishments, and experience. As an international student, it can feel strange to talk about yourself in such a way, but American organizations and employers expect this level of eagerness from applicants.

5. Video Interview:

Taking place remotely via video, these interviews are similar to traditional interviews. Suitable location, good lighting, quiet space, and adequate internet access are all critical for video interviews. Similarly for phone interviews, you can have notes or prepared questions in front of you, but keep these out of sight. Avoid reading off of your notes, or looking off camera too much. Maintain eye contact and conversation as you would in person. The interviewer will be able to tell if you are reading off your responses.
6. Recorded Video Interview:

For these types of interviews, you’ll record yourself answering a set of questions and send them back to the employer or recruiter. Conduct yourself in this recording as you would in person - act natural, and don’t read off a script! Be sure to check how these recorded video interviews will be conducted. Are your responses automatically recorded and saved right away? Do you have one chance or multiple chances to submit a response?

7. Group Interview:

Some employers utilize group interviews in which a hiring manager will interview multiple candidates at once. Group interviews are common in various industries (e.g. law) and help employers save time and money when searching for new hires. This can be an effective way for employers to find the best candidate efficiently, as well as to see how candidates interact with peers. If you are in a group with multiple interviewees, it will likely be hard to demonstrate all of your qualifications during the interview. Speak up when appropriate, and prepare a few key highlights about yourself.

Interstride Tip: One way to distinguish yourself from the group is to convey how your story, skills, and experience as an international student has prepared you for the role (e.g. communicating cross-culturally and adapting to new environments). You want to ensure interviewers will remember you among the group of interviewees.

8. Panel Interview:

In panel interviews, a candidate is typically interviewed by a panel of 3-4 interviewers. These are common in government agencies, as they often follow structured hiring practices. Despite there being multiple interviewers, it is important to focus your attention on whoever asked the question while also engaging the larger group. Panel interviews test your presentation skills and give interviewers an idea of how you will interact with audiences or clients.

9. Case Interview (Project Interview):

During a case interview, you are often given a “project” to solve, or a business case to tackle. Employers are evaluating how you would handle projects, tasks, and priorities once hired. Your critical thinking, analytical, and problem solving skills will be on display through case interviews. This is a chance for employers to see how you approach a problem, and not always how you solve it or if you get the “right” answer. Case interviews are a common practice for consulting roles.
Preparing for the Interview

As you prepare for your interview, remember that your primary purpose is to convince the interviewer that you are the best candidate for the position. If you are “selling yourself” to a prospective employer, why should they “buy you?” This is often the most difficult thing for many international students as they feel uncomfortable being boastful. As an international student, use your experiences and unique advantages as selling points that many American candidates might not possess.

The hiring culture in the U.S. is highly competitive, and employers will expect a certain level of confidence and enthusiasm from applicants. Convince employers that you are the best candidate for the role based on your achievements, talents, and unique story as an international student.

Before the Interview:

- Research the company and the position you’re interviewing for. Pay close attention to the preferred skills and qualifications in the job description.

- Review the company’s website, mission statement, and values.

- Depending on the type of interview, prepare your space and yourself accordingly.

- Be prepared to discuss your resume and cover letter in detail. Make sure you have detailed answers to common interview questions and typical questions asked to international candidates.

- Prepare your “story” for the interviewers. While it is common outside the U.S. to simply go over your resume items and accomplishments in the interview, there is a bigger emphasis on storytelling in U.S. interviews. By putting facts in a more impactful context, storytelling allows the interviewer to easily remember who you are and recall the information you share.

Potential Questions to Ask an Interviewer:

1. What would my day-to-day routing look like if I got the job?
2. What is the key to succeeding in this role?
3. What is your remote work policy like?
4. Do you expect the responsibilities for this role to change in the near future?
5. How would you describe the overall management style at the company?
6. What is the biggest change or challenge that the company has had to face recently?
7. What learning and professional development opportunities are offered to your employees?
During the Interview:

- First impressions are crucial. Be punctual and arrive prepared for the conversation ahead.

- Non-verbal communication is equally as important as verbal communication. Simple cues include maintaining steady eye contact, smiling, keeping an even tone of voice, projecting self-confidence, and utilizing active listening techniques.

- Maintain a calm, conversational flow. Use the experiences and situations you prepared ahead of time to answer questions naturally.

- Ask the interviewer questions. Remember that you are interviewing them just as much as they are you. Make the interview an interactive exchange.

- Always thank the interviewer at the conclusion of the interview, and feel free to inquire about next steps in the process.

After the Interview:

- Follow up! Your first step after your interview should be to thank the interviewer within one business day of your interview. This note should be short and sweet. Express your continued interest in the job itself and the organization. It can also be a useful exercise to ask the interviewer for feedback on your interview. Don’t be afraid to ask for their input.

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<td><strong>Be yourself.</strong> Interviewers can often tell when someone is simply telling them what they want to hear. Highlight your advantages as an international candidate, and don’t be afraid to discuss what makes you, you!</td>
<td><strong>Expect an employer or interviewer to know about the international hiring process.</strong> Be proactive and prepared to address any concerns they have about your status in the U.S.</td>
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<td><strong>Ask questions.</strong> It’s important for you to determine if the employer and culture of the organization is a good match for you. It also makes you look enthusiastic and engaged in the conversation.</td>
<td><strong>Disclose your race, marital status, age, or past salary when asked.</strong> In the U.S., it is illegal for employers to ask personal questions such as your race, marital status, or age. Although it is common to provide such information or even a photo on your resume in another country, it is not recommended in the U.S.</td>
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<td><strong>Build rapport with the interviewer.</strong> A good interview comes down to establishing a friendly rapport with the interviewer. They are evaluating you as a potential future team member and colleague. Building a relationship with the employer can set you apart as a more memorable, likable candidate. Showcase your personality by</td>
<td><strong>Answer questions vaguely.</strong> Rather than keeping responses vague, have evidence prepared to back up your statements and experience. For example, international students are sometimes hesitant about past experiences because they do not</td>
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making small talk, engaging in positive dialogue, asking questions, and showing gratitude.

Ensure you fully understand your work authorization options as an international student. Your immigration status shouldn’t be the first thing you discuss with a prospective employer, but it also shouldn’t be something you wait to mention. You need to know about the restrictions of your visa type and be able to confidently and comfortably discuss your situation. The more knowledgeable you are about your work authorization options, the more confident you will be in the interview.

have any. This is fine, but you want to be upfront with the interviewer and present other appropriate evidence to highlight why you are the best candidate.

Avoid talking about your skills and accomplishments. You should use this opportunity to show the employer just how much of an asset you will be to the organization. Remember, in the U.S., this is completely normal and expected.

Challenges You May Encounter as an International Student

When interviewing for jobs, international students face many obstacles that their American counterparts may not. Successful candidates are well prepared to address potential concerns and make a positive impression. Here are some challenges you may encounter during an interview and your overall job search journey.

• Complexities of hiring in the U.S. Not all organizations will have staff dedicated to immigration. Some employers may be hesitant to hire international students due to confusion on the process, complexities surrounding visa requirements, and the potential costs involved. Be prepared to walk your potential employer through these complexities - what happens when your student status expires, explaining what a change of status to a work visa is, and the timeline surrounding this process.

• Language. Studying in a language different from your native tongue can be intimidating, and expressing yourself professionally in an interview can be difficult. Remember to speak slowly and clearly. Ask for clarification if you’re unsure about a question. Avoid slang or idioms from your home country that interviewers might not understand. Take advantage of Career Services or the International Student Students office for advice, mock interview practice, and language help.

• Lack of experience. Given that international students have strict restrictions on working while being a student, you might not have a ton of work experience to draw on. Utilize your coursework and student experiences, as well as past experiences in your home country. Work experience in your home country still counts!
• **Unrealistic expectations.** The job market in the U.S. is incredibly competitive. As an international student, it is highly likely that you will apply for many more jobs compared to your American counterparts. Many times, you will be “ghosted”, meaning you will not hear back from the hiring team at all. This is normal in the job search process. Finding the right job in the U.S. may mean adjusting your expectations and being more open to “next best” opportunities. To tackle unrealistic expectations, do your research and become more knowledgeable about the job search and interview process. It’s also important to be honest with yourself. Ask yourself what you really want in a job. What is negotiable and what is not?

• **Commitment.** Employers invest a lot of time, training, money, and sponsorship on international employees. Some employers fear that these international employees will not be able to stay in the U.S. when sponsorship is not a guarantee. This is often a concern for smaller companies with little resources or experience. If you are interviewing for a larger company, show how you can be an asset to the company’s domestic and overseas operations.

According to the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE), over 50% of recent American graduates leave their job within the first year. Let employers know they are your top priority and that you are committed for the long run.

**Types of Interview Questions**

There are many techniques and approaches that you might come across. Interviewers typically utilize two types of questions to see how your skills and experience align with the organization and job function. These are resume-based and behavioral questions.

**Resume-based Questions:**

Resume-based questions are those that tie directly to information you included on your resume or cover letter. The interviewer will ask you to expand on certain areas of your resume. As an international student, you should be prepared to explain any gaps in employment or education, share highlights from a class or previous job, or talk about strengths and weaknesses of your background. Given the limited space on your resume, tell your story “between the lines.” What can’t an employer see on your resume that you want them to know?

**Behavioral or Situational Questions:**

Behavioral or situational questions will require you to clearly describe how you handled difficult situations or issues in the past. This will give interviewers insight on (1) how you identify and resolve problems, (2) how you react to stress, and (3) how you conduct yourself in a professional environment.

Prepare one or two concrete examples that can showcase your unique skill set,
utilizing the STAR method below. In all responses, be concise and include a clear beginning, middle, and end to your stories. Set the stage (Situation and Task) quickly, and focus the bulk of your story on the Actions and Results. If the story involves being part of a group, be careful not to overuse “we” and focus on your individual role and contributions.

**Situation**
Set the context for your story. Where were you working or studying? Who was involved? What happened?

**Task**
What had to get done?

**Actions**
What steps did you take?

**Results**
What was the outcome?

The STAR method is an effective technique in answering behavioral and situational questions. American interviewers will be looking for this answer format. Let’s take a look at the following example STAR answer for a common interview question.

**Question:**
Tell me about a time where you had to deal with a difficult colleague. How did you approach this situation?

**Situation:**

I worked as a Corporate Analyst in Singapore, creating reports for management. In order to produce these reports, I had to collaborate with the data acquisition team.

**Task:**

- **Ex.** I was responsible for collecting the data from the data acquisition team, and creating an external report that illustrated company metrics and performance. The obstacle I had to overcome was the difficult nature of one data acquisition team member who I needed to get the data from.

**Actions:**

- **Ex.** Noting one specific team member’s tendency to get overwhelmed and frustrated at my data requests, I asked about his timeline and discussed when would be the best time to request data to fulfill mutual tasks.

**Result:**

- **Ex.** The team member appreciated my thoughtful approach to collaboration, and he coordinated a monthly schedule that allowed me to get the data I needed to produce a report in a timely manner.

**Common Interview Questions for Applicants**

Not all interviews will be the same. To help yourself become more confident and prepared, you should have answers ready for these frequently asked interview
questions below. To ace your interview, prepare specific examples of your experience as an international student. You can refer to the appendix for a list of additional common interview questions.

• **“Tell me about yourself.”** Have your “elevator pitch” ready. This is a 30-60 second introduction that is short and focused.

• **“Why do you want this job?”** What the employer is really asking is twofold - why this company and why this role? After talking about the company, be sure to connect your skills to the job. How will your specific skills fulfill the responsibilities of this role? Is there a specific reason why you are seeking this position in the U.S. as opposed to in your home country?

• **“What are your greatest strengths?”** Try to have a combination of “soft” skills (people skills like teamwork, leadership, etc.) and “hard” skills (technical skills like computer programming, copywriting, etc.). As an international student, you want to paint a picture of how your international experience acts as a strength and sets you apart from other candidates.Characteristics of international talent that are appealing to employers include knowledge of other cultures, flexibility, independence, adaptability, and multiple language capabilities.

• **“What are your greatest weaknesses?”** Be cautious with your answer and demonstrate your value. For example, instead of saying “I don’t work well with others,” maybe say “I sometimes find it hard to delegate.” Always look for ways to turn a weakness into something that can tie back to a strength. Keep in mind that this question is not asking about disadvantages as an international applicant (visa issues, lack of experience, etc.). Focus instead on personal weaknesses.

• **“Why are you the right candidate for this role?”** Separate yourself from other candidates and tell the interviewer what you will bring to the table. Why should they hire you instead of your American counterpart? For example, are they looking for someone with highly technical skills or someone who can successfully interact with clients from different cultural backgrounds?

• **“What is a project you are particularly proud of?”** Showcase your skills, as well as the things that interest and excite you. If possible, choose an example that can tie to the job you’re interviewing for.

• **“What are your salary expectations?”** Prior to the interview, do some research on Glassdoor or LinkedIn for salary ranges of similar roles in the field and industry. When you are asked this question, first ask the interviewer for the range they are offering before revealing your expected salary range. While you may feel happy and grateful that the employers are considering you as a prospective employee, do not undersell or fail to negotiate for yourself.

Questions you might receive as an international candidate:

• **“Are you authorized to work in the U.S.?”** While it is illegal for a potential employer to ask about your race, nationality, or visa status, they can ask if you are authorized to work in the U.S. As an international student on an F-1 visa, you have work authorization through CPT and OPT at no cost to the employer. If your interviewer asks about your work eligibility, answer directly and honestly. It makes it easier for the hiring manager to assess this if you disclose it upfront. Know your visa situation and requirements that are specific to you and your situation. Practice responses to this question so that you feel more confident during your interview.

• **“Do you require sponsorship?”** Many employers ask this question because
they need to know if they will need to submit a petition on your behalf. Generally, the answer to this question will typically be a “yes” since you will need sponsorship to continue working after your visa expires.

• “When can you start?” When applying for work authorization, you can select a specific date to start your OPT period (up to 60 days after graduation). However, you also need to have your physical Employment Authorization Document (EAD) card in order to start working.

Communicate with your prospective employer that you can work once your OPT period starts and you physically have your EAD card.

Appendices of Interview Questions

Here are some additional questions you might want to prepare answers for. Be sure to have specific examples or situations you can speak to in your answers.

• How did you hear about this job?
• Are you interviewing with other organizations besides this one?
• Can you tell me about a time where you were faced with difficult conversation? How did you handle it?
• Can you tell me about a time when you had a conflict with a manager or supervisor?
• What is an example of a time you made a mistake at work/school? How did you fix it?
• What would you say is your greatest accomplishment to date?
• How do you prioritize work?
• What is your work style?
• How do you approach difficult situations or colleagues?
• How would your colleagues/classmates describe you?
• In five years time, where do you see yourself? In ten?
• Do you have any hobbies or interests outside of work/school?
• What book are you currently reading?
• What is something you are passionate about?
• How has being an international student helped your communication skills, especially in diverse environments?
• Why do you want to pursue a career in the United States?