

## Tips for Interview Success for USACE Careers

12 August 2021

Q&A Session

*This webinar presented tips for building a resume and delivering a strong interview for USACE employees. Presenters Susan Layton (Acting Chief of Planning & Policy, South Atlantic Division) and Rhiannon Kucharski (Chief of the Civil and Public Works Branch and Legislative Liaison, Honolulu District) covered all aspects of the interview process, including tips for a top-notch interview; what not to do during an interview; how to prepare for various types of interviews; and tips for developing an effective resume. Additional leadership perspective was also provided by Wes Coleman (Chief, HQUSACE Office of Water Project Review).*



*This summary of the Question / Answer session of the webinar is not a transcription; questions and responses have been edited and reordered for clarity.*

### **Resumes and Cover Letters**

**What is the preferred resume format of USACE hiring officials? Is it recommended that applicants upload their own version of their resume to USAJobs or use the USAJobs resume builder function to manually generate a resume?**

The preference varies among hiring managers and panelists, but the resume should always be tailored to the job to which you are applying. Resumes should be visually appealing and provide all of the relevant information that a hiring manager wants to know. One idea is for applicants to build their resumes directly in USAJobs to ensure they capture all relevant information. Applicants can then take the USAJobs-generated resume and reformat it in Word to make it more visually appealing and readable. Applicants should then reupload the resume onto USAJobs as a PDF to avoid formatting issues.

While there is no magic resume page number (unless a specific length is specified in the application instructions), resumes should generally not exceed four or five pages to ensure interviewers read the whole document. However, when applying for a position through USAJobs, applicants should also keep in mind that they need to provide enough information on their resume to ensure they rank highly so that their resume is passed on to the interview panel.

**Applicants are often advised to include specific words from the position description in their resumes when applying to a job via USAJobs. Is it necessary or advised that the accompanying cover letter also include exact search terms from the job description?**

The cover letter should speak to the themes in the required Knowledge, Skills and Abilities (KSAs) listed for the position. You don't have to use specific words or phrases. Why are you uniquely qualified and excited about the job for which you are applying? Make sure the answers to those questions come through in your cover letter.

**Should trainings and PROSPECT courses be listed on an applicant's resume?**

Trainings, coursework, and certifications relevant to the job can be listed on an applicant's resume, but an applicant should prioritize work experience on their resume over trainings. As a general rule of thumb, the longer an applicant's career, the more the applicant's resume should emphasize experience to tell the story about why they are qualified for the position. Note: applicants should always follow the specific instructions provided with respect to what type of information to provide; for example, some application processes such as the Water Resources Planner certification require all relevant training to be current in the USACE Planner Database.

**Interviews**

**How should an applicant respond if they are asked a question that starts with "Tell me about a time when..." if they do not have the referenced experience? Should the applicant tell the interviewer what they would do in that situation instead?**

In this situation it is often best for the applicant to generalize the question by responding with something they have seen done or have second-hand experience with that relates to the type of experience in question. An example response might be "I haven't performed that action personally, but I was on a project delivery team where I was responsible for a similar task..."

**Should an applicant send a thank-you note, either handwritten or an email, after the interview?**

Sending a thank-you note is always recommended. They are appreciated by interviewers and show a willingness to "go the extra mile." Typically, an email is acceptable, unless you have the interviewer's mailing address. The decision will often be made within a few days, or sometimes the same day, so an email is often more timely.

**Is there a standard number of minutes applicants should limit their answers to?**

It depends on how many questions there are and for how long the interview will last. Make sure you balance the time you have across all questions and leave a bit of time at the end for you to make your closing statement/elevator pitch about yourself.

**During a virtual interview, should a blank or blurred background or a picture be used if the interviewee is not already in a professional setting?**

It is up to you, just make sure the background is appropriate, professional and not a distraction from you or your responses. I like the virtual office backgrounds available on WebEx.

**Miscellaneous**

**Does a promotion SF-50 (Notification of Personnel Action) count for the purposes of previous position SF-50 documentation typically required for federal job applications?**

If that promotion SF-50 is for your current job, it should work. Just don't use a SF-50 from a cash or time off award.

### **Tips for Interview Success from the Field**

*The following tips were suggested by webinar participants based on their experiences participating in interviews (both as interviewees and interviewers).*

#### Resumes

- Applicants should tighten their resume so that it is concise and easy for an interviewer to review and to ensure that the skills and experiences highlighted relate specifically to the job you are applying for.
- Don't copy and paste the position description into your resume – this doesn't tell the interviewer how your experience is applicable.

#### Interviews – General

- When responding to multi-part questions, it can be helpful for the applicant to write down the different parts of the question to ensure they respond to all parts. It can also be helpful for an applicant to note a word or two next to the question parts to remind themselves of how they want to respond.
- Applicants can prepare – and practice – responses to different anticipated questions during their preparation for an interview.
- Applicants can and should ask the interviewer to repeat the question if needed, to ensure they answered all parts of the question. This is much preferred over not providing a complete answer.
- It is acceptable for applicants to pause for a moment or two before responding to a question to collect their thoughts and deliver a better formulated response. An applicant can also restate the question to give themselves a little more time to think.
- It is helpful for applicants to include examples in their answers, as it gives the interviewer a better understanding of the applicant and their experience.
- Applicants should use different and recent examples for each answer, to show a diversity of experience. Applicants should also try to use examples with successful conclusions.
- Even if an applicant knows their interviewers, they should treat the interviewers as if they do not know them at all. Applicants in this situation should also make sure to provide complete answers detailing the “so what” of their responses and specifically outline the value they can provide, as opposed to assuming the interviews automatically understand the relevance of the applicant's experience.
- Applicants may find it helpful to use the “STAR” method when responding to a question by detailing the “Situation” and challenges faced, the “Task” or the context of the situation, the “Action” taken by the applicant, and the “Result” of those actions. This link describes the method in more detail: <https://careercenter.lehigh.edu/node/145>
- Applicants should attempt to be as succinct as possible when responding to questions.
- An applicant should be careful with the use of filler language and avoid “um” or starting every sentence with “so.”
- When responding to a question, applicants should endeavor to tie their skills and experiences to those being looked for in the job posting.
- Maintaining eye contact is an effective interview strategy.
- It is sometimes helpful to include a funny or charming anecdote to show an applicant's personality in the workplace and let the interviewers know you are human!

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- If an applicant is asked about a time something went wrong or failed, they should include what they learned from that experience in their answer and how those lessons will help them succeed in the position they are interviewing for.
- When answering the question, “Would you accept this position and why?” an applicant should be careful about how they respond – interviewers may not be convinced an applicant is the right fit if he or she hesitates or has clearly not thought through whether or not he or she can accept the position.
- In prepping for an interview, an applicant should take a video of himself or herself doing a mock interview. This will allow the applicant to identify mistakes and correct them in advance.
- Don’t Google answers during an interview – this can make the interviewer feel ignored and can make the applicant seem unprepared.

### Virtual Interviews

- In preparation for a virtual interview, applicants should have a hot spot available nearby in case of internet connectivity issues.
- If the interview is conducted via a webinar platform, have the call-in number on speed dial in case the connection is lost.
- Make sure to install the interview program prior to the interview and practice using it to troubleshoot any issues beforehand.
- Join the webinar early to troubleshoot any technical issues; however applicants should be careful about how early they join as they could inadvertently join the last part of another applicant’s interview.

### Tips for Interviewers

- Interviewers should set up different WebEx “rooms” or make use of WebEx’s “lobby” function to ensure applicants aren’t admitted to the interview before the interviewer is ready.
- Avoid the use of too many acronyms during an interview.

### Final Tips

- Even if an applicant doesn’t get the position, he or she should recognize it as a learning opportunity and a skill building exercise. Applicants are also encouraged to reach out to the interviewer(s) afterward to request feedback.