THE ULTIMATE BIG 4 INTERVIEW PREP GUIDE

ACE THE INTERVIEW FOR A HIGH-PAYING JOB.
Big 4 Interviews can be stressful, but if you prepare and practice enough, it will make it a much easier and relaxed experience. Big 4 firms are looking for polished, professional, and hardworking people to fill their slots for new hires.

The good news is that since there is so much turnover associated with the profession, there are a ton of spots to fill every year. This is encouraging for those looking for their first entry into one of the Big 4. However, it doesn’t mean that the company you interview for is not going to be selective as candidates are plentiful.

Always remember that the company is interviewing you because they see you as a solution to a problem. They need a capable and qualified person to perform Task A in the XYZ office. You want to be the answer to that problem. When you present yourself as a solution to the company’s need, you are putting yourself in a positive position.

Being prepared and confident is going to be the key to a successful interview. It is also important to note that it isn’t only going to be one interview that you go through, it will be a series of interviews until the company offers you a position.

Often, your first interview will be with a recruiter, usually at your campus. Recruiters take part in scheduled job fairs at colleges or make themselves available at selected times. These recruiters are the initial screening filters before you move on to your next interview, which might be with the recruiter again, or with personnel from the company itself.
It is not unusual that the only person in a hurry to get a position with a Big 4 company is you as you seek a position. Mentally prepare yourself for a marathon, not a sprint. You could very well go through several interviews with different people before the process concludes.

**THE FIRST-ROUND INTERVIEW** is commonly known as a “fit test.” If you applied directly to a Big 4, your resume goes through the initial screening process, and if they like it, you will be called to have an interview. This could happen at a company office or school with a recruiter from one of the Big 4. A recruiter could also be from an outside company that refers qualified candidates to one of the Big 4. Whoever you first talk to, the point is to be as prepared.

Here are some of the things that can help you during your initial interview to propel your name to the top of the prospect list. They are also good tips for any subsequent interviews you got through before receiving an offer.

**RESEARCH EVERYTHING ABOUT THE OFFICE**

Before you step into your interview, you have to do some of your most important work. There is the adage of the 7P’s: Proper Prior Planning Prevents Pitiful Poor Performance. To throw in another cliché, knowledge is power. By researching the firm, the office you want to work at, and how the company performs in the discipline you want (tax, audit, etc.), your interviewer will know you did your homework. It means a lot that you took the time to increase your knowledge of the firm, and it shows that you are someone who prepares themselves accordingly for whatever task is at hand.

Most firms have their office information online, and it would be a great resource to look up the office’s main clients and industries. Sometimes, they mention intramural or non-profits they participate in, and you could discuss how that interests you. I would do some googling and see if the office recently won any major clients. If you’re interested in a particular industry, explain why. This is especially important for offices heavy with financial service clients, healthcare, or nonprofits.

If you’ve done some networking in the industry, you have several people on the inside of the office interviewing you where you can ask information that isn’t online. Hopefully, you’ve already received a lot of information as part of the initial information request, but you can go to them with questions about the culture, clients, etc. of the company or office. They are likely to give you some great information that you can use. They may take a while to respond since we tend to stay busy.
to start talking for fear we will spill all over the floor. Go in, focus on each person asking questions, and simply answer them. Everything you want to say will be shared in the end.

**ALWAYS HAVE QUESTIONS PREPARED TO ASK AT THE END**

I missed this tip going through the interview process, and although I came out with an offer, you shouldn’t follow my example. Having questions at the end of the interview gives you an opportunity to display your personality, build rapport with the interviewer, and get them talking about themselves. Some questions you can ask are:

“Could you tell me a little about how long you’ve been with the firm and why you made the decision to go with XXX.”

“Have you had any interesting experiences with clients either good or bad?”

“Has the office had a lot of turnover in the past few years?”

The last question is something that you as an interviewer should care about. On our end, we hate hearing it because we have to tell you about how people quit because the work environment was terrible or that we laid some people off. Turnover is normal for the Big 4, and people often leave because of competitive offers. However, if there are a lot of people jumping ship, you might need to weigh that into your consideration of offices.

**SEND A THANK YOU E-MAIL AND CARD**

My strategy was always to send a thank you e-mail ASAP so that you stay at the top of the mind of the interviewer during the daily debrief (this usually occurs either the day of the interview or the next day). Then I would mail out a thank you card. Yes, an actual hand-written, physical thank you card that you put in a mailbox with a stamp. Doing something like this via snail mail is so rare, that you will stand out.

The message can be something simple like:

Dear ________________,

Thank you for taking the time to talk with me today. I learned a great deal about (company XYZ) and have even more motivation for wanting to join the firm. If you have any additional questions, feel free to contact me. I look forward to the next step of the interview process.

Sincerely,
First round interviews are generally one-on-one with either a recruiter or a manager. Depending on the person and the time slot, you could get someone who grills you with behavioral questions or someone who wants to discuss the campus, college football, or their good old days back in school. Hopefully, for your sake, it’s the latter, not the former.

In many cases, the representative will have printed copies of your resume, along with all the other candidates they’re interviewing that day. I think it would be wise to say something like

“I’m sure you have a copy my resume, but just in case I brought an extra copy.”

This way, you can hand them your resume on resume paper, so they know you mean business.
Walk me through your resume or Tell me a little about yourself/your background

Prepare for this question by going through your resume and looking at the items that you have identified as achievements or responsibilities. Try to think of specific examples of each. This is an ideal chance to provide the interviewer with an overview of your resume from your viewpoint.

“I’m a senior accounting major at XYZ. I will be graduating in the Spring of 2014 and currently hold a 3.5 GPA. I’ve been involved in on-campus activities as treasurer of my fraternity/sorority. I’m also on a committee within Beta Alpha Psi and volunteer at XYZ. Two summers ago, I had the opportunity to work as a camp counselor at XYZ, and last summer I worked as an accounting intern at XYZ. As a camp counselor, I was able to… (list 2 or 3 key areas) and in my accounting internship I… (list three things).”

Make sure to spend more time discussing things that are relevant (like accounting internships). This is a good time to jump into where you want to go from here:

“Since I’m graduating from XYZ next Spring, I plan to enroll in the Masters in Accounting at XYZ to fulfill the CPA exam requirements. I plan to intern in audit/tax next summer so that I can work full time after my graduation in the spring of 2019.”

It is important that the interviewer knows your graduation schedule, your plan to meet the CPA requirements if you aren’t doing grad school, and whether you are targeting audit or tax. I know some of you are hesitant to choose one because it is a big choice, but I think it is better to choose one and commit to it rather than saying you aren’t sure. For internships, it is less important as if you choose one and don’t like it, you can likely switch. If you’re going for a full time position but can’t choose, it makes things a little more difficult.

Why KPMG/Deloitte/PwC/E&Y?

There are a few good ways you can answer this, and you can use all of them. Discuss how you are interested in a Big 4 firm vs. smaller firms for the reasons below (applicable to all the Big 4):

“Your firm consistently tops the list in BusinessWeek’s best places to launch a career. The opportunity to work with high profile clients and key executives at an early point in my career. There is a ‘learning culture’ where questions are encouraged, and regular feedback provided (which is very true, I’ve found). You are constantly being challenged to perform at your highest, and you truly learn something every day.”

A second way to answer is to talk about the culture if you have met someone from the office. If you collected cards from ‘meet the firms,’ or other places, remember the representatives’ names and the topics you discussed. If you’ve visited the office on a prior occasion for a recruiting event or something, this is also helpful. Discuss how you believe you would mesh well with the office environment.