

# Keys to Successful Interviewing



WISCONSIN  
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CENTER

# Keys to Successful Interviewing

to help you unlock the doors in your job search

## CONTENTS

Plan and Prepare  
**page 2**

Present your Strengths  
**page 3**

Be Prepared for Questions  
**page 4**

Be Effective in your Follow Up  
**page 8**

Interviewing Do's and Don'ts  
**page 10-11**

Why Didn't I Get that Job?  
**page 12**

Keep Learning  
**page 14**

Interviewing Checklist  
**page 15**

An interview gives you the opportunity to showcase your qualifications to an employer, so it pays to be well prepared.

The employer is looking for what you can offer the company: your talents, your skills, your knowledge, your energy.

To interview effectively, you must communicate effectively using your words, tone of voice, and positive visual image. The employer will receive your message of confidence, credibility, trustworthiness, intelligence, experience and education levels appropriate for the job.

The information in this publication provides some helpful hints for interviewing success.



Feeling “locked out” of the job market? There are many key elements to a successful job search – research, resume writing, filling-out applications, interviewing and follow up. The job interview puts you on the spot to show your key strengths. Unlock the door to successful interviewing by following these keys:

- **Plan and prepare carefully**
- **Present your strengths clearly**
- **Be prepared for questions**
- **Be effective in your follow up**



## Plan and prepare

Learn about the company or organization that is interviewing you. The employer will be impressed that you took the time to research the company. It also saves the interviewer time in explaining the company history.

Find out all you can about the company. What does it make or do? How long has it been in business? What’s the market for its services or products? How stable is it? What qualities does it look for in its employees?

Answers to these and other questions may be available from company literature, your local library, business associations, local newspaper files, or employees of the company.

This is also your opportunity to screen the company’s potential as an employer. The first day or week on the job is not the time to learn of major drawbacks that will leave you unhappy with the choice you made.

You should also find out, if possible, the name of the person who will interview you. Then say it often enough to yourself that you will be able to remember it easily during the interview.

You should also know beforehand, if possible, whether the interviewer will be your boss, if you are hired.

One way to keep all this information together is to maintain a separate sheet on each company and position, noting the date, time and place of the scheduled interview. This could be followed by your research notes on the company, the questions you have about the company and the position for which you are applying.

Think about yourself — the kind of person you are, the things you are really interested in, the things you do well (and don’t do well), your past training and experience, your likes and dislikes, and your employment goals.

Get materials ready so that you will be prepared for the interview. Have a copy of your resume and your references. Make certain that you have prepared a few questions to ask the employer. If applicable, bring samples of your work, school transcripts or copies of letters of

recommendation. And, of course, be sure that you have the correct address and time of your appointment.

Dress and grooming are important and often critical factors in an employer's hiring decision.

Despite an apparent trend toward more freedom of expression in today's society, many employers have dress codes.

With most employers, first impressions still count. Poor personal appearance and careless dress at an interview are major factors leading to the rejection of applicants.

Here is a grooming checklist to use before job interviews:

- Hair should be neatly combed, or appropriately arranged.
- Be clean-shaven or trimmed.
- Avoid tobacco, alcohol and highly-spiced foods, such as onions or garlic, prior to your interview.
- Teeth should be brushed and breath fresh.
- Wear clean clothing.
- Clothes should be pressed and neat looking.
- Shoes should be shined.
- Face, hands and fingernails should be clean.

## Present your strengths

The most effective way to present your strengths at a job interview is to tell the employer what you can do for him/her and then prove what you can do by giving specific detailed examples of what you've done in your past. Here are the steps to developing strong answers that will convince the prospective employer that you're the right person for the job.

Think about which skills, abilities, experiences, training and attitudes the prospective employer

might want and need. Think about what you have to offer in terms of the employer's wants and needs. These are your strengths. Think about specific examples from your past experience that demonstrate your job-related strengths.

Provide examples about specific problems, challenges, situations or skills that prove your job-related abilities, attitudes and skills.

Include specific details about for whom, when, where, what, how, and why.

Use numbers to show the employer how much, how many, how often, how long, how fast, etc., if possible. Keep your examples brief (under a minute) and be sure they're related to the job.

Show results of your actions that benefited the employer.

Did you:

- Increase sales?
- Cut costs?
- Improve quality?
- Reduce production time?
- Improve customer satisfaction?
- Save money (etc.)?

Specific examples of what you've accomplished in the past will allow the employer to forecast what you might accomplish in the future. This is the key to presenting your strengths.

*To help in identify your important skills, ask your Wisconsin Job Center for the publication, "Employment Skills" (DETJ-9446-P).*



## Be prepared for questions

Questions you will be asked will vary from employer to employer. However, there are standard questions most interviewers ask.

Two open-ended questions employers often ask to get applicants talking are, “Tell me about yourself,” and “What can I do for you?” These questions may be difficult because they are so broad. Your job is to avoid the temptation to give a general answer. Instead, direct your reply to show the employer how you are qualified for the position. Focus your answer on strengths — personal skills and abilities — which relate directly to the job available.

Answer all questions briefly and to the point. Some questions may be discriminatory. However, you may want to answer them. Remember, you should always answer so that you present yourself in the best possible way. Always try to relate the questions to the job for which you are applying.

The best way to relax and build self-confidence is: practice, practice, practice!

### Frequently asked interviewing questions

**Q.** Tell me about yourself.

**A.** Indicate trustworthiness, stability, job-related interests and skills, as well as positive qualities.

**Q.** What are your future plans?

**A.** Express your desire to gain more on-the-job experience. Talk about wanting to become a valuable employee to the company. If you’ve heard that the company is good to work for, say so.

**Q.** Have you ever done this type of work before?

**A.** Never answer “no.” Mention similar types of tasks from past paid and unpaid experience, training or education. Talk about your ability to learn quickly or aptitude for the type of work.

**Q.** Why do you want to work here?

**A.** State your interest in the company and be positive in your response. Aspects to include are as follows:

- The good reputation of the company in the community.
- You would be proud to tell other people that you work here.
- Honest employer.
- Heard that the company appreciates good workers.
- Pleasant working conditions.

The important thing to mention is that you like this type of work and you feel that you can do a good job.

**Q.** What kind of machines, tools or equipment can you use?

**A.** Your answer should include all information on any machine related to the job and also any hobbies that require the kinds of skills you will need for this job. You should know the name of any type of equipment you have operated.

**Q.** Can you work under pressure and deadlines?

**A.** If the employer asks this question, it probably means that’s part of the job.

Your answer should assure the employer that you can work under pressure and deadlines. You should cite examples on previous jobs or related experience when it was necessary to work under such conditions. For instance, if you have ever worked in a restaurant, you can mention lunch hour pressures when you had to serve many customers in a short period of time. Assure the employer that you were always able to do the job without becoming agitated.

If you have been a student, you could mention that you often had to work under the pressure of completing reports by a certain time or while studying for and taking exams. Or if you worked at any type of production job, you can mention that you often had to fill an order in a short period of time or on short notice and that you were always able to put in the extra effort necessary to meet the deadline.

**Q.** Why did you leave your last job?

**A.** If it was a legitimate reason, be brief and factual. State that the company had a layoff and you didn't have enough seniority. Whatever the reason, a single explanation will do.

If it was an unsatisfactory reason (for example, you were fired), explain in a positive manner how the situation was or has been corrected.

Do not say negative things about your previous employer. Also, do not say you left your job because you didn't get along with your boss. The interviewer may do business with the other company and/or may have personal friends there. It is also too easy for an employer to assume that because you didn't get along with your previous boss, you won't get along with your new one.

Mention all good things about your last job even if you didn't like working there. If you say negative things about your last job, the interviewer might think you will tell people bad things about



this company too and not hire you for that reason.

**Q.** What was your employer's opinion about your work?

**A.** The best thing to do is provide a copy of an open letter of recommendation. If you don't have this letter, simply say that you always got along well with the employer and if contacted, you are sure a good recommendation would be given.

If you feel you would not get a good recommendation, be brief and positive explaining the reasons.

**Q.** What are your career objectives?

**A.** Indicate your desire to learn new things, gain more experience and increase your value to the company. If you know that this is the type of place which advances from within, state your desire to learn your job well and that you want eventually to achieve a position of higher responsibility within the company. If you don't know about the advancement policies, do not state a specific position you are hoping to advance to because the employer may think you will be dissatisfied with the position that is open. Instead, simply say that you hope to become the best person the company has in that area.

- Q.** How long do you plan to stay with this company?
- A.** Simply say that you are not planning on moving, getting married, having a baby, or going back to school, etc., and since you can't see any reason why you wouldn't stay with it for many years, you expect you would be very happy with this job.

- Q.** What are your salary requirements?
- A.** Depending on the job, your qualifications, and your self-confidence, either:
1. State that you feel whatever the employer suggests would be fair, if it is based on your experience, qualifications, and the company's set salary rate.
  2. Give the employer a salary range based on your qualifications, but make sure to let the interviewer know that it is flexible, depending on the duties and responsibilities of the job.
  3. Ask the employer what wage range was paid in the past for the position.

If possible, have the employer offer you the job before discussing wages. Be careful about mentioning a wage figure below or above the standard rate. If you mention a figure below the standard wage, you may wind up with less than you could have received. And, if you ask for more than a standard wage, you may not get the job.

- Q.** What is your greatest strength?
- A.** Mention something that is related to the job, and explain how it would be useful to the company. You want to present yourself as a good worker (being on time, efficient, organized, work until the job gets done, take pride in your job, etc.).
- Q.** What is your greatest weakness?
- A.** Turn a weakness into a strength. Examples: "I see a project through to

completion even though it requires working extra hours" or "I tend to be overly organized."

- Q.** How do you describe yourself?
- A.** Indicate positive attributes that the employer would want you to have. Examples: friendly, honest, punctual, efficient, organized, responsible, cooperative, hard-working, creative, dedicated, intelligent, energetic, cheerful. Never indicate anything negative.
- Q.** What do you know about our company?
- A.** Your answer should include information about the history of the company and the product(s) they produce or service(s) they provide. For information, check with the library reference desk or your Wisconsin Job Center.
- Q.** What have you been doing between jobs?
- A.** Express the constructive things you have done, such as schooling, volunteer work, and temporary employment. You need to leave the impression you have been active and not idle between jobs.
- Q.** How many days of work or school did you miss last year?
- A.** Attendance records are important to employers, so if you are uncertain about the exact number of days missed, give a conservative estimate. If you missed the days due to a certain illness, tell the employer that you have recovered and therefore it would not interfere with your employment. It is good if you can present a note from your physician that you are recovered.
- Q.** When are you available for work?
- A.** Express willingness to begin as soon as possible. If uncertain about whether you want to accept the position, establish a reasonable time to inform the employer of your decision.

- Q.** Why would we hire you instead of someone else?
- A.** Explain all the qualities you have that would make you an asset to the company. Examples include the following:

- Good attendance and punctuality
- Personal attributes, such as friendliness, honesty and efficiency
- Work qualifications and any additional skills you have
- Work fast with very few errors
- Get along well with supervisors
- Willingness to work extra hours

You may say you like this type of work, are good at it, and think you would work harder at it than other people would.

- Q.** Do you have any questions?
- A.** An interviewer will often ask if you have questions. Have some questions prepared before the interview. It's a good opportunity to clear up any details, gain insight into the company, and show your interest in the position and the company.

**Here are some examples of questions to ask during the interview:**

- Will I work alone or with other people?
- Who do I report to — directly and indirectly?
- What are the greatest challenges you think I may face in this company?
- What are the key tasks and responsibilities for this position?
- How does your company plan to grow / expand in the next few years?
- May I see the area where I would be working?
- May I speak with one or two employees?
- Why is this company a good place to work?
- Do you have any company literature I could take with me?
- Is there any probationary period?
- Who will evaluate my performance?

When? How?

- What can you tell me about the new products/services the company is planning to introduce?
- What is the company's position within the industry?
- What are the challenges this company / department are facing?
- Can you describe a typical work day?
- Where does the position fit into the organizational structure?
- How would you describe the working atmosphere of your company?
- What are some things you feel could be improved by the person you hire?
- Why have you gone outside the company to fill this position?
- Is this a new position?
- How would you characterize your leadership style?
- Could you describe how this job relates to the overall goals of the department and the company?
- What are some of the more important objectives that you would like to see accomplished on this job?
- Does your company encourage participation in community projects?
- Will there be overtime / travel?
- What benefits does the company offer?
- Do you have a bonus plan, stock options, profit sharing, expense accounts?
- What is the transfer policy within the company?
- What opportunities for professional development are offered?
- Why did the last person leave this job?
- What strengths or abilities would the ideal candidate for this position possess?
- Would you describe the job duties?
- How many people have held this position in the last two years?
- What kind of equipment, machines, tools will I be working with?
- Is there anything I can do or study to get a head start on learning this job?
- What hours will I be working if hired?
- What is the normal pay range for this position?

## To close the job interview

People remember what they see first and what they hear last.

- Do you feel I have the qualifications you are looking for?
- Is there any additional information you would like to know about me?
- Is there any area in which you feel I fall short of your requirements?
- When are you planning on making a hiring decision?
- Shake hands.
- Tell the employer you look forward to hearing from him/her.

## Close the interview positively.

Before the interview is over, let the interviewer know that you really want the job and that you have something to contribute.

Be sure the interviewer has a telephone number where you can be reached during the interviewer's business hours for at least the next few days. If you are currently employed, you may wish to set a time when you can call the interviewer back.

Sense when the interview is over and leave. Don't linger in the doorway with unnecessary questions.

## Be effective in your follow up

After you leave the interviewer's office, take a few minutes to mentally review and decide how you did. Review this pamphlet again, and decide what to do differently, if anything, in your next interview.

Also, mail a thank you note/letter to the employment interviewer as soon as possible after the job interview. The purpose of the note/letter is to restate your interest in the job. It also serves to remind the interviewer of you and to give the interviewer a positive impression.

The note/letter may be neatly typed or handwritten. It may be on note paper or personal stationery. Always address the note/letter to the person who interviewed you. Be sure to center the text on the paper, even if the note/letter is very brief.

If you have not heard from the interviewer after a reasonable time, check back to see if he or she has been unable to contact you.

Even if you don't get a job offer, let the company know you are still interested in working for them and that you would like to be considered for other job openings.

## Sample Thank You Note

July 21, 2009

Dear Mr. Jones,

Thank you for the opportunity to interview for the accounts payable/bookkeeping position.

I am very interested in the job and feel that I have the skills and qualifications you desire. I enjoyed meeting you and learning about your company, and I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Sincerely ...

# Sample Thank You Letter

1234 Fifth Avenue  
Luck, WI 54853  
715/555-6789

July 21, 2009

Mr. Bob Jones  
Black Company  
112 Oak Street  
Oakwood, WI 53711

Dear Mr. Jones,

I would like to reiterate my interest in the accounts payable/bookkeeper position which we discussed today. I was impressed with the varied duties of the job, the computerized bookkeeping equipment, opportunities for advancement and services the company offers.

I believe I have the necessary qualifications for the position. My five years book-keeping experience, combined with my accounting degree, make me a qualified candidate for the accounts payable/bookkeeping position at the Black Company.

Thank you for the consideration shown me today. It was a pleasure meeting you.

Sincerely,

[Substitute what impressed you about the job, the department, the company, etc.]

[You may note your: training and/or education; successful background in (field or expertise); particular interest, avocation in the service or product provided by the employer; personal attributes needed for the job]

## Interviewing Do's and Don'ts

Your actions, words and attitudes often influence the way other people think about you. What you do or don't do in the interview can make the difference in getting the job.

The following list of tips offers common sense guidelines for the interview and can also be used in other parts of your job search.

### Do:

1. Get information about the company/organization ahead of time.
2. Practice answering difficult, illegal, or "too personal" questions.
3. Get a good night's sleep the night before so you will be mentally alert for the interview.
4. Dress appropriately and appear well-groomed.
5. Have some money with you. You may need to make a phone call or buy some coffee.
6. Bring an extra resume, list of reference, small notebook and pen.
7. Arrive 10 to 15 minutes early to use the rest room, find offices, allow for unexpected traffic problems and to RELAX!
8. Treat all secretaries and receptionists politely — they are important allies.
9. Express enthusiasm. Smile and offer a firm handshake upon meeting the interviewer or other staff; speak clearly and directly, and vary the tone of your voice.
10. Remember and correctly pronounce the names of people you meet (or are speaking with over the phone).
11. Sit up straight, maintain good eye contact, lean slightly forward in your chair. Show a sincere and polite interest in the job as well as in the interviewer.
12. Answer interview questions completely.
13. Listen to the interviewer. This will avoid asking questions that have already been covered. Also, take time to clarify any questions you are asked that you don't understand.
14. Sell your qualifications rather than your need for a job.
15. Use "please" and "thank you" when appropriate. This courtesy should be extended also to anyone else involved in your job search.
16. Ask questions in the interview.
17. Indicate your interest in the job by saying, "I hope you will consider me for this job," or, "I am very interested in this position because ..."
18. Thank the interviewer when the interview is done.
19. Jot down your impressions (after you leave) of the interview and what you might do differently next time.
20. After the interview, make a follow-up phone call or send a thank you letter.





## Don't:

1. Bring relatives, friends or children.
2. Ask questions only about pay and benefits.
3. Act as if you have to have this job no matter what.
4. Interrupt. If you have questions or need clarification, wait for a logical break in the conversation to speak.
5. Bring up personal matters (personal problems, financial matters, health issues). Focus on your qualifications for the job.
6. Criticize former employers and co-workers.
7. Give petty excuses such as: "That work was too hard," or, "The people I worked with were not nice."
8. Lose sight of the effect you are having on the interviewer.
9. Chew gum, smoke, play with your hair, or constantly adjust your clothes. These actions are a definite distraction.
10. Read any papers or handle any item on the interviewer's desk.
11. Bring anything bulky to the interview such as: books, shopping bags or overly large briefcases.
12. Take notes during the interview without permission.

# Why didn't I get that job?

Often an employer will not notify you if you did not get the job, and you will be wondering what went wrong. Many employers often tell people that they “hired someone more qualified” and that may be the truth in some instances. But often this is just a statement used to conceal the real reason why you did not get the job.

Listed below are some reasons that you may want to review:

## Lack of preparation

- Did you do all your homework and find out all the information about the employer's business before the interview?
- Did you practice answers to questions the employer may ask?
- Did you talk too much — or too little?

## Employment history

- Was it truthful?
- Did you explain gaps in working?
- Is your resume current?
- Have you given work references which will support your work record?

## Background Education / Training Skills

- If you did not have the background the employer says is needed, have you had an adequate amount of education and on-the-job training that could have been presented?

## Salary

- Were you realistic?
- Did you show flexibility and the desire to “earn” promotions and raises?
- Did you consider any benefits such as insurance, company car, or schooling/training opportunities?

## Over-Qualified

- Did you express a definite interest in the company?
- Did you indicate specific skills that would apply to this position?
- Do you need to generalize your resume?

## Job Hopping

- Does your work record consist of many short-term jobs? (Exceptions may be summer/seasonal work between school terms.)

## Relocation

- Were you flexible and realistic? For instance, jobs in retailing and marketing often require frequent relocation.
- Did you indicate your willingness to travel, as needed?

## Long Unemployment History

- Did you work at odd jobs or short term jobs while you were searching for work? If so, list those jobs to indicate your willingness to work.

## Schooling

- Have you made a sincere attempt to continue education or diversify your knowledge?

- Did you indicate applicable training while you were working on your previous jobs?

### **Personality Conflict?**

- Did you take an instant dislike to the interviewer? (This may not be the place for you to work productively.)
- Did you indicate personality conflicts on previous jobs indicating a reluctance to work cooperatively?

### **Potential for Advancement**

- Did you emphasize that you are dependable, willing to work hard, and a long-term employee?

### **Interested**

- Did you ask intelligent, inquiring questions showing a genuine interest in the employer’s business?

### **Language**

- Did you use proper English?
- Did you speak clearly and present your answers concisely and completely?
- Did you avoid arguments?

### **Appearance**

- Did you look your best?
- Grooming and appropriate dress?

### **Punctual**

- Did you report to your interview on time — or before the scheduled time?
- If you were unavoidably detained, did you place a follow-up call with a reasonable explanation?

### **Stress**

- Did you leave your problems at home? (Conflicts with family, minor illnesses, transportation or financial problems.)
- Did you prepare for a possible “stress” interview where the employer deliberately tries to provoke your anger to judge your effectiveness in dealing with his/her clients or customers?

### **Courtesy**

- Did you remember your manners — please and thank-you?
- Did you send a follow-up “thank you for the interview” note?



## **Discrimination**

If you are not hired, you may believe it was because of employer discrimination. Certain types of discrimination are prohibited by various local, state and federal laws.

All employers in Wisconsin must comply with the state’s Fair Employment Law, which is administered by the State Equal Rights Division, 201 E. Washington Avenue, Madison, WI 53702, or 819 N. 6th Street, Milwaukee, WI 53203. That division has information which explains this law, and staff there can answer questions you may have.

## Keep Learning

Don't get discouraged if you are not hired after your first interview. It should have been a useful experience and can give you more confidence for your next interview — if you consider it a learning experience. Don't blame yourself. Realize that an employer's decision not to offer you a job does not mean you have been rejected as a person.

Don't forget.  
Getting a job is a full-time job.

Use the keys to successful interviewing to unlock the doors in your job search.



# Interviewing Checklist

## Preparation:

- Learn about the organization.
- Have a specific job or jobs in mind.
- Review your qualifications for the job.
- Prepare answers to broad questions about your self.
- Review your resume.
- Practice an interview with a friend or relative.
- Arrive before the scheduled time of your interview.

## Personal Appearance:

- Be well groomed.
- Dress appropriately.
- Do not chew gum or smoke.

## The Interview:

- Relax and answer each question concisely.
- Respond promptly.
- Use good manners. Learn the name of your interviewer and shake hands as you meet.
- Use proper English — avoid slang.
- Be cooperative and enthusiastic.
- Ask questions about the position and the organization.
- Thank the interviewer when you leave and, as a follow-up activity in writing.

## Test (if employer gives one):

- Listen closely to instructions.
- Read each question carefully.
- Write legibly and clearly.
- Budget your time wisely and don't dwell on one question.

## Information to Bring to an Interview:

- Social Security card.
- Government-issued identification (driver's license).
- Resume.

Although not all employers require applicants to bring a resume, you should be able to furnish the interviewer information about your education, training, and previous employment.

- References.

Employers typically require three references. Get permission before using anyone as a reference. Make sure they will give you a good reference. Try to avoid using relatives.

Keep a record of the expenses you encounter in your job hunt, since some may qualify for income tax deductions.

Contact federal and state tax officials for information on conditions and qualifications.

# WISCONSIN JOB CENTER



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[jobcenterofwisconsin@dwd.wi.gov](mailto:jobcenterofwisconsin@dwd.wi.gov)

Your Wisconsin Job Center features additional publications to guide you through interview situations

Informational Interviewing  
(DETJ-9407-P)

Hidden Elements of Interviewing  
(DETJ-9484-P)

Prove It!  
(DETJ-9526-P)

Publications are also available through Wisconsin Job Centers on these topics related to job search success

## RESUMES AND APPLICATIONS

Personal Data Record  
(DETJ-4937-P)

Thoughts on Resumes  
(DETJ-4658-P)

The Right Words to Use in Your Job Search  
(DETJ-9463-P)

## JOB SEARCH

Qualities and Employer Looks for When Hiring  
(DETJ-8459-P)

Networking  
(DETJ-9455-P)

Where to Look for Job Opportunities  
(DETJ-9467-P)

To obtain single copies of this publication, visit your nearest Wisconsin Job Center. For multiple copies of this or other Wisconsin Job Center publications, contact Document Sales at 1-800-DOC-SALE (Visa/MasterCard accepted).

We invite your comments. Send an e-mail message to:  
[jobcenterofwisconsin@dwd.wisconsin.gov](mailto:jobcenterofwisconsin@dwd.wisconsin.gov)

*The Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development (DWD) is an equal opportunity employer and service provider. If you have a disability and need to access this information in an alternate format or need it translated to another language, please contact the DWD Equal Employment Opportunities office (e-mail: [dwdeeo@dwd.wisconsin.gov](mailto:dwdeeo@dwd.wisconsin.gov)).*

DETJ-6951-P (R. 01/2010)

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**Toll Free Help Line 1-877 US-2JOBS (TTY 887/889-JOBS)**

*The Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development (DWD) is an equal opportunity employer and service provider. If you have a disability and need to access this information in an alternate format or need it translated to another language, please contact the DWD Equal Employment Opportunities office (e-mail: [dwdeeo@dwd.wisconsin.gov](mailto:dwdeeo@dwd.wisconsin.gov)).*