

Some thoughts on AEA interviews from John Burgess at Pricewaterhouse Coopers

The interviews will be 30 minutes long for each candidate. Each interview will involve perhaps 15 minutes in which the candidate can discuss his/her dissertation with the interviewers, but we're equally interested in whether they would be suited to working with non-specialist clients in a "transfer pricing" tax consulting environment. My sense is that this is different from an academic interview, since we're looking for somewhat different traits. This is definitely an interactive interview rather than a seminar presentation of research findings and interests. I'd come with a succinct overview of my research ready to present, and be ready for questions, but I'd be careful not to use up my interview in a discussion of technical minutia.

English language skills, interview skills, writing skills, ability to design, execute and explain simple and powerful research projects to non-economists are important. Ability to work in a team setting with strong personal skills is also important. Foreign language skills, industry background, finance, legal, software, and accounting expertise are also assets. We're interested in their career aspirations and in their overall professional and academic background. Organizational skills and ability to work well under budget and deadline pressure are also desirable.

Basically, with PwC, they would be working in small research teams on projects involving allocating the profitability of multinationals between the various countries in which they operate. We look at the detailed facts associated with the functions, risks and assets brought to bear on each side of an inter-company controlled transaction in order to determine how that transaction would have been conducted at arm's length. Each project typically involves a fact-gathering stage and an economic analysis stage. Newly hired people are trained in our special tools, techniques and regulatory environment in classroom and (mostly) on-the-job training in the context of stratified teams of 3-5 researchers working on any given assignment. We're hoping that PhD economists can bring their own research interests and perspective to bear once they have learned the basics of transfer pricing analysis.

Well, I hope this helps. The short answer to your question is that candidates should come prepared to discuss not only their research, but also why they would be suited to working in a private consulting environment, which has some overlap with academics, but also has some significant differences. Also, candidates should keep in mind that these are the initial screening interviews for our practice. We have openings for PhD economists in major cities across the country. For promising candidates, followup interviews in the cities where they might be located would follow over the next few months. Typically, followup interviews would consist of a series of interviews over the course of a full day with local partners and staff.

Some thoughts on AEA interviews from Tim Daniels at NERA:

NERA, like other employers, typically asks candidates about their dissertation research to get them talking on familiar terrain. But we also, like many employers I presume, seek to interject with questions in an effort to discern how fully the candidates have thought through the theory and the empirical methods used. We read the job papers pretty carefully in order to be prepared w/ questions such as -- what other implications might one take from your empirical results? How sensitive are the results (or how sensitive do you think they'd be) to a different measurement of X or Z? If we see anything potentially inconsistent in the paper we'll want to know whether we've misunderstood or if the candidate has yet to see the possible problem. The latter is clearly not a good outcome for the candidate. If empirical results are simply too good to be believed, we'll probe on that. And, finally, many of us like to scan the candidates CV for other projects/papers/experiences and then ask them what that's about, what hypotheses were tested and what empirical methods were used to test the hypotheses, etc.

I hope this helps. Nothing too earth-shattering I fear, but we are hunting for solid micro economists with good empirical skills who also can explain what they've done, why they've done it, and what the potential weaknesses of the analysis would be (and every analysis has its soft, but hopefully difficult to locate, underbelly.)

Some thoughts on flyouts from John Burgess at Pricewaterhouse Coopers

Generally, for followup interviews, each candidate will be visiting the local office where they will potentially be working. Usually, the office visit is a series of on-on-one interviews with partners, senior managers, managers, and perhaps senior research associates. HR may request writing samples. I'm not sure what the current policy on writing samples is, but you would think they would be relevant for PhD candidates. Each interviewer would certainly be looking at the candidate's vita, with a summary of dissertation research, and would probably have questions at some level about the candidate's research.

At the January screening interviews the candidates would have met with teams of PhD economists. At the followup interviews, a few of the interviewers are likely to be PhD economists themselves, but several (probably most) are likely to be attorneys, people with general finance or accounting backgrounds, or people with BS/MA level economics training. While they're not all economists, they are very knowledgeable in their fields, and pretty senior people in the practice. I hate to say it, but some may even tend to be skeptical of PhD economists! The candidate's mission is to win all of these people over, economists and non-economists.

It would be useful for the candidates to know who they are talking with in each interview, and adjust their interviews accordingly. One of the challenges for PhD candidates is always show they can communicate effectively with non-economists. Candidates should be ready for a simple, intuitive summary of their research, and be ready to expand on

it as requested by each interviewer. Highly technical and detailed answers may be great, within limits, for an interview with another economist, but may not be not with an attorney, an accountant or an MBA. Humility with enthusiasm are good traits, but keep it simple. It's always tough to convince the economists that you are a good researcher/technician and still convince the non-economists that you are someone they would like to have as a resource/team member.

Each person the candidate meets with will be looking at the candidate as a potential colleague for working on small team projects. Training/research skills, aptitude, communications skills, a positive work ethic and attitude for team-based research, and personal chemistry are what interviewers will be looking for.

The candidate usually goes out to lunch with a small group of research associates and perhaps senior associates at a local restaurant, but this isn't a seminar, just an opportunity for the staff to talk with the candidate in a group interview setting.

Usually, within a few days of the office visit, everyone has an opportunity to present their impressions and recommendations of the candidates in a group meeting where everyone compares notes, and a hiring decision is made.

Local offices might vary a bit. I'd have each candidate check with their contact at the local office where they'll be interviewing to make sure they aren't expected to present a seminar.