

## **Interview tips: How to prepare for an interview**

**Essential advice on getting ready for a job interview, polishing your technique and calming your interview nerves...**

### **What do I need to do before an interview?**

Give yourself plenty of time to:

- research the role and the organisation;
- think about how well your experience, interests and skills fit the job and the organisation;
- research current affairs and trends in your job sector
- find out what the prospective employer is actually looking for;
- anticipate questions you might be asked, then prepare answers to these questions;
- find out what form the interview will take, e.g. single, panel, group etc.

You should also:

- plan the day of the interview, especially your journey with an aim to arrive ten minutes early. Take money in case you need to take a taxi or bus unexpectedly; carry an A-Z street map or put the postcode of the organisation into Google maps on your mobile to prevent getting lost;
- decide what you will wear and set it out the night before. Suits and business wear are the best option with comfortable, polished shoes;
- get an early night - we all perform better when fully awake.

### **How do I make a good impression at a job interview?**

Stand out for all the right reasons by ensuring you:

- arrive on time or better still early;
- are organised. Take your application letter, CV and examples of work (if appropriate) with you;
- listen carefully to questions and answer them concisely;
- highlight your best attributes in the interview. Before you go, think about what you want the interviewer to know about you (in relation to the job) during the interviewing process;

- pay attention to the way you communicate. There's evidence to suggest that non-verbal communication overpowers verbal communication so if you describe yourself as confident and outgoing but speak inaudibly and avoid eye contact, the interviewer will read the latter as indicating a lack of confidence and disregard what you said about being confident;
- practise anything you're concerned about. This could be saying your answers aloud, which builds confidence in hearing yourself speak, or having a trial run of the journey to the interview.

## **What techniques can I use to control my nerves?**

In interviews, nerves can make you forget to do simple things such as smile and listen, which can result in being thought of as unfriendly or inattentive. You're more likely to be nervous if you're inadequately prepared so as well as following our advice above, you should:

- give yourself time to think about what unique qualities you will bring to the job/organisation;
- think of practical examples to demonstrate what you have achieved and draw upon all aspects of your working, educational and social life;
- write notes and take these along to the interview;
- use cues in your notes to highlight examples that you want to draw upon, such as 'cricket team', 'course representative', 'sales job';
- be aware of the structure of the interview. Interviews often begin with topics that are easier to answer because you need less time to think, such as 'tell us about your studies at university';
- pause before answering a difficult question in order to give yourself time to think;
- use positive language, as interviewers will be assessing your motivation and enthusiasm;
- ask for clarification if, at first, you're unsure of what the question means;
- breathe.

## **Where can I practise my interview skills?**

Your university careers and employability service is likely to provide practice interview sessions.

Alternatively, you could:

- practise your answers (to anticipated questions) with someone you trust and seek feedback but don't be overly self-critical;
- use non-job interviews as opportunities to practise and monitor your interview skills, e.g. discussions with your tutor, doctor etc.;
- ask for feedback and advice after unsuccessful interviews and take it as an opportunity to learn and improve;
- pay a private company to provide interview practice.

## **What should I take to a job interview?**

- In general you will not need more than your own letter of application and CV, the job specification/description and your own notes.
- Your invitation to interview should detail everything you need to bring. Often employers request examination certificates, which can take time to locate, so make sure you check what you need in plenty of time.
- You might wish to impress by reading up on the organisation's literature, e.g. a business plan or corporate social responsibility strategy, but make sure you have read it in depth and be prepared to share your views and ideas.
- A pen and notebook are always worth carrying with you and, if giving a presentation, take a copy on a data stick even if you have emailed it beforehand, along with copies of the slides to use as handouts for the interview panel.
- If you take a mobile phone, make sure it is switched to silent or off before entering the organisation.

## **What is a competency-based interview?**

This type of interview is one where the interviewer seeks evidence that you have the skills and experience required to do the job.

Interviews that take this form involve questions developed around the job and person specifications, so think carefully about examples from your own experience that match or complement these specifications.

Remember that you can use examples from contexts other than work, for example, you may never have worked in a team in the same type of organisation but you have participated in teams elsewhere.

It's important to show an ability or interest in being able to learn new skills; if you are asked about something that is outside your experience, describe a situation where you learned something new and suggest you can do so again.

## How do I prepare for a phone interview?

Phone interviews are most often used as a preliminary screen. When preparing for the interview it's important to consider:

- **tone of voice** - ensure you're enthusiastic and use positive language;
- **battery life** - if using your mobile charge it fully before the interview;
- **location** - find a quiet place for the interview, where you will be undisturbed by noise or others.

Phone interviews are often recorded so you may want to find out whether yours will be. It's important to pay particular attention to getting your key messages across quickly - write key attributes down and have this available during the phone call. Be willing to repeat these with the use of examples.

More recently, there has been an increase in Skype or video interviews. This is particularly likely if applying for jobs overseas or where key staff are located overseas.

Remember to dress as you would for a face-to-face interview and check what else will be in the shot with you before the interview begins.

Plan your answers to common interview questions

Questions are likely to cover:

- educational achievements;
- work experience;
- personal skills, such as leadership, teamwork;
- personal goals;
- understanding of the role;
- strengths;
- weaknesses.

They might be put as:

- What made you decide to study at university x?

- What did you find challenging about working as an x?
- Give us an example of how you worked effectively in a team.
- Where do you see yourself in five years' time?
- What would you bring to the role of x?
- Tell us about your proudest achievement.
- Do you envisage any difficulties in carrying out this role?

Don't assume that the interviewer has read your application carefully (there may have been many). Prepare your responses as if the interviewer knows little about you, but be prepared to justify anything you have put in your application.

## **What is a competency-based question?**

Competency-based interviews may include 'scenario' questions, where you are asked what you might do (or have done) in a given situation or scenario. Again, thinking in advance about your own experience is good preparation to respond well.

Here is an example of a required competency in a job specification:

Ability to motivate learning in lower primary age (KS1 and KS2) children.

In an interview, this might be put as:

- Can you give us an example of how you motivated children while on school placement? This question requires a skills and knowledge-based answer; or
- We have a small group of children in school whose ability to progress in KS2 English is significantly lower than the UK or local norms. What would you suggest could be done to raise their attainment? This question requires a scenario-based answer.

## **How do I answer challenging interview questions?**

Challenging questions are sometimes used to find out how you react under pressure. Any question can be challenging if you have not prepared for it so it's important to:

- prepare well for anticipated questions;
- admit you don't know the answer, rather than waffle or lie;
- provide balanced responses if the question seeks your views;
- give practical examples to illustrate your answer;

- be honest and avoid responding with something you think the interviewer might want to hear as you could get it wrong.

## **Can I refuse to answer personal questions?**

Yes. If you don't think a question is relevant to the job application, then you can refuse to answer. All candidates should be asked the same questions; it would be considered highly unethical for an interviewer to ask female candidates about how they manage childcare, but not to ask males.

Once the decision to offer a job has been made however, it might be in your interests to respond to a personal question if it relates directly to fulfillment of the role. For example, if you have disclosed a health consideration on an application form, it would be reasonable for an employer to ask for additional personal information in order to enable you to access the job safely.

The important distinction here is whether you have been offered the job. Personal information, such as family circumstances, sexual orientation, religious beliefs and health matters should be considered when job competency has been fully explored - and only if relevant to fulfillment of the role. This will often arise in a follow-up interview.

## **What are typical portfolio-based questions?**

Where you are asked to bring a portfolio of work to the interview, for example, in a creative/design job application, you are likely to be asked questions about:

- how you created the design/artefact;
- what/who inspired you;
- what commercial value the work has;
- whether the work has been patented;
- how you see the work being mass-produced;
- whether the work is the result of a collaboration with others.

## **What makes a good answer in a group interview?**

Group interviews are carried out by prospective employers to observe how candidates perform in a competitive group situation.

They take the form of:

- group discussions where candidates are given a topic to discuss or a task to complete; or
- questions that are put to the group by a questioner/group leader. There is often a note-taker or observer.

Group interviews are an opportunity for you to show your group or teamwork skills and:

- show your knowledge of a topic;
- demonstrate you can listen and understand the views of others;
- act as a leader by bringing all group participants into the conversation;
- intervene positively if a group member is dominant;
- summarise, build consensus and agree action.

Effective group working is a skilful activity and benefits from practice and feedback. Your university careers service may offer training in how to manage your contribution in groups.

Good answers include:

- I agree and would like to add that... (elaborate);
- Another approach would be to... (provide alternatives);
- We seem to be agreeing that we take the following action... (summarise);
- Does anyone want to add to this...? (include others).

## **What questions should I ask the interviewer?**

Asking questions shows you are interested in the job and it's a good idea to have two or three prepared in advance. For example:

- What kind of further training would be provided?
- Does the organisation have plans to develop in...?
- What is the proposed start date for the role?

If you have had all your prepared questions answered during the interview, then simply explain that and indicate you look forward to hearing the outcome.