

# Interviews

*How to prepare and present yourself in the best way possible.*

the  
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If you've been invited to an interview, you've already impressed at the application stage. Employers don't interview people unless they think they're a realistic candidate for the job. Be confident that you have the skills and experience to be successful, you just need to show it.

## What will I be asked?

Although it's unlikely you'll know exactly what questions will be asked, you can get a good idea if you understand the organisation and the role you're going for.

## Your motivation and understanding of the job

Some questions are likely to come up regardless of the type of job, for example 'why do you want this job?' and 'why do you want to work for this organisation?' Employers want to understand what motivates you and test how much you know about the job and organisation. What will the day to day tasks in the job be like? Who are their clients and competitors? What services or products do they offer? Think about the bigger picture and read around the sector trends and challenges.

## Your skills

The job description lists exactly what the employer is looking for, so by reading it carefully you can make an informed guess that you will be asked questions relating to these areas. If the job description mentions planning, communication and team working skills, make sure you prepare examples to demonstrate these skills (also called competencies). The concept of these competency based questions is that past performance is the best predictor of future performance; interviewers are seeking evidence and examples of what you have already done. Examples could come from work experience, your course and extra-curricular activities. See the box on this leaflet on the STAR technique for an effective way to structure these examples. You can find out more from the 'skills and competencies' leaflet.

## Practical considerations

- > Try to relax and be the best version of yourself. Look smart and professional. If you're not sure what to wear, it is safer to look a bit too formal.
- > First impressions are vital. The interview starts as soon as you enter the building, so be polite and professional from the start.
- > Pay attention! Answer the question they ask - not the one you wish they had asked.
- > Speak slowly and clearly. Ask for a moment if you need time to think.
- > Ask for clarification if you do not understand the question.
- > Don't give yes or no responses, but avoid giving unnecessary detail. The body language of the interviewer can often tell you whether you need to expand or bring that answer to a close.
- > Be truthful but positive. If you have to present negative information (e.g. a failure or a weakness), say how you learned from it or overcame it.

## HOW TO STRUCTURE ANSWERS

The STAR technique is a useful tool:

**SITUATION:** briefly outline the general circumstances leading up to your action.

**TASK:** explain what the specific task, problem or goal was.

**ACTION:** a step-by-step explanation of what you did (to show the skill you are giving evidence of).

**RESULT / REFLECTION:** outline the outcome to show your effectiveness in using that skill. Be specific.

As a rough guideline, 10% of your answer should be giving background information (situation and task), 80% for explaining what you did and 10% for the end result. In some cases, particularly for questions about where something went wrong, you could add reflection e.g. what you learned from the situation and what you would do differently next time.

## Strength-based interviews

Some large employers have switched to strength based interviews as they feel they are less formulaic than competency based interviews and let them see the real you.

### What to expect

Strengths-based interviews are so called because they aim to find out what comes naturally to you; what you do with ease and enthusiasm, rather than simply what you are able to do. In this type of interview, you are likely to be asked more questions about your motivations and your values.

You may be asked several follow up questions. This isn't a sign that your initial answer was lacking, the interviewer is just trying to see how you think on your feet and get to know you. There will still be questions where you'll be asked to give an example of when you've demonstrated a skill, and the STAR approach will be useful for these.

### How to prepare

If you are going to be asked about your strengths, it helps if you know what they are. Try asking yourself the following:

- > What activities energise me?
- > When do I feel most like myself?
- > What comes easily to me?

Also think about why you enjoy those types of work or activities, or why you think you are good at them. Improving your self awareness will help you perform better.

### What they are looking for

- > People whose strengths align with the job. They want to choose people who will be happy in the job, and feel comfortable and confident with the key skills required for it.
- > A good match between you and the company. They will be looking for people whose values match up with theirs and who they think will be comfortable with their way of working. Make sure you know what the company's values are and think about what they might actually mean in practice in the workplace.

## Telephone, Skype and video interviews

This form of interviewing is becoming much more common, as it is cost effective and saves travel time. Prepare as you would for a face-to-face interview – they will still want to know that you have the motivation and ability to do the job. However there are certain extra considerations:

- > Control your environment. Prevent any potential disturbances - warn the people you live with not to interrupt you and switch off any phones or alarms. For video or Skype interviews make sure there is enough lighting so they can see you clearly, and that the background is appropriate and gives a good impression. Check the angle of the camera, so you are in the middle of the screen and your eye contact is central.
- > Wear interview clothes as not only will you look professional, but it will help you feel professional.
- > Body language is still important. Even if the interviewer can't see you, sit up straight, smile and speak enthusiastically. Good posture will make it easier to breathe, which will help with nerves and make your voice sound clearer and more confident. Some people find standing up helps with this.
- > Check the technology in advance. If you don't use Skype regularly, try some practice conversations with friends. Consider using a microphone and / or headphones to help reduce 'fuzz'. If you experience technology problems during the interview let them know. Be honest about it and ask to rearrange.
- > Be ready! First impressions count. Warm up your voice before the interview time. Start the call in a professional manner and be prepared for either a serious question or small talk.
- > Memory aids (such as written notes for telephone interviews) – if used well, they can make your answers sound seamless and informed. However, used poorly, they can make your answers sound unnatural or result in long pauses or rustling sounds as you look through your papers.
- > If you are on the phone and have no visual clues, pause periodically to allow the interviewer to interject. This will help you gauge whether you have said too little or too much.

## What do good answers look like?

### **WHY DO YOU WANT THIS JOB?**

Here the recruiter is looking for your motivation and enthusiasm for the industry, company and role – i.e. what you will get out of it apart from the salary! They will also be checking that you have a realistic understanding of the job and organisation. The best answers will show how the skills you enjoy using align with the nature of the job, and how your goals align with the organisation's goals.

### **TELL ME ABOUT A SITUATION WHERE YOU HAD TO MANAGE MULTIPLE DEMANDING DEADLINES. HOW DID YOU MANAGE?**

This is an example of a competency based question where you are being evaluated against the skills the employer thinks are required for the job. Preparation is key to answering these questions well. Plan ahead and identify examples you can use for the skills that you may be asked about. When you talk through your example, use the Situation, Task, Action, Result (STAR) model outlined on this leaflet.

### **WHAT IS YOUR BIGGEST WEAKNESS?**

You need to demonstrate self awareness, so be honest and avoid clichéd answers such as 'I'm a perfectionist'. Admit a minor weakness such as being impatient or needing to be more assertive. Don't confess something that would majorly impact your ability to do the job. It is important to demonstrate how you overcome your weakness, so turn it into a positive by explaining how you manage it.

### **TELL ME ABOUT YOURSELF.**

Do not tell them your life story! Give a brief summary including recent experiences and major achievements. Make sure your answer is relevant to the job. The recruiter will be looking for what you can bring to the company. If you are not sure you have given enough information, ask them if they would like you to expand on any area.

### **WHAT DO YOU THINK ARE THE BIGGEST CHALLENGES FACING OUR ORGANISATION AT THE MOMENT?**

This is where you can demonstrate your knowledge of the organisation and its work. If you're going for a teaching job, you might talk about how exam reforms will challenge teachers and impact that school specifically. Prepare for this type of question by reading industry news and using events and networking to find out what people working in the area think.

### **CAN YOU TELL ME ABOUT A TIME YOU'VE WORKED EFFECTIVELY AS PART OF A TEAM?**

This is another competency based question. When you are choosing examples to use in answering these, try to use a mix of examples from work, volunteering, and academic work. When you're talking about teamwork, make sure that your answer is about what YOU did, and that you're not using 'we'. The recruiter is interested in what your contribution was, even if it was a team effort.

### **HOW MANY PIZZAS ARE DELIVERED IN LONDON EACH WEEK?**

Recruiters are interested in how you approach and solve problems, rather than a particular 'correct' answer. A simple start would be to estimate the population of London and assume that most people would order pizza once a month. You could improve this by breaking the population down into categories and estimating how often they might order it. They want to see that you can keep your cool and talk them through a logical thought process.

### **WHEN WERE YOU MOST ENGAGED WHILE AT UNIVERSITY?**

This is a strengths based question. Pick an activity or task which you enjoyed because it allowed you to use your strengths, and let your enthusiasm show. Use the STAR method to structure your answer, but make sure you explain why you found the task so engaging. If you were most engaged when analysing the results from a lab experiment, for example, you might say you relished the chance to use your analytical skills and make your own conclusions.

## Sample interview questions

### General

- > Tell me about yourself.
- > What are your key strengths?
- > Why should we employ you instead of someone else for this role?

### Motivation and values

- > Why do you want this job?
- > How does this job fit in with your longer term career plans?
- > What would be the main challenge you'd face if you got this job?

### Teamwork and interpersonal skills

- > Describe a situation where you had to deal with someone who didn't like you. How did you handle it?
- > What qualities do you have that make you an effective team member? Can you give me examples?
- > Please describe a situation in which you had to demonstrate sensitivity and tact.

### Prioritising and organising

- > Describe a situation in which a number of things had to be done at the same time. How did you handle it? What was the result?
- > Tell me about a situation in which you have had to make compromises in order to get something done by the deadline.

### Problem solving, analysis and creativity

- > Can you tell me about a time when you have had to make a decision with incomplete information?
- > Can you give me an example of a time when you found it hard to make a decision about something? Why was it difficult? What did you do?

### Drive and determination

- > Describe a task that you completed that you didn't enjoy. How did you motivate yourself?
- > Tell me about a situation in which you have had to cope with various setbacks.
- > Tell me about something you gave up on. What else could you have done to succeed?

### Adaptability and initiative

- > Describe a situation when you have taught yourself a new skill in order to complete a task.
- > Can you tell me about a time when you had to adapt to an unexpected change?
- > Can you give me an example of any tasks or projects you started on your own?

### Communication and negotiation

- > What is the most difficult thing you have had to explain to someone? How did you do it?
- > Tell me about when you have persuaded someone to change their mind about something.

### Commercial awareness and customer focus

- > Can you give me an example of when you have done more than your duty in order to provide a good service to someone?
- > Are there things that our competitors are doing that we should be worried about?
- > What are the most important issues facing this sector in the next five years?

### Leadership

- > Describe a situation in which you took responsibility for achieving something.
- > How do you get the best out of people?
- > How would you describe your leadership style? Can you give me an example of it in practice?