

Interview tips

Types of interview

The interview is a core part of the recruitment process for all organisations and is a two-way exchange between you and each interviewer. Interviewers assess your suitability for the role by asking questions which give you the opportunity to demonstrate your abilities and personality. In turn you can ask questions of your interviewers and assess whether the organisation and job is the right match for you.

Interview format

Informal interviews are often used as the first part of a multi-stage recruitment process. For less senior jobs this may be the only selection method used. The format tends to be a general chat about you and your interests. Be aware that it is still an assessment of you. In structured interviews, all candidates are asked the same set of questions in a structured format. Typically they begin with a brief chronological review of your overall career to date.

- Competency/criteria-based interviews - these are structured to reflect the competencies or qualities required by the job. The interviewers are looking for evidence of your skills and abilities and expect you to support your answers with examples of your experience from your life to date.
- Technical interviews - if you have applied for a job that requires technical knowledge, it is likely that you will be asked technical questions or have a separate technical interview. Questions may focus on your final year project or on real or hypothetical technical problems. Don't worry if you don't know the exact answer - interviewers are interested in your thought process and logic.
- Portfolio-based interviews - if the role is within the creative, media or communications sectors, you may be asked to bring a portfolio of your work to the interview and to have an in-depth discussion about the pieces you have chosen to include.
- Case study interviews - in these you may be presented with a hypothetical or real business problem. You will be evaluated on your analysis of the problem, how you identify the key issues, how you pursue a particular line of thinking and how you organise your thoughts.

Specific types of interview

Some recruiters use a single interview to decide whether to hire you. Many will use a sequence of interviews to inform their decision. In sequential interviews you will be interviewed by a number of different interviewers or panels in turn. You may find that the questions asked get more difficult each time. Alternatively you may be interviewed by a more senior member of the organisation each time or be asked about a different set of competencies. Answer every question fully even if you feel you have been asked it previously.

- Face-to-face interviews - this is the most common method. One interviewer or two or a panel of interviewers will conduct the interview. The one-to-one method is the least preferred due to ethical issues around equality and transparency but is sometimes used for informal pre-screening interviews as part of a multi-stage recruitment process. Two person interviews ideally have an interviewer of each gender. Panel interviews generally contain a spread of gender and expertise and are often chaired by the person to whom you will report, should you get the job.
- Group interviews - several candidates are present and will be asked questions in turn by two or more interviewers. A group discussion around a specific topic may be encouraged and you may be invited to put questions to the other candidates and/or to the panel.
- Telephone interviews - telephone interviews are increasingly used by companies as part of the recruitment process, often at an early stage of selection, especially by overseas recruiters. Prepare in the same way that you would for a face-to-face interview. Make sure you choose a suitable time and date, in a place where you will be free to chat in a quiet place without any interruptions. Make sure your mobile is charged if you are using it. Remember to keep any necessary documents, like your CV and the job advert, to hand throughout the phone call.

Professionalism

Employers are noting your level of professionalism at each stage of the recruitment process. Use a formal style for every communication whether it's an email, letter or telephone call. It is courteous to respond in a timely manner to offers of an interview and job offers, even if you have decided not to accept. Even more importantly, demonstrating total professionalism leaves the employer with a good memory of you - essential should you decide to apply for any future position with them.

Preparing yourself

Before the interview find out:

- Where will it be held?
- How long will it last?
- What format will it take?
- Will there be any tests or group exercises?
- Do I need to bring or prepare anything specific?

The interview invitation is likely to provide you with the above information. If not then call the organisation and ask for it.

Ensure that you check the date and time of your interview. Figure out how you will get to the venue and how long the journey takes, especially if you are using public transport. Check for any planned disruptions to road or public transport services and aim to arrive early, rather than rushing in late. This is especially important for assessment centres, where the day runs to a tight schedule.

What to take

On the day, make sure you have the interview invitation letter and a copy of your CV, cover letter and application form if you used one. You will need notes of the key points you want to make and the questions you want to ask during the interview. Take some cash in case you need to get a taxi at the last minute or some other unforeseen expenditure.

What to wear

Decide on your outfit well in advance; ideally it should be a suit or equivalent business wear. Ensure it is ironed and ready to wear. Have a second outfit as a back-up and ensure your shoes are clean. Personal grooming is essential and you should avoid wearing overpowering fragrance. It is probably best to avoid alcohol the night before the interview and smokers should resist the temptation to have a cigarette on the way to or while waiting for an interview.

Personal safety

Give someone all the details of where you are going and when you expect to return. In the unlikely event that you are invited to a private residence bring someone with you and have them wait for you outside the venue.

Knowledge about yourself

If you are being interviewed for a job that was advertised, use the job description as a guideline as to what you'll be asked about in terms of your personality, skills, work experience and qualifications. Other candidates may have similar abilities, employment and academic experience to you. Think about how you might distinguish yourself. It is possible to highlight all of your strengths without sounding over-confident or aggressive.

Knowledge about the job

Know everything you can about the job on offer including the job and/or person specification. Search the web for profiles of employees who hold the same or similar roles and read the relevant occupational profiles in [types of jobs](#).

Knowledge about the organisation

Research your prospective employer organisation. Employers will expect that you will have at least researched their website, their recruitment information and their annual report(s). Do more than this - search for media articles about it and consult [job sectors](#) for an overview of a range of employment sectors.

Current affairs/commercial awareness

Expect to be questioned about current affairs, about how they currently impact upon the sector in which the organisation operates and what developments are likely to impact on the organisation's future.

Disability

If you have a disability, check the physical access to the premises. Let the employer know in advance if you need any additional support in order to fulfil the requirements of the interview or assessment centre. If you do not need any special arrangements, you may choose not to disclose your disability. For help and advice on when and how to disclose a disability, you can contact [SKILL \(National Bureau for Students with Disabilities\)](#) or go to [equal opportunities - disability](#).

Psychological preparation

Remember that the interviewer wants every candidate to be a great one. Remember also these key points:

- get a good night's sleep the night before;
- eat properly and drink plenty of water on the day;

- practise breathing deeply;
- think positive thoughts;
- remember that, if properly harnessed, nerves can sharpen your performance.

Making an impression

First impressions really do count. If you get an interview you can assume that your potential employers already like what they have seen. The interview is an opportunity for you to build on that impression to secure the job.

It's not just what you say but how you say it that reinforces the message you are giving and creates an overall impression of your suitability. Here are some tips for making a good initial impression:

- arrive on time - ideally at least ten minutes early which will give you time to relax and collect your thoughts. If you are unexpectedly delayed, contact your prospective employer as soon as possible to explain the situation;
- when you arrive you will meet a receptionist or someone appointed to receive you. State, in a clear and friendly manner, your name, the time of your appointment and the name of the person you expect to meet;
- have all the relevant documentation ready to present if needed: your interview invitation and a copy of your CV and cover letter or application form;
- switch your mobile phone off before you enter the interview room.

Once the interview commences you will continue to make a positive impression if you:

- listen carefully to each question and give concise answers supported with relevant examples; avoid saying just yes or no;
- ask for clarification if a question is not clear;
- speak clearly and loudly enough for the interviewer to hear and try to keep to a moderate pace;
- stay as relaxed as possible. Prepare techniques in advance that will help to offset any nervousness. This might be simply repeating a silent mantra such as 'relax' or whatever works for you and also taking a deep breath before you start to answer a question.

Body language

- Be aware of the effects of your body language and how to use it to your advantage.
- Give each interviewer a firm handshake at the beginning and end of the interview.
- Keep a relaxed but alert posture and a friendly expression. This will indicate a positive approach on your part. Be conscious of maintaining good posture throughout the interview as you may find that when an interview is going well you tend to slouch into a casual pose.
- Maintain good eye contact. If there is more than one interviewer, look at the person asking the question when you reply but glance at the other interviewers from time to time.
- Most interviewers need to make notes as you are speaking so that they will remember key things about you when making their selection decision. Showing that you are distracted by it will have a negative effect so stay focused.
- You may find that you fidget when you are nervous and/or wave your hands a lot when speaking. This can be distracting to the interviewer and take away from your performance. Develop a technique that will help you to control the movement whilst still appearing natural and relaxed.

Interview questions

Their questions

Imagine that you are the interviewer. Think of every question you would ask to find out if a candidate was the best person for the job. Try to cover all aspects of the job and/or person specification that has been provided. If you've been granted an interview on the back of a speculative application then try to anticipate the questions that might be relevant.

Prepare your answers but avoid sounding as if you have rehearsed them. Ask your careers adviser for a mock interview.

Most interviews will contain questions about your competencies and skills, personality, interests and values. Interviewers will expect you to support your answers with evidence from your life to date. A useful strategy for providing that evidence and for answering competency-based questions concisely is to use the STAR technique:

- Situation - briefly describe the where/when/who;
- Task - outline the task or objective (what you hoped to achieve).
- Action - describe what you did - focus on your role and your input.
- Result - what the outcome was and what skills you developed.

Develop a range of examples of numerous competencies, using the above format. Draw from all aspects of your

life. Store them safely and update your examples as you go through your career.

Challenging questions

Think of all the questions you would least like to be asked. Is there a gap in your CV? Have you had some poor academic results? Were you ever fired? Prepare an answer to each one. Answer as honestly as you can, without being defensive or blaming anyone. Try to turn your answer into a positive statement with a successful outcome. Show how you overcame any difficulty and what you learned from it.

Sometimes you may wonder if a question has been designed to antagonise you. Questions such as this are designed to test your emotional intelligence, i.e. will you just react or provide a calm and insightful response?

Finally, if you are asked a question that you feel you can't answer ask to return to it later and, if still unable to attempt it then, say so.

Personal questions

Recruiters must not discriminate on grounds of gender, race, religion, sexual orientation, age or disability. If you feel uncomfortable about any question then say so. If you feel unsafe or very uneasy, end the interview politely and leave. If you feel that you have been discriminated against, or that your personal safety has been compromised, discuss this with your careers adviser as soon as possible. See [equal opportunities](#) for further advice.

Your questions

Have a list of questions in mind to ask. You may feel that all your questions have been answered at some point during the interview but try to ask some, if only to show enthusiasm and interest.

These might include questions concerning progression opportunities, support for further study or any plans that the company has to expand. Avoid asking questions for the sake of it or asking very basic questions that you should already know the answer to.

Ending positively

If the interviewer does not tell you, at the end of the interview ask when you should expect to hear news of their selection decision and, if you are successful, what the next stage of the process will be. End the interview on a positive note. Thank the interviewer and reiterate your enthusiasm for the job for which you have applied.

Interview problems

Not getting interviews

If you have been applying for jobs for which you meet the minimum criteria but are not being asked to interview it is probably time to take a critical look at your CV and application forms. Make an appointment with your careers adviser to review and improve them. You may also find it useful to look at [job application advice](#) and [CVs and covering letters](#).

Ask yourself: Am I demonstrating in my applications that I know what the company does, what its products are, what the job is about and how my skills, experience and personality relate to what the job and the organisation require? The written application you send is all the employer has to inform them when making a decision about who to short-list for interview.

Do not send the same generic covering letter and CV to a multitude of jobs. Tailor both your letter and CV to each specific job application.

If you are applying for popular graduate training schemes which have only a few places on offer then think about other routes into the organisation, such as a very junior position, to gain experience. You could also consider work shadowing.

When you make speculative applications, make sure you follow up your initial enquiry. Call them within a few days to ensure they have received your application. If they do not offer you even an informal interview, try to negotiate a short meeting with them at a time convenient to them. You will know by their tone if it is time to thank them and put down the phone or whether a bit of charm and persuasion will get you a foot in the door to chat.

Not getting past interviews and assessment centres

Stay positive!

If you are not successful in progressing to another round of selection, or in being offered a job, it is not necessarily an indicator that you have performed poorly. It is merely that the employer has deemed that another candidate or candidate(s) are a better fit for the organisation than you.

Get feedback

It is best practice for organisations to give you feedback on your interview and assessment centre performance. If they do not do this automatically then call and ask for it. Discuss any information they give you with your

careers adviser and consider what action you might take to improve your performance in the future.

Review

After interviews and assessment centres, along with the interviewers' feedback, it's important for you to conduct your own critical review on how things went. You can really learn from the experience and build on it for the next occasion. Make notes on how you think you performed, asking yourself questions such as:

- Was I as prepared as I could have been?
- Did I demonstrate my interest, enthusiasm and a positive demeanour?
- Did I articulate my personal skills, strengths and abilities clearly?
- Was I able to relate my previous experience to the position for which I was being interviewed or assessed?
- Did I provide concrete examples of my skills and experience and did I avoid generalising?
- Did I under-sell myself by using 'only' in my examples? E.g. 'Yes, I've worked as part of a team, but I was only a waitress and it was only a part-time job.'
- Was I able to show the interviewers how much I wanted the job?
- Did I demonstrate a good knowledge of the organisation and the position?
- Which elements of the assessment centre did I do well on and which did not go so well?
- Was I as well presented as I could have been?
- Did my body language or nervousness detract from my performance?
- Would more coaching and more work on practice tests improve my performance in the future?

Job offers

What constitutes an offer

You are likely to receive your offer initially by telephone. This should be followed by a formal written offer letter inviting you to accept the job which contains the following information:

- your name and the name of the employing organisation;
- the date of the offer;
- the job title and department or location;
- the salary;
- the period of notice required for either party to end the contract;
- your start date.

It may also include your full conditions of employment including:

- hours of work;
- holiday entitlement;
- other information, e.g. details of pension scheme, bonuses, salary reviews, other benefits such as a company car, medical schemes, employee handbook;
- details of the any probationary period.

The offer may be contingent upon the following:

- acceptance of the offer by a given date;
- completion of a medical examination;
- proof of a specific class of degree;
- positive feedback from your referees;
- police vetting or clearance.

Keep your letter safely - it forms one half of your employment contract. Seek clarification if there is anything you do not understand or that you think has been omitted. If you have concerns about any aspect of the job offer, discuss it with your careers adviser.

Making a decision

To evaluate whether an offer is right for you, or to decide between multiple offers, you need to consider a variety of factors including: the job itself, the organisation, the location, the working conditions, the salary, training and career development, and your own values and needs. Compiling a list of weighted pros and cons can help you make your choice.

Remember:

- when jobs are in short supply it may be that you will opt for a 'good-enough-for-now' job in order to earn money and gain experience;
- few people find their ideal job, at least not initially;
- every job can open unexpected doors into other career options and provide you with a valuable network of contacts as well as new skills;
- if you find that the job doesn't suit you, discuss the issue with your immediate supervisor or the HR

department to try and resolve it. If it cannot be resolved you can leave giving the appropriate period of notice. It is in no one's interest for you to stick with a job that you are really unhappy in.

Accepting an offer

If you decide to accept an offer, telephone the employer to state your initial acceptance and follow with a reply in writing by the deadline given or on the next working day. There may be a form or a copy of the letter included with your offer that you just need to sign and return. If not, address your acceptance to the person who wrote the offer letter, stating that you agree to the terms and conditions of employment outlined. Your reply constitutes the other half of your contract of employment so keep a copy and store it safely with the offer letter.

When your offer of employment is confirmed, i.e. no longer conditional, you should immediately decline all other job offers or invitations to interview and withdraw any outstanding applications.

Declining an offer

Think very carefully before deciding to reject an offer. Respond in writing to the person who sent you the offer, thanking them and outlining your reasons for declining it, if you feel happy to disclose these.

Send your response as soon as possible so that the employer has time to offer the job to an alternative candidate. Such an approach will reflect well on you, especially if you decide to seek employment with the organisation again in the future.



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