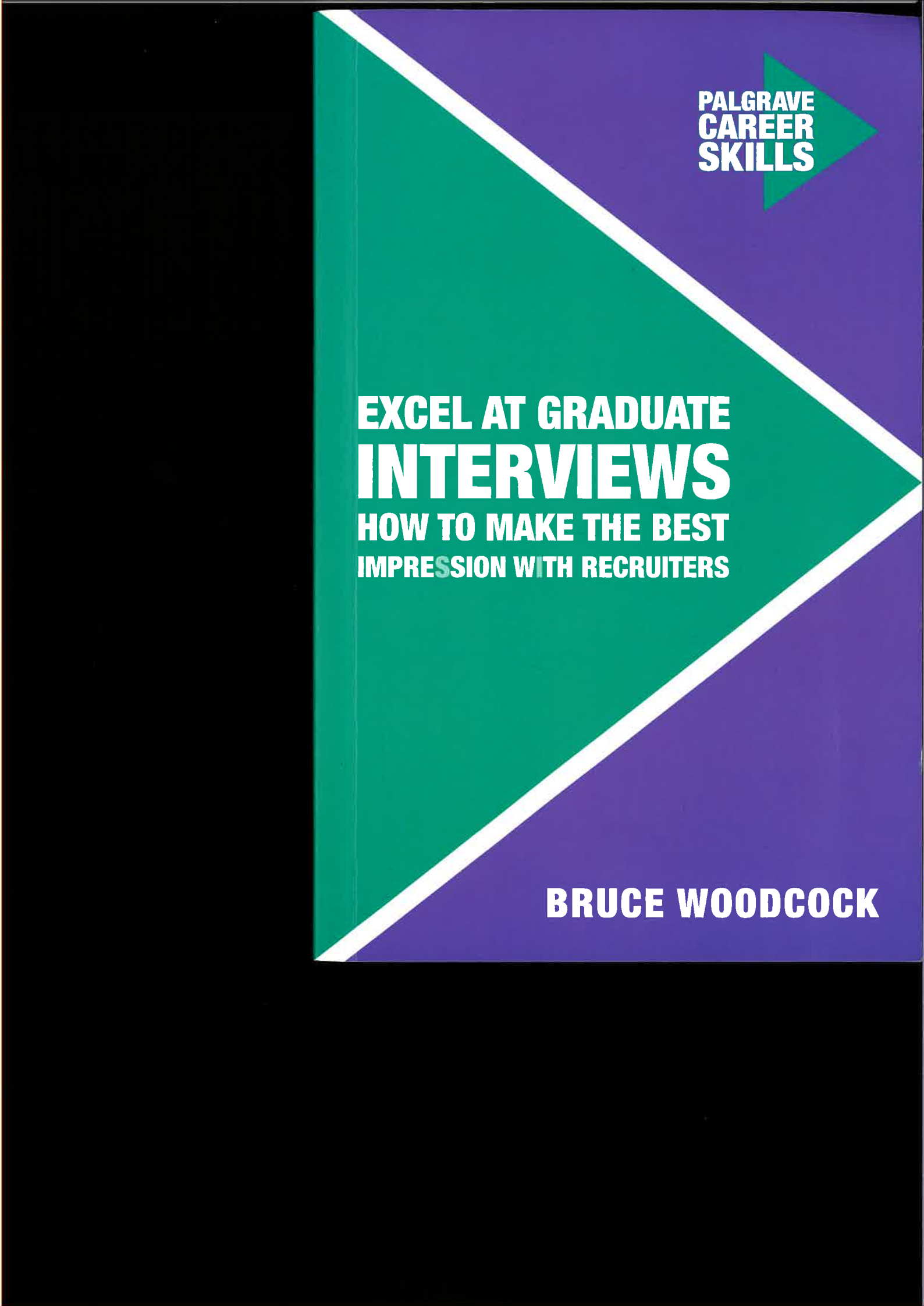




**PALGRAVE
CAREER
SKILLS**

**EXCEL AT GRADUATE
INTERVIEWS**
**HOW TO MAKE THE BEST
IMPRESSION WITH RECRUITERS**

BRUCE WOODCOCK

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Preparing for the interview

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- Analyse the job description and person specification
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- Check your social media presence before interview
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What you will learn in this chapter

- How preparation makes the difference between success and failure
- How to research the job, organization and sector and how to predict interview questions from the job description
- What questions to ask at the end of the interview and why this is important
- How to identify your unique selling points
- How to manage your social media presence to provide a professional image

If you have been called for an interview, you are already halfway to your objective of getting a job offer. It shows that the employer is seriously interested in you and that your application is on the right lines. Employers only shortlist a handful of candidates, so you should congratulate yourself on getting this far.

Failure to prepare is to prepare to fail

You won't get far trying to sink an unsharpened axe into a tree trunk, nor will you be successful at interviews without careful preparation. There are no short cuts! To make a change in any part of your

life, you must commit the time to do so. The most important factor determining success at interview is good preparation. Most interviews are lost before the interviewee even enters the room. An interview is a game where you know most of the rules and must play by them.

'Give me six hours to chop down a tree, and I will spend the first four sharpening the axe.'

Abraham Lincoln

Research, research, research!

One interviewee asked the interviewer, 'By the way, what is the name of this company?'

Insight from a student

One graduate was invited to interview for an internal audit position with an accountancy firm. Although she had an A Level in mathematics, her degree was in English literature, and she didn't feel she would have much chance of success against the business graduates she would be competing against at interview. She felt her best strategy was to find out as much as possible from the Web about the firm, accountancy and particularly what internal audit involved.

A few days later she got a phone call offering her the job. At the interview she had been asked to explain what she knew about internal audit, and she had managed to talk at length about it. When she was offered the post, she was told that none of the other candidates had known much about internal audit. The interviewers had been impressed with her research, especially as it was unrelated to her degree.

An employer may spend up to £100,000 in recruiting a graduate, training the person and paying his or her salary for their first three years. Graduates are seen as the future management of organizations, the clean slate on which the company ethos can be imprinted. No organization will risk this amount of time and money on graduates who don't know what the job involves,

whether they have the right attributes and if they will be comfortable with the training required, because these graduates might drop out if they find they aren't suitable. This is why the employer will look for evidence of careful research.

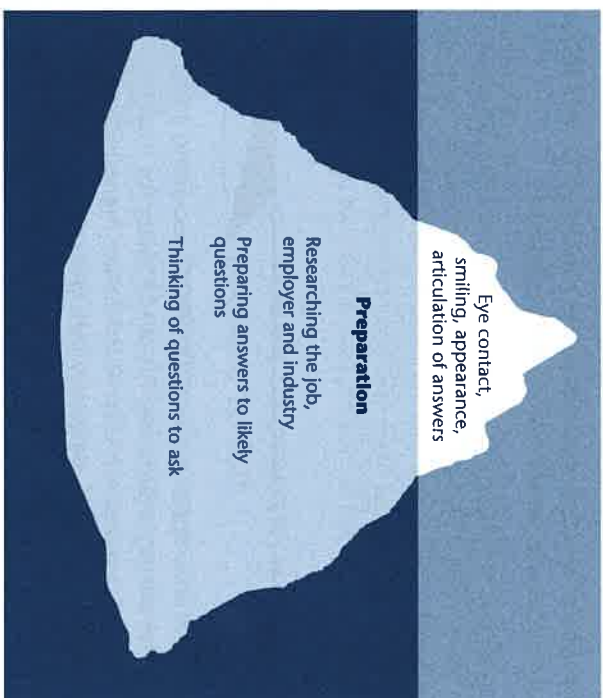
Employer story

One company director said that nine students had applied for a post he had on offer, but he had rejected every single one of them as not one had taken the trouble to take a detailed look at the company's website. When he asked, 'What does our company do?' and 'What are our main products?', none could give a coherent answer. He decided that all future applicants would be required to apply via the company website, so at least they would be forced to take some notice of it.

Research the job and organization

Most interview success comes from what can't be seen during the interview. Like an iceberg, it's the hidden part which has the most impact: the preparation you do beforehand.

The interview iceberg



You must show an interest in the organization and the wider environment in which it operates as you will be asked about this. Teachers need to be aware of current educational trends, journalists must know of the developments in web journalism and social workers have to be aware of the latest government initiatives.

'I find that the harder I work, the more luck I seem to have.'

Thomas Jefferson

Carefully read the organization's website. Try to find out how many people work for the organization. Research its turnover and profits, share price and products or services. Find out who the organization's competitors are: you may be asked to name these and to say which ones you've applied to. Organizations are reassured if you are applying to their competitors – if you haven't applied to any, it suggests a lack of career focus.

Relate your own experience to the organization you are applying to. You may be working in a shop just to earn money, but this can give you an insight into business. What are the good and bad points about this employer? If you were a manager, how could you improve the company?

Tips from an employer

- Thoroughly research the company and the market that it's in. Find out who's interviewing you and his or her remit within the company, and then tailor your preparation for this audience.
- Thoroughly prepare for the usual competency-based questions. Ensure you have at least two to three good examples for each competency, and practise your answers out loud.
- Have some intelligent questions prepared to ask during (or at the end of) the interview.

Parvinder Matharu, Managing Director of Newton Recruitment

Employers will test your knowledge by asking questions like these:

- Why are you applying for this job?
- Why do you want to work for us?
- What do you know about our organization?
- What do you think the job you would be doing entails?
- What skills do you think are required to do this job?
- Why do you wish to enter this industry?
- What are our main products and services?
- What are the problems facing our company at this time?
- What changes have there been in the industry recently?
- Where do you see yourself in five years' time?
- What skills did you gain from your work experience?

One interviewee recited the history of the company from its beginning but got several facts completely wrong.

Use Glasdoor, The JobCrowd and other websites to find out about the experiences of other students who've had interviews. Just enter 'Interview feedback for ... company'. If it's a large organization, you may find lots of feedback, including the questions asked and any tests or group exercises given.

Tips from Rebecca, a biology graduate

Prepare thoroughly – as the application form was not very long, the interviewer picked up on every little thing I'd written, so make sure you know your form well and can expand on the points you made. She began by asking me to tell her about myself and what I'd done, and this actually took up much of the interview. Always make sure you do research on the company on why you want to join them, as this is usually one of the first questions. Show eagerness and enthusiasm when you answer questions. Keep smiling, even when you are under pressure – show that you can handle it. You'll certainly be nervous, but once the interview starts, it just flows by. The emphasis is on getting to know the real you, rather than just ticking boxes.

Rebecca, applying for accountancy role

Analyse the job description and person specification

To persuade the interviewer that you are the right candidate, you have to understand the employer's needs, to see things from the company's perspective and to gather the evidence to prove your case. The best way to do this is to analyse the **job description** and the **person specification**.

The job description

Job descriptions are written statements of the duties, responsibilities, working conditions, qualifications, knowledge and skills required to perform effectively in a specific job. They are based on a job analysis in which the tasks, knowledge and skills needed for the role are examined.

Exercise: Detecting interview questions from the job description

As a customer support analyst, you provide customers with phone and face-to-face support and resolve queries.

The role involves

- providing first-line support to customers and staff;
- participating in the training of new staff; and
- ensuring smooth implementation of processes.

You must be someone who

- enjoys working in a team;
- can work to tight deadlines;
- has initiative/flexibility to react to changing circumstances;
- has strong organizational skills;
- has strong customer service skills;
- has strong communication skills, both written and verbal;
- has excellent problem-solving abilities;
- has good time management skills: can handle multiple tasks; and
- is proficient in Microsoft Office, including Excel and Word.

Highlight key words above which describe the main activities and skills required

If you were the interviewer, what questions might you ask based on the skills and activities you've highlighted? Write these down.

A student's story

A few years ago a health authority interviewed eight graduates for their management training scheme, but only one of these was put forward to the final assessment centre. The student selected had an average academic record and, although pleasant, didn't seem to have any attributes that the other candidates didn't also possess. At the end of the day, I asked the interviewer why this person had been selected. She said it was quite simple. He had, on his own initiative, arranged and spent a day at a hospital shadowing a senior manager, finding out as much as he could about what the job involved. His knowledge of the Health Service, how it worked and the skills required was far better than that of any of the other candidates she had seen, and his initiative and motivation had greatly impressed her.

The person specification

The person specification indicates the employer's needs and is usually included within the job description. Person specifications are used in large organizations with big HR departments such as multinational companies and public sector employers: local authorities, hospitals, universities and the Civil Service. They are normally shorter than the job description, and you probably won't get a person specification if the company is small.

If you are sent a person specification, the interview will be structured around it. It is commonly divided into essential and desirable characteristics. Study it carefully and think of evidence you could provide to show you meet these characteristics.

The interviewer will have a form with all the criteria listed and a list of questions based on these criteria. Each interviewee will be asked the same questions, and answers will be scored depending on how well they fit the criteria. This is called a competency-based interview (see Chapter 4, 'How to STAR at competency questions').

Exercise: Relating the person specification with what you have to offer

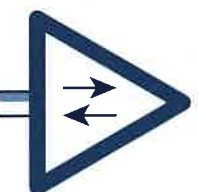
Experience and Knowledge	Essential	Desirable
Experience of prioritizing competing demands	✓	
Experience of working in a customer service environment		✓
Knowledge of Microsoft Office	✓	
Skills and Abilities		
Able to achieve targets within agreed time scales	✓	
Able to work autonomously and in a team	✓	
Numerate, with excellent IT skills		✓
Ability to adapt to changing priorities	✓	

Look at the specification and write down questions that the interviewer might ask you. Think of examples to show how you've gained relevant experience. Are there any areas where you might be weak?

Prepare questions to ask the interviewer

At the end of the interview you'll normally be asked if you have any questions. The interview is a two-way process, and you are selecting the organization just as much as they are selecting you. The interview is a conversation which you are partly in control of, and asking questions will help you appear to be an assertive, confident candidate. You are in a position of power, as the employer is relying on you to provide the information needed.

You don't necessarily have to wait until the end of the interview to ask questions. Sometimes the opportunity to ask a question arises naturally in the course of the interview, and if so, take it.



An interview is a two-way process

I have known occasions where the interviewer has suddenly switched from asking the candidate questions to telling the candidate how good the company is compared to its competitors. This may mean that they've identified you as an outstanding candidate who is likely to get offers from competitor companies, and so they are trying to secure you.

One interviewee asked, 'Would it be a problem if I'm angry most of the time?' Perhaps not, if you wish to work as a debt collector!

Sensible interviewers treat interviews as a meeting of equals. They treat all interviewees with respect and aren't overly formal or serious. They sell their company to the interviewee by setting a positive example of the company culture. If this is good, people want to work for the company. These interviewers will get many applicants and easily retain staff. Interviewers who practise old-fashioned stress interviews put candidates on the defensive and turn off the most talented candidates, who will join friendlier organizations.

Why must you ask questions?

This is your chance to find out more about the job and the company so you have the information to decide whether to accept the job. If you don't ask questions, the interviewer may suspect that you lack interest in the job; you lack curiosity, initiative or self-confidence; or that you just haven't done any research. Not asking questions or asking poor questions may be sufficient reason for the interviewer to fail you.

Another interviewee asked, 'Do I have to dress for the next interview?' I think she meant 'dress smartly'!

If you really feel that the interviewer has answered all of your questions, you could say that you've carried out careful research and that all of your questions have been answered by the company website, but it still sounds weak: 'I was going to ask about the training I'd get, but you've answered all the questions I prepared.'

You could ask the interviewer about his or her own experience of working for the organization, as this can't have been answered beforehand and people like talking about themselves. You can also use this time to mention anything important that hasn't come up in the interview. Or, 'Is there anything else you would like to know about me?' or, 'I'd like to say that now I've found out more, I'm really interested in this job.'

Think of the questions you wish to ask well before the interview. The interview isn't a memory test: it's fine to write down the questions you wish to ask, but don't write them in a large notebook you have to rummage in your bag to find. Instead write them on a piece of card that will fit in your pocket. Have a number of questions written down, even if you only intend to ask a couple, as some of your questions might be answered in the interview.

Tips from an employer

It has been said that interviewers only ask the question 'Do you have any questions?' because it would be impolite not to, after grilling you with questions for the last 40 minutes, but we disagree. Even if that were true and until that point your interview had not gone as well as you would have liked, this is your one chance to potentially change the course and success of your interview by turning it on its head.

Can you imagine yourself in an interview for the job you really want, competing against many others? If you are the only one who has prepared a written list of questions that don't just relate to what is already on the website, what is the crucial message you are sending out? *I want this job and I've worked for this. I am organized, well informed, interested in your company, and I come prepared for my meetings.*

Be cautious, though. Interviews normally have a set time allocated. If you were to try to ask all of these questions, your interviewer would become agitated and cut the meeting short.

Grovelands Recruitment

What questions should you ask?

Good questions are on training and career development; bad ones are those answered by the employer's website or ones on salary, holidays, perks, flexible hours and pensions, as these suggest that you are only interested in the job because of the benefits. If the salary hasn't been specified, it's okay to ask about this, but you must ask other questions as well. Questions that show evidence of careful research are also good: *'I see that last year you opened a new factory; how is this affecting your production?'*

The best questions are those that you really want to know the answer to. If you really do want the job, these should be easy to formulate based on your research and will show you have a good insight into the job and organization. Make sure you've researched the employer carefully so that you are not asking about things you would be expected to know.

Questions not to ask

Don't ask questions just for the sake of it. Here are some embarrassing questions asked by interviewees:

- What is it that you people do in this company?
- Why aren't you in a more interesting business?
- Would the company be willing to lower my pay?
- What is your zodiac sign?
- Will you pay to relocate my horse?
- Does your health insurance cover pets?
- Do you have a policy regarding concealed weapons?
- I know this is off the subject, but will you marry me?
- Why am I here?

How many questions should you ask?

Interviewers only have limited time available for you to ask questions at the end of the interview, so don't outstay your welcome by asking too many; you are the interviewee, not the interviewer. Asking too many questions can annoy the interviewer if he or she is behind schedule and other interviewees are waiting. If you know that your

interview should end at 3 p.m. and it's already after that time, only ask one or two questions. Watch the interviewer for signs of encouragement or impatience; if the interviewer is gently snoring, then perhaps you've asked one question too many!

Two or three questions are about right for a graduate job. The more senior the post, the more questions you would be expected to ask. If you are offered the job, you can always ask more questions at this point.

Some questions you could ask the interviewer

- Please tell me about your training programme?
- What support would I get for professional development?
- How does the company promote personal development?
- Where would I be located?
- How often would my performance be appraised, and what criteria would you use to measure performance?
- What are the duties and responsibilities?
- What would be the main priorities in my first year?
- What kind of career paths have other graduates taken?
- How do you see this role developing?
- What is the turnover of graduates?
- How much say would I have in setting my targets?
- How much discretion would there be for me to make my own decisions?
- When would I be given responsibility?
- Will there be travel involved?
- Would there be opportunities for using my language skills?
- How would you describe the working atmosphere?
- What is your personal experience of working for this organization?
- How would you see the company developing in future?
- What are the long-term objectives of the organization?
- How much do people socialize together outside of work?
- What is the corporate culture, the way of doing things?
- Have you any reservations about my application and if so what are these?
- How is the economic climate affecting your business?
- What are the biggest challenges affecting the organization at the moment?

Exercise: Write down some questions to ask

Now show your questions to a friend to get his or her views on how good they are.

Identify your unique selling points (USPs)

Your unique selling points (or USPs for short) are strengths you convey during the interview to make you stand out from other interviewees. These could be an excellent academic record, evidence of key skills required in the job or relevant work experience. They are the attributes that make you an attractive applicant.

You are marketing yourself to the employer in the same way you would sell a car. You would emphasize its good points and play down the bad ones. You would not advertise it as 'Four wheels and an engine'; instead, you would say, 'One careful owner, low mileage and a new set of tyres.'

Use every opportunity in the interview to put across your USPs. If the interviewer asks you questions such as 'What are your strengths?', 'Why should we take you rather than other candidates?', 'How would your best friend describe you?' or 'Tell me about yourself?', or at the end of the interview asks you, 'Is there anything we haven't covered?', it's an ideal opportunity to mention your USPs.

Listing your USPs will boost your confidence. After all, if you can't convince yourself you can do the job, you won't convince the interviewer.

Some example USPs

- Getting a First in your exams (academic study)
- A high mark for a group project (teamwork and organizing skills)
- Duke of Edinburgh Award (determination)
- Captaining a sports team (leadership)
- Raising £300 for charity (community involvement)
- A summer job in a shop where you developed strong communication skills

- Working in a part-time job while studying (time management)
- Starting in a school play (coping with pressure)
- Language skills or ability to work across cultures (multicultural awareness)
- Travelling to the United States on your own to work as a summer camp counsellor (independence)

One way to get your USPs across is called the **elevator pitch**. Imagine you were in an elevator with the managing director and you had just the 30 seconds' ride to the top to sell yourself to her, how would you do this? For example,

'Hi I'm Vivian Choi a final-year student studying history at the University of York. I achieved 67 per cent in my exams last year and have a strong interest in marketing, having done several modules and a project on this. I have extensive experience of customer service in which I found myself good at negotiating with and persuading customers. During my degree, I successfully combined my studies with work and other commitments, showing myself to be self-motivated and well organized. I show pride in all the work I do, work well under pressure and love a challenge. I have a drive to see things through to completion, and I try to learn something new from every experience because I believe there is always room for self-improvement.'

Preparing your elevator pitch can be useful at the start of the interview if the interviewer asks you to talk about yourself, but it can also be used to introduce yourself in a professional manner at careers fairs, employer presentations and similar circumstances.

Exercise: Write your own elevator pitch

Think back through your life and focus on times when you've done things you are proud of, where you've learned a lot or developed relevant skills. Make a list of these points you would like to get across during an interview.

When you've written your pitch, practise it on a friend or family member to get feedback.

Check your social media presence before interview

For many students, the Internet is their main way of finding a job and a well-developed online presence through blogging, social media and networking can demonstrate that you have the desired skills and knowledge. It's especially important for business communications careers such as marketing, advertising, PR and the media. Social media is now an important communication platform, and many employers now use it to check candidates for suitability, particularly via LinkedIn.

Facebook is like a fridge. You know there is nothing new inside, but you check it every 10 minutes.

You must manage your online presence and pay attention to privacy settings on your social media accounts. Google yourself to see if anything inappropriate comes up and also what is positive about you. Employers have rejected candidates because of what they found online, so protect your online reputation. Take ownership of your Web presence by limiting who can post to your profile and by monitoring posts in which you've been tagged. Think twice before you post: if you wouldn't want your parents to see it, then don't put it on your social media.

By developing your personal brand, you can accomplish the following:

- Increase your employability
- Establish a strong, professional social media presence
- Display your proactive nature
- Get noticed by potential employers
- Develop important relationships
- Protect your online privacy

LinkedIn is a business-orientated social networking site with 15 million users in the United Kingdom, and students are the fastest growing group. It is the top social media site for job-hunting so it's well worth putting your professional profile on LinkedIn (this is basically a cut-down CV without personal details such as address and age). Make sure your page sells you and mentions your career goals. It provides opportunities to network online with professionals; there are groups

for different regions and also institutions such as universities. Put a professional photo in your profile, as people are four times more likely to connect to you if they can see your picture.

One interviewee was asked, 'Do you post about work on Facebook?'

Many employers use **Facebook** to promote their brand and graduate programmes and to allow candidates to network with graduates and recruitment staff. You can pick up useful tips on the company and their recruitment processes that help you appear well informed. Set your Facebook privacy to high, so pictures of drunken nights out aren't visible, and make sure that your profile picture looks professional. Smile a little in your picture: research^[1] found that people with positive expressions such as upturned eyebrows or a smile, are more likely to be seen as trustworthy.

Twitter can follow companies, brands and issues. Recruiters make much use of Twitter, dispersing information about their organizations and posting vacancies. You don't have to tweet yourself: you can just follow companies, brands, people or issues of interest; get a feel for current issues; and retweet their tweets. You can use your own tweets to show your interest in a career by tweeting about current issues in the sector you wish to work in. Your Twitter bio should include your degree and some relevant skills – all in 140 characters.

Writing a blog can show your writing skills and knowledge of a particular field, and other sites such as YouTube (for video CVs), Google+ and Viadeo can be useful.

Be wary of identity theft

When posting to your social media sites or replying to a job advert, if you have any doubts about the validity of the organization, be careful about what information you give. The following are not needed by employers and could lead to identity theft, so don't include them:

- Date of birth. Because of equal opportunity legislation, you don't have to disclose your age on a CV, but if you wish to do so, just give your year of birth.

- Place of birth
- Marital status
- Copies of birth certificate/passport or bank details

Compile your pre-interview checklist

A few days before your interview

- ☐ Carefully research the career area, job sector and employer.
- ☐ If there is a job description and person specification, read these carefully as questions are often based on these. Prepare examples of how your skills match those listed.
- ☐ Reread your CV or application form (which you've kept a copy of) from the perspective of the interviewer, and try to anticipate questions he or she might ask. Think about any problems the interviewer may focus on and how you could deal with these. Put yourself in the interviewer's shoes and think of what you would want to ask.
- ☐ Prepare answers to the obvious questions, such as '*Why do you want this job?*' You can probably anticipate 80 per cent of the questions you will be asked with careful research and by using sites such as Glassdoor. Don't learn your answers by heart as you'd sound stilted in the interview, but do write down in bullet points the key points in your answers. This will help you to memorize them so your responses become automatic. Practise speaking your answers out loud to see how they sound.
- ☐ Prepare questions to ask, and write these down on a small piece of card to take with you.
- ☐ Check the location of the interview, and print off maps.
- ☐ Plan your route carefully, leaving plenty of spare time in case of traffic jams or delayed trains.
- ☐ Check train times and buy rail tickets.
- ☐ Get your hair cut.
- ☐ Choose your outfit and iron it.
- ☐ If you have a disability which may make the interview harder for you, tell the employer so appropriate adjustments can be made.
- ☐ Carefully research the job, employer and sector.
- ☐ Read your application form or CV again with a highlighter pen, and identify questions that might be asked.

- ☐ If you know the name of your interviewer, check his or her profile on LinkedIn.
- ☐ Make sure that your social media presence doesn't show you in a bad light.
- ☐ Try a practice interview with a friend.
- ☐ Don't take qualifications, awards and other records of achievement. Certificates are only asked for when an offer of employment has been made. For creative jobs, such as graphic design, architecture and journalism, interviewers may want to see a portfolio of your work.

The evening before

- ☐ Put your list of USPs and questions to ask in your pocket.
- ☐ Pack a copy of your CV/application form to refer to before the interview and a copy of your CV for the interviewer if it might be needed.
- ☐ Charge your phone, and enter the number of the employer so you can ring for directions or inform the interviewer of delays.
- ☐ Take a pen and notepad, money for a taxi, handkerchief and perhaps a small bottle of water, but not unnecessary clutter.
- ☐ Take a smart briefcase or bag if needed, but not your battered old rucksack.
- ☐ Check travel times again.
- ☐ Exercise releases endorphins and relieves stress, helping you to sleep, but coffee or alcohol may hinder sleep.
- ☐ Don't spend too long doing last-minute revision – better to relax and have a clear head.
- ☐ Set your alarm and get an early night.

On the day of the interview

- ☐ Eating breakfast will increase your energy levels.
- ☐ Don't drink lots of liquid: you don't want to need the toilet during the interview.
- ☐ Check the weather forecast, and take a coat and umbrella if necessary.
- ☐ Check for any train delays or traffic problems on your route.

Finding out more

On the Web

- **Glassdoor** www.glassdoor.co.uk – excellent website with interview processes and questions for many companies
- **TheJobCrowd** www.thejobcrowd.com – interview tips for lots of organizations.

Reference

- 1 E Hehman, JF Ale and J Freeman, 'Static and dynamic facial cues differentially affect the consistency of social evaluations' (2015, August), *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 41(8), 1123–34.

Further reading

S Rook, *The Graduate Career Guidebook: Advice for Students and Graduates on Careers Options, Jobs, Volunteering, Applications, Interviews and Self-employment* (Palgrave Study Skills, Palgrave, 2013).