



Guide to Passing Interviews

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Preparation for your 1st Interview

Besides reading through this pack, it is incredibly important that you do plenty of research and preparation before every interview you have. Probably the largest contributor to a candidate we put forward failing an interview is down to their lack of effort beforehand, which quickly becomes evident when they step in the interview room.

Why Good Preparation is so important

- It proves to a potential employer you are genuinely interested in them
- It is the first illustration to an employer that you are professional, committed, hard working and thorough in your work.
- It will help you stand out against the competition
- Knowing you are well prepared will give you the confidence to stay calm and perform in the interview

“What should I research?”

Using the information we give you, the company’s website and the internet, make sure you can answer the following questions.

1. What is the name of the company I am interviewing with, my interviewer (and their job title)?
2. Where is the location of the office and do they have offices anywhere else?
3. When was the company established/how long has it been going for?
4. What sector(s) does the company exist in?
5. Who are their main competitors?
6. What is the company’s USP – unique selling point?
7. Why in particular do you want to work for this specific company?
8. Sell this company to me in two lines.

On the day

Dress

Dress in a smart business suit with a clean, ironed shirt and tie (or blouse) and dark shoes. Do not wear casual clothes even if you know that it is company policy, unless WE tell you THEY have asked you to dress otherwise. Keep it simple, wear a white shirt with a plain tie to avoid judgements from the fashion police! Keep your Jacket on during the interview, unless offered otherwise

Ensure that you know the following things

- The time of your interview
- The location of the interview (PLEASE print a map)
- Know your route and how long it will take to get there. (allowing for delays)
- Who do you need to ask for (ask us for pronunciation of their name if necessary)

The Perfect First Impression – The Golden Rules

- Arrive a few minutes early. Being late is inexcusable, but being more than 20 minutes early is just weird!
- Fill out any application forms neatly and completely.
- Be polite - Greet the interviewer by his or her title and surname.
- Shake hands firmly.
- Wait until you are offered a chair before sitting. Sit upright in your chair and look alert and interested at all times.
- Maintain a positive body image (don't cross your legs, fold your arms, shuffle your feet, fiddle, pick stuff etc.)
- Be as charismatic as possible; it is very important that you demonstrate your interpersonal skills during the interview.
- BE a good listener as well as a good talker. – Follow their leads, and mirror them where possible.
- Smile.
- Look the interviewer in the eye

What not to do (unless you want to be unemployed)

- DON'T smoke before an interview, you will smell like an ashtray!
- DON'T lie.
- DON'T answer questions with a simple 'yes' or 'no' – explain yourself.
- DON'T make derogatory remarks about your present or former employers.
- DON'T 'over answer' questions, or make the same point 3 times – if an interview hints for you to wrap it up – Take the hint.
- DON'T argue with your interviewer.
- DON'T enquire about salary, holidays, bonuses etc. at the initial interview unless you are positive that the interviewer wants to hire you

The 1st Interview

The first interview is extremely important. It is your chance to make a strong first impression on your potential employer, and an opportunity for each side to learn more about each other, and if there is enough synergy to move forward to a 2nd interview.

A good first interview should last anything from 45minutes upwards, and normally consists of

1. A set of questions on your experience and CV
2. Your knowledge of their industry, their company and the role
3. Some questions on your motivations, ambitions and interests
4. The employer selling you their opportunity
5. Your questions
6. Close!!!

Remember

Make sure that your good points get across to the interviewer in a concise, factual and sincere manner. Waffle will get you nowhere. Bear in mind that only you can sell yourself and make the interviewer aware of the benefits that you can offer to the organisation.

Always conduct yourself as if you are determined to get the job you are discussing. Never close the door on opportunity. It is better to be in a position where you can choose from a number of offers - rather than only one.

Also make sure you can provide examples of your skills, preferably in a work related capacity, if not think of other examples where you have handled objections, questioned effectively etc. Again offer these examples as they show that you have a good understanding of what skills and activities make you perfect for the role.

1. Your experience - selling yourself

Q: Tell me about yourself. The interviewer is really saying "I want to hear you talk."

A: This is a loosener, but is a common question so your response can stay the same. Write a script and rehearse it so that it sounds impromptu. Spend a maximum of 4 minutes describing your qualifications, career history and your range of skills - emphasising those skills relevant to the job on offer.

Q: What have your achievements been to date? The interviewer is saying, "Are you an achiever?"

A: Again, this is a common question so be prepared. Select an achievement that is work-related and fairly recent. Identify the skills you used and the achievement and quantify the benefit. For example, "my greatest achievement has been bringing on X amount of business for a client that then generated Y amount of revenue"

Q: Are you happy with your career to date? The interviewer is really asking about your self-esteem and self-confidence, your career aspirations and whether you are a happy, positive person.

A: The answer must be 'yes' but if you have hit a career plateau or you feel you are moving too slowly, then you must qualify the answer.

Q: What do you like about your present job? The interviewer is trying to ascertain whether you will enjoy what the role entails.

A: This is a straightforward question. All you have to make sure is that your 'likes' correspond to skills etc required in the job on offer. Be positive, describe your job as interesting and diverse but do not overdo it — after all, you are leaving!

Q: What do you dislike about your present job? The interviewer is trying to find out whether the job on offer has responsibilities you will dislike or which will make you unsuitable.

A: Be careful with this one! Do not be too specific as you may draw attention to weaknesses, which will leave you open to further problems. One approach is to choose a characteristic of your present company such as its size / slow decision making etc. Give your answer with the air of someone who takes problems and frustrations in your stride and as part of the job!

Q: Why do you want to leave your current employer? The interviewer is trying to understand and evaluate your motives for moving.

A: This should be straight forward. State how you are looking for more challenge, responsibility, experience and a change of environment. NEVER be negative in your reasons for leaving, and rarely will it be appropriate to cite salary as the primary motivator.

2. Your Knowledge

Firstly you will need to provide good evidence that you have really given this role/industry as a career some real thought. This could involve;

- Researching the job title/description
- Speaking to friends in that industry/sector
- Researching on the web e.g. company website(s), related news
- Browsing various related industry websites

3. Your drivers, motivators and ambitions

Throughout your interview your interviewer will be looking for you to qualify why you have chosen to follow your particular career path, and what you are looking to get out of it in the short, medium and long term. They are doing this for 2 major reasons;

1. Are your career motivations aligned with what they want in their new employee?
2. How much value are you willing and able to add to their business if they give you the opportunity to join them? (This includes management potential etc.)

Important - Expect to face these questions at every interview stage, and many senior decision makers your meet will base their final decision on you on these particular answers (as their focus is more strategic and long-term than a team leader).

Q: What are your strengths? OR what can you bring to this organisation? (Same question) The interviewer wants a straightforward answer as to what you are good at and how it is going to add value.

A: This is one question that you know you are going to get so there is no excuse for being unprepared. Concentrate on discussing your main strengths. List three or four explanations of how they could benefit the employer. Strengths to consider include technical proficiency; ability to learn quickly; determination to succeed; positive attitude; your ability to relate to people and achieve a common goal. You may be asked to give examples of the above so again - be prepared.

Q: What is your greatest weakness? The interviewer is really asking about your self-perception and level of self-awareness.

A: This is another standard question for which you can be well prepared. Don't say you have none - this will ensure further problems. You have two options - use a professed weakness such as a lack of experience (not ability) on your part in an area that is not vital for the job. The second option is to describe a personal or professional weakness that could also be considered strength and the steps you have taken to combat it. An example would be, "I know my team think I'm too demanding at times - I tend to drive them pretty hard but I'm getting much better at using the carrot and not the stick." Do not select a personal weakness such as "I'm not a morning person - I'm much better as the day goes on."

Q: What kind of decision do you find most difficult? The interviewer is really saying, "I need someone who is strong and decisive but who has a human side."

A: Your answer must not display weakness. Try to focus on decisions that have to be made without sufficient information. This will show your positive side. For example "I like to make decisions based on sufficient information and having alternatives. When you have to make quick decisions you have to rely on 'gut feeling' and experience."

Q: What are you looking for in a company? Be careful; make sure you only offer needs that you know the company can offer you!

A: This is another way of asking what needs are most important to you in your career, so make sure that you cover the same points for consistency. Examples could include a positive office environment, a challenging yet viable career path, structured and continuous training and the opportunity to push yourself against other successful professionals.

Don't focus too heavily on benefits packages, car parking etc. This is relatively trivial and shouldn't be seen to be of the same value to you as the opportunity to progress up the ladder.

Q: Where do you want to be in 5 years? The interviewers want to be reassured that you are looking for a long term position, but do have ambitions to progress

A: Start your answer by confirming that you definitely want to be in your (and the company's) industry in 5 years time, and would have expected to have hit your own personal career targets. This could include, successfully building a good name for yourself in your market, being amongst the highest performing in the business, achieved x number of promotions within the business, be managing a small team of 3 or 4 etc. Keep your aims realistic, otherwise your confidence will be taken as arrogance. If you like, ask the interviewer where they were after the same time, as it will give you a good benchmark for your own answer.

4. Listen to them selling the opportunity

Enough Said

5. Your Questions

Prepare the questions that you want answered, take them with you into the interview, and ask them - after the interview is too late! Always ask open questions, e.g. those beginning: How? What? Which? Where? Why? When?

At the end of the interview, you must make sure that you have 2 or 3 intelligent and relevant questions to ask and let the interviewer know that you are very interested in the position being offered.

Consider asking the following if not already covered:

- How will you assess my performance?
- What are the longer term opportunities for promotion?
- How has the position become vacant?
- What encouragement is given to undertake further training?
- What ambitions does the company have for the future?
- Where could I be in 3/4/5 years with the company

- How does the training scheme work
- How would you sell your company against other firms?
- How has your team performed in the last 3 months compared to this time last year, what are you doing about it?

Useful hints

Do ask about career progression but do not let enthusiasm about future roles outweigh the current position on offer - your interviewer will not want to feel that you will be lost from this position 6 months after you have been trained!

If, at any point, you begin to have reservations about the role and/or the company, do not show it. You may later hear details that revive your interest, but your chance may have been lost by then. You can always turn down second interviews or job offers when you have had time to appraise them in the cold light of day.

It is best not to ask detailed questions about terms and conditions – your consultant will clarify these at the offer stage. If the interviewer opens a discussion on salary, indicate a range rather than a specific salary so that your options remain open for negotiation at any subsequent interviews.

2nd and final Stage Interviews

If you thought that the 1st round was difficult, then expect this stage to be even tougher. Traditionally the latter interview stages are used by a potential employer to really put you through your paces. So expect;

1. Competency based questions
2. Company presentations

1. Competency Based Questions

What clients are assessing:

Competencies indicate what an individual is able to do rather than what he or she needs to know. The distinction between knowing and doing is significant. For example, many know the significant benefits for themselves and for the business if they were to improve their time management. Few do anything about it!

What areas do competency based interviews cover:

- Individual competencies – your personal attributes: Flexibility, decisiveness, tenacity, independence, risk taking, personal integrity.
- Managerial competencies – taking charge of other people: Leadership, empowerment, strategic planning, corporate sensitivity, project management, management control.
- Analytical competencies – the elements of decision making: Innovation, analytical skills, numerical problem solving, problem solving, practical learning, detail consciousness.
- Interpersonal competencies – dealing with other people: Communication, impact, persuasiveness, personal awareness, teamwork, openness.
- Motivational competencies – the things that drive you: Resilience, energy, motivation, achievement orientation, initiative, quality focus.

Examples of assessed competencies and possible questions:

1. Adaptability

Ability to modify style in order to reach goals and to maintain effectiveness within changing environments and with varying responsibilities. Flexibility.

How would you define your normal interpersonal style?

- Provide an example of when you have changed this style in order to deal with changing circumstances?
- What did you do and say differently?
- What impact did this have on the outcome?

2. Ambition

High desire to be successful, progress and develop. Career focused.

What are your long-term career aspirations?

- What are you doing now to ensure that you achieve your goals?
- What are the barriers that you need to overcome in the short, medium and long term?
- How would you describe your level of ambition in comparison to your peer group/friends/ colleagues?
- What are you prepared to sacrifice in order to achieve your personal goals?
- Provide a specific example that illustrates this?

3. Resilience

Maintains composure and effectiveness in the face of adversity, setbacks, opposition or unfairness. Stress tolerance – able to maintain a stable performance under pressure and to make controlled responses in a stressful situation.

Provide an example of when you experienced a serious setback at work?

- What happened?
- What was your initial reaction?
- How did you move the situation forward? (Provide an example of when you have lost your composure under pressure?)
- In hindsight what could/should you have done differently?
- How did you regain control of yourself and the situation?
- What was the outcome?

4. Influence

Ability to create a positive impression on others and to exert influence in an assertive manner. Gets others to accept views and act on them, even in the face of conflict or resistance.

Describe an occasion when you challenged a more senior or experienced colleague over an important issue.

- Why did you do this?
- What approach did you take?
- How did they react?
- How did you handle this?
- What was the outcome? (Provide an example of when you had to actively influence others in order to achieve a desired result in a work context)
- What was the 'first impression' you wished to portray?
- Were you successful or not?
- What impact did this have on the situation?

5. Goal Orientation

Responds well to working toward goals and objectives set by self and others.

How would you define your current work related goals?

- Do you have responsibility for setting your own performance goals or are they imposed by others?
- What tactics do you employ to ensure that you meet your goals?
- How do you demonstrate personal ownership of your set objectives to others?
- Illustrate with a recent example, your approach to planning and organising your time to achieve targets.
- How did you ensure a balance between structure and flexibility?
- How did you set realistic timelines?
- Were there any conflicting demands?
- How did you balance these?

6. Initiative

Seeks opportunities and acts on them; originates action and actively influences events.

Provide an example of when you have identified a new business opportunity.

- How did you identify this opportunity?
- How did you take advantage of it?
- What was the benefit of pursuing this opportunity?

Describe a specific example of when you took the initiative and took on any additional challenges/ responsibilities in order to make things happen?

- Why did you feel you had to act?
- What was the impact on you / others?
- What was the outcome?

2. Answering Competency Based Questions

- Use specific examples.
- Ensure that you are clear on the objective, the actions and the results in any given scenario.
- Be clear and unambiguous on what you personally delivered – plenty of 'I' and not too much 'we'!
- Where possible try not to use the same example to cover multiple competencies, as this can imply a lack of depth.

The STAR approach may assist in structuring your answers:

- Situation – describe a situation or problem that you have encountered.
- Task – describe the task that the situation required or your ideas for resolving the problem.
- Action – describe the action you took, obstacles that you had to overcome.
- Results – highlight outcomes achieved.

In short, competency questions are nothing to fear. The main difference from a typical experience based interview is that rather than the discussion following a time line i.e. your career development, it is about matching specific aspects and examples from you experience against a specific attribute i.e. a competency!

3. Company Presentations

If you have been asked to produce a presentation for a company for your final interview then they are looking for you to prove your commitment to the process by investing time and effort into its preparation.

All presentations will vary depending on the title you are given, but they are all looking for the following key factors

- Public speaking under pressure (replicating client meetings)
- Clear, concise and impactful communication skills
- Presence – your ability to hold an audience
- Research skills
- Intelligence – your understanding of the chosen topic
- Creative thinking -
- Sales skills

How Should I Present it?

Most companies are flexible on how you present to them, however we always recommend a PowerPoint slide show if you are confident with it, as it not only looks professional, but helps you focus your audience and maintain a structure to your presentation.

If you are not happy using PowerPoint, make sure you still produce a hand out for your audience, and prompt cards for you. This can always be passed to them as evidence of your preparation (even if you fail to deliver it as well as you would have hoped).

Structure

Regardless of the subject matter, you always need to start your preparation with a clear structure which you can build your speech around, which should always consist of the following;

- Introduction – Announce who you are and where you are from, (yourself or in Character), Why you are here, and you hope to achieve by the end of the presentation.
- The Background – opening slides normally set the scene, proving you have done research around the area you are presenting on.
- The Focus – Narrowing down on the key factors you believe are most important

- The Solution – using your own ideas, draw on what you have learnt to offer a solution to the initial problem, or sell the benefits of the product/service on offer (it could be you)
- Conclusions – draw everything together
- Questions – Great last slide, shifts the focus onto the audience and allows you to tackle anything missed initially.

Appendix 1 – Interview Questions to Consider

- What do you enjoy (dislike) about (your role)?
- Have you worked under pressure? (Meaning can you?) Give examples.
- What kinds of people do you like working with?
- Can you give me an example of when your work was criticised? (Be prepared for the next one of how you coped and the outcome).
- What is the worst situation you have faced outside work? (As above).
- Give me an example of when you have felt anger at work? (And how did you cope and still perform a good job?).
- What kind of people do you find it difficult to work with? (Take care! You won't know about all the staff at the company you are interviewing with).
- Give me an example of when you have had to face a conflict of interest at work. (Testing interpersonal skills, team and leadership opportunities).
- Tell me about the last time you disagreed with your boss.
- Do you prefer to work alone or in a group, and why?
- This organisation is very different to your current employer; how do you think you are going to fit in? (You may not be able to answer until you have established what he/she perceives as the differences).
- How do you measure your own performance?
- What kind of pressures have you encountered at work?
- Are you a self-starter? Give me examples to demonstrate this.
- Describe the biggest problem you have faced recently and how you resolved it. What changes in the work place have caused you difficulty and why?
- Give me an example of when you have been out of your depth.
- What can you bring to this organisation?
- How would your workmates describe you?
- Why should I give this job to you instead of the other people on the shortlist? (Strengths).
- What reservations should I have about you as an employee? (Weaknesses).
- What 5 adjectives would you use that best describe you (both in and out of the workplace)?

Top Ten Tips

These are our top ten tips for being successful in interviews. They may seem obvious but it is surprising the number of people that fail an interview for one of these reasons. Make sure you don't make the same mistake.

1. Research – this applies equally to both the industry and the company you are interviewing. The interviewer will expect you to have a good commercial awareness of the industry in general. If you don't know the basics then how can they believe that you really want to pursue it as a career. Likewise they will expect you to know about their company too. Their company website will often be a good source of information on the history of the company and this is the minimum you will be expected to know. To really impress make sure you understand the markets they work in, type of work they do, who their major competitors are. If you have done research beyond just looking at their website it will really set you apart.
2. Appearance – This is the first opportunity to make a good impression. Make sure you are smart, corporate and well groomed. How you dress for an interview is how the interviewer will expect you to dress when they send you to meet their clients. Small details like not doing up your top button or dirty shoes may seem minor but will be interpreted as you not being professional and not paying attention to detail.
3. DON'T be late – make sure you turn up on time; lateness will give a bad impression. Again if you are late to your interview, this will be interpreted as you also being likely to be late to client meetings too. Leave early and make sure you know where you are going. If you arrive early then have a look around the area or get a coffee. Turning up too early can be just as disruptive as turning up late. If you are going to be late than make sure you call as soon as possible to explain why and what time you expect to arrive.
4. Ask good questions – it is important you show that you are interested in the role and the company. The best way to do this is through asking good questions. This is also a good opportunity to demonstrate your commercial awareness. Ask about the growth of the company, how it stands out from its competition, plans for future. Also ask about the development of the role, where they see it going.

In your first interview avoid questions about salary, benefits or holidays. This will be discussed at a later stage. The interviewer wants to see that you are interested in the opportunity and excited by the role and not there just to get a certain salary or number of holidays.

5. Body Language – it may seem obvious but body language can make a huge difference in the interview. Make sure you are SMILE, are positive and engaging. Make EYE contact but don't stare. Fidgeting, crossed arms, not sitting up straight, and avoiding eye contact will reflect really badly. The interviewer will be watching you!
6. DON'T LIE – It is fine to sell yourself but do not lie. Interviews often take place over several stages so you are likely to be asked the same question more than once it will look very strange if you change your answer.
7. Know your CV – this particularly applies to any gaps or weaknesses you may have will get asked about them so make sure you expect to be questioned about them. Make sure you are able to justify decisions and give good answers.
8. Stay Calm – some interviewers will push you hard make sure you stay calm and stand up for yourself. They are not being nasty but just seeing if you will respond. Don't be controversial but give clear well justified answers. They are testing to see if you can sell under pressure. If you need to buy yourself time then ask questions!
9. BE POSITIVE! – do not fall into the trap of being negative particularly about past employers/co-workers/bosses. If you are negative about people or companies this will put questions into the interviewers mind about how you will portray them and their company and about how easy to manage you will be. If asked why you left (a very common question) then focus around looking for a better opportunity/challenge.