



# Interview skills

## Introduction

“When you are asked to attend an interview you can consider you have the job. Then you have an hour to talk yourself out of it”

Unfortunately most people talk themselves out of a job rather than talk themselves into it.

This section aims to remove the mystique of interviews and give some practical tips to make the process more enjoyable and more successful.

It is an unusual person who really enjoys being interviewed. For most it is an anxious time – even for those on the other side of the desk.

### POINTS TO REMEMBER

- ✓ Have clear goals about what you want from the meeting
- ✓ Prepare thoroughly- the job, the company, your relevant skills and achievements
- ✓ Work on gaining rapport with the interviewer
- ✓ Build your interview skills by learning from previous situations

## What interviewers look for?

Interviewers have two clear objectives:

1. To fill a vacancy as soon as possible
2. To identify the most outstanding candidate

The interview and any tests or assessments will therefore be looking to satisfy three key areas.

- Can you do the job?
- Will you do the job?
- Will you fit in?

## CAN YOU DO THE JOB?

This is normally the most straightforward part of the meeting. They have already been attracted by something in your CV. Now they need to explore your experience and competence by asking you:

- The how, why, when, what of your career
- Situational questions like “what would you do if”
- To participate in tests, presentations or team meetings where applicable

The most important point to remember at this stage is not just to repeat what is already on your CV. Try to bring it off the page by giving examples.

## WILL YOU DO THE JOB?

This is often a harder area to be convincing in because they are looking to discover your motivation for applying.

Typical questions may therefore be:

- What do you know about us?
- How does this job fit with your career plans?
- What attracts you to this job?

## WILL YOU FIT IN?

Questions about your ‘fit’ are important part of the job interview process. You need to be prepared to answer questions about yourself, your style of working, how you operate within a team, your strengths and weaknesses and possibly your views on topical issues.

## Presenting a positive image

The way you look, how you dress and how you say things has a tremendous impact on the outcome of an interview.

Plan your journey

Consider a dummy run before the day if you are not familiar with the area or check how long the journey will take. If necessary ask the employer for directions, bus routes or details of car parking.

Aim to arrive at least 10 minutes before the interview.

Think about what to wear.

Give yourself plenty of time to decide what to wear and get the clothes ready before the day. You don't have to buy a new outfit! Aim for a neat, tidy, clean, uncluttered appearance. If you look good it will help you feel good.

If you are not sure what to wear then check out how people in your line of work dress and use that as a guide. Remember that the interviewer will be trying to assess whether or not you will fit in.

Make first impressions work for you.

First, accept that symptoms of nerves such as “butterflies” in the stomach are natural. These are your body’s natural way of meeting a challenge and in small doses can give you a boost that helps you make a good impression. However, it is important that you don’t let your nerves get the better of you.

Remember, most employers like people who:

- ✓ listen.
- ✓ answer questions with examples.
- ✓ are brief in the right places.
- ✓ come prepared.
- ✓ who appear confident.

## BODY LANGUAGE

- Words are only a small part of communication.
- Research has shown that over 70% of communication are non-verbal.
- Body language often communicates our feelings and attitudes.
- We use body language to show we are listening, for example by inclining towards the speaker, maintaining eye contact, and non – verbal feedback, e.g. head nodding.
- Body language means different things and can often be misinterpreted. It is important to put behaviour into context and note other non-verbal clues.
- Usually body language conveys more than verbal messages.
- It is useful to become more aware of posture, gestures, facial expression, voice, and voice tone. We should ensure that body language matches our verbal communication.

## WHAT DOES NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION MEAN?

**NODDING** Agreement, interested, paying attention, understanding.

**FACE** Smiling – pleasant environment, non -aggressive, entertaining, encouragement, confirmation something is shared.

Eyebrows, interest, surprise, not sure.

Eyes – widen – Disbelief

Pupils – widen – interest

Looking – paying attention.

Mouth – register agreement, sympathy.

**HANDS** Emphasise, “open” - encouragement and inviting, fumbling for words, calming, composed, focussing, stifle a yawn.

**POSTURE** Leaning forwards open, stiff and relaxed moving.

**FEET** Shuffling makes it look like you want to leave.

# Interview dos and don'ts

## DO

- ✓ Enter the room confidently.
- ✓ Shake hands – make sure your handshake is firm and positive
- ✓ Sit down when invited and where indicated. It would be embarrassing to find yourself seated in the interviewer's chair and have to move
- ✓ Remember that you are already more than half way there
- ✓ Check your posture – don't slouch. Sit well back in the chair
- ✓ Pick a position for your legs that is appropriate and comfortable and don't fidget. If you use your hands to gesticulate keep them at, or below, elbow level
- ✓ Maintain good eye contact – interviewers will notice if you avoid looking at them
- ✓ Use your interviewer's name if you know it. Do not use first names until invited to do so
- ✓ Listen carefully to the information you are given and the questions you are asked
- ✓ Give clear, full answers without rambling or going off at a tangent
- ✓ Stress your suitability for the post without appearing boastful or arrogant – do not lie or exaggerate
- ✓ Ask the questions you have prepared when invited to do so. If all your questions have been answered and you cannot think of any others, then say so
- ✓ Always thank the interviewer for their time, even if the experience was not pleasant one. Smile, shake hands and wait to be shown out

## DON'T

- ✗ Sit until you are invited to.
- ✗ Accept tea or coffee during the interview. This can act as a distraction and prevents you fully concentrating on listening and talking.
- ✗ Slouch or lean on the interviewer's desk. Sit up straight, leaning forward slightly to show you are keen.
- ✗ Give yes or no answers.
- ✗ Swear, even mildly.
- ✗ Criticise former employers or colleagues
- ✗ Talk about personal or domestic matters unless specifically asked to do so
- ✗ Force your research about the company upon the interviewer. The interviewer might be impressed to know that you have taken the trouble but you may come across as smart.
- ✗ Include what you have discovered in conversation rather than by producing reams of paper and charts.
- ✗ Argue. Some interviewers ask deliberately provoking questions to see how you will react. Stay calm.
- ✗ Be either overly modest or boastful
- ✗ Worry! Even if you feel the interview is going badly or realise that this is not the job for you. Carry on the best you can. This will be good experience for the next interview. Learn from your own mistakes.

# Handling questions

Whilst you cannot possibly know exactly what the interviewer will ask, it is possible to practise answering some commonly used questions.

Try saying your answers out loud which is much better than thinking you know what you will say. Of course asking someone else to act as the interviewer is great practice too!

- ✗ Do not read from your CV.
- ✓ Be crisp and concise in your replies.
- ✓ Whenever possible give real, specific examples to back up what you are saying.
- ✓ If a question is not clear, ask for clarity. Do not answer a question with a question.
- ✓ Answer the question that is asked but include other aspects of your work history where appropriate.
- ✓ Ask the kind of questions that show you have done your homework.
- ✓ Spend more time on your relevant, recent experience.
- ✓ Be open but discreet.
- ✓ Show a sense of humour if possible but only when you are sure you have gained rapport with the interviewer.
- ✓ Show enthusiasm.
- ✗ Do not deliberately avoid answering questions about salary

If asked your salary, tell the interviewer the truth. Otherwise, only volunteer it if it is clearly to your advantage, e.g. if you know the salary on offer and it is near your existing package.

If asked by consultants/networking contacts about your expectations give a realistic figure – do not pitch yourself too high or too low.

Having said that, this is the one occasion in an interview when you can bounce a question back to an interviewer if you really are unsure about the or mix of salary package on offer. For example, in response to the question “What salary are you looking for?” you could respond by asking on of the following types of question if you feel it is appropriate:

“Well I’m not too sure what the total salary package consists of, perhaps you could just explain it to me?”

“I’m not sure whether the job falls within a particular salary band or not, could you just explain it to me?”

If you are unsure about the level of salary on offer and are concerned that you may mis-pitch your response either too high or too low than respond by giving them a salary band yourself:

“I’m looking for a salary of between £x and £y per annum (or per hour), depending on the job content.”

# Typical questions and ideal responses

Questions asked fall into six general groups.

## 1. OPENING QUESTIONS

- Q Tell me about yourself?
- Q Could you summarise your career?
- Q Describe the last three jobs that you have had?

Use a statement similar to your profile statement. Keep it short (about 30-45 seconds only) and business related. Remember this is the first impression you are giving to the interviewer, so what are the first key pieces of information you would like them to know about you?

Prepare in advance a list of five or six items to mention. They could be key skills, strengths, achievements, job roles, personal traits, work experiences, qualifications etc – whatever you think they will be most interested in.

## 2. CAN DO IT QUESTIONS

- Q What would you say are your strengths?  
List three strengths relevant to the job. Provide a specific example of how you have used each strength effectively in a work situation
- Q What have been the two major achievements in your career/life so far?  
Give specific, relevant achievements and stress why they are important to you and how they made a difference at work or in your life. Use this opportunity to sell your skills and strengths
- Q What would you bring to XYZ Ltd. If you were to work for us?  
Use your strengths and skills and stress the results you hope to achieve. For each skill or strength give an example of how you used it at work to make a difference
- Q Why should we offer you this job?  
This is another opportunity to sell more of your strengths, skills and abilities. Always provide work-related examples of how you have used them
- Q What would be your priorities in this job?  
Use your research and knowledge of the job to give two priorities. Keep your answer general with examples of what you would do if appointed
- Q What makes you think you could be successful with us?  
Sell yourself using examples tailored to the information you have about the job and organisation
- Q Describe a time when you felt under pressure?  
Give an example of how you handled a sticky situation well, the skills and strengths you used to overcome it
- Q Tell me about a difficult time at work?  
Choose an example of a challenge you overcame and explain how you did it

### 3. WILL YOU DO IT QUESTIONS

Q What are your ambitions?

What they are really asking is what will keep you motivated to do this job? To prepare for this question think about what has motivated you in work in the past that would be relevant to this job. For example, it could be as simple as knowing that you are doing the job well. Use real examples from your past

Q Why do you want this job?

You should know this before the interview. Not for the money! The emphasis here is on the word 'want'. Where is the evidence that you would be interested in the job?

Q Where do you want to be in five years?

They want to hear evidence and examples from your previous work experiences that you will continue to be motivated in the job

Q Would you like to know about our other vacancies?

Yes! Even if you don't still say yes. The job may change, other opportunities may arise from keeping the discussion going and you can always turn the job down when it is offered

Q What motivates you?

They want to hear examples, which indicate that you would be motivated in this job e.g. challenging work, recognition and a supportive environment are all good answers.

### 4. WILL YOU FIT QUESTIONS

Q How did you communicate with your last manager?

Very well. Do not give any other answer. What they are looking for is some evidence of how you fit in with a manager so tell them about the positive aspects of the relationship

Q Do you have any hobbies

Be honest, but think about what your hobbies say about you, e.g. are You a team player or do you prefer to work alone?

Q How would your colleagues describe you?

Use your selling statement. Emphasise your good points, don't give Bad ones and stick to strengths

Q How would you describe your work style?

The best style will be different situations, so describe the range you use e.g. sometimes being independent, sometimes supportive, sometimes facilitating team activities etc. Give examples to support your answer

Q Do you prefer to work on your own or with others?

Answer in line with the job and your real preferences. Give specific Examples within work to back up your response

Q If you could make changes in your current organisation what are they?

Be constructive and objective. Don't criticise your former/current employer

## 5. REMUNERATION QUESTIONS

### Q What salary do you require?

Avoid being specific. Use a phrase like: "In the range of..." Try not to discuss salary until you are offered the position because at that time you are in a better position to negotiate terms and responsibilities. If you really are very unsure then bounce the question back if this seems appropriate to the interview situation

### Q When could you start if you are successful?

Be accurate and honest

## Selling yourself

You will have already researched the employer and the job. This is about knowing yourself and what you have got to offer the employer that will convince them that you are the right person for the job.

### Q What does "selling yourself" mean?

It means matching your skills and abilities with the requirements of the employer.

### Q What are my skills and abilities? Analyse what they are. Are they:

**PRACTICAL** – good at DIY, able to use machines, handicrafts, using office equipment, able to use tools.

**COMMUNICATION** – Listening, speaking confidently on the telephone, good at selling/negotiation, writing reports.

**ORGANISATION** – can I manage time, controlling a budget, administration.

**MANAGERIAL** – able to supervise staff, motivate a team, organise rotas, delegation.

**NUMERICAL** – accounts, statistics, analysis.

## What are my achievements?

Think about previous jobs.

- What are you really proud of?
- Think of specific tasks you have done that made a positive contribution to the company.

The key is to be able to show a prospective employer what you could potentially do for them. A good tip is to link your skills, experience and achievements to the benefits that they brought to your previous employer. Using this approach to answer some of the questions will help to reinforce in the mind of the interviewer the benefits that you might bring to them, if they choose you in preference to another candidate.

Another technique at interviews is to use examples of jobs you have done that have produced good results. Real life stories are much more likely to be remembered by the interviewer and to promote interest. Also you will be talking about things that are familiar to you and this will help you feel more at ease and confident.

# What are my strengths?

Look at yourself and your personality and think about how you approach work.

- Are you able to work under pressure or able to keep to a strict deadline?
- Do you have a conscientious approach?
- Are you reliable, always on time for work?
- Are you able to use your own initiative and work well in a team?

These are attributes an employer likes in a prospective employee. Think about what your strengths are and how to convey them in your application.

You could answer this by saying that you have a good awareness of the importance of providing high quality customer service.

You could also plan to tell a real life story. For example, *"...in my last job I was responsible for the electrical department and I recognised that there was a problem with the quality of service we provided to our customers because of the low level of product knowledge amongst our staff. I arranged for a programme of training to be provided and the result of this was that there was a significant improvement in the level of customer satisfaction with the service provided by our department. So you could say that providing a quality of service to customers is one of my strengths."*

Try to think of one or two real life stories and work on them in your preparation.

## SELL YOUR BENEFITS AS WELL AS YOUR FEATURES

The employer not only wants to know what your skills and experience you have but how you can benefit them. So you must not just say what your features are but what are their advantages. This will help make a good impression and show how you are different from all the other applicants.

- A feature is the property of the product.
- A benefit is what the feature gives the buyer.

For example.

- The feature of a secretary is that she can type, the benefit is that she is able to produce work to tight deadlines.
- An inspector has experience in quality checking but his excellent eye for detail means that more faults are noted and customer satisfaction maintained.

Match your benefits to what the employer is looking for.

# Dealing with awkward questions

## Q Questions that may refer to your age

“Age diversity at work” means employing people of all ages, and not discriminating against someone because of how old they are. If you choose to discuss your age you should not rule out any disadvantages that may be stereotyped around age.

If you are an older person these may include the following:

- You are not stuck in your ways, you are adaptable to change and have no problems.
- You are as fit and healthy as ever.
- You are settled and unlikely to move on.
- You have mature judgement and common sense.
- You have learnt to get on with a wide variety of people.
- You have established a sense of responsibility and a history of punctuality and reliability.

If you are a young person your advantages may be that:

- You have no intentions of moving away.
- You intend to stay in the job for a long while.
- You are keen to prove yourself.
- You are eager, enthusiastic and willing.
- Your physical capacity is at its peak.
- You are adaptable to changes.
- You are free from bad work habits.

## Q What have you done while you have been out of work?

How would you give the impression that you have used your time positively?  
Avoid giving the impression that you have not used your time positively.

- Mention your jobsearch activity.
- If you have helped with voluntary work.
- Followed a course of education.
- Looked after someone.
- Repaired or built something.
- Talk about hobbies and interests.

### Q What are your greatest strengths?

This is an opportunity to give all your positive attributes for the job:

- Skills
- Experience
- Enthusiasm
- Reliability
- Efficiency
- Ability to get on with people
- Pride in a job well done

### Q What are your weaknesses?

How might you sell yourself when answering a negative question?

- Start by describing parts of your last job you found testing but explain how you overcame these problems.
- Be fair but honest, I can sometimes be a little over enthusiastic etc.

Employers value people who can admit to their mistakes rather than blaming their failings on others.

## Types of interview

### TELEPHONE INTERVIEWS

Some companies carry out initial interviews over the telephone where the match is explored between your experience and qualities and those that are considered essential for the job. Remember this could be your first contact with the employer and it is important that you make a good impression it could get you a more formal interview. It is essential that you prepare as fully as possible.

Before you phone:

- ✓ Think about what you have to offer the employer.
- ✓ What you will say if you are asked questions about yourself, your experience or why you are interested in the vacancy.
- ✓ Have a pen and paper handy to take down any details.
- ✓ Keep a copy of your CV handy.

On the phone:

- ✓ Ask for the person or section you wish to speak to.
- ✓ Speak clearly and give your name.
- ✓ Fully answer any questions they put to you.
- ✓ Don't forget to ask any questions you wish to ask.
- ✓ If the person says something that you miss then don't be afraid to ask them to repeat it.
- ✓ If you are offered a more formal interview, make a note of the date, time and place and the name of the person you are to see. Read this back to the interviewer to make sure you have written it down correctly.
- ✓ Ask for directions if you need it.
- ✓ Thank them for their time.

## PANEL INTERVIEWS

Panels are often made up of two or more members, for example a Personnel Officer and Head of Section/Foreman/Supervisor.

Try not to be intimidated by this situation. Look at the person asking the question and glance at the others occasionally when you reply. Remember the decision will be made by more than one person that in turn could increase your chance of success.

## COMPETENCY BASED INTERVIEW

These interviews are designed to allow you to demonstrate your level of competency in key areas of the job. You may be asked to discuss examples of your previous work and achievements. The examples you give should be different from those on your application form. Before the interview you will need to list the competencies needed for the job and think about the things you have done which illustrate each one.

## GROUP INTERVIEWS

You may be invited to be assessed as part of a group. This is to test how you might work as part of a team. Be prepared to take an active part in the discussion/task and put forward your ideas in an assertive but not aggressive way.