

Interviews

Being invited for an interview means you have overcome the first hurdle. Your application was good enough to make it beyond the bin; however, there's a long way still to go!

BEFORE YOU GO

Preparation is essential to performing well in an interview. Even if you feel confident or you know the organisation well, good preparation will always help you. There are a number of things you can do to prepare in advance.

Know yourself

Of course, you have kept a copy of your application form or your covering letter. This is the time to re-read what you wrote. Try to think about it from the employer's point of view. What are your strong and your weak points? What areas might need clarification? Is there anything not on the form that you think they need to know?

Anything you put on your application form or in your CV may prompt an interview question so be prepared to expand on any of the information you have given.

Know the job

Re-read the job description and the person specification, if you've received both. (The job description details the duties and responsibilities of the role. The person specification lists the skills, qualifications, experiences and personal qualities needed to do the job.) List the skills and qualities needed. Think about which examples, from your own experiences, you could use to demonstrate that you have those skills and qualities. If possible, talk to people doing the same type of job.

The more you can demonstrate that you know about the job, the more likely it is that the employer will believe you when you say you are well suited to it.

Know the organisation

Find out as much as you can about the employer. Visit the organisation's website or try to get hold of their annual report. Or visit the website of the City Business Library (free of charge) to find out more. Companies often have mission/vision statements or key principles: try to think of situations in your own life which demonstrate those principles.

Keep your eyes on the news for any stories about the organisation or about their sector. Make a note of the facts and try to form opinions. If something significant has occurred (eg a change in legislation) try to think what impact that could have on the organisation, or the sector, in case you are asked about it at interview.

Many organisations hold presentations. As well as being a useful source of information, these events can be an opportunity to get some insider knowledge about the organisation and meet some of the people with whom you might be working if you are successful.

Know the details

Check the time of the interview, the date, the location (it may not be at the employer's offices) and the name and job title of the interviewer(s). Take the letter inviting you to interview along with you. Have the phone number available in case anything goes wrong or you are delayed. Make sure you know how to get there and how long it will take. If possible, think about alternative routes in case of

transport problems and have enough cash on you for a taxi, in case of emergency. Make sure that you have the right clothes washed and ironed and that you have set the alarm clock. Try to get a good night's sleep.

ON THE DAY

Interviewers are not just concerned about what answers you give to their questions. There are many factors that they will be taking into consideration, from how you dress to how you cope with 'difficult' questions.

First impressions

Always arrive on time (preferably early - give yourself time to calm down, go to the toilet etc). Be aware of your body language (firm handshakes, smile, make eye-contact, be attentive, do not fidget). Make sure you're comfortable when you first sit down as this will help you to relax. Remember, first impressions matter.

Their questions

Employers may ask you a variety of questions, but in essence they want to know three things, and these are the questions you need to answer with evidence:

- **Can you do the job?** Do you have the appropriate qualifications, knowledge, skills and experience to do what they want you to?
- **Will you do the job?** Do you have the right motivation, commitment and enthusiasm? Are you really keen on this job or would you rather be doing something else?
- **Will you fit in?** Will you fit in with the people who work there and with the 'culture' of the organisation? Would people enjoy working with you? Can you see yourself working with these people?

SOME TRICKY QUESTIONS

Tell me about yourself

Do not waffle or tell them your life story. Concentrate on a brief summary, recent experiences and major achievements relevant to the position. You can then ask them if they would like you to expand on any area.

What is your greatest weakness?

This is a question about self-awareness. A good approach is to admit a real weakness (which does not impact on the job), then describe how you overcome it by using strengths which are relevant to the job. You could, for example, refer to overcoming nervousness at public speaking by thorough preparation and organisation.

Why do you want to work for us?

This is something you should have thought about in your preparation. It could be the excellence of the organisation, their size, their training, their global nature, their ethical stance, etc. Try to find a fit between your strengths, values and interests and those of the organisation.

Why should we recruit you?

Think about how your differing skills, experience, personal qualities and motivation combine so that you have something unique and **relevant** to bring to the job and the organisation. Emphasise what you can do for them, not just what they can do for you.

What salary are you looking for?

The job advertisement or the application pack should state the salary scale or the salary range so, if you are asked this question, it may be an indication that the organisation would be prepared to negotiate, up to a point.

In any case, part of your pre-interview research should be to find out a reasonable salary range; say that you expect to be within that range. Think about the whole package (pensions, healthcare etc) not just salary.

If you were an animal, which animal would you be?

There are a number of variations of this question (eg 'what sort of biscuit would you be?'; 'which household object best symbolises you?'). Ask yourself 'What are they trying to find out?' It is usually to discover how you see yourself - your key strengths, weaknesses and/or personal qualities. They are also testing your ability to remain calm under pressure. Your answer to the 'animal' question could be something like, 'I would be an octopus because the eight tentacles would fit in with my ability to handle lots of jobs at once.'

Your answers

- Try to relax and be yourself. Breathing slowly and deeply before you go in can help. Make sure you're sitting comfortably.
- Pay careful attention to the interviewer and answer the question they ask, not the one you wish they had asked.
- Speak slowly and clearly. Give yourself time to think if necessary.
- Don't give 'yes' or 'no' answers. Volunteer relevant information about yourself. Your responses should be long enough to answer the question, but not too long.
- Always watch the body language of the interviewer. This can often tell you whether you need to expand on something or bring that answer to a close.
- Avoid going off at a tangent or becoming involved in unnecessarily detailed explanations.
- Be truthful but positive. If you have to present negative information (eg a failure or a weakness), say how you learned from it or overcame it.
- Don't be afraid to ask for clarification if you do not understand the question. You may also ask for a little time to think (but not too often).
- Do be enthusiastic, interesting, animated, or whatever else comes naturally to you (with reasonable caution). Do not be an interview robot.

Your questions

Do not ask anything you should already know from details they have sent you. Don't ask about salary or holidays at this stage. Good topics to ask about are:

- **The job:** find out more detail on duties, how long has it been vacant, where did the previous incumbent go?
- **The organisation:** what are the strategic goals, challenges they are facing, most significant recent developments in the organisation?
- **The working conditions:** what about support for training, career development, appraisals?
- **The process:** what happens next, how many people are being interviewed, when are you likely to hear whether or not you're being offered the job?

AFTERWARDS

What do you do?

- Think about what you have learned and your impressions of the employer. The interview is your opportunity to decide if you want to work for them.
- Reflect on the interview. Make a note of the questions they asked. Were you satisfied with your answers, or could you do better next time?
- If they do not contact you when they said they would or if it has been a long time since the interview (more than two weeks), try ringing or emailing to check the situation.
- If you are rejected, try ringing to ask for some feedback so that you can gain an idea of where improvements need to be made.

What do they do?

- They should let you know how long it will be until you hear from them.
- Their next communication (if it is not a rejection) could be a job offer or an invitation to a second interview or assessment centre. Make sure you know what to expect.

DIFFERENT INTERVIEW SITUATIONS

Interviews can come at any stage in the selection process and can take many forms. You may be interviewed on a one-to-one basis by a personnel manager or someone from the relevant department. You may face more than one interviewer. You may be interviewed at the employer's premises, in a hotel, or possibly over the telephone. The important thing to remember is that the basic principles mentioned above apply to any situation.

Panel interviews

Generally, these consist of three or four people although interview panels of six or more have been known. You cannot talk to all of them at once. Concentrate on giving your answer to the person who asked you the question, but include the others with an occasional glance.

Stress interviews

The interviewer(s) try to test how you react under pressure by firing rapid, or unexpected, questions at you. This does not happen as often as rumour would lead us to believe. Keep calm and try not to take it personally.

Criterion-based interviews

Some recruiters ask every candidate the same questions. Whilst you must always answer the questions asked, be ready to volunteer extra **relevant** information.

Telephone interviews

These are becoming more common in the early stages of the recruitment process. In some cases you might have to undergo a telephone interview to check your qualifications and experience before you can obtain an application form. Some companies have been known to conduct interviews over a video-conferencing link. See the leaflet in this series on *Telephone Interviews* for more advice.

FURTHER INFORMATION

- www.careers.lon.ac.uk/sortit a collection of interactive modules designed to increase your ability to manage your career, from choosing your future path to settling in to your new job
- www.cityoflondon.gov.uk click on 'leisure & culture', 'libraries', 'City of London libraries' and 'City Business Library' for where to find information about employers
- *How to Succeed at Interviews and Other Selection Methods*, The Careers Group, University of London, 2007
- *Great Answers to Tough Interview Questions*, Martin John Yate, Kogan Page, 2005
- *Perfect Interview: All You Need to Get It Right First Time*, Max Eggert, Random House Books, 2007
- *Brilliant Answers to Tough Interview Questions*, Susan Hodgson, FT Prentice Hall, 2007

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