



PREPARING FOR AN INTERVIEW: A QUICK REFERENCE GUIDE

With interviews it is very much about the planning beforehand and ensuring that your personality shines through.

Interview Research before the interview

Your performance in your interview depends upon how much research and preparation you have completed prior to the interview. Don't leave this until the last minute. Focus your research on the following areas:-

- *The Employer*
What is the business truly about?
What job sector does it operate in?
What challenges does it face?
Who are its main competitors?
What major projects has it just completed?
What is its culture and values?

- *Review the job description*
Refresh your memory of how your skills and qualifications fit with what they are looking for. Why do you want the job and why should the organisation choose you over other candidates? Think of some examples that will demonstrate how you previously demonstrated the required skills and behaviours.

- *Interviewers*
Who is interviewing you? Your invite to interview should give you this. Use LinkedIn and the company website to find out more about their professional interests and experience.

- *Travel*
If you need to travel to the interview - How will you get there? Do you have alternative routes if there are delays?

- *Virtual interview process*
If you are completing your interview via telephone or video consider the following:-
Phone – what is your signal like in your house? Ensure your phone is fully charged prior to the interview time. Do you need to phone them or will they phone you? What greeting are you going to use? I would recommend something like Hello, xxx speaking, how can I help you? Will the call show as a private number?
Video – what system will you be using? Have you used it before? Do you have a back up plan such as your phone in case it doesn't work?

- *Understand your value*
Think about and write down your strengths, talents, areas of expertise and your unique skills. Be clear on how you can add value to the organisation by using these talents. Come up with some examples of HOW you have already added value to projects/activities in your current or previous roles. Be ready to share these examples during the interview.

- *Be honest about your strengths and weaknesses.*
Everyone has things they are amazing at and things they are not – it's those who understand what their capabilities are and where their talents "fit" that have the best luck with jobs. Being self-aware really helps – remember you are the master of selling you!



- *Prepare an elevator pitch*

Quite often you will be asked to summarise your career to date. This is effectively your elevator pitch. Try to develop one that sums up who you are and your experience in a concise manner.

Types of interview

- Telephone interviews – a way of doing an initial sift of candidates.
- Video interviews – either live or pre-recorded – particularly in use due to Covid-19, systems used include Zoom, Microsoft Teams or a bespoke video interview software.
- Face to face interviews – becoming less prevalent due to Covid-19.
- Presentation – opportunity to showcase your applied skills with a specific topic.
- Work trial – sometimes used to test your abilities within an actual role scenario.

What to take to an interview (whether face to face or other formats)

Ensure that you have everything you need such as:-

- Pen and notebook
- Your CV and interview invite
- Your academic certificates and work examples if requested
- Photo ID
- A bottle of water
- Money for transport and food

What to wear for interview

What you will be expected to wear depends on the nature of the organisation such as size, the industry it operates in and the culture. If unsure, ask before you attend. The key is to be too smart than too casual. Whatever you choose, make sure that your clothes are ironed and your shoes are cleaned.

4 ways to make a good impression

1. *Punctuality*

Arriving late doesn't help anyone let alone yourself. Try and do your best and arrive in good time.

2. *Positivity and enthusiasm*

Be polite and professional with anyone you meet before or after the interview.

Try to avoid criticising previous employers.

3. *Body language*

Once you're seated sit naturally without slouching in your chair or leaning on the desk. Remember to smile and retain eye contact. This applies whether you are face to face or virtual. If face to face remember to offer a handshake and make sure that you are firm with your handshake.

4. *Clarity*

Answer all questions clearly and concisely.

How to prepare for different interviews

Types of questioning

Closed

One which can be answered very quickly, often with just one word such as yes or no

Open

One which forces a lengthier answer. An example is “Can you tell me a time when”

Leading

Drawing you down a specific path. An example is “why haven’t you achieved more in your career”

Funnel

Initially asked a very general question before following up with a more precise question

Just remember the essentials of a good interview

E ENGAGE
B BRAIN
B BEFORE
O OPENING
M MOUTH

- Give examples
- Never exaggerate your abilities
- Don’t sound like a parrot Take time and effort to develop possible responses that give you confidence to respond

Types of interview questioning

You won’t necessarily know the type of interview questioning that you may be faced with but be prepared to handle whichever one is used.

1. *Informal*

This format allows recruiters to really get to know you out of the structured environment and what makes you unique. However, this doesn’t mean that it is any less important. Don’t let your guard down too much and say things negative about former employers. This format is great though for probing more about the company, the role, and more importantly the interviewer themselves. Remember your elevator pitch will come into play within this. Think about the highlights from your career and where you have added value to an organisation. So for example, any key large scale events you have organised or the rotator project for BP.

2. *Semi-formal*

This format can be held within a workplace but may not be a long discussion and doesn’t allow you to truly demonstrate your value to an organisation.

3. *Structured*

This format follows a greater structure – quite often prepared beforehand to ensure consistency between candidates in questioning. Often there will be more than 1 interviewer to allow a fairer assessment. Often in these types of interviews they are not only looking for you to demonstrate your hard-skills and experience but also for you to demonstrate behaviours and competencies – so how you did something as much as what you did. This is where the STAR method of responding comes into play.

Telephone Interviews

These are often used as a means of sifting down candidates and making sure that you are suitable based on the job description, personality fit and experience required. It can be as short as 15 minutes or anything up to an hour. Essentially it is a way of checking that what you have stated in your CV or application form is actually correct.

How to prepare for a telephone interview

1. Have a snappy elevator pitch that sums up who you are and your experience in a concise way. Start out at your current position and lay out your key responsibilities there. Then summarise your key educational and professional steps that you have taken to get there.
2. Make sure you know your CV and cover letter inside out.
3. Remember the sense of occasion, you need to represent both yourself but also how you would represent the new company.
4. Dress smartly, this will help you to feel more professional and you will carry out your telephone interview more confidently.
5. Be sure to smile too, as this naturally makes you sound enthusiastic.
6. When it comes to answering questions remember the STAR technique

Situation: start by outlining the situation you were in

Task: What was the task at hand? What was required of you?

Action: What did you do? What action/s did you take and why?

Result: Summarise the results of your actions.

This will help you show your experience for the position, and to formulate your answers in a clear, concise and confident manner.

Video Interviews

This format is becoming more and more prevalent, primarily as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, where businesses are not inviting candidates to site. They can vary in style and length.

How to prepare for a video interview

1. Check out the format that the interview will take. There are 2 main formats but are very different experiences
Live: similar to a face to face interview. In real-time you will speak to the interviewer or panel of interviewers via a video connection such as Skype, Zoom, Google Hangouts or a bespoke video conferencing software. You should be given this information in your invite letter so will have chance to practice prior to the interview. Try to treat the conversation as you would a face to face interviewer and build a rapport with the interviewer.
Pre-recorded: this a much less personal experience where you will be presented with a pre-recorded or written question(s) on a screen and you will have to record your answer on video, often to a time limit. This helps interviewers as they can simply watch them at a time that suits them. However, it can be awkward for you as a candidate particularly if you are not used to recording yourself.
2. Choose your location
Use a room where you won't be disturbed by noises and people.
Use a clean and simple background – remember that a recruiter doesn't want to see your laundry!
Think about the lighting – make sure you don't get a shadow.
Close any software that might play notification sounds.
Switch your phone to silent so you won't get distracted.
3. Dress appropriately
This is your first opportunity to give a professional first impression. Wear the same outfit that you would have chosen to wear for a face-to-face meeting.
Avoid too busy patterns and stripes as this can be difficult on a screen.
4. Try to avoid slouching, moving too much or touching your face.

5. Test your computer device, camera and any other software to make sure that they run properly. Make sure that the picture is clear and the sound quality is good. Check out your internet connection and have a back up available if things don't work.
6. Make sure your computer device is plugged in during the interview, as there is nothing worse than the battery running out.
7. If using an iPad or tablet get a stand to put it in otherwise the picture will wobble and you will hear constant rustling during the call.
8. If you are using a personal Skype or Google account, make sure that you have a professional username.

During the interview

1. Have a pen, notepad, a copy of your CV and any other notes set out on your desk.
2. When listening, nod and smile to show that you are engaged.
3. Use hand gestures, when appropriate.
4. Have a glass of water.
5. Dress smartly, this will help you to feel more professional and you will carry out your video interview more confidently.
6. Be sure to smile too, as this naturally makes you sound enthusiastic.
7. When it comes to answering questions remember the STAR technique
 Situation: start by outlining the situation you were in
 Task: What was the task at hand? What was required of you?
 Action: What did you do? What action/s did you take and why?
 Result: Summarise the results of your actions.
 This will help you show your experience for the position, and to formulate your answers in a clear, concise and confident manner.

This article by the BBC will also give you some pointers on video interviews <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/business-53560928>

Face-to-face interviews

The format for face-to-face interviews are very similar to video interviews except you will likely to be visiting the location where you will be based if successful in gaining the role. Remember first impressions count!

At the end of the interview (whatever the format)

At the end of the interview many interviewers ask candidates if they have any questions. This is your chance to ask a question or questions that may stand you out even further from other candidates. It will show the interviewer that you are interested and help you to visualise what it would be like to work there. Don't use this as a chance to enter into salary discussions or start date discussions.

Questions you could ask include:-

- What are the top priorities for my first 6 months in the job?
- How would you describe the team I will be working with?
- How would you describe the work culture here?
- What do you enjoy the most about working here?
- In what ways is performance measured?
- What training and professional development opportunities will be available?
- Where do you think the company is headed in the next five years?
- What do you think are the most important qualities for someone to excel in this role?
- What are the biggest opportunities facing the company right now?
- What are the biggest challenges facing the company right now?

The interviewer(s) should tell you what the next step is. But if they don't then remember to ask them.

As with any interview, you should conclude by thanking the interviewer(s) for their time.

Send a follow-up email later that day (or the next day if your interview was in the evening). The message may help build a stronger connection with your potential employer and help you progress to the next step.

I would suggest something like.

Subject: – Interview on Wednesday 10th March at 4pm

Dear 《name》 ,

Thank you for your time <yesterday / date of interview>. It was great to speak to you about the <job title> role and I'm convinced that the position is a perfect fit for this stage in my career. I very much looking forward to receiving an update from you. Also, feel free to ask me any follow-up questions that may have come up since we last spoke. Looking forward to hearing from you,

Kind regards

Name

Should you have not heard anything by the date the interviewer stated then I recommend that you drop a quick note confirming that you are very interested in the role and are looking forward to hearing from them.

Not been successful after the interview?

Should you not be successful ask for feedback. You might be disappointed, and naturally so, but asking and hopefully getting feedback will help you to understand where you might need to focus your attention going forward.

The STAR Method of interview question responses

So what is the STAR Method

Behavioural interview questions are questions about specific situations in your past work experience and how you handled them or behaved. These are the essence of the STAR method of interviewing.

In this approach, the recruiter assesses your answer to see if you are capable of taking proper initiative and action should a similar situation take place.

Situation – describe the event/project or challenge faced

Set the scene of the story by giving a context and the background of the situation. If you're asked about teamwork, your response should include the project details, who you were collaborating with, when you undertook the project and your location at that time.

- What happened?
- How did this come about?
- Who was involved?
- What was the main issue?

Task – responsibilities/assignments for the situation – what role did you play?

Describe your exact role or responsibility in the situation. Make sure that the hiring manager knows what you were specifically assigned to do, rather than what everyone did.

- What responsibility did you take on to solve the problem?
- Did your manager assign this task to you?
- Did you take on this task on your own?
- Did others have tasks as well?

Action – steps/procedure taken to relieve or rectify the situation

This step is probably the most important part of the story. Here, you explain how you handled the difficult situation or conquered the problem. Say whether you did it alone or together as a team. What you're trying to communicate is your assessment of the situation and your response to the problem as well as how you got the team involved.

Share as many details as possible so the interviewer can follow you. As you do so, avoid acronyms and company-specific jargon.

- What did you do first?
- How did the person/situation respond?
- What did you do next?

Result – the results of the action taken

Close the story by stating the positive outcome of your actions and what lessons you learned. If possible, quantify the results and show the effects of your actions. Examples may include a 10% increase in sales, getting repeat business or saving your team five hours of work in a week.

- What was the end result of the situation?
- Was your manager satisfied?
- Did you continue to handle this issue as time went on?
- Were you given new responsibilities because of this particular event?

Here are some steps you can take to ready yourself for the interview portion of the hiring process:

1. *Recall the latest situations you've been in that demonstrate positive behaviours or decisive actions, especially involving work experience, team effort, leadership, initiative and service delivery.*
2. *Create short descriptions for each situation and be prepared to share the details if asked.*
3. *Make sure the story has a beginning, middle and conclusion. Be prepared to describe the situation, task at hand, the action you took and the result.*
4. *Be forthright in your responses. Avoid embellishing upon or omitting any important parts of the story. It is likely that the interviewer has conducted enough behavioural interviews to know when someone's being honest.*
5. *Ensure that the outcome reflects positively on you even if the result was not favourable.*
6. *Be specific about events and give a detailed account of what happened, avoiding generalising.*
7. *Provide various examples, and don't recount the same situation over multiple questions.*
8. *Be specific, try to use numbers to give credibility to answer re the size/scale of the activity.*

The STAR method is in response to behavioural questioning so probing what you have done in the past and how you handled this. Examples include –

Tell me a time when

Give me an example of

Have you ever

Describe an instance where you've had to

So the following is an example of a STAR response

Question: "Tell me about a time when you performed well under enormous pressure."

Step 1. Using the STAR method to answer this question, we'll first start with describing the situation:

One time, at my last job, my co-worker had a family emergency and needed to miss work for some time, and their super-important project was left unfinished and without a manager.

Step 2. Next, we'll give them the task:

My supervisor instructed me to take on the project, and with no leniency on the deadline, I had days to complete a project that originally should have taken several weeks.

Step 3. Then the action taken to solve the problem:

I requested and was granted a reduction in my weekly goals, allotting me more time to attack the special project. As far as my weekly goals, I was able to delegate them out evenly to some of my teammates.

Step 4. And finally, the result of your actions:

With the reduction in my daily goals, I was able to dedicate more time to the special project. This allowed me to finish it on time and with complete accuracy. My supervisor appreciated my attitude and drive, and I was given several more projects after that, along with an eventual promotion and pay raise.

It is ok to pause before replying – gather your thoughts before responding and make sure that you thoroughly understand the question.

It is ok to check your notes too, try to maintain eye contact as much as you can.

Another form of questioning is Situational questioning

This focuses on speculative events in the future. They will ask you to consider how you might act in a situation that could happen in a company's future. So for example Give me an example of how you would handle an irate customer phone call".

Handling tricky questions

Tell Me About Yourself

This can be quite a tough question for most people as it is very easy to waffle. Ultimately, the interviewer wants to know a little bit about your career so far and what you aim to achieve, but they also want to know a little bit about what you are like as a person and what other interests you have outside of work. Before you attend an interview, write down approximately ten bullet points that would fall in to this category, then turn that list in to a short description you can easily remember and recite when asked the question. You may need to practice to make your answer sound natural. Remember, preparation is the key to a good interview.

What Are Your Strengths?

It is a good idea to skip the standard cliché answers such as: "I'm a fast learner" or "I am really passionate about what I do", and focus on specific tasks you are genuinely strong in. It helps if you can embellish the points you raise with examples and try to explain why you are good at something and what your unique approach is. This will help to distinguish you from most of the other applicants and will show you have given careful consideration to your answers.

What Are Your Weaknesses?

There are so many wrong answers to this question. Try to avoid the obvious pitfalls such as: "I find it hard to get out of bed in the morning" or "I drink too much at weekends". Also avoid answers that make it sound like you are sucking up to the interviewer, such as: "I work too hard" or "I spend too much time working after hours". The best answers to give are genuine answers, so find an area you are not so strong in and explain how you are working to improve in that areas and highlight any training or self-study you are undertaking. This will show you are keen to improve and will make a good impression.

Do You Have Any Questions About Our Company?

The answer should always be yes. Ask about the company structure, how the company plans to grow, the opportunities for promotion, or what training is provided etc. It is important to show that you are genuinely interested in the company you might be working for.

Where do you expect your career to be in 10 years?

The best way of answering this question is look ahead to possible promotions within the company and explain how you would like to progress from the position you are applying for. State that you would also like to have been trained in relevant disciplines or the undertaken learning required to get you there.

Why did you leave your last job?

If you are currently unemployed, this question will arise. At all costs, avoid the temptation to speak badly of your former employers. The best approach to take with this question is show that you have left to work on progressing with your career and that you take your career seriously and are dedicated to working hard, learning the skills required, and are prepared to make tough decisions to help you progress. If it is true, you could highlight the lack of upward mobility offered by your last employer. If you were fired, it is usually better to tell the truth and explain what you have learned from the experience.