

Succeeding at Job Interviews



Preparing for a Job Interview

Research and preparation are 50% of the hard work to getting the job. Many interviewers often say that candidates let themselves down almost immediately by not knowing enough about the company.

Research is Critical

Employers like to feel that candidates have made an effort to find out about them. And the more information you have, the easier it will be for you to tailor your interview responses to show the interviewer that you are the perfect person for the job.

At a minimum, you should be able to establish the following:

- What sort of business are they in and what are their current services or products?
- What are the company's vision, mission and values?
- What is their strategy for the future? What plans or investments do they have lined up or going forwards?
- Approximately how many staff does the organization employ? Are they a very large or a very small employer?
- Who are their competitors?
- In your preparation, you should read ravenously. Any snippet you pick up could make the difference - showing that you have invested time and effort in understanding the company.

Do You Have the Skills and Experience needed for a Job Interview

No matter how relaxed and informal an interview might be, it is not simply a conversation or a 'chat'. It is an opportunity to sell yourself and convince the interviewer that you are the best person for the job.

So, think of an interview as a sales pitch. And before you can do your sales pitch, you must understand your product - yourself. Before you carry on with the rest of the book, take a notepad and jot down some thoughts to the following questions:

- What are the three biggest achievements of your career?
- What are you most proud of outside of your work?
- What are your goals in your career? What would you like to get out of your next job move?
- Why should an employer want you to work for them?

Do take the time - even if it is only 20 minutes - to think about these questions. Time spent now will make it much easier for you to respond competently to the many questions that interviewers might throw at you later.

Successful Interview Presentation

Many interviewers make up their minds about candidates in just the first few minutes of meeting them. How you look and behave in those first few minutes could make the instant difference between success and failure.

Put yourself into the interviewer's shoes for a moment. If you saw a scruffy-looking candidate in reception waiting to meet you, wouldn't you think that they were probably a bit disorganised in their work too? Or if a candidate were a bit nervous or stilted in introducing herself, wouldn't you suspect that she might be lacking in social skills with her colleagues as well?

So get your first impression right.

Don't let your Clothes let you down

A book can't tell you exactly what to wear for every single interview. However, your friends might be able to give you some valuable advice on what to wear. So go ask your friends, colleagues and partner for their honest opinion. But if you ask them for advice, then be gracious enough to thank them for their advice and, above all, listen to their advice and incorporate some changes into your wardrobe.

The rules for men are simple:

- Wear a dark suit. Navy blue and grey are the most acceptable colours.
- Wear a long-sleeved shirt, either in white or a pale colour such as light blue.
- Choose an uncomplicated tie.
- Ensure shoes are well polished
- Don't overdo it with the jewelry.

For women, the principles are not dissimilar:

- Also aim to wear a suit as opposed to separates.
- Wear smart sensible shoes.
- Avoid unusual jewelry.

Dressing Down

Increasingly, companies often have "smart casual" dress codes at work. However, be very, very careful if you are tempted to dress down to match the culture of a company. You may, for instance, find that an interviewer makes an effort to dress up in a suit when meeting candidates.

If you are planning to dress down, make sure you are 100% certain that this is the right move. Far better to be overdressed than underdressed.

Tips for Handling Interview Nerves

Being nervous can be a pretty unpleasant feeling. Nobody likes to feel anxious, under-confident, fearful of the situation, unsure of themselves - and most people have experienced one or more of these feelings at some time or other.

Controlling your nerves isn't easy, and even if it were, it's one more thing to have to think about in what is an inherently stressful situation. But keeping your anxiousness under control can reap such huge benefits that are certainly worthwhile. And nerves can be controlled. Learning simple techniques will at first help, and eventually may even become an unconscious habit, so you automatically control your nerves better.

Transforming Thought Processes

Internal dialogue

For nervousness, you need to identify the thought process behind your nervousness and so deal with it more positively. You do this by internal dialogue. Discuss the thought process with yourself, and try just focusing on the thoughts - that will take your attention away from the emotion and its biological effects on your system. Don't worry that you won't have time for this - conducting internal dialogue is pretty quick for most people; these split-second 'conversations' usually go on in our heads all the time.

Identify thought processes

- Identify the thought process, e.g. 'I might not get the job.'
- Doing this takes your mind off the emotion you are feeling.
- It also refocuses your attention.

Evaluate rationally

- Evaluate the thought rationally - this means examining it unemotionally.
- Is it justified to that extent?
- Is it even true?
- Would the consequences that you fear really be all that bad?
- Talk it over with yourself - rationally, e.g. 'They wouldn't have interviewed me if they didn't think I was a possibility. If I don't get it, there are other jobs out there. But I might get it - who knows?'

Replace the negative thought with something more helpful

- amend it
- replace with a more sensible, appropriate and/or positive thought, e.g. 'I might get the job or I might not. Either way this is valuable experience I can learn from.'

Re-examine how you feel

Re-examine the emotion you feel

It should either be reducing or gone, e.g. 'Hey! If I see it as a learning experience, this interview doesn't make me feel quite so nervous!'

Relaxing and Calming Yourself

Breathe

- Getting oxygen to your brain will make you able to think more clearly.
- Breathe deeply and slowly.
- Try breathing in for a count of five, and then out for a count of five.
- Get some fresh air. Like breathing, this will increase the supply of oxygen to your brain and make you able to think more clearly.
- Take a short walk - for the same reason.

Calming rituals

- People often have calming rituals, such as having a cigarette or a cup of tea. If you don't have one, establish one!
- Have a drink - preferably a soft drink, juice or water.
- Remember that tea and coffee are stimulants, so if you are very nervous, they won't help and could even make things worse - caffeine can make you feel even more anxious!

Relaxing yourself

- Find somewhere to sit down.
- Concentrate on relaxing.
- Starting with your feet and moving up, tighten each part of your body in turn and then relax it. This will remove any muscle tension.
- Concentrate on relaxing your body - stop nervous, edgy movements and actions such as fiddling, licking your lips, biting lips, tapping feet, etc.

How to Start an Interview

There is a common saying that an interviewer decides within the first 30 seconds of meeting you whether or not he/she wants to hire you. This is unlikely to be true, especially now that managers are becoming more and more enlightened, more aware of 'human factors' such as psychology, and are better trained in interviewing techniques, etc.

However, there is no denying the fact that preconceptions and prejudices exist, as do instant reactions. People do tend to react positively or negatively to others quite quickly; to get around this at interview you have to bear in mind that you can influence interviewers, even to the extent of changing an initial negative reaction. Obviously, the quicker you start to influence them, the better, so the early stages of an interview are vital, when you are introducing yourself, meeting and greeting, etc.

Arriving

From the moment you enter . . . you're on show:

- You may be on security camera from the moment you enter the building
- Receptionists/PAs, etc, may be asked their opinion, or what they thought of you, so be on your best behavior with everybody from the moment you step into the building.
- Try to avoid carrying too much baggage
- Ladies should avoid carrying both a handbag and briefcase - it's too much
- If possible, avoid carrying multiple items such as a coat and umbrella and briefcase into the interview
- Ask if you can leave things in reception before you are announced - it shows confidence as well as getting rid of the clutter!

Breaking the Ice

Never be afraid to initiate conversation if necessary. It shows confidence without being pushy. Safe comments are things like 'It's a beautiful day, isn't it?' or 'What a lovely building; have you been here long?'

Body Language

With body language, three things seem to make people relate to each other quickly and easily at a first meeting:

- Make eye contact - look them in the eye
- Smile - to show you are pleased to see them
- The 'eyebrow flash' - quickly raising your eyebrows when being introduced apparently shows interest in the other person and indicates a willingness to establish a good relationship.

Body Language & Interview Techniques

Body language is a huge subject upon which many books have been written. Unfortunately, they can sometimes give you conflicting advice, while studying body language in depth can mean you spend all your time studying other people's mannerisms instead of concentrating on your own! You need to have enough information to allow you to focus on performing at your best at interview. Knowing the basics of body language can increase your performance at interview greatly. Being able to control your own body language makes it easier for you to relate to interviewers, and to make a good impression. It can also make you appear more confident, more honest, and more in tune with the interviewer.

But there is one other advantage of knowing about body language - it helps you control your nerves, if you suffer from nervousness. Concentrating on your physical actions will take your attention away from negative thought processes and feeling nervous, and make you focus instead on what you are actually doing. This can reduce your nervousness significantly.

The Golden Rule

The golden rule with body language is to match your interviewer's body language. Like attracts like.

Match verbal with non-verbal behaviors

- Use non-verbal behavior - i.e., body language, to reinforce and back up what you are saying verbally.
- Try never to use body language that gives a different message from your verbal message, such as saying 'Yes' and shaking your head at the same time, or a more common example, saying 'No' and nodding.
- The trick is to always match non-verbal messages with verbal messages - so you should always nod when you agree, shake your head when you are disagreeing, etc.

Positive body language

All these actions, on the other hand, will enable you to establish a good rapport with interviewer:

- good eye contact
- leaning forward slightly in your chair
- tilting your head whilst maintaining eye contact with your interviewer
- open-lipped smiling
- open hands with palms visible
- unbuttoning your coat or jacket upon being seated
- keeping your chin up
- putting tips of fingers of one hand against the tips of fingers of other hand in the 'praying' or 'steepling' position
- having your hands joined behind back you're when standing.

Proven Interview Skills

An interview is a sales pitch and you are the product. Unless your skills and experience are in short supply - in which case you will be interviewing your prospective employers rather than vice versa. But, if you are just one of many well-qualified and experienced applicants for the same few jobs, you will have to do some competitive selling.

If you have the intention of actively selling your skills, you will feel more in control. And most people feel better and perform better when they have some control. Of course there will be surprises and unexpected questions, but there are many ways of staying in command: by asking questions, by actively listening, and by taking notes so that you can refer back to difficult points.

Awareness of some basic sales techniques can take you beyond feeling comfortable in interview and on into enjoyment of the adrenaline rush and challenge of the situation.

Selling the benefits is the most important sales technique of all. Every salesperson knows that they have to sell the benefit of the product rather than the product itself.

Use your CV in the interview. Refer to it whenever you feel you might be losing your way. You wrote it, so you can use it as a means of getting back on track and staying in control. Interviewers like talking through a CV - they can make notes on it and refer back to it afterwards. A well-written CV gives you lots of hooks for mini-presentations about your good points and achievements.

You must decide what to sell. Analysing the criteria for a job will have given you a pretty good idea of the benefits you need to sell. Nevertheless, it's important to listen carefully in interview for live, on-the-spot clues.

You may think you will get a job by what you say in interview. But listening is actually more important than talking - if you don't listen carefully you may answer the wrong questions - or give the wrong answers to the right ones.

Leading the interviewer can bring positive results. There are two reasons for asking questions:

- to get more information about the job
- to get a 'yes' response. This puts the interviewer into a positive thinking mode which is much more likely to lead them into a buying (hiring) position. For example: *'Would it be true to say that you are you looking for somebody who will be a good team player?'*

Once you are getting consistent yes responses, you can slip in some questions which start from the premise that you are already an employee:

'If I were to join you, what would my first assignment be?'

Without thinking about it, the interviewer will already be allocating your first task to you and picturing you doing it.

Common interview questions

Although there is no set format that every job interview will follow, there are some questions that you can almost guarantee will crop up. Here's a list of the most common questions and a guide to the kind of answers your interviewer wants to hear.

Tell me about yourself...

This is usually the opening question and, as first impressions are key, one of the most important. Keep your answer to under five minutes, beginning with an overview of your highest qualification then running through the jobs you've held so far in your career. You can follow the same structure of your CV, giving examples of achievements and the skills you've picked up along the way. Don't go into too much detail – your interviewer will probably take notes and ask for you to expand on any areas where they'd like more information. If you're interviewing for your first job since leaving education, focus on the areas of your studies you most enjoyed and how that has led to you wanting this particular role.

What are your strengths?

Pick the three biggest attributes that you think will get you the job and give examples of how you have used these strengths in a work situation. They could be tangible skills, such as proficiency in a particular computer language, or intangible skills such as good man-management. If you're not sure where to start, take a look at the job description. There is usually a section listing candidate requirements, which should give you an idea of what they are looking for.

What are your weaknesses?

The dreaded question! This is best handled by picking something that you have made positive steps to redress. For example, if your IT ability is not at the level it could be, state it as a weakness but tell the interviewer about training courses or time spent outside work hours you have used to improve your skills. Your initiative could actually be perceived as a strength. On no accounts say "I don't have any weaknesses", your interviewer won't believe you, or "I have a tendency to work too hard", which is seen as avoiding the question.

Why should we hire you? Or what can you do for us that other candidates can't?

What makes you special and where do your major strengths lie? You should be able to find out what they are looking for from the job description. "I have a unique combination of strong technical skills and the ability to build long-term customer relationships" is a good opening sentence, which can then lead onto a more specific example of something you have done so far in your career. State your biggest achievement and the benefit it made to the business, then finish with "Given the opportunity, I could bring this success to your company."

What are your goals? Or where do you see yourself in five years time?

It's best to talk about both short-term and long-term goals. Talk about the kind of job you'd eventually like to do and the various steps you will need to get there, relating this in some way back to the position you're interviewing for. Show the employer you have ambition, and that you have the determination to make the most of every job you have to get where you want to be.

Why do you want to work here?

The interviewer is listening for an answer that indicates you've given this some thought. If you've prepared for the interview properly, you should have a good inside knowledge of the company's values, mission statement, development plans and products. Use this information to describe how your goals and ambition matches their company ethos and how you would relish the opportunity to work for them. Never utter the phrase "I just need a job."

Why are you leaving your current job?

Be honest and explain the reasons why you are considering a change of job. However take care that your answer does not show you in a poor light and never use this as an opportunity to criticize your previous company or boss.

What are three positive things your last boss would say about you?

This is a great time to brag about yourself through someone else's words. Try to include one thing that shows your ability to do the job, one thing that shows your commitment to the work and one thing that shows you are a good person to have in a team. For example, "My boss has told me that I am the best designer he has ever had. He knows he can always rely on me, and he likes my sense of humour."

What salary are you seeking?

You can prepare for this by knowing the value of someone with your skills. Try not to give any specific numbers in the heat of the moment – it could put you in a poor position when negotiating later on. Your interviewer will understand if you don't want to discuss this until you are offered the job. If they have provided a guideline salary with the job description, you could mention this and say it's around the same area you're looking for.

Tips for second interviews

Once you've reached the second interview stage, it can be tempting to think you're almost there and that the job's there for the taking. It is, but there's still a lot of work to do. Prepare as well for the second interview as you did for the first. Think about what it is about you that makes them want to consider you for the job.

They may want to delve deeper into your personal skills and interests to see if you're the right fit for the team, or they may have brought someone in to play the tough guy to see how you handle pressure. If you do have a new interviewer, be prepared to go over some old ground using notes from your first interview.

As before, plan your answers to their likely questions, and be clear in your own mind where your cut off point is in terms of sharing views or talking about your private life.

Expect more open-ended or challenging questions about your experience. Have some examples in your head about specific projects you have managed or challenges you have met. It may be worth preparing some cue cards of your key work achievements to keep them fresh and organised in your head ready for when you go in.

If you've been asked to give a formal interview presentation, request that all the equipment you need is ready and waiting for you when you turn up.

Think the offer over in your head and discuss it with friends to make sure you're totally comfortable with the idea. Did the atmosphere feel right? Did you like your interviewers? Did the people you saw while you were there look focused and motivated? Use your common sense and experience, and don't go all glassy-eyed and lose your judgement in the thrill of the moment. Take this as an opportunity to negotiate a deal that's right for you. You're talking about making a commitment that will probably last for years rather than months so take your time.

Making an interview presentation

It's not unusual when recruiting for senior roles, or where presentations are going to be part of the job, to ask candidates to make a presentation as part of their interview. This is an excellent opportunity to show your potential employers what you can do, away from the formal interview question and answers procedure.

Preparing your presentation

- The most important thing is to know who you're going to be speaking to. This will inevitably influence what you say and how you pitch your presentation. Find out how many people will be on the panel, their status, their expertise, any knowledge levels you can safely assume, and whether they know each other.
- This information is vital in helping you pull together the right amount of material, pitching it at the right level, and ensuring you have enough supporting materials to hand. Once you've established these details, you can get to work on the all-important structure.

Getting the right structure

- You should always have one clear message that runs through your presentation, and limit yourself to three sections: introduction, development of your argument, and summary. Any more than that and your presentation will lose focus.
- Develop a powerful introduction and close, as these are the times when your audience will be most attentive.
- Ensure that your ideas are clear and come in a logical sequence, using sentences that are short and to the point. When calculating how much time to devote to each section, allow 10-15% for your opening, the same for your conclusion, and the rest for the main content.

A clear delivery

- Keep your opening punchy and have a memorable ending that will leave your audience on an upbeat note. Speak slowly and with purpose; avoid rambling or making digressions. Make regular eye contact with members of your audience, rather than allowing your gaze to drift vaguely round the room or over their heads.
- Try to learn your presentation by heart. It will save you having to fumble around with prompt cards or PowerPoint slides and will give an excellent impression of your confidence and professionalism. However you choose to present, practice your presentation beforehand, testing it on friends or family if you have the chance.

Visual aids

- Most of us have experienced 'death by PowerPoint' at some time - that sinking feeling that comes from seeing 'slide 1 of 60' up there on the screen, or staring at densely-packed slides as the presenter reads the text out word-for-word.
- Have mercy on your audience and improve your chances at the same time. Maximum content should be a headline and perhaps three or four bullets per slide with graphs and diagrams where appropriate. It should be there to help emphasise what you're saying, not to take the focus away. Don't start the slides before you have first addressed your audience. They don't want to be distracted by what's on the screen while you introduce yourself and what you're going to say. As you progress through your presentation, give your audience time to digest what's on each slide before you begin talking again.
- Flashy animations may show your technical expertise, but can cause major problems in distracting your audience and confusing you when it comes to pressing the button in the right places.
- Avoid glancing down at the screen for prompts – if you've learnt your presentation properly, you won't need them – and talk to your audience, not your laptop. Always make sure any projection equipment is working properly and try to get set up and ready to go before you are asked to begin.

Taking questions

- Dealing with questions gives you the opportunity to further demonstrate your knowledge of your subject. Let your audience know in advance that you will be willing to take questions at the end so they don't disrupt the flow of your presentation.
- Take your time to answer, be ready to defend yourself and don't argue with a questioner. If you do come up against a conflict of opinions, don't try to win the battle - search for a good compromise position. Inviting other questions or views from the other members of the audience may help you diffuse a potentially prickly situation.
- Answer the question you have been asked, not the one you fancy answering. Repeat each question as you receive it and give yourself a moment to consider what is actually being asked. If it is a loaded question that's inviting you to say something you'd rather not, diffuse it by reinterpreting it in a less pointed way, or ask your questioners to expand on what they mean.
- Finally, enjoy it. It's a great chance to shine!

Questions for the interviewer

Most interviewers will give you an opportunity to ask questions after they've finished grilling you, so be prepared to make the most of it. Try to concentrate on issues that are important to you and combine an interest in the company with an interest in the job.

With a wide variety of interview styles and structures, there's every possibility that everything you want or need to know about the job will have been covered over the course of the interview. There is always more information available though and if you don't have at least five questions prepared, you'll come across as passive rather than curious and interested.

Regarding role specific questions, look through the job description to see if there are any areas that you would like more information about. Here are some good examples of the questions you could ask about the role:

- Why has the position become available?
- What are the main objectives and responsibilities of the position?
- How does the company expect these objectives to be met?
- What are the measures used to judge how successful I am in the role?
- What obstacles are commonly encountered in reaching these objectives?
- What is the desired time frame for reaching the objectives?
- What can I expect from you in terms of development and support?
- What aspirations do you have for me at the company?
- Where will the job fit into the team structure?

Good interview preparation should have given you an insight into what it's like to work for a company, but it's good to get answers straight from the horse's mouth in case you've misinterpreted anything. These questions are a good place to start:

- What's the best thing about working at your company?
- What is the main thing the organisation expects from its employees?
- How do you build good relationships within teams?
- What is the turnover of staff like throughout the company?
- Are there any plans for expansion?
- How would you describe the company culture and management style?

To show your interest and knowledge of the industry the company operates in, it's also a good idea to have a question ready regarding a current event or issue in the market. For example, "How do you think the recent merger between your two main competitors will affect the future of the industry?"

How well your interviewer reacts and answers your questions gives you a great insight into the company.

The interview isn't just for them to see if you're the right fit for the organisation – if you're confident about your skills and ability to do the job, you should also be making sure they're the right fit for you.

How to handle the money issue

Generally, it's not a good idea to ask about pay or benefits, as this can make you seem more interested in what the organisation can do for you, rather than what you can do for them.

The question of remuneration can be very sensitive and often requires extended negotiations to reach a figure that is fair and acceptable to both the company and the individual. Some points to remember:

Most companies want to make a fair offer. They want to bring new employees on board at a salary level that provides incentive to change jobs that also is consistent with the company's existing salary structure for that position.

The days of 20% and 25% increases in compensation are gone. Inflation rates are down, all corporations are more conscious of maintaining consistency in existing salary structures, the economic growth in many industries has levelled off and the competition for better positions has increased. So be realistic in your expectations.

The position and opportunity is the single most important element of your decision. No amount of money will make a bad job good. A quality position, working with quality people in a dynamic work environment offers rewards that money can't buy.

Be flexible. Compensation packages are a combination of salary, reviews, titles and perks. These elements can be arranged and re-arranged – sometimes very creatively – to satisfy both the individual and the company.

If you're asked what salary you are looking for, try to avoid quoting a specific figure. Try something like this: "I'm very interested in working with you, and I feel I can make a meaningful contribution. I'm currently earning £..... per year and would hope that you would make me your best offer". It is best not to name a figure if at all possible.

How to say 'yes'

How you accept a job offer depends on how it was made to you. If you were offered it verbally, face-to-face, then you should accept it in the same way or over the phone. However, always back this up with a letter of acceptance, and expect a letter of appointment in return. If this process has been handled by email, feel free to use email yourself. Make sure you get formal confirmation of your new position, including start date and time and any forms you may need to supply or complete.

- As soon as you accept a new job, you're morally obliged to take yourself off all job sites and notify any agencies who may have been acting on your behalf. If you are on any other shortlists or have any other applications out there, inform the companies concerned.
- It goes without saying that you also need to let your current employer know you're resigning. Check the terms of your contract with them and make sure you give them adequate notice. This could also have a bearing on when you can start your new job.
- Make sure any references you're using are aware of the situation, and make sure their going to give you a glowing review!