

PREPARING FOR INTERVIEWS

Be aware of different types of interview

Most recruiters have a pre-planned approach or tactic that they use for interviews. Sometimes this may be very structured, and other times it may feel quite unstructured. It can be useful for your preparation and help you feel more relaxed in an interview, if you can recognise one or more of the approaches being used. Below is a summary of the commonly used approaches to interviews:

Biographical interviews

Sometimes referred to as career history interviews, this is a fairly traditional approach where recruiters work through your experience on your CV. It helps them understand your skill set, what you have experienced and what you have not, plus also your motives for moving between different jobs. Expect for the recruiter to be holding your CV in their hand and possibly writing notes on it.

Competency interviews

This approach requires recruiters to follow a series of set questions focussing on the competencies, capabilities or behaviours required in the role. Recruiters will have a set of criteria or indicators that they are looking for in an answer which will be relevant to the role. The theory is that it enables recruiters to understand whether an applicant has the skills required to do the job, even if perhaps they have not actually done it before (ie, they have transferable skills). It is supposed to eliminate any potential bias from someone's background (such as where they went to school) and give all applicants the same opportunity to shine in the interview.

Questions are typically asked like a funnel, with a broad opening question followed by further more specific or narrower probing questions. A typical question may start, "Tell me about a time when.....". Below is a sample of a competency approach with some sample interview questions and associated positive and negative indicators.

Working with People	
Competency definition: Demonstrates an interest in and understanding of others; Adapts to the team and builds team spirit; Recognises and rewards the contribution of others; Listens, consults others and communicates proactively; Supports and cares for others; Develops and openly communicates self-insight.	
<i>Describe a situation where it was important to that you identified and understood the needs of others.</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How did this come about? • How did you involve and communicate to those involved? • What was the outcome? 	
<i>Give me an example of when you had to be particularly supportive to others?</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How did you identify what type of support was needed? • What factors did you consider when trying to decide how best to support them? • To what extent do you think you understood their feelings and concerns? 	
<i>Tell me about a time you had to adapt your own style to work effectively with others in a team.</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How did you approach this? • What was the outcome? • What did you do to build team spirit? 	
Negative Indicators	Positive Indicators
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Little evidence of observing and analysing others' behaviour • Prefers to work alone or with a subset of the team • Causes disruptions or factions within the team • Is unaware of or does not act to address issues affecting team functioning • Fails to acknowledge others' contributions • Keeps information to self, rarely shares • Does not actively seeks others' input • Interrupts or argues without listening • Shows little support, or undermines others • Rarely offers encouragement • Does not take an active interest in other people's wellbeing (emotional or physical) • Displays little self insight about strengths and weaknesses 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Observes other people's behaviour, notices changes • Works well with a group of people • Encourages harmony and co-operation when working in at team • Quickly addresses issues that disrupt team functioning • Recognises the contribution of others • Shares information with others • Encourages others to share their views • Listens carefully • Provides support to others • Gives encouragement to others • Asks about other peoples' wellbeing (emotional or physical) • Communicates an awareness of own strengths and weaknesses

Taken from SHL's Universal Competency Framework

Note that some organisations specifically do not follow up with probing questions leaving applicants to provide all the evidence needed. Sometimes this can feel that you are not getting anything back from the recruiter, and it can bring self-doubt about how the interview is going. Rest assured, a lack of conversation from a recruiter may mean that they are following a process about treating everyone the same, and is probably not an indication that are not enjoying your interview!

Behavioural event interviews

This is a fairly specialist approach which is also targeted at understanding your competencies. However, as an applicant, you will probably not be aware of what competencies you are being assessed on. Typically, the recruiter will ask you to think of a specific event in your recent career

history that you feel is a good example of when you were achieving something (such as influencing a situation, or challenging under performance in others). They will then ask you to recount it in some detail, and may probe or prompt you further with questions like “what happened next?”, “what did you do then?”. What they are doing is providing you with every opportunity to demonstrate you have the competencies required in the role and they will be listening for evidence of this as you tell your story.

This approach can feel a bit weird at first, but again it is a good idea to remind yourself that it is a process and therefore the best tactic is to embrace it positively.

Strengths based interviews

This is a fairly new approach that is gaining popularity with recruiters. It is targeted at understanding your strengths and what you **enjoy** doing at work rather than what you **can** do. Typically, the recruiter will ask you to think about ‘what a good day at work looks like for you’ or ‘when you have achieved something that you were really proud of’. What they are doing is identifying your interests and passions, as we are irrevocably drawn to do things that play to our strengths – even when we are tired, stressed or disengaged. Remember be open and honest as there is not necessarily a right or wrong answer.

Conversational interviews

A skilled recruiter will be able to run your interview making it feel like a conversation or chat, but actually, through using good questioning and some of the techniques mentioned above, they will be listening for evidence of key criteria and motivations needed for the role. It may feel fairly satisfying as an applicant as the recruiter will be taking a genuine interest in you and your aspirations. Remember that although it is a conversation, it is also a process and a high feel-good factor at the end does not always mean you have performed better than in any other approach!

Pressure interviews

Less commonly used although apparently still a technique employed by some people, particularly for graduate recruitment schemes or people trying to enter universities, is the approach of deliberately putting people under pressure to see how they cope. It involves asking questions that at first do not seem relevant to the role, such as, “How many paperclips would it take to fill an Olympic sized swimming pool”, or “Sell me this drinks coaster”.

Again, remember it is just a process that does not require a correct answer necessarily. It is more about how you deal with it and whether you can reason or think logically under pressure. There is little you can do to prepare for it.

Telephone interviews

Telephone interviews can follow many of the above approaches it is just that they are held by telephone rather than face to face. Sometimes recruiters find it necessary to use this format if they have high volumes of people to shortlist, or they live a long way away. Usually, a telephone will be an earlier stage in a selection process before a smaller number of successful candidates are asked to come to meet the organisation in person.

Preparation and tips for the interview itself

Do not underestimate the importance of preparing for an interview. Here are a few things for you to think about in advance:

1. Know your career assets and career capital

Most of your life to date is a source of evidence and examples of your career capital: what you have to offer. It is a really useful exercise to go through your work responsibilities and non-work experiences to pick out the skills that you demonstrated, the expertise you gained and the knowledge you acquired in the course of these things. You can categorise them into lists or types so that you can draw on them to help you in interviews.

Use the exercise sheet “What you can offer” to help with this.

2. Anticipate possible competencies

Go through the job description, person specification and/or advert and produce a list of skills or competencies required in the role. Ask yourself if you were the recruiter, which competencies you would be asking about; which things are really important to make sure you have hired the right person. The aim is to try to anticipate and practise your responses to questions relevant to the job.

3. Structure your answers

To help you structure your answers to competency, or “What did you do” questions, try providing your answer around the STAR concept:

S: SITUATION Describe the Situation that you were in, including where, when and why.
T: TASK What Tasks did you undertake to deal with the situation?
A: ACTION What specific Action did you take to ensure the tasks were addressed?
R: RESULT What were the Results or outcomes of your action and what did you learn?
This technique is sometimes referred to as SOAR where ‘Task’ is replaced by ‘Objective’.

This approach is useful because it focuses your answers onto specific occasions, provides a structure so that you do not waffle, and helps you demonstrate your skills and competencies, your decision making and thought processes.

You will probably find you take several minutes to go through your examples using this approach. You are best to focus most of your time in the Actions section rather than too long setting the scene. Do not forget to use the first person and describe what you actually did. Do not be afraid to ask for a question to be repeated if you genuinely did not hear or understand it. If needs be, repeat back the question to the recruiter to check. Also, take a few seconds to compose your answer in your head rather than launching straight in. It is much worse to wander off talking about something irrelevant and lose your direction in your answer.

4. Practice

Try answering questions out loud to see how they sound and what it feels like saying them. Practise in front of a mirror if that helps. You are trying to make your answers feel natural and to put the

details of your experience into your memory bank so that you do not forget important things you want to say in the heat of the moment.

5. I, not we

Do not be afraid to talk about “I did” or “It was my idea to....”. This is all evidence of your experience, skills and achievements, and it is not arrogant to tell recruiters about it. Indeed, if applicants start saying “we did it”, it can make recruiters think that you did very little in the task and actually someone else was responsible for it not you. It could make you sound like you are recounting a story, not presenting evidence about your skills.

6. Know the company

As with tailoring your CV, it is useful to tailor your answers to the industry or company. For example, if you know that the company is expanding in certain areas, you can say “when my previous company expanded into these products, I was responsible for researching suitable online distributors” for example. It is all about mirroring the company to make it feel like you are a natural fit. It also shows that you have put in effort, that you are interested in the company and motivated to work there. All of these things can make you stand out as being different from other applicants.

7. Prepare your own questions

You must always have some useful questions to ask the company in an interview. This shows you are interested in the job, either at a macro level about the company, or about what the role might actually be like, and that you have done some research. Questions such as:

- I have read that there is a new senior management team. Can you tell me what the objectives are of this new team?
- What is the team like that I would be joining?
- What are some of the things the company stands for?
- What has your career progression been like in the company?
- What are some of the things you like about the company?
- Can you describe a typical day/week in the role?
- What training, development or support do you think I will need for the role?
- How has the vacancy arisen?

Try to avoid asking questions about pay, terms / conditions in the role, and certainly do not ask these questions without any other questions. If you do want to ask about pay, try phrasing it like it is a two-way street, rather than just what you can get from them: “How easily does my current pay fit within the pay scales for this role”, or “What are your thoughts on what my worth is for this type of role with you”.

8. Think about the impression you give

Think, and practise the first few minutes of an interview; the shaking hands, sitting down, where to put your coat etc. When shaking hands, make sure your grip is firm with all fingers but not gripping. Give the recruiter’s hand a quick one or two up-down movements (like a bounce), look the other person in the eye and smile. It is always reassuring to get off to a confident start.

Think also about what clothes you wear and that they are appropriate for the company, and that your shoes and hair are tidy. We do not encourage people to wear comedy ties and socks.

Remember that the whole visit to the offices is important including how you interact with the receptionists and other staff. You never know how much of your visit is part of the selection process, and certainly the whole impression counts.

9. Work out the practicalities

Nothing is worse than turning up to an interview hassled or even late. Do your preparation in advance, dry-run the route to work at the time of your interview, and arrive in plenty of time.

10. Gain feedback

Always ask for feedback after the selection process; interview, application form and other activities whether or not you were hired. Every piece of information is useful, now and in the future. Also, if you are invited for interview for a role that you are not sure whether you want, it might still be useful to go for the interview for practice and feedback as much as anything.

11. Nerves

Nerves are an important part of any performance but making sure that you are not too nervous and learning to manage your nerves is the key to giving a good interview. You may notice one or more of the following happening:

- Firstly, your temperature is likely to increase and you may notice that you have sweaty palms, that you feel slightly flushed and maybe even clammy.
- Second, adrenaline may be pumped into your system and this may make you feel shaky.
- Third, your respiration rate is liable to increase and this may make you feel stressed and panicky.
- Finally, nervous energy may cause you to consume body sugar with the result that your mouth starts to feel dry.

These effects may make you feel uncomfortable and different from normal. However, try not to misinterpret them as signs of fear, but that you are gearing up for a performance. Recognise the symptoms for what they are, and that they should not panic you, and are in fact there to help you perform better.

The best preparation you can do to manage nerves, is to do your preparation. As well as being prepared, you can try some relaxation and positive visualisation techniques just before you go into the interview.

Relaxation is mainly about learning to control your breathing and being able to relax your muscles. Shortly before you go into interview, take time to sit comfortably and calming in a chair and consciously relax your facial, shoulders, back, stomach and thigh muscles. Slow and deepen your breathing and try to stay in this state for a few minutes. Whilst relaxed, you can engage in some positive visualisation. This is all about seeing yourself performing well in the interview. You can see what you are wearing, how you are sitting in the chair. You can see yourself providing good eye contact with the recruiters and smiling. You can see the handshakes go well. You can hear yourself responding with some of your rehearsed answers, and can see yourself asking the questions you want to ask. Both of these techniques will help you bring some calm to your performance and will

help control your nerves appropriately. Further information on relaxation is available online or in self-help books on the high street.

Finally, remember that the recruiter is not your adversary and that it is not in their interest to try to trick you or pull you apart. Of course they will be judging you, but purely to find out what you have to say and can bring to them and their organisation.

Remember: performing in an interview is a skill and as such, needs practice, just like you would learning a sport, new hobby or some new skills at work.

Popular questions

There are some questions that often seem to come up in interviews, and it is worth being prepared for these. In our experience, the following are a good selection to be starting with:

- *Tell us about yourself.*
Often used as an opening question to get you talking. Spend no more than one or two minutes on it, perhaps focusing on your route to where you are now (eg, “After many years spent xxx, I decided to move into xxx where I was lucky enough to learn about xxx. From there I went to xxx and am now keen to xxx”). It is not usual for recruiters to be asking about your personal situation, marital status or hobbies with this question.
- *What is your motivation for working here?*
Do not answer it about the fact that it is because you got made redundant or you did not like your previous role. Answer it positively in relation to the new company.
- *What interests you about the role?*
This is a great opportunity to show that you are really enthusiastic about the role and have done some research.
- *What are your strengths? What strengths can you bring to the team?*
Try to tell the recruiter about things that are relevant to the job. Be honest though.
- *What are your weaknesses?*
Again, be honest without totally shooting yourself in the foot. It is a good idea to show self-awareness, that you know you have some aspects of your character that are not always helpful, but that you have taken active measures in your job and life to improve these things in yourself. Do not say that you do not have any weaknesses.
- *What do you know about the company?*
Again, this is a great opportunity to show that you are really enthusiastic about the role and have done some research.
- *What can you bring to the role?*
This is where you can evidence a sentence or two to highlight how your skills, expertise and achievements can be of value to the recruiter. Phrase your answers around what the recruiter is looking for in the job or organisation.