

Interviews



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Interviews

So, you've got an interview.... The first thing to say is well done! Generally employers will only interview people who they think can do the job, so now you've got an interview the task is to show that out of everyone being interviewed you are the *best* person for the job.

This advice sheet will cover general tips for interview success, some common interview formats, and some common interview questions (and how to prepare for them).

General Interview tips

- **Be Positive:** try to convey a positive, enthusiastic attitude. Interviewers will be looking for someone who is good to work with, so being upbeat, positive and enthusiastic are all helpful. Key to being positive is to avoid being negative about previous jobs, employers or colleagues.
Try this: practice answering questions like 'why did you leave your last job' or 'why do you want to leave your current post' in a positive way.
- **Be Confident:** employers are more likely to employ you if you appear to be confident and competent. This doesn't mean being *over*-confident and trying to pretend that you know everything about the job that you're applying for – true confidence involves asking for further information if you need it, or saying when you don't know much about a subject, but it also means being comfortable with presenting yourself in a positive light, being able to talk about what you *do know* and what you're good at as well as what you could bring to the job.
Try this: practice answering questions like 'why should we employ you and not another candidate?'
- **Be Relaxed:** giving answers in a calm relaxed manner will help you to appear confident. Rushing through answers, rambling, or freezing up may stop you from really being able to convey yourself positively at interview. Knowing yourself, and how you best deal with stress will help. Some ways to deal with stress are: making sure you're prepared, relieving stress by taking exercise, ensuring you have eaten properly, getting enough rest, trying a breathing exercise or a visualization.
Try this: consider moments that you have felt stressed before, compare them. When you handled stress better what were you doing or what had you done? What are your key methods to deal with stress and help you feel relaxed?



Key to being positive, confident and relaxed is **preparation**. Preparation involves identifying your interview 'outfit', knowing where you are going and who to ask for when you arrive, and crucially, understanding the format of your interview, and practicing potential interview questions and answers.

Interview preparation: features of an interview

Before you attend interview make sure you have read the full information about the interview provided by an employer. There are different formats and features for interviews and knowing what you may be expected to do is important. If you have been given limited information on interview format prior to the interview don't worry, normally at the start of every interview the interviewer will explain the format for the interview. Some things to look out for are given below.

Interview format

- **Panel vs One to One:** Some interviews will be 'panel' interviews: which means you will be interviewed by a 'panel' often comprising of three people, but sometimes up to five or six. At other times you may just be interviewed by one person.
- **Formal vs Informal:** Some interviews will be relatively formal, with a series of set questions. Sometimes these questions are provided to candidates *before* the interview – so check your documentation carefully. Informal interviews do not normally consist of set questions, but are more like a conversation. They may be conducted individually or with groups of candidates, they are sometimes used as screening interviews to select people for a second round of interviews. Even if an interview is described as informal you should prepare carefully – although the set up may be less formal you still need to think about your key messages and how to convey them.
- **Telephone vs Face to Face:** Some companies use telephone interviews at some stage in the recruitment process – often as a 'first interview' before selecting candidates for a second round of face to face interviews. Sometimes the interviewer is from an agency acting on behalf of the company rather than from the company itself, and sometimes the entire interview is automated with prerecorded questions that you have to respond to using your telephone keypad. On occasion, people at a significant distance from the employer may be offered (or may request) a telephone or video-conferenced interview as an alternative to a face to face interview.
- **Whole-day Interviews:** Alongside the interview itself it may be that a company lays on a series of other activities, so that the interview takes a whole morning or a whole day. Other activities commonly combined with interviews are given below.

Interview activities

- **Group work:** Some interviews contain a group work element. This is where a group of candidates are brought together and given an activity to engage in, often a discussion or problem solving task.



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The interviewers will observe how the group interacts, and how you interact with the group. It is important therefore that you take an active role in the group. It is also important not to approach the group activity as a 'competition', the interviewers will be looking at how you work in a team, *not* at whether you are the 'best' in the group.

- **Exercises:** Some interviews will contain business-simulation exercises to see how well you might operate in the workplace. Common exercises are case study exercises and in-tray exercises. In a case study exercise you are normally given a set of documents relating to a situation, asked to analyse them and give a report on your recommendations. In an in-tray exercise you are given details about your role and your organisation and then you are given a set of emails, correspondence or reports and asked to take decisions, recommend actions, and prioritise your workload. Both of these exercises are normally timed, and afterwards you are normally asked to talk about what you did and to justify your actions. It is important with exercises to stay calm, read the instructions fully, work as quickly and accurately as you can, and then to be able to explain what you did.
- **Presentations:** Some interviews will contain a presentation, this may be part of the interview itself or may be delivered at a separate time. You may be given a topic or choice of topics in advance, or may be given the topic on the day with some time to prepare. With presentations it is important to prepare fully and structure your presentation – making sure you have a clear introduction and conclusion and several key points in between. When you are preparing your presentation, consider how you are going to present – make sure you feel confident and comfortable with your mode of presentation, unless otherwise directed you may want to use powerpoint, other visual aids, exercises or audience participation or a combination of these. You will often be asked questions about your presentation, so make sure you are comfortable with the topic, and try and anticipate any potential questions.
- **Psychometric Tests:** the interview process may include some form of psychometric test, testing your personality, your literacy, numeracy, problem solving skills or other skills. A number of practice tests are available for literacy, numeracy and problem solving (check the 'applying for work' pages on our website for further details: www.uhi.ac.uk/careers). Personality tests are harder to prepare for because they are not 'tests' so much as personality indicators, and are used to profile the kind of person you are and your working style. These questionnaires will contain a series of questions to which there is often no clearly 'right' answer. In addition the questionnaires normally have a built in consistency measure to check how consistent your answers are. Therefore normally the best guidelines are to answer the questions honestly.
- **Informal Elements:** Alongside the interview itself sometimes an employer will provide activities such as a tour of or presentation about the company, and activities like lunch. These may seem like 'easy' elements of the interview, but it is important to be aware that employers may well be looking at things like how well you interact with other candidates and members of staff, the interest you show in the company (through the questions you ask for example) and your general conduct.



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Interview preparation: practice questions

Once you have checked the information about your interview and are prepared for any additional activities, it is important to practice potential interview questions. Even if your interview is going to be informal, practicing answers to these questions can help you gather your thoughts and become clear on what kinds of things you want to say. Some common questions are given below with some tips on how to answer them.

‘Why do you want this job?’

This is a question that is very useful to prepare for as it will appear in some form or other in almost all interviews. Your answer to this question should act a bit like an introduction in an essay – it is a summary of exactly why you want the job and what you will bring to the post.

This question is your key chance to state why it is *this* job in *this* company that you want. Make sure your answer is not too general, so rather than ‘I want this job because I’d like to work in retail’ you would say something more particular like ‘I love this job because I’ve got experience in retail and would love to develop a career in the sector. I feel like working in a customer services role would suit me well, because I’m such a people person, and enjoy working with customers directly. And I would love to work at your company because of your strong reputation as a local retailer’. Structuring your answer is important as it will help you not to ramble, to be concise and to convey your key points.

Exercise 1: Structuring your answers

Having three or four main points or ideas in your answer often makes it easier to remember the key points you want to convey and for your interviewer to follow your answer. When practising answers think about what your three points could be. In the question ‘Why do you want this job?’ try these three points:

- 1) This job suits my interests, which are:....
- 2) I have the skills to do it really well, and these skills are:....
- 3) And I would particularly love to work in this role and for this company because:...

You may use other three part structures such as: talking about your past, present, future (I have just finished... I am currently looking for... and this appeals to me because in the future I want to....) or using three different kinds of experience (this job appeals to me because I have studied... I have experience in... and I have worked as a volunteer at....) Try thinking of other three part answers – and see how you get on.



‘What could you bring to this role?’

This question is asking you about your skills and experience for the job. This kind of question is very common in interviews. It may also be phrased as ‘what are your key skills’, ‘what skills and experience could you bring to this job’, ‘what kind of person do you think would suit this job’ and so on. It is very difficult to predict the form that this question will take, but the most important thing is that you are prepared to say what your key skills are, you are able to say why they are important for the job, and you are able to give examples of times when you have demonstrated these skills as this will help you prepare for different variations of the question.

Exercise 2: My skills

Knowing what skills you have and being able to talk about them will help you to sell yourself at interview. Try this:

- 1) Reflect on your key experiences in education, work, voluntary work, or other outside activities. Identify key ‘successes’ and then think about what kinds of skills you showed at these times. List these skills.
- 2) Check the job description and person specification (if there is one) for the job you’re applying for. Identify the key skills that the employer might be looking for, or that might be appropriate in the job. List these skills.
- 3) Compare your two lists. Skills that ‘cross over’ and appear on both lists are probably good ones to talk about at interview, as they are both what the employer wants and skills that you *genuinely* feel you have. Remember that sometimes similar skills have different names, so if the employer wants ‘customer service skills’ and you have written on your list that you have ‘people skills’ these may well be similar things.
- 4) Remember that the best skills to talk about are:
 - a. Core skills for the job: for example if you are applying for a job as a sales adviser, sales skills, or customer service skills are likely to be core skills.
 - b. Specialist skills or experience: that is skills or experience that you have that may be useful in the job, but which are unusual and therefore that other people may not have. So for example ‘team work’ is a skill most people may be able to demonstrate but managing or leading a team is a skill that relatively fewer people have. Be aware though that whatever skills you talk about *must* be relevant for the job. Talking about managing or leading teams in some interviews may actually put the employer off employing you if these skills are not part of the job itself.



‘Can you give us an example of a time when...?’

‘**Competency based**’ interviews will often include questions in this format. Competency based interviews are commonly used in local authority settings and in some big companies. These questions can seem difficult to predict and to prepare for but in fact with a little bit of work you can prepare yourself for the majority of these questions relatively easily.

Exercise 3: Preparing examples

A good ‘example’ to give at interview is of an occasion where you faced a specific challenge or had a specific task to do, and where the outcome was positive. You can take a ‘four part’ approach to describing the example, called the STAR approach:

S – Situation: describe the background to the example, outline the situation or the problem.

T – Task: describe how you understood the situation or the problem, what you decided were the tasks you needed to undertake and how you planned them.

A – Action: describe what you did.

R – Result: describe the result (it should always be positive!)

You can’t possibly prepare an answer for every possible ‘example’ question, but what you can do is prepare 3-5 really good examples that demonstrate lots of different skills. Try this:

- 1) Think of a couple of times when you faced a specific challenge or problem (challenges or problems are good as they tend to require quite a lot of skills to resolve them). Pick one specific challenge which you dealt with and where the outcome was positive (this is critical, a positive outcome shows that whatever you did worked).
- 2) Using this specific example, talk it through to yourself (or write it down) in terms of the STAR approach.
- 3) Once you have done this, try to identify all the different skills that this example could be an ‘example’ of – perhaps team work, communication, problem solving, planning, taking initiative etc.
- 4) Try this exercise again until you have between 3 and 5 good examples. Try to choose examples from different kinds of aspects of your work or study, as this may help you to ensure that you cover the widest range of skills.

Once you have clear in your own mind the 3-5 examples of challenges that you have faced and how you have dealt positively with these, then look at the ‘person specification’ for the job (if there is one). The person specification will list skills and experience that the job requires. If you are going to be asked an ‘example’ question, it is more likely to be around one of these skills than about something else – so make sure that somewhere in one of your examples you have evidence of each of the skills in the person specification.



'If you were....and this happened.... what would you do...?'

Questions like this are '**scenario**' questions – typically they ask you to imagine that you are doing the job already and that you face a problem and then ask you what you would do. Some common scenarios include how you would handle a team member who isn't pulling their weight, a customer who is being difficult, or a service-user who has a drink or drugs problem, but there are lots of possibilities. These questions test whether or not you *really* understand the job, including the challenges. There is normally no 'right' answer. The art to responding to these questions is to show that you can identify the main challenges and then to identify a clear plan of action about what you might do. The best answers are ones where you end by giving an example of a similar challenge you have faced and what you did, or where you talk about what you have observed another professional doing in a similar situation.

Exercise 4: Anticipating Scenario Questions

Scenario questions are difficult to anticipate. There are two main ways that you can prepare for them:

- 1) **Look at the job description:** try to imagine actually doing the job. Imagine what you would be doing on a daily basis, and then try to imagine what difficulties you might face – e.g. if it's a job working with the public what kind of person would be difficult to work with? If it's a job managing a team, what kind of team member would be challenging?
- 2) **Do some research:** often company websites will give you more detailed background, and may give you more of a rounded picture of the job. Read company reports and look at strategic plans – these will often reveal company priorities and challenges.
- 3) **Get work experience:** if you are applying for a particular kind of job or course (e.g. a job or course in social care, social work, teaching, a managerial role) getting work experience can be really helpful. When you're doing work experience, identify people doing the job you want to do, watch what they do and how they act – what problems do they face, how do they manage them? Keeping a diary of your work experience can help.
- 4) **Try work shadowing or a professional discussion:** if you have a job interview next week you probably don't have time to find work experience. You may, though, have time for organising half a day's work shadowing, or you might be able to set up a meeting with a relevant professional for an 'information interview'. More information about setting up work experience is given on our 'work experience' advice sheet, and information about 'information interviewing' is given on our 'researching careers' advice sheet.



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Free confidential advice is available to all students on an HNC course or above via telephone, videoconference or email. Contact our advisers by clicking on 'speak to an adviser' on our website. This service is also available to graduates within two years of graduating from an HNC course or higher.

As well as general advice and guidance, our advisers also conduct mock interviews for students and graduates.