

Types of Interview

This booklet deals with interviews as we have come to know them, i.e. the traditional format in which the candidate is interviewed by three or four people in a session lasting approximately 45 minutes to an hour. Questions can range from your application to your leisure interests and will certainly address your motivation for the job. This *traditional* format varies a great deal, however, and new interviewing practices have been adopted by employers in recent years.

Interviews now come in different formats and as well as the *traditional* form there are three you need to take particular care with:

Informal interviews

The most misleading words in the interview game are, “*Just come in for a friendly chat*”, “*It will be totally informal*”, “*Simply a chance to get to know each other.*” Be on your guard, because even if the interviewer genuinely believes that it is informal, he or she is nevertheless assessing your suitability for the job. Remember that the person interviewing is not your friend, is not a career adviser and is looking for somebody to add value to his or her organisation. Although you yourself should act in a relaxed and informal way, the general rules about interviews still apply and you should prepare your answers in the usual way.

Structured interviews

Some companies, notably Bass and British Telecom, feel that the traditional interview is haphazard and unscientific and can only be objective if a structured apportion is taken. In structured interviews all candidates are asked the same questions and are asked to give examples as evidence of the skills they claim to have. Such questions as, “*Give me an example of when you received positive feedback from a customer,*” are common. This direct approach can be a little off-putting but it certainly goes some way to making sure that equal opportunity issues are addressed. Again, the normal rules apply and you need to be well-prepared.

Telephone interviews

These are very common in the sales sector and have spread to a wide variety of employers as they become more customer-focussed. Telephone interviews are seen as a cost-effective way of screening out unsuitable candidates. You should be prepared for some questions even when you phone for an application form. Some companies will not send you an application form if you do not succeed at this stage.

Although the rules for successful interviews are the same as for face-to-face interviews, the lack of eye contact means that your tone of voice is very important. A monotonous drone would be disastrous and you should remember to smile as this communicates to the interviewer.

Although interviews of whatever kind have been shown to be rather hit-and-miss affairs, being far less objective than was previously assumed, they are still an essential part of the selection process. You need to know how to handle them. Although practice is the best teacher, this booklet will help you to avoid the major pitfalls.

Interview Preparation

The basis of a sound performance at interview is preparation: without it you will not get the job but you will also not learn anything from the experience either. You should be able to answer the following simple questions in a clear and direct way, giving concrete examples to back up your claims about yourself.

- **Why do you want to be a lawyer, a police officer or a teacher?**
Be specific. You should be able to express your reasons in a clear and precise manner. If you aren't sure why you want to enter the profession you will not sound convincing. List your reasons. Try to give positive reasons rather than saying, "*Well, I knew I didn't want ,*" or the hopelessly vague, "*I want something interesting.*"
- **What qualities make a good accountant or transport manager?**
Everybody knows that teachers need to have patience and that sales people need to be good talkers but you need to go beyond such a shallow analysis. Teachers themselves stress organisational skills and sales people need to be good listeners.
- **What qualities do you have to offer?**
Again be specific. Write them down and be prepared to back up your claims with **evidence and examples**. Do not simply assert that you have "good communication skills", give an example such as; being the student representative on the course committee. Which qualities do **you** want to get across to the interviewers?
- **What do you know about X Company?**
What do you know about chiropody as a profession?
Find out all you can about the employer. You should be in the habit of scanning the quality papers, especially the business pages for references to the industry or profession you are interested in. Who are the main players? What are the current issues in the industry? Use the employer section in the careers library and the CD-ROM facilities in the University libraries. As a way of getting background information, the **Europe Intelligence Wire** database in the Careers Development Service will be a revelation.
- **What don't you know about Bloggs and Co?**
At the end of the interview you will be asked if you have any questions. If you have done your homework on the employer you will have the chance to leave them with a good impression. You can, for example, ask about their expansion plans or the future direction of the profession.
- **Dress**
You should dress neatly and smartly which means a tie and suit for men and a conservative suit for women. Even if the interviewer is more casual in their dress, for example in a design studio or a community centre, you should err on the side of caution. By dressing in a conservative way you are simply showing that you are taking the job seriously. If you adopt a more flamboyant style you cannot be sure how the messages you are sending will be picked up.
- **Arrival**
Be sure you know where the interview is, when you have to be there and your travel arrangements. It always takes longer than you think and having to rush can affect your confidence.
- **Meeting people**
Be polite to everyone you meet. Often staff who are not formally involved in the interview will be asked for their impressions.



- ① Shake hands warmly.
 - ② Try to smile as this will help you relax and appear confident.
- Sit back with an upright posture - body language is important.

Points to consider when preparing for your interview!

- Re-read and become familiar with your application before the interview – a good application prompts many of the questions you are asked in the interview.
- Be prepared for a very direct start to the interview, questions such as this one are common:

“Please tell us in about five minutes why you want this job and what makes you think you would be any good at it?”

- Make sure you know the difference between wanting ***this*** job and wanting ***a*** job.

**If you want the job you will be nervous - that is only natural.
Good preparation will make positive use of your adrenaline.**

Interviews – The Golden Rules

- **Always be positive.**

Never criticise, complain or be derogatory about anybody or anything. Even if you had good reason for leaving your last job or placement do not blame the employer. It is simply too easy to come across in a negative way and who wants to employ a whinger? Even if you were desperate to leave your last job say that you had gone as far as you could in that position and you are now looking for a new challenge.

- **Never offer negative information about yourself.**

Sounds obvious but people do, often because they are nervous or because they somehow feel that if they own up to failings it will make their positive claims all the more credible. Don't bring up something negative in the hope of pre-empting a difficult question - you could be making an issue of something which was not relevant.

- **Never offer excuses**

People who do are very expensive to employ and we all have skeletons in the cupboard. If you are asked about mediocre 'A' level results, for example, don't blame the Maths teacher or the hamster dying, instead admit that you seriously underestimated the work involved. Don't leave it at that though, be positive by pointing that your subsequent degree results showed you learned your lesson.

- **If you don't understand a question, always ask for clarification.**

Being nervous you may think you should know what they are talking about but, again, people who are afraid to say they don't know can be very expensive to employ. You will probably have to ask them what they mean in any case.

- ***Nil desperandum* - never give up.**

Even if you think it is going badly, don't throw the towel in. It's hard to judge how you are doing in the middle of an interview and it's easy to assume the worst. You may be right but you certainly don't know how well, or how badly, the other candidates have done.

- **Keep you eyes on the interviewer.**

You will pick up valuable visual clues as to how long your replies should be and when the interviewer has had enough you will pick up the signal. If you are interviewed by a large panel, address your replies to the person who asked the question but "include" the others by glancing at them as you speak.

- **Don't respond to (what you think is) aggression**

It would be bad interview technique for a selector to be openly aggressive but if you are used to the caring, supportive atmosphere of Wolverhampton you may be taken off guard by a direct question. Even if you feel the question is unfair do not respond in kind. That is not to say you have to put up with sexist remarks such as your ability to cope with the job and a family, but an interview is a stressful situation and you may not have the time to make a considered response.

- **Be aware of body language and verbal mannerisms**

Body language is important but you should not get so hung-up on it that you become too frightened to walk into the interview room. Research has shown that 55% of communication is made-up of non-verbal signs and you should avoid the more obvious turn-offs. Maintain eye contact with the interviewers (without staring, of course); try not to cross your arms in a defensive position and don't let your bag or case become a barrier to communication by putting it on your knee. Try not to fidget or allow verbal mannerisms to creep in.

Basically they can be very *um* irritating ***if you see what I - er - mean, OK? Obviously.***



★REMEMBER★

Smile!

You are allowed to. You are not being interrogated by the KGB. If you appear relaxed this will have a positive effect on the panel.

Likely Interview Questions

"What questions will I be asked?" is one of the most common questions careers advisers themselves get asked. The answer is, of course, that 80% of the questions can easily be predicted because they relate to your motivation and the qualities essential to the job. There will always be questions that you cannot prepare for but most will be no surprise. It is highly likely that the panel will have a matrix listing the essential and desirable skills and qualities required for the job which should have been made clear from the job description that you may have been sent with the application form. You should re-read the job description and your application before the interview.

"What are employers looking for?" There is nothing really mysterious about this one. It costs a small fortune to train a recruit at graduate level and even those who have studied quite vocationally specific subjects take a long time before they really earn their corn. First and foremost they are testing your motivation to do the job. Employers need to see a clear link between you and the job, such as previous experience in a similar field or a final year project which examined some aspect of the industry or profession. If you can't point to these clear links you will need to analyse the job thoroughly and be quite direct in saying you possess the necessary attributes - do not make the interviewer do the work.

"As a police officer you have to deal with all kinds of people. Throughout my time at Wolverhampton I worked part-time as a taxi driver and I feel I can handle old people and drunks."

It is very important to be prepared for the follow-up question:

"OK. So just how do you handle drunks?"

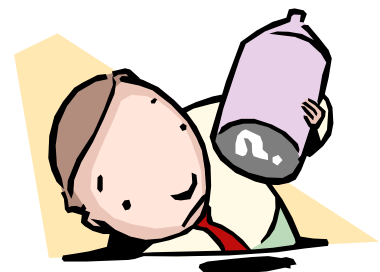
If you are vague the interviewer will pin you down:

"When I was captain of the hockey team I developed leadership skills, I feel this makes me a good team leader".

★REMEMBER★

There is no magic formula, no "right" answer.

Be very wary of books that promise to give readers the right answer to tough interview questions - Your answer will be as individual as you are.



Example Questions

Question: *"Where do you see yourself in 5 years' time?"*

Answer: *"Sitting where you are, doing your job."*

or

Question: *"We have heard about your strengths, tell us about your weaknesses."*

Answer: *"Gee, that's a hard question but I guess it's my uncompromising commitment to ever-improving standards that just possibly means I demand too much of myself and, just occasionally, others."*

The answer to the first question is trite and sounds like an unconfident person trying to appear confident. The interviewer wants to know that you have researched the careers paths in your chosen profession, that you have a clear focus based on realistic ambitions. How about:

"As an engineer I want to build on my degree and achieve chartered status. I like the idea of project management and I see this as a natural development from that."

The second answer very obviously seeks to deflect the interviewer and is wide open to a follow-up. You cannot wriggle out of admitting any weaknesses at all but in answering the question truthfully be careful not to admit a failing which is central to the job. A careers adviser could not admit to being irritated by people, for example, and a police officer would be foolish to admit being hot-tempered. But both could admit not being terribly organised with paperwork, provided they show they are aware of it and have a strategy for overcoming that weakness. Nobody is perfect and we all have weaknesses, being aware of them is the first step to doing something about them.

Typically questions can be arranged in groups:

- **Your knowledge of the job in question:**

Why did you apply for this job?

Tell us what you know about personnel?

How would you define the term marketing?

Employers want to know what you think, not a textbook answer, something you think they want to hear.

Example Questions continued...

- **You may be asked questions like:**

What do you understand by the term "management"?

What qualities and skills do you have which make you suitable for the job?

Employers are looking for more than just the obvious ones.

- **Your knowledge of the organisation**

What do you know about our business?

Why did you apply to us?

What do you think of our products/service?

Who do you see as our major competitors?

Which sectors of the market are they targeting?

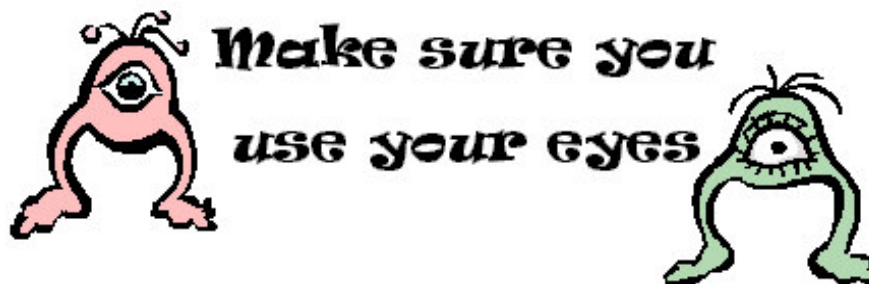
What do you consider to be the main difficulties/issues facing the industry/profession?

Be Honest, but constructive.

★REMEMBER★

Employers will be looking to see if you are genuinely interested in working for them:

If you are shown around the building or factory



Example Questions continued...

- **Your career focus and motivation**

What made you decide on this career?

What other jobs have you applied for?

They are looking for consistency here. It's fine to admit to Sainsbury's that you have also applied to Tesco and Asda - they actually expect it - but they will be alarmed if you say you have applied for Social Work and the RAF as well.

Do you consider there to be any drawbacks in being a police officer/sales manager/librarian?

All jobs have minus points. Here they are checking that you have a realistic view of what the job involves so be honest but positive.

What do you see as your career path over the next five years?

How mobile are you?

If applying for retail management they are very keen to check this. In other cases they may be checking that you have not applied to them simply because of location, that York is a pleasant place to live or that it gives access to your favourite football club.

- **Your education**

Basically they are checking that you are the kind of person who makes rational decisions rather than being carried along by events

Why did you choose this subject?

Clear reasons are required, not just that your best 'A' level grade was in

Why did you choose Wolverhampton?

Yes we know Wolverhampton is not Harvard but do not make the big mistake of thinking that employers always prefer Oxbridge graduates. Many of the people who have become senior managers today haven't all had opportunity of Higher Education, and therefore might not understand the suggested hierarchy among universities. In any case you shouldn't ask yourself if a first class honours from Wolverhampton is always inferior to a third from Bristol? Never say or imply that Wolverhampton was the only place that would take you.

Example Questions continued...

For mature students: *Why did you choose to do a degree?*

Give positive reasons rather than simply saying you wanted to get away from a dead-end job. Present your degree, if possible, as a linear development of your career rather than as a right-angle change of direction.

How is your degree relevant to this job?

You need to be clear about the transferable skills gained from your subject. These may not be immediately apparent. For example a design student applying for the Police Accelerated Promotion Scheme could point out that police work is largely visual and that visual detail is very important; that as a design student you were well used to working on several pieces at the same time and that you are capable of immediately focusing on the task in hand. A History graduate would point out the importance of evaluation and judgement inherent in the subject, that Ancient History is about making judgements when there aren't enough facts and Modern History is about making judgements when there are too many and usually conflicting information.

what have you got out of your time at university?

Why did you choose that subject for your final year project?

Your project involved working as part of a team How do you handle somebody who isn't pulling his or her weight?

What did you get out of your year abroad?

Everybody says they learned to appreciate another culture, try to be more specific and give more detail.

• **Your leisure and extra curricular interests**

What you put down on the application form often sets the agenda here. Do not be tempted to exaggerate or tell untruths, a mildly probing question will uncover this. At the same time you should not assume that your voluntary work, for example, is irrelevant to the job. Employers are looking for rounded personalities who are interested in people.

What exactly has your membership of the film club involved?

You were captain of the hockey team, how do you motivate a team?

Have you had do you deal with awkward people in organising these activities?

General Questions

If it is true that 80% of questions can be predicted and therefore prepared for, that still leaves a significant proportion which will come as a surprise. These will usually fit into one of three categories:



Situational questions

Such as:

"You are a primary teacher about to take the register one morning. A huge tattooed brute storms into the classroom shouting that one of the children has bullied his daughter. There is a clear danger of him becoming violent. What do you do?"

or

"As a supermarket manager you are presented with four times the usual number of staff ringing in sick. It is Saturday morning. What do you do?"

Unless you have experience of the retail grocery trade or teaching you will most probably get the answer wrong but that is not the point. They merely want to see that you can think logically under pressure and that you can sort out sensible priorities without panicking. Do not be afraid to think out loud; resist the temptation to rush out an answer.



Questions on current affairs

Such as:

Your views on Britain's entry to the single European currency, particularly if you are applying for a management post. Again there is no right answer but they do expect you to know what is going on in the world. Current affairs questions were once very common but seemed to go out of fashion. Recent reports to the Careers Development Service indicate they may be making something of a come-back. They are favoured by the European Commission and *JET* (teaching in Japan).



Questions which defy all logic

Such as:

Which you cannot see the point of. It may be that the people on the panel have no real experience of interviewing and may be asking questions which have no real purpose. "Questions such as "What makes you angry?" will probably have no deep psychological meaning and in extreme cases you may see the other members of the panel squirm in embarrassment. Just do your best and do not respond in kind.

Your Questions to the Panel

Some psychologists claim that interviews are decided on first impressions, on what happens in the first two minutes but nobody talks about the last two minutes. This is a golden opportunity for you to ask intelligent questions about the job, the industry or profession and your prospects and leave the selectors with a good impression.

- **Prepare plenty of good questions. You might not use them all but you are expected to have some.**
- **If all your questions have genuinely been covered during the course of a presentation or a tour of the factory, don't ask questions for the sake of it. It is advisable to think of a couple of questions that actually spring from what they say or show you, or for you to keep one in reserve.**
- **Don't ask questions if the answer is obvious or if it is covered in the brochure or job description they sent you.**
- **If you have done your homework on the organisation this is your chance to let them know:**

*"I was reading in the Economist last month that you have increased market share in northern Europe.
To what do you attribute this?"*

- **Try to avoid questions which focus on the incidental benefits to you. The provision of luncheon vouchers should not decide your career direction but you *are* expected to ask about your starting salary towards the end of the interview if it has not already been discussed.**
- **Do ask about training, likely career progression and developments in the industry or profession.**

Your questions could include:

Could you tell me more about the training programme? I'm particularly interested in...

What do graduates think of your induction training?

What support do trainees get? Are they allocated a mentor?

What opportunities are there for staff training/professional development after initial training?

How is performance measured?

Could you tell me more about the appraisal scheme? How often does it occur?

Possible questions to the panel continued.....

What would be a typical career path for a recent graduate with your organisation?

Where would I be based?

How frequently would you expect me to be moved?

Do you offer any help in finding accommodation?

Are there any opportunities to work abroad?

Could I expect to make use of my languages?

How many people would there be in my team? And what is their background?

How flexible are job functions? Do you encourage changing roles?

How do you see the company performing/the profession developing over the next few years?

What would you say were the defining characteristics of this organisation?

When could I expect to know whether I have been successful?

Is it your policy to give unsuccessful candidates a debriefing or feedback on their performance? You should note that you have no right to demand feedback and although many organisations do, some consider it too time consuming.

- Two or three questions will normally be enough and the panel's answers will normally be brief unless you are lucky enough to be able to spark a discussion. Remember that most people like talking about their job and giving their views on the profession.
- Keep your eyes on the interviewers, they will provide you with the visual prompts for you to know when to finish.

Afterwards – The Post Mortem

Whatever the eventual outcome of the interview, you will be acutely aware of the questions you had difficulty in answering. Make notes as soon as possible after the interview and think of a better way to answer them for next time.

But as we now know successful interview technique is more than simply spotting or predicting the questions. Ask yourself if the thorny questions were difficult because of lack of preparation.

Above all you should ask yourself if you got your point across. What were the essential qualities you wanted to communicate? How well did you succeed? If you didn't get your message across was it because you were not clear enough in your own mind? Did you clearly articulate what you could do for them rather than saying what the benefits were to you? As John F Kennedy could have said;

“Ask not what your company can do for you but what you can do for the company”.

Good Luck !