



Nottinghamshire
County Council

Corporate Learning & Development Good Practice Guide



Interview Skills

Learning & Organisational Development
2011



“... a game of two halves ...”

Introduction

If you ask someone to make a list of their favourite things, being interviewed is not going to be something on many people's list. However, interviews are something we all have to face at some point – sometimes by choice, sometimes not – but either way it is important that we are able to make the most of the situation and get the best result.

There are many kinds of interview, but in this guide we will focus on recruitment interviews.

Interviews are often described as **stressful** and **difficult** experiences. The reasons for this include:

- The result of the interview could mean getting a job, getting a promotion or keeping a job – **or not!** So the stakes are high in terms of how it will affect your life.
- During the interview – there is a spotlight on you and you have to 'perform' well because you are being assessed.

Also, the process may also involve a test of some kind or having to make a presentation – with only **one chance to get it right**.

You cannot change the level of importance of the interview – but you can influence the level of stress by how you prepare for the interview and how you think and feel about yourself.

This guide is designed to help you by giving you tips and hints as to how to prepare for and behave during interviews to present yourself in the best light.

The other thing to remember about interviews is the role and objectives of the interviewer (effectively the representative of the employer). They are investing a lot of time (and money) in getting the right people in the right job. Employing you also means investing in your training etc... so they want to get it right.

To do this they want to see you at your best – in other words they are not trying to make things difficult and stressful for you – rather than setting you up to fail, they are setting you up to succeed – so they can select from the best.

Also, if you are unsuccessful at a recruitment interview, this does not necessarily mean you have 'failed' – it only means that on this occasion there was someone better suited to the position than you. Your strengths, qualifications, experience and qualities have not lessened.

Lastly, remember, your experience at interview also gives you the opportunity to assess the employer – for example, if they did not impress you, would you accept an offer even if they made one?



An inside job...

Where the interview is for an internal promotion or as part of a re-organisation there can be a number of additional hurdles over and above stress and technique to overcome.

Two common situations are:

They already know me!

The most frequent mistake that internal candidates make – is thinking that you **do not** have to **say it** as the interviewer (*the employer*) already knows you, what you are like and your past achievements.

Also, that if you miss any details out – it does not matter as the interviewer will fill in the gaps for themselves

This is **not** the case – you **must** conduct the interview as if you have never met the interviewer and/or panel before and give them the **'full version'** – as any decision will be based only on the evidence provided at the interview.

Actually, the interviewer is not allowed to take into account what they know about you as this would not be fair for the other candidates. It is all about what you do on the day.

Not by choice:

If the interview is not by choice, for example job re-application as part of an organisation re-structure, any feelings of anger or sense of in-justice need to be dealt with **in advance** of the interview.

It is unlikely that the person(s) undertaking the interview is personally or solely responsible for the situation – so there is no need or point showing these feelings on the day or taking any frustrations out on them. You will only do yourself a disservice in the end.

Instead, approach the situation positively - the interview is the opportunity to show you understand the changes in the organisation and how you can contribute to the future direction of the service and the Authority

Remember: In a large organisation, people undertaking the interview, most likely, are themselves going through the same re-structure process or have done so in the past – so they do understand



Before you go...

Great News! You have been invited to attend an interview. It is safe to say that the employer is definitely interested in what you have to offer. So, the key factors you need to consider now are:

- Boosting your confidence and ensure you perform at your best on the day
- Knowing how to really sell yourself
- Securing your ideal job and get the best package available

So, what do you need to do?

Research

- Look committed and find out as much as possible about the organisation.
- Visit their web site for more information on the organisation.
- Read their annual report (if available), which you can get by telephoning them.

Interestingly, over 60% of employers expect job applicants to have done some research into their organisation before a job interview. You may be asked questions like:

- What does the organisation do?
- Who are its primary competitors and/or partners?
- What current issues or events are of interest to the organisation?
- What are the organisation's mission, vision and values?

Job Description

- Read the job description carefully - make sure you meet all the criteria detailed in the job description (and/or person specification) and that you are technically qualified to do the job.
- Prepare examples from your previous roles to demonstrate your ability to do this job

Confirm Details / Location

- Write down the interview time/date to enable you to double-check.
- Ensure that you have the correct address / building number etc and a map/directions
- Make sure that you know whom to ask for at the reception desk.

Rehearse

- It's always worth getting used to hearing yourself answer formal questions. If your current employer doesn't offer interview practice, try getting a friend to do it.
- If you have been asked to prepare presentation – rehearse that too – especially if you will be using any presentation tools (lap-top, projectors... etc.) If you have been told you will complete a literacy/numeracy test – practice by completing sample tests in books or on the internet

On the Day...

Personal Presentation

Look your smartest and show your most professional side during the interview. An employer is more likely to hire someone who is well presented and who will therefore best represent their organisation. Even if the organisation states the dress code is 'casual' – still make sure your clothes are suitable, clean and well turned out.

Punctuality

Arrive on time.

Plan your journey, allowing plenty of time to arrive. If you are unavoidably delayed, notify the company immediately giving the reason and your estimated time of arrival.

During the interview

- Introduce yourself courteously. Show tact and good manners at every opportunity
- Express yourself clearly
- Be confident and maintain poise. The ability to handle your nerves during the interview will come across as confidence in your ability to handle the job. Keep a glass of water handy for 'dry mouth' moments
- Watch your body language - try to stay as 'open' and relaxed as possible. Don't cross everything and don't fidget
- Be prepared to show how your experience would benefit the company
- Take time to think and construct your answers to questions to avoid rushing into a vague and senseless reply
- Don't be afraid of silence - take the time to form your responses. This is a sign of a steady and confident mind. If you need a moments thought – feel confident and tell the interviewer this
- Demonstrate that you are sufficiently motivated to get the job done well and that you will fit in with the organisational structure and the team in which you will work
- Always talk in a positive manner
- Maintain eye contact with the interviewer
- Be assertive without being aggressive
- Steer clear of one-word answers. 'Yes' and 'no' responses don't tell the interviewer anything
- Answer the question you've been asked - don't ramble on about everything you know
- Don't tell them what they already know, especially about the organisation. Don't just regurgitate the brochures you've read – instead share observations or insights you have gained about the organisation
- Ask the interviewer to clarify anything you don't understand
- Thank the interviewer as part of your farewell.



Common Pitfalls

During the interview ensure that you **do not** allow the following to happen:

- Be late for the interview. Tardiness is a sign of irresponsibility or disorganisation and the employer could take it as what to expect in the future
- Arrive unprepared for the interview
- Say unfavourable things about previous employers
- Make excuses for failings
- Give vague responses to questions
- Show lack of career planning - no goals or purpose could convey the impression you're merely shopping around or only want the job for a short time
- Show too much concern about **rapid** career advancement – as this indicates you are less interested in the job itself – and more about how you can use it as a stepping stone
- Overemphasise money. Your interviewing goal is to sell yourself to the interviewer and to get an offer of employment. Salary discussion is secondary
- Refuse to travel and/or relocate. Always be open for discussion concerning travel and relocation. The employer may be talking about future plans, not present
- Show any reservations you may have about the role/company. You can always turn down second interviews and job offers after you have had time to appraise your concerns in the cold light of day
- Leave your mobile phone on during the interview



Typical Questions and Sample Answers

Here are some typical questions. There is no magic answer or script but here are some suggestions as to what to include in your responses.

"Why do you want to work for us?"

Explain why you see them as an attractive employer. Financial package should never be given as the *primary* reason, but think about things like the culture, training program, organisation structure, the ability to cross-train into different technologies, or the organisation's ethic. Obviously these need to be relevant and well researched.

"Where do you see yourself in five years' time?"

Think about where you really want to be within a company: in a lead role with a team under you; or a lead consultant; or a director. Be ambitious but realistic and have direction in your answers. Do not say: ***"I would like to be in your position"***.

"What are your strengths and weaknesses?"

Talk specifically about the positive things you've achieved to illustrate your strengths rather than generalising and make them relevant to the role you are going for. Try to show your weaknesses in a positive light and give examples of what you have learnt about yourself and where you have addressed and overcome your weaknesses.

"Why did you apply for this job?"

You should be careful not to mention a desire for promotion or money. Instead, really focus on the actual content of the job, referring to the possibility of learning, new challenges, or the prospect of putting your previous experience to work in a new role. Always provide examples with your answer, rather than "I'm ready for the next step."

"What are your major achievements in terms of your career, education and life to date?"

Achievement means different things to different people. It's not so much the actual achievement that's important in your answer, but the way you present it. This question always provides a good indication of a person's level of self-awareness.

"What motivates or drives you?"

For some people this could be particular types of work or experiences, knowing that you are helping people or the satisfaction of making something. The answer really tells the interviewer about what makes someone tick. Not everyone wants to be a Director, and an interviewer isn't necessarily going to see it as a weakness if you don't.

Remember, be honest and truthful, do not say simply what you think they want to hear.



Competency Based Interviews... tell me about...

This is a particular style of interview where the focus is on identifying how you have demonstrated key behaviours in the past that are seen as essential in the job role you are applying for.

The principle behind them is that if you have examples of how you have behaved successfully in the past then there is a good chance you will apply those behaviours again in the future.

What is a competency? A specific quality, knowledge, skill or behaviour that a person should have to be successful in a position.

Why is competency-based interviewing used? This approach is considered to be a more objective and fair method of interviewing.

How might a competency-based interview differ from other interviews? The main difference is the style of questions. Rather than ask technical questions about your area of specialism or giving you hypothetical “what would you do if...” questions – you will be asked “tell me about a time when you...”

What approach should be taken to the interview? In order to make the most of the interview, you should spend some time reflecting on previous experience, whether it be employment, academic or from another source.

Think about examples of instances where you feel you have performed well or that have provided you with important learning opportunities.

If you are taking these examples from outside the work environment, it is important to make sure that they have a strong relevance to the workplace.

When talking about these experiences it may prove helpful to both yourself and your assessors if you adopt the **STAR** format. It is a simple, very effective way of organising your thoughts:

- **S** - Situation or Background
- **T** – Task: what you set out to do
- **A** – Action: what you actually did
- **R** – Result: what happened and how you learnt from the experience

Effectively, you are telling a story. The *trick* is not to spend too much time on the ‘S’ stage but give just enough context so the story makes sense and then focus on “TAR”.

IMPORTANT: Speak from ‘I’: I did this, I did that, then I did the other – do not spend time describing what other people did – you are there to promote your own role in the story.



Are you sitting comfortably...

So, the next question is what 'stories' to tell that will both:

- respond to what the employer is looking for
- show you in the best light

The best place to start is the job advertisement – this will contain many clues as to what the employer is seeking. Over and above the technical skills or qualifications that may be needed the advertisement may also include references to aspects of the work, for example:

- team working, customer service, managing a budget, managing people, meeting tight deadlines, working with partners, influencing skills...

These details, combined with detailed information contained in job descriptions or person specifications that you can get from the employer, effectively tell you what stories you need to tell – namely positive examples of where you have been successful in these areas.

So what makes a good story?

Simply put, a good story is one that focuses on a specific example of where you demonstrated your skills and experience – and told as you would if some asked you “what happened to you today?” – for example

Influencing skills... *“...we had a situation in my last job where my team was asked to organise an event to promote a new service. The problem was that everyone had different ideas as to how to do it – and there was tension in the team because we had to decide quickly to meet the deadline.*

My idea was to run the event like an exhibition, with different members of the team on different stands rather than a formal presentation. Some team members were nervous about doing this and how they would answer questions from people. I reassured them that chatting 1-2-1 with people would be easier than doing a presentation, and that I would write a mostly likely questions ‘answer sheet’ for people in advance. I presented the idea at a team meeting, then discussed things with individuals about any personal concerns.

Bob was most resistant, he felt things should be more formal – so I met with him and shared my experiences of where this had worked before and arranged to go to an exhibition event so he could see how it would work first hand. That won him over...

The event got excellent feedback and the team enjoyed doing it...

Some of your ‘stories’ will actually cover a range of different competencies – so you can modify how you tell it to emphasise different aspects as necessary – this story could be used to illustrate meeting a tight deadline for example.



And here is one I prepared earlier...

Here are some examples of competencies and the kind of question you may be asked. Each question is normally preceded by a **scene setting** statement – e.g.

- “I see from your application that your last role was ... and that you used to ... so can you ...” (**note:** do not be put off if the interviewer fails to do this)

Example Competency Areas	Sample Question
Team working	Tell me about a time when you had to work together as part of a team to reach a specific objective
Communication Skills	Give me an example of an occasion where you had to adapt your communication style to meet the needs of another person
Influencing Skills	Tell me about a time when you had to persuade another person or your team and get agreement to your ideas about how to achieve a task.
Customer Service	Give me an example of when you had to deal with an upset or dissatisfied customer. Tell me about a time when you had to serve a particularly difficult customer but in the end managed to exceed their expectations
Time management and personal organisation	Tell me about a time where you were under particular pressure and had to make hard choices and prioritise your time.
Acting on own initiative	Give me an example of where you needed to act on your own initiative to solve a problem or meet an objective.
Written skills	Tell me about a time when you have had to adapt your writing style to meet the needs of the particular audience.
Manage systems and follow procedures	Give me an example of a time when you kept to the correct working procedures even when there was pressure from others not to do so. Give me an example of a time when you had to go outside the correct working procedures to meet the needs of the situation.
Manage a budget	Tell me about a time when you had to manage a budget and make decisions to make sure you did not overspend.

Expect to be probed...

A skilled interviewer will ask follow-up questions to get a deeper understanding about you and your past experience. Expect this!

It can feel quite challenging – but remember, the more vague you are with your answer the more the interviewer will probe to see if there is anything there.

The more you give the interviewer in the first place, it is easier for them – as they do not need to probe so deep to find it!

If you use...	They might ask...
<p>Generalisations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• All (white van drivers are bad drivers!)• All, None, Never, Always.... <p>Imperatives:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• We must/should do 'x'• It is essential (to eat a good breakfast) <p>'Verbs'</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• I motivate my team• I organise my time well <p>'Nouns'</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Productivity is key to business success <p>Comparatives</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• It is quicker (to go by train...)• It is Better, Easier, Cheaper to...	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• ALL?• What would happen if you didn't?• How do you do that exactly?• What do you mean by 'productivity'?• Quicker than what?• Better, easier or cheaper than what?

More examples of probing...

- “You said that you always ... can you give me a time when you did not ...”
- “So you decided to ... can you tell me your **thinking** behind that decision?”
- “You said that it was important not to ... what would have happened if you did?”
- “You said that it was a difficult situation ..., how did that make you **feel**? How did you respond?”
- “You said that ... was the best option, what were the main alternatives?”

Questions to Ask

Most interviewers will offer you the opportunity to ask questions, normally near the end of the interview. You should take full advantage of this to find out everything you need to know so you can decide whether this is a job for you.

If necessary jot your questions on a small card which can be slipped into an easily accessible pocket or bag (and thus found quickly if needed during the interview).

Some questions you might like to ask could include:

- Where does the unit fit into the overall business? How many users are there?
- Why is the position available? Is it a new role or a replacement?
- What induction or training programme would be on offer?
- How many are in the team? What is the reporting structure?
- What volume of work does the unit deal with?
- What are the proportions of maintenance or administration tasks compared to more complex tasks
- What would the next stage of the selection process be?

If you are interested in the position, tell the interviewer so, and ask when you will hear about the next round or when they will have made a decision.



Stand out from the crowd...

This is not about wearing something 'loud', having an unusual hobby or having just returned from a trip doing voluntary work in the Himalayas!

Also, expect other people who have similar qualifications and experience to you to apply for the job – if it is a good job others are bound to be interested

So, how do you stand out from the crowd?

Well, essentially it is down to how you choose to be on the day and the quality of your preparation.

Use the “tips and hints” and “Do’s & Don’ts” as a checklist for both preparing and reflecting on your interview experience.

Take care of yourself – eat well, sleep well so that you look and feel at your best on the day.

Choose to enjoy yourself and welcome the chance to practice your interviewing skills – so effectively you always get something positive from every experience

Apply for roles that you **actually want to do** – this will show through

REMEMBER:

Be yourself – remember, the person they meet is the person that they want to join them

And Finally...

Analyse your performance. If you know that the interview went well and you didn't get the job, it may be simply that someone on the day had that little something else to offer.

If you know that you could have done better at the interview then work on your technique. Don't hesitate to:

- Ask for some feedback on your application/interview. While they are not obliged to, it is considered good practice to give feedback
- Talk it through with someone for some impartial advice.

Good Luck

