

# Interviews



Guidance & Employability Team

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## Why have interviews?

Employers use interviews to get a clear idea of whether you meet their requirements for a particular job and would fit into their organisation. They will be seeking evidence that you genuinely have the skills and qualities you have mentioned in your application, so you must be prepared to speak about yourself positively. This does not mean distorting the truth, but it does mean that you should come across as enthusiastic and highly motivated.

Your objective in the interview is to convince the interviewer(s) that your experience, qualifications, personality and motivation all mean you are well equipped to do the job. So far, the employer only knows those things about you that you were able to convey on paper. The interview is your opportunity to show them more about yourself as a person. You should also remember that the interview is a chance for you to find out more about the employer.

Employers only interview candidates who they feel have already demonstrated in their application that they might well have the qualities for which the company is looking. So if you have been invited for an interview, bear in mind that they must already like you – you have passed the first hurdle successfully!

## What happens at an interview?

The sort of interview you can expect will depend on the type of company or organisation to which you are applying. You might be interviewed by one person or by several acting as a panel. If you are interviewed by a panel, it may be made up of representatives from the section/department where you will be working, your prospective line manager, a technical representative and a representative from the personnel department.

The format of the interview will also vary. An employer of a small company who recruits only the occasional graduate and, for example, where the general manager also acts as personnel manager, may adopt an unstructured and informal approach compared with organisations taking large numbers of graduates each year. A bigger company or organisation will almost certainly use a structured interview.

A structured interview means the format of the interview will be the same for all candidates. This is good practice, particularly regarding equal opportunities as it allows employers to fairly compare all the interview candidates, and means that all candidates are asked the same questions and have the same opportunity to state their case. You may

be able to find out from the company's literature whether they have an equal opportunities policy.

As one of the first stages in recruitment, employers identify the qualifications, personal skills and experience that they consider are essential and desirable for the posts for which they are recruiting. In this way, all the applicants can be compared against a pre-determined standard for the job. The employer may then produce a person specification and, if so, you should have been sent a copy of this. The employer will be looking for evidence that you meet these standard criteria in your application and at the interview.

You may be asked questions to explore just one or two aspects of the person specification or several. The questions should have been worked out in advance. Good practice would require all candidates to be asked the same questions, and the extent to which interviewers will follow up a question with another based on your response will vary. This makes preparation for likely questions essential, so that you get used to putting across your key points in your answers.

Depending on the nature of the post, you may be given a task to prepare for the interview, for example a short presentation or some written work on a particular topic. Allow yourself plenty of

time to prepare this and read the instructions carefully. You will find more information about common interview tasks, including presentations, in the GET handout Assessment Centres.

Interviews usually last for anything between 30 minutes and one hour. Longer interviews without a break are not good practice and are unusual. Employers will also attempt to interview all candidates on their shortlist on one day or over two successive days. If the interview has been carried out by a panel, the interviewers will meet at the end of the day(s) to discuss the performance of all the candidates.

## Preparing for your interview

You should get at least a week's notice of an interview, but sometimes this may be less. Confirm that you will be attending and advise the company if you have any special requirements regarding access or equipment, for example because you have a disability. If you really cannot attend on the day requested, contact the organisation quickly to see if an alternative date can be arranged.

## However little time you have make sure you...

- read through any information you have been sent by the company about the job for which you are

being interviewed, for example the job description and the person specification. Then read it through again!

- read your copy of your application form/CV and your covering letter. It is particularly important to go through the sections which ask for a personal statement, or ask for information about how you meet the person specification. It is quite likely that points from your application will come up in the interview;
- think about your personality, skills, qualities and experience. Make sure you can give examples of situations that show that your skills match the organisation's requirements;
- find out as much as you can about both the job and the company. How much do you know about the type of work for which you are applying? Would you have something to say if they ask you what you know about the company? The Employability Centre on your campus can help you with this research. The Occupations section will help you to find out about the type of work and the handout *Finding Out About Employers* will guide you to some useful sources of information about companies;
- find out what you can about the selection process – do you know whether there will be one interviewer or a panel? Will there be a test or

task to perform at the interview? It is perfectly acceptable to ring up and ask if your letter of invitation does not make this clear;

- prepare in advance for any task have been set, take your time and make sure you do it carefully and thoroughly. Read the instructions carefully. If you have been asked to send it to the company in advance, complete the task and send it to them as soon as you can – only take it with you to the interview if you have been told to do so;
- prepare thoroughly for the most likely questions, particularly on what you have to offer them and why you have chosen that career and that company. It really is worthwhile practising saying your answers out loud, so get a friend to ask you some of the interview questions listed below and have a go at making a succinct and positive response. Take a look at the GET handout *Helping You Prepare a Curriculum Vitae (CV)* in the section "Action Words";
- prepare some questions of your own to ask the interviewers – there are some suggestions further on in this booklet;
- consider whether you would like a mock interview with a careers adviser – you will need to book an appointment and bring in a copy of your application form or CV as well

as any information you have about the post, such as the advertisement, job description, person specification;

- have a look at some of the additional material we have in the Employability Centre on your campus to help you prepare – see the **further Information** section of this handout;
- make sure you know exactly how to get to the interview venue. Plan your journey so that you will arrive in a comfortable time – enough time to recover from the worry of the journey, but not so much that you begin to get over-nervous. It might be worth having a trial run to find out exactly where the building is located and how long it takes you to get there.

## On the day of the interview

First impressions count and your dress and appearance are very important. Make sure you dress appropriately for the organisation and are tidy, smart and comfortable. Even if you know that the 'dress code' for the organisation is informal, it is safer to stick to formal clothing.

Arrive on time. If you are at all unsure about where the building is located, take a good map with you and allow plenty of time. Make sure you have the

company's phone number with you so that you can ring them if you are unavoidably delayed. If you take a mobile phone with you, remember to switch it off when you arrive!

If you do arrive early, you can actually make good use of that time. Find the toilets and make a quick check on your appearance. Go over the key points you want to be sure to get across during the interview. Make a note of the kind of material displayed in the reception area, read any company publicity brochures that are lying around.

Make sure that you are friendly and polite to all the staff you meet – even the person offering you a cup of tea might be your future manager.

Try to relax – a few long, deep breaths might help!

## During the interview

### Try to remember these tips as the interview begins

- When you are called into the interview, try to appear quietly confident. It helps to smile and, if you can, to look relaxed. First impressions are very important and can influence the course the interview will take. Meet the interviewers' eyes as you are introduced and shake hands firmly. Don't worry about being nervous – it

is perfectly normal to be nervous and some of your interviewers may even be feeling just as nervous as you!

- Speak clearly and not too quickly. Look at the person talking to you, but don't stare. If you are being interviewed by a panel, try to look at other panel members when you give your answers as well as the person who asked the question. Remember to smile when appropriate.
  - Listen carefully to what is being said and answer the question which is being asked - keep to the point and don't ramble. If you really don't understand something, ask for clarification of the question. That is better than giving a rambling response that proves to be off the point. If you feel you need a few moments to gather your thoughts to answer a difficult question, ask for a few seconds 'thinking time' – this is perfectly acceptable.
  - Remember, your aim is to give all the information and evidence you can to show that you are right for the job. Use concise and positive language and factual examples that provide evidence that you have the requirements the employer is seeking. Good equal opportunities interviewing practice means that you should be asked exactly the same questions as all other candidates.
- This can sometimes mean that interviewers cannot ask supplementary questions to follow up something you have said. So make sure you get your key points across in your initial answer which should be as full as possible without waffling! If you feel you might be talking too much, pause and ask whether they would like you to continue further.
- You can refer to things you have included in your application. Remember that the interviewer may not have had time to study your form closely and will not necessarily remember everything you wrote. The interview is your opportunity to add more detail to your application to make your case more convincing.
  - Convey enthusiasm, motivation and commitment to the post for which you are applying. Use every appropriate opportunity to highlight your selling points and demonstrate the relevance of your experience and qualifications. Try to be positive – even if you are being asked about a bad experience you have had.
  - At the end of an interview you will usually be asked if you have any questions. Make sure that you have prepared some possible questions in advance. As well as giving you the information you need, the

questions you ask provide you with another opportunity to demonstrate that you have thought about the organisation and the job. If your questions have all been answered during the course of the interview, you can use this moment to raise any other points about your application which have not come up in the discussion. Just remember that the interview is coming to a close, so be brief.

- As the interview closes, make sure that you know how and when you will be informed of their decision about your interview. And don't forget to smile and thank the interviewer(s) for their time as you leave.

## Declaring disability

When and whether to declare a disability is an issue that concerns some students, when preparing for their interview. It is also an issue that depends on whether nature of the disability will affect the work. It is important for you to think through carefully prior to the interview, what information you want to get across about your disability and how you can best highlight the coping strategies you have developed, your ingenuity and the messages which all of this conveys about your motivation and perseverance. You might find it helpful

to talk to your careers adviser before the interview.

## Typical interview questions

### Some examples of the kind of questions which commonly arise

- Tell me about your course.
- Why did you choose to study (your subject) for your degree?
- What have you gained from your time at University?
- Tell me about how you tackled your final year project/dissertation.
- Why have you chosen this career/job?
- How would you define marketing/personnel/accountancy?
- Why are you interested in this career?
- What do you think are the main challenges of this job?
- What do you know about this organisation?
- Why do you want to work for this company?
- Where do you see yourself in five to ten years time?
- What did you learn from your work experience?
- Tell me about your interest in...
- What do you get out of your involvement in this?

- What are your main strengths and weaknesses?
- What is the biggest mistake you have made and what have you learned from it?
- Tell me about one of your major achievements.
- What have you got to offer us?
- Why do you think you could do the job?
- What is your opinion of (any particular current affairs issue)?
- Have you any questions you would like to ask?

You will often find that the interviewer will press you for more detail on some questions. For example, you might be asked: "Describe a difficult situation you have faced and tell us how you managed it." This might then be followed up with more probing questions such as:

- What exactly did you do?
- How did you involve others in resolving the issue?
- What were the main skills you used in dealing with this situation?
- How would you tackle it differently next time?
- Can you give me another example?

## Discriminatory questions

You may, occasionally, be asked a question that you feel is unfair. Questions that relate to your sex or race, rather than to the job, are against the law and so are some questions relating to any disability you might have. A good quick test is to ask yourself 'Would someone of a different sex, race or religion be asked this question?'

How you deal with these questions, for example "How would you feel about supervising a team of white technicians?" or "What do you plan to do about child care?" depends on you. Remember that the interview is as much a chance for you to find out about a potential employer as the other way around and questions of this type could signal problems ahead. You may choose not to answer the question or to end the interview on this basis or you may decide to go ahead. If you believe you have been unfairly discriminated against at your interview, write down exactly what was said as soon as possible, and contact the university equal opportunities officer (x8817/9111) in the Student Centre.

## Some questions you might like to ask the interviewer

Before you go for your interview, prepare some questions to ask of the interviewers. You may get some ideas from company literature or by reading about their or similar products or the market sector they occupy. You should also make a point of reading the relevant pages of the national press before the interview. Asking informed questions about the impact on the work of the organisation of a company merger or a government tax proposal can make a good impression.

Try to avoid questions for which the answers are obvious or easily found in company literature as this could imply you had not prepared for your interview. You should also try to avoid questions about the 'perks' of the job. Questions about car parking, pensions and holidays do not give a good impression at this stage!

### Some ideas for questions

- How long is the training period for graduates? Is it a fixed period or flexible according to individual progress?
- What sort of career progression have other graduate trainees experienced?

- At what stage am I likely to take up my first management responsibilities?
- How will my work and training be monitored and appraised?
- To what extent will it be possible to tailor elements of the training programme to meet my own development needs?
- Are there any external courses or professional qualifications that would be appropriate to my career development with this company?
- Would you be prepared to consider sponsorship for further study at any stage?
- Where would I be based? Is this function based in one place or several around the country?
- Am I likely to move to different company offices around the country during my training period?
- Will there be any opportunity to gain experience in other departments of the company?
- I have a particular interest in... Is there likely to be an opportunity to carry out some work in this area with your company?
- What are the opportunities for me to use my language skills? What opportunities will there be for me to learn new languages?
- Are there likely to be any opportunities to work overseas?

Is the company planning any major expansion in the next few years?

## After the interview

After the interview, review your performance. It probably won't be the last time you go for an interview! Think about how you performed without agonising too much over every detail.

- Consider how you came across. Were you over-confident, hesitant, just right?
- Were you adequately prepared? Had you really done enough homework to convince them that you were right for the job?
- Did you sell yourself well? Did you use the questions as opportunities to highlight your relevant skills and experience?
- Were there any questions that really threw you? Or questions, you wish you had answered differently? How would you answer them next time, given time to prepare your response?

Finally, performing well at interviews is a skill that you will develop with practice. Any interview experience is valuable, whatever the outcome, provided you reflect on how it went and learn from your mistakes.

## Asking for feedback

If you were not successful, you may want to ask the company for feedback

on your performance. This is a perfectly reasonable and acceptable thing to do. It is often worth asking politely as feedback can help you prepare for your next interview.

## Second interviews

If you are successful at the first stage, you may be asked to attend a second interview. This interview will often be with more senior managers and may well be more demanding than the first. If you are invited to a second interview, don't be afraid to refer to or repeat things that you said at the first. A second interview may form part of a more broadly based assessment or selection centre involving for example, tests and tasks either to perform in a group or as an individual.

There is more information about assessment centres and second interviews in our handout assessment centres.

## Telephone interviews

Telephone interviews are becoming increasingly popular amongst employers as an inexpensive method of initially screening candidates in preference to expensive and time-consuming face-to-face interviews. This is done either by simply verifying the information already given by the candidate and/or to ascertain the appropriateness of the candidate by

identifying qualifications, personal skills and experience which the employer consider to be essential and desirable for the posts for which application has been made.

One of your objectives during the interview is to confirm the information already given on your CV or application form. Depending on the nature of the interview, your objective may also be to convince the interviewer that your experience, qualifications, personality and motivation all mean you are well equipped to do the job. So far, the employer only knows those things about you that you were able to convey on paper. The interview is your opportunity to tell them more about yourself as a person. You should also remember that the interview is a chance for you to find out more about the employer.

## What happens during a telephone interview?

The sort of interview you can expect will depend on the type of company or organisation to which you are applying. You might be interviewed by a representative from the section/department where you will be working, your prospective line manager, a representative from the personnel department or an agency on behalf of your prospective employer.

The format of the interview will also vary. A small company that recruits occasionally, for example where the general manager also acts as personnel manager, may adopt an unstructured and informal approach compared with organisations taking large numbers of employees. A bigger company or agency will almost certainly use a structured or fully automated interview.

In the case of a fully automated interview, a letter will be sent to the applicant inviting them to ring a freephone telephone number at a convenient time. An automated system asks a series of questions and the applicant has to press the telephone keypad to respond. The time taken to respond may also be taken into account.

As one of the first stages in the recruitment process, employers seek to confirm that you are the person you claim to be by asking you to give your name, address and the post for which you have applied. Depending on the nature of the interview employers go on to identify the qualifications, personal skills and experience which they consider to be essential and desirable for the post for which they are recruiting. In this way all the applicants can be compared against a pre-determined standard for the job.

You may then be asked other basic questions such as “Why do you want to get into this industry/company?” and “Tell me about your A-levels/degree/gap year/current job?” You should be able to explain why you applied for the job and how your skills, qualifications and experience are suitable. If you are contacted by an agency, you will probably be asked a set of standardised questions, which gives you very little room for interaction and flexibility.

## Preparing for your interview

First and foremost, always put a telephone number on your CV or application forms. Lots of candidates forget and consequently lose any chance of being selected. If possible, try to give a number where you can easily be reached, e.g. at home or on a mobile phone rather than a payphone. If you're likely to be out during the day, make sure you have an answer machine or voicemail service – ensuring that the message is suitable for potential employers to hear – or that your flatmates are briefed to take a detailed message.

When you make or receive the call make sure you're in a suitable environment when you are speaking to the employer. Avoid noisy backgrounds. If you are in an unsuitable environment

you can ask the employer to call you back or you can take their name and number and call them back once you're in a private room or on a landline. This is a much better option, and most employers will appreciate your initiative.

The key thing to remember with telephone interviews is that they can be sprung on you at any time. If you have applied for a job, or even just sent a speculative CV, you must be prepared to be called. It's not uncommon for a phone interview to be cut short because the candidate simply can't remember the company s/he applied to.

## Once you have sent off your CV and/or application forms, you must...

- keep a well-maintained and fully documented file of all your application forms and various person specification and personal statements. Make sure they are in an easily accessible place;
- also keep a list of all the jobs you have applied for by the phone, with contact names and a copy of your CV;
- think about your personality, skills, qualities and experience. Keep in mind examples of situations that show you can use to demonstrate your skills.

- practice answering some of the most likely questions on page 6 particularly on what you have to offer them and why you have chosen that career and that company. It is really worthwhile practising saying your answers out loud or getting a friend to ask you some of the interview questions listed on page 6 and having a go at making a succinct and positive response.

## During the telephone interview

First impressions are vital, but over the phone the interviewer doesn't have any of the usual signals such as dress, posture, gestures and eye contact, to help him/her make a decision. The only tool you have at your disposal is your voice. In order to convince the interviewer that you're bright, efficient and genuine you should speak clearly and plainly. Avoid long silences though – these can feel particularly uncomfortable over the phone. If you need a moment to think about an answer, say so or the interviewer will think you've fallen asleep or disappeared!

Most jobs involve an element of telephone-based work. Your interviewer will be assessing your ability to be professional and credible on the phone. In the same way as poor eye contact

and sloppy posture can put you at a disadvantage in face-to-face interviews, an unpolished telephone manner can take you out of the running. Avoid nervous coughing, sniffing or sighing. Being able to answer questions without muttering, laughing or clamming up will show the interviewer that you could confidently handle a client or supplier on the phone.

As with any interview, be yourself. Most interviewers are looking for someone who is comfortable talking on the phone. If you relax you'll be able to project your personality and enthusiasm – which is more than enough to get you through to the next round.

Be forthcoming, upbeat and enthusiastic. Without facial expression or gesture you have to work doubly hard to get your personality across. Try to vary the tone and volume of your voice and be careful not to mumble. Avoid one-word answers and try to volunteer information about yourself. Your interviewer will be working just as hard to get the information out of you, so you don't want them to end up feeling exhausted or bored. Make sure that what you say is relevant, and that you don't talk to the exclusion of your interviewer, good communication is about listening as well as talking.

## Typical telephone interview questions

You are likely to be asked to confirm your name, address and the position for which you have applied. You will find that you will be asked a series of other questions. These largely depend on the nature of the job and the recruitment procedure of the organisation. See page 6 for examples of questions, which are commonly asked.

## After the telephone interview

At the end of the interview, feel free to ask questions about the next step in the procedure. However, it's not the forum to ask about salary, training or holidays. Please note that with the exception of casual work you will not be offered a job at this stage. Most employers regard the telephone interview as a preliminary round – save the detailed discussion for the face-to-face interview.

After the interview, if you haven't heard anything within a week you are fully entitled to call and ask for an update. As long as you're not pushy, the proactive approach will be welcomed. If you're invited for further interview, make sure you write down and repeat back all the details – it's easy to misunderstand or forget information when it is conveyed over the phone.

## Further information

If you feel that your interview technique could be improved, we can help you before you face the real thing. We offer practice interviews and run regular workshops on interview techniques and selection centres. You may also find the following helpful:

*Why Ask Me That?*  
AGCAS video

*Going for Interviews*  
AGCAS Information Booklet, available free from Employability Centres.

*Great Answers to Tough Interview Questions*  
Martin John Yate, Kogan Page, available for reference from Employability Centres.

*Three in One Success*  
AGCAS video available for reference from Employability Centres

## Other titles in the Employability Guides

*Application Forms*  
*Finding out about Employers*  
*Assessment Centres*  
*Interviews*  
*Choosing a Career*  
*Postgraduate Study*  
*Covering Letters*  
*Psychometric Testing*  
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