

Preparing for Interviews

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Introduction

If you are reading this guide, it may be that you have been invited to an interview. This is good news; the employer thinks that you look good on 'paper' and look like a person that potentially can do the job that they are looking to fill. You are probably feeling pleased but also a little nervous about the interview. You might also be wondering what to expect and how to prepare; this guide will help you to understand what makes the interview the most important part of the recruitment process and how you can ensure that you perform at your best on the big day.

A key point to remember is that an interview is a two-way process. The employer will use the process to assess your skills, knowledge, and experience and how they fit with the job's criteria. You, on the other hand, can assess whether the job is really what you are looking for and if the company is right for you. Understanding this will help to lessen some of the nerves you might be feeling.

Types of interviews

1-2-1's – Which are sometimes used by SMEs (Small to Medium-sized Enterprises), or as a result of speculative approaches to a company. Whilst the interview may seem informal, it is still an interview, and it is best to prepare in the same way as you would for any other interview.

Panel – A common interview format. This is used by both public and private sector organisations. Panels may consist of two or more people e.g., the Line Manager and HR representative. Each member of the panel will ask questions.

Group – This may mean working with other interviewees in group scenarios. The objective is to showcase your teamwork, interpersonal, problem-solving and leadership qualities. This interviewing approach is becoming more common and may well form part of a larger assessment centre day that may still include an individual interview.

Telephone – These are commonly used by larger recruiters or in situations where the job advertised has attracted large numbers of applicants. Employers will inform you about their recruitment cycle and if you are likely to have a telephone interview, this will be the first formal assessment of the recruitment process after submitting your application, CV or completing aptitude tests.

Pre-recorded interviews – This may be a screening interview in which you have to record yourself answering several standard questions. The preparation you would need to do for this would be fundamentally the same as for any interview and you should dress in suitable interview attire while on camera. An additional note here is to consider what will be on screen at the time of the recording. Think about venue and if you intend to use your flat / room to make sure that things look tidy, or at least neutral in the background.

Video/Online – Previously, most interviews have taken place face to face. Post pandemic, online interviews have become more commonplace, using software such as Teams, Zoom or Skype. They can also be used when location is an issue, e.g., you may be on holiday, on a year abroad or gap year and not returning to the UK for some time; alternatively, the employer may well be based outside of the UK. A key issue to consider around online interviews is appearance – you must still think about what you wear and what your surroundings look like.

Preparation

Getting your preparation right is the best way to reduce nerves and to ensure that you perform well on the day.

Key aspects of preparation include:

- Understanding what the employer is looking for and how you meet the criteria specified within the job description and person specification.
- Identifying what evidence, you can present that proves you meet the criteria.
- Understanding your strengths as a candidate and having the evidence to prove them.
- Understanding the organisation, the nature of their business, their culture and their values, their customers, the marketplace and who their competitors are.
- Knowing the details around the interview, i.e., location, travel, dress code, contact details in case of problems etc.

Understanding what the employer is looking for

When recruiting for any post the employer will draw up 2 documents:

- **Job Description:** This is a document that outlines the duties and responsibilities of **the job** itself. It will describe the typical responsibilities that you would be required to undertake if successful.
- **Person Specification:** This is a key document as it will clearly set out the essential skills, knowledge and experience being sought. In other words, this describes **the person** they are looking for.

Job descriptions and person specifications are readily available when applying for jobs within the public sector but may not be as available when applying for jobs within the private sector or for graduate programmes. If this is the case, then it will be necessary to analyse the job advertisement or the graduate recruitment web pages, to understand the mix of skills, knowledge and experience being sought.

Understanding what the organisation is looking for and identifying the evidence to show how you meet their criteria is the most important aspect to your preparation. The questions asked at interview will focus on these criteria and the expectation is that you will provide some specific evidence that illustrates the competency or quality being focused upon.

Types of interview questions

The questions asked at interview can take a variety of forms but would typically include the following types:

- **Warm-up:** To ease you into the interview process, they are good opportunities to show your research and enthusiasm for the role.
- **Competency:** Used to test if you have the relevant attributes needed to be successful in the role.
- **Behavioural:** Assesses your character and how to handle situations.
- **Strength based:** Focus on what you enjoy doing.
- **Technical:** Assess your technical ability that are required for the position.

You can find out more about interview question types [here](#).

Preparation is vitally important; therefore, think about the different types of questions that you might get asked and prepare examples and potential answers. Doing this 'off-the-cuff' is difficult and does not present that best impression of you to an employer. Here are some example questions to help with your preparation:

Warm Up:

- Tell me about yourself!
- What made you apply to this company?
- What makes you the best candidate for this job?
- Tell me about a business / news story that has caught your eye recently
- How has your degree prepared you for the role you have applied for?
- What are the 3 key things you have gained from your degree?
- How would your friends describe you?

Competency:

- Tell me about a time when you have persuaded somebody to your point of view - how did you approach this?
- Describe a time when you have made a significant contribution to the work of a team.
- Tell me about a challenge that you have had to overcome – how did you do this?
- Tell me about a time when you have worked with someone you found difficult to have a good relationship with – how did you handle the situation?

Behavioural:

- Can you describe a time you were under pressure - how did you handle it?
- When faced with a challenge, how would you overcome this?
- How would you deal with conflict at work?

Strength Based:

- What do you do well?
- Describe a successful day you have had.
- When did you achieve something, you were really proud of? Do you prefer to start tasks or to finish them?
- What things are always left on your to-do list and not finished? (These are probably weaknesses: things you dislike doing)

Technical:

- How would you improve our website or app?
- What software are you most experienced with?
- Please talk us through your project management process

This is just a small sample of possible questions; there are literally hundreds of potential interview questions, and it would be impossible to prepare for them all. The best preparation that you can do relates back to understanding what the company is looking for – the job advertisement, job description and person specification and gathering your evidence to show how you meet their criteria.

Answering Interview Questions: The STAR Approach

The **STAR** approach is a tried and trusted way to help you to reflect on your experience and to identify specific examples that could be used at interview. It is an effective method to demonstrate how you have developed and applied a skill, competency or quality that the recruiter is looking for in the interview. As an approach to answering questions, it provides a useful and logical framework through which to 'tell your story'.

*Use the **STAR** technique to help you organise your thoughts and provide more coherent answers to the questions that you are likely to be asked.*

- **S – Situation.** Set the scene, e.g., in the second year of my marketing degree, a major part of assessment involved working within a small project team on behalf of an external client, in this case a local charity that provided services to disabled people in the community.
- **T – Task.** What was your role? e.g. A key challenge for the charity was funding and it was decided that the project would focus on developing a marketing strategy that would assist the charity in raising funds in the short-term, as well as providing a viable fundraising plan for the future.
- **A – Action.** What action did you take? E.g., As a group, key tasks and roles within the project were identified. I led on the design of the posters as well as the marketing and promotion of the charity event that was identified as a key project outcome for the short-term. I spoke with a graphic design friend who helped me to produce posters and displayed them around university. I then developed a social media marketing plan, publicising the event on Facebook, Twitter and the University website as well as the Charity's website. In addition, I was able to secure interviews with our local radio station and local community newspaper, which provided further publicity for the event.
- **R – Result.** What happened at the end / reflection e.g. The project team was successful in securing donations from local businesses and a rugby player from the local super league team helped to compère the evening. We raised money by selling tickets and holding raffles for prizes donated by local businesses. The event was well attended raising over £1,500. We were acknowledged for the effort we had put into promoting the event, and for being able to use our negotiation skills to persuade local businesses to make donations to the raffle.

In addition to outlining the result it can also be useful to include some level of evaluation of the example that you are discussing; was the approach taken effective? What key issues did you have to address to complete the task? Would you do things differently next time? Using and applying the **STAR** approach in an interview situation takes time and practice.

Why not book a mock interview with one of our Careers Advisers to help you to become comfortable with the whole interview process? These are most effective when you have an interview coming up and want to hone your performance before the real thing. All we need are the details of the job you are being interviewed for, and we will draw up questions to ask you – it's that simple. After the 'interview' has been conducted we will provide you with feedback on specific aspects of your performance. For booking details, see the 'Further Help' section at the end of this guide.

Asking questions

It is normal practice to be given the opportunity to ask the panel any questions. Preparing your questions is a good idea and it can be useful to take them into the interview with you. This will save you the trouble of trying to remember them and will also communicate that you have taken some time to think about and prepare what you want to ask. Questions that you may consider asking could cover the following areas:

Questions around the job itself – what are key tasks? What would typically be done by a new entrant to the firm? What would they like to see in terms of achievement after the first 6 months?

Questions around development within the role – What support do you offer in relation to professional development? Do you have a mentoring programme in place to support new graduates? What's the typical career path taken by graduates who start in this role?

Disclosing a Disability

Preparing for an interview can be daunting for anyone, particularly if you have additional support needs. You may feel apprehensive about disclosing your disability for fear of a negative reaction from an employer. If it has not been addressed in your application form already, you may wish to contact the HR department before the interview if you have questions about access, or you need a support worker or sign language interpreter. Please be reassured that employers must provide reasonable adjustments in line with the Equality Act 2010.

Employers and HR departments may already be well versed in providing support and will have policies in place to support new and existing staff members with learning difficulties and disabilities. Telling an employer about your disability gives you control over how and what you choose to tell them. Anticipate likely questions around support needs and make clear your achievements, how you have managed your needs and succeeded in your studies and work. You may also wish to let employers know about schemes such as 'Access to Work' which can help to meet the costs of resources you may need in the workplace.

Final preparation

Read over the job description and person specification and highlight all the key skills, knowledge and experience areas that they could ask you about in the interview. Decide which examples from your skills and experience provide the best evidence to demonstrate you have succeeded in these areas. Practice using the STAR technique to talk through your examples.

Prepare questions to ask. This shows you are keen on securing the position. You might wish to ask for more information about the job, your training and future developments of the organisation.

Re-read your application form and/or CV.

Re-read the invitation letter to ensure that you have prepared everything needed for the day, e.g., identification requirements, what you are going to wear etc.

After the interview

It is always useful to seek feedback on your interview performance – even when you have been successful. By contacting the interviewers in the days following the interview, you may get some information on how you came across and how you can improve your performance. Not all organisations will provide detailed feedback, but it is always worth asking.

Further help

If you have an interview lined up, you can book a mock interview with a Careers Adviser. This will give you the opportunity to test yourself in an interview situation and receive feedback on your performance. A mock interview lasts an hour, and we'll ask you to provide the job description and person specification (if available) or details of the role you're applying to so the interview can be fully tailored to your needs. To book a Mock Interview appointment please email: careers@salford.ac.uk

If you have been invited to complete a pre-recorded interview, and would like to practice beforehand, take a look at 'Graduates First: Video Practice [Job interviews | University of Salford](#) Graduates First provides interview simulations online that provide instant, individualised feedback to help you learn and improve.

Please contact the Careers Team for more information: careers@salford.ac.uk or 0161 295 5000.