

# Interviews

**Careers & Employability Service**

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**Manchester  
Metropolitan  
University**

## INTERVIEWS

Getting an invitation to attend for interview means you have passed the first part of the selection process. The selector liked what you've said in your application and now wants to find out more about you. The interview will normally be wide ranging, with questions designed to reveal your personality, knowledge and skills.

It gives the selector the opportunity to consider if you will fit into a particular team or department and are confident that you can work effectively for their company.

The focus of the interview should be on what you are able to offer in relation to their requirements. However, remember that the interview is a two way process – you are also deciding whether the employer is right for you.

### 1) Types of Interview

There are many different types of interviews and, depending on the kind of job and organisation you are applying for, you may be required to undergo one or more of them. Usually you will know what type of interview you will be having once you receive the letter inviting you to interview. If you are not sure, ring them up and ask what the process is; their letter may only refer to the first in a series. They could use one or a few of the following interview types:

**One-to-one interviews** are just you and the interviewer. These can be either casual, basically a chat about the job and your application; or more formal, with the interviewer asking all candidates the same set of questions and making notes on your answers.

**Panel interviews** consist of a number of people who are involved in the selection process asking you questions in turn. This can be anything from two people upwards and can include the department manager, the post's immediate line manager, and a representative from Human Resources etc.

**Initial or first interviews** are used by some employers who have a fairly lengthy selection procedure, and will be used to establish your overall suitability and whether or not you will go onto the next stage. Many employers still select on the basis of one interview.

**Technical interviews** – if you have applied for a job which requires specialist technical knowledge (e.g. engineering or IT), it is likely that at some stage in the selection process you will be asked technical questions or have a separate technical interview to test what you know.

**Assessment Centres** - These bring together a number of competing applicants who will be assessed during a range of activities which could include: business games; group discussions; psychometric tests; in-tray exercises (simulating a manager's in-tray where you may be asked to prioritise the documents and make notes justifying your decisions); presentations (See our separate handout on presentations), and possibly one or more interviews which will probe more deeply into your reasons for wanting

the job, and possibly pick up on issues raised in other parts of the assessment centre. There may also be social, informal events which provide the opportunity to meet with senior members of staff, last year's graduate intake etc. Don't be afraid to ask questions to find out more about the organisation you may end up working for, but remember you are under scrutiny at all times!

### **Tips for Assessment Centres**

- Show enthusiasm and get involved in all tasks, no matter how strange some of them may seem.
- Don't act a part – It can be easy to convince yourself that the organisation is looking for a particular type of person. However, this can lead you to behave unnaturally and the selectors will pick up that your behaviour is in some way odd. Be yourself, but a very positive version of yourself.
- Don't worry if you underachieve at any one stage, as you may find you perform much better in one of the other tasks.
- Remember you are being assessed against specific competencies, not against the other candidates.

**Telephone interviews** are becoming more popular, normally as the first stage of selection. You may be contacted directly by the organisation, or they may ask you to phone them at an agreed time. Regard any telephone contact with a potential employer as part of the selection process and ensure that you have researched and prepared yourself as you would for a face-to-face interview.

### **Types of telephone interviews include:**

- A process involving general questions about your interests, qualifications and knowledge of the company. This is normally intended to produce a shortlist for face- to- face interview.
- A personality type test where you are asked to give a reaction to various statements on a 'strongly agree to strongly disagree' basis. This approach is often automated, with the candidate pressing an appropriate button on their telephone.
- A selling type – where you are asked to promote a product or service to the employer.

What can make a telephone interview difficult is the lack of eye contact or awareness of body language to which you can respond. This means you must listen carefully to the questions, avoid interrupting and ask for clarification when necessary. It may help to stand up during the phone call as this can help to convey confidence in your voice.

Keep your CV/ application form/ notes handy along with a pen so that you can make any notes during the interview.

Where possible take the call on a land line and in a quiet private room to avoid noise or interruptions or the line going down during the call.

## **2) Preparing for interviews**

Thorough preparation is the key to a successful interview. The employer will have decided on the selection criteria for the job, and will then ask each candidate questions to supply evidence to determine whether or not they have the skills to do the job effectively. You need to research the employer, the industry sector and the job role and the interview process and clearly relate your own skills and experiences to what they are looking for.

## Research the company and the sector

Read as much as you can about the company or organisation. Use the recruitment literature; internet; ask friends/ family, to find out:

- What the company does
- What are its current priorities and developments
- Who are its major clients, customers, suppliers, competitors
- What are the major trends in the sector
- Has any legislation impacted on the sector
- Sector salaries: regional and national
- Visit the site to get a feel for the area and the community.

Go to the business section in libraries to see if there are any useful articles, press releases, professional or trade journals relating to this type of work.

## Research the job and yourself

Be sure that you have a clear understanding of what the job involves:

- Read the person specification/ job description which comes with the vacancy details -if there isn't one then read careers leaflets on the particular job, see – [www.prospects.ac.uk/Links/Occupations](http://www.prospects.ac.uk/Links/Occupations)
- Look at the company web site to see which skills or attributes are mentioned.
- Think of situations where you demonstrated these skills, choose examples from all areas of your life including academic work, outside interests, placements/work experience.

For Example:

### **Skill Area:**

Team Work

Analytical Skills

Communication

Planning/ Organising

### **Evidence:**

Working in a shop/ bar work etc

Dissertation, project

Call Centre work, doing presentations

Travelling/ organising an event

Once you've identified the evidence, you need to go a stage further and be more specific about what you did and what you learned from it. What you learnt from the activity is not just about gaining skills – it is also about reflecting on the experience. It is important to show that you can evaluate situations and your own personal performance .For example, you may have learned how important it is to set regular deadlines in order to meet an overall target date, or, if the result was not what you expected, what would you do differently next time?

## Anticipate the questions

- Based on the research you have done on the company/ job role, think through the types of questions you are likely to be asked and how you may answer them. Some organisations will help you by identifying 'essential and desirable criteria' for the post and indicate which ones will be covered at interview.
- Prepare a short list of questions you want to ask the interviewer, take a copy to your interview.

- Read through your application form or CV before going to the interview and try to anticipate what they might pick up on. Some questions could be linked to your achievements from your degree, work experience or interests. Be ready with a positive answer to explain any areas of weakness.

## **Examples of Interview Questions**

### **Tell me about yourself**

This is the classic opener which helps the interviewer to 'size you up' and note possible areas for further exploration. A brief history of what you've done, relating this to the skills you have acquired through your various experiences will give a good picture and where possible keep it relevant.

### **Why do you want to work for us?**

This is the chance to demonstrate your prior research into the company. Your reply could be based on their reputation for product, management, international scope, IT development etc. Mention any experience you have which they may find useful.

### **Why are you interested in this type of work?**

Describe experiences which show you have knowledge of the work and actual ability wherever possible. If you don't have much work experience, describe other life experience which show your ability to learn a job quickly and your keen interest and enthusiasm. Briefly list your positive characteristics even if repeating things you have already said. The aim is to help instil confidence in the employer that you are confident about yourself.

### **What are your weaknesses?**

Be prepared to talk about one weakness, but try to turn it around into something positive if possible. For example, "I used to get nervous about giving a presentation but I have been on a short course and now feel more confident when I give presentations."

### **Why should we employ you?**

Look at the job requirements and relate them to your own skills, knowledge and experience, providing evidence of when you've displayed these and answer showing your enthusiasm for the job.

### **What has been your most significant achievement to date?**

This need not be related to the workplace, as long as you are able to say why it was an achievement for you e.g. if you did a parachute jump for charity and had to overcome a fear of heights to do so, this could be considered quite an achievement.

### **How would you describe yourself?**

Use this as a further opportunity to market your strengths. Pick two or three characteristics which reflect your personality and, (hopefully) tie in with what the employer is looking for.

### **What are the challenges facing our business in the next five years?**

This tests your knowledge of the wider picture as well as the specific company or organisation. Prepare your answer to demonstrate your awareness of how external factors, e.g. global politics, can affect companies.

## **Situational Questions**

For example: What would you do if....? How would you cope with.....? How would you deal with...?

These cannot always be anticipated but try to think beforehand what situations you might have to face in the job you are applying for. These could be; how would you deal with a difficult customer, what would you do if a member of the team was underperforming, how would you persuade someone to buy this product? If you are asked this type of question then it is ok to ask for a moment to think about it and then give your considered answer.

## **How to cope with difficult questions**

Sometimes you may be asked a question that you just can't answer, for example if you were asked about a particular IT package that had not used. The best way to deal with this is to be honest, but say you have learnt other packages quickly and feel confident that you would do the same for this one. If you really don't know how to answer then say so – don't waffle! Do allow yourself some time to make a considered answer though. Equally, if you don't understand a question, ask the interviewer to repeat it, or check out your understanding of what they've asked before giving your answer.

## **Questions to ask the employer**

The questions you ask will depend upon the type of interview and will vary according to the circumstances. However, they should not be questions that the employer would expect you to know from having looked at their web site or read any recruitment brochures. Examples could include:

- Can you give me a fuller picture of your training programme?
- How do you see the organisation developing over the next few years?
- Is it possible to study for further qualifications?
- What has happened to the graduates you recruited in the last 3-4 years?

## **3) Preparing Practically**

- Choose clothing that fits in with the image and culture of the organisation. If in doubt, always err on the side of too smart rather than too casual. Make sure you feel comfortable wearing the clothes you choose.
- Work out what transport you are going to use and how long the journey is likely to take (allowing for any delays.)
- Make sure you know where the building is and who to ask for on arrival.

### **On the day:**

- Arrive at least 10 minutes early.
- Try to relax in the waiting room before your interview – practice slow, deep breathing to try and calm any nerves. Have a good look around there may be items on the walls, trophies or photographs you can use at interview.
- Be pleasant to the receptionist who greets you (and any other members of staff you are introduced to) – they may be asked for their impressions later.

#### 4) During the Interview

First impressions really do count. Research shows that the first impression is made up of:

55% visual impacts: dress, facial expressions and other body language.

38% tone of voice.

7% from what you say.

So, head up, shoulders back, deep breath, smiling face, and in you go!

- Shake hands when offered, or if you think it's appropriate.
- Try to sit comfortably and don't fidget. The trick is to look relaxed so don't perch on the edge of the chair. Legs together, ankles crossed and hands' resting in your lap tends to look and feel comfortable.
- Try to maintain eye contact as you speak. In a panel interview, concentrate on the person asking the question but look at the others from time to time.
- Do not be flippant. Be careful about the use of humour – take the lead from the interviewer.
- Be positive and enthusiastic and show a genuine interest in the organisation.
- Do not undersell yourself with words like "I have only..."
- Be aware of language. Try to speak clearly and avoid any verbal bad habits such as ending every statement with "you know?"

#### 5) After the Interview

If you don't get the job, it may be that you didn't perform well at interview. On the other hand, you could have been fine and someone else just had the edge (more experience, more relevant qualifications.)

After an interview it can be a good idea to talk over what happened with a friend in order to review your behaviour and identify which questions you could have answered better.

You may want to request feedback from the employer. This can be a valuable insight into why you didn't get the job and help you to perform better the next time.

#### 6) Disclosing Disability

There are no rules about this. Further help is available from SKILL (the National Bureau for Students with Disabilities) at [www.skill.org.uk](http://www.skill.org.uk)

##### **Further Help:**

Remember you can always book an appointment with an adviser to practise your interview skills and questions and discuss your interview preparation.

##### **Reference books and Materials available in the Careers Centre**

'Great answers to tough interview questions'

"How to interview like a top MBA"

"How to succeed at assessment centres"

'Successful interview skills'

'Successful presentation skills'

'The Times - Graduate Job-hunting guide' (includes information on assessment procedures.)

'The Times – Your job search made easy' (includes information on interviews and assessment centres.)

### **Free handouts**

'Useful websites for online aptitude and personality tests'

'Psychometric tests'

'Presentations'

'Going for Interviews' (AGCAS booklet)

### **Videos/ DVDs (can be viewed in the Careers Centre)**

'Why ask me that?'

'The Assessment Centre'

### **Websites**

[www.whatwilltheyask.com](http://www.whatwilltheyask.com)

Site covers example questions for different occupation sectors.

[www.careerplayer.com](http://www.careerplayer.com)

Tips on navigating graduate job market and how to prepare for interviews

[www.kent.ac.uk/careers/applicn.htm](http://www.kent.ac.uk/careers/applicn.htm)

Kent University has an excellent selection of on-line interview materials and sample interview questions and a section on assessment centres including an on-line in tray exercise.

[www.wikijob.co.uk](http://www.wikijob.co.uk)

A site for students detailing the application processes for numerous graduate recruiters.

[www.blueskyinterviews.co.uk/interview\\_advice.htm](http://www.blueskyinterviews.co.uk/interview_advice.htm)

Advice and information for jobseekers featuring interview questions and answers, techniques and tips.

[http://ltss.beds.ac.uk/careers/first\\_impressions](http://ltss.beds.ac.uk/careers/first_impressions)

Video produced by the University of Bedfordshire. It offers advice on how to dress appropriately to create a good first impression, along with body language and confidence boosting exercises. Also features graduate employers outlining their expectations of ideal candidates and their interview behaviours.