



careers advice pack

## 12. Guide to interviews



### Taking the fear out of interviews

Few people enjoy them, but an interview should really be a conversation between equals where a discussion takes place. You may feel as though you are about to sit an examination or be interrogated, but try to treat it as a discussion.

An interview is just as much about whether you want the job, as about whether they want you. It's a two-way process:

- The interviewer is working out whether you can do the job, fit in with the team and organisation, and if you will be motivated to stay.
- You're working out whether the job is what you want, whether you like the culture of the organisation and if the package is what you are looking for.

Remember that you will only have been offered an interview if the employer likes your CV and believes you can probably do the job. There is a role to be filled and in most cases recruiters are very keen to get someone in to start work. Your focus simply needs to be on giving them the **evidence** to show that you are the person they need.

There are three key steps to help you do your best at interview:

- Preparation
- Practice
- Performance

We will look at what you need to do to complete each step....

### Preparation

Get together as much information as you can about the role. If you only have the job advert, or a vague description from a contact, ring the company and ask for a job description. Organisations often provide a 'person specification' giving an outline of the skills and qualities they are seeking.



## careers advice pack

If you have obtained the interview through a recruitment agency, ask them for as much detail about the job as possible.

If you really can't get more information, analyse what you have and try to work out tasks the job will require and the extent to which you have the necessary skills and experience.

Even if the interview appears less formal, perhaps because it has come through a contact, take this meeting as seriously as if it was a formal interview and prepare as above.

### **Prepare evidence that you can do the job**

Go through the job description and write a list of tasks involved in the job.

Against each task write down words for the skills, knowledge and personal qualities required.

Then, for each task, **match** similar tasks that you have done in previous jobs that show similar skills, knowledge and personal qualities. If your experience does not match the task, try and think of **evidence** that shows similar skills, knowledge and personal qualities.

For each task prepare an example to demonstrate that you have necessary skills and experience. Use the **CAR** format to prepare your example:

1. **Circumstances** – What was the situation or task?
2. **Action** – What did you do? What skills and experience did you draw on?
3. **Result** – What was the positive outcome? How was this measured?

Do the Coffee Break Exercise for CAR, provided separately on the Women Like Us website.

### **Gather information about the organisation**

Obtain as much information as possible about the organisation via the company website or social media accounts, company reports, press reports and any contacts you may have.



## careers advice pack

Choose information relevant to the role you have applied for and also broader information about the organisation's mission, values and business plans. Then prepare:

1. One or two statements about the organisation that you would like to bring into the discussion at the interview.
2. Any relevant questions about the organisation that you might want to ask.

You need to show that you understand what is important to them and demonstrate your interest in working for them.

### **Find out about the interview process**

Talk to the contact who invited you to interview, asking to speak to the interviewer or HR manager if appropriate. Ask for the information below. If they have any instructions, ask them to email or send them to you.

Ask what format the interview will take. Will it be...

- An interview with one or two people? Who are they?
- Several one-to-one interviews with different people? Who are they?
- A panel interview - how many on the panel?

Ask what approach will be used. Will it be...

- An informal discussion?
- An interview based on your CV (also known as a biographical interview)?
- A competency-based or behavioural interview (where you will be scored according to the evidence of your skills and experience that you give)?
- Is there likely to be more than one interview - a first round and then a second round on another day?

Ask if anything else is involved. For example, will you be asked to....

- Give a presentation?
- Complete aptitude or psychometric tests?
- Take part in a group exercise and/or assessment centre?
- Do an in-tray exercise?



## careers advice pack

If the interview is less formal, because it is through a contact or a speculative approach, and the 'interviewer' has said it is just a chat, take it as seriously as a formal interview. Find out if you will just be meeting one person, or more, where you will be meeting etc.

### Sort out the practicalities

**Venue** - Make sure you have clear directions to the location of the interview and that you work out how long it will take you to get there. If you feel nervous about finding it, do a practice journey. Ideally arrive about 10 minutes before the agreed time of the interview. Allow time for delays!

**Clothes** - Wear appropriate clothes and something that you feel comfortable in. If you are a little unsure, go for something more formal. Avoid anything that might distract the interviewer (or you), such as lots of jewellery or strong perfume.

**Time** - Check the time of the interview and how long it will last. Allow some extra time in case the interviews are running late (particularly if you are arranging childcare).

### Practice

You can't know exactly what you will be asked but there are many tried and tested questions used in interviews. Prepare answers to the questions you think you will be asked, based on the job advert and what you know about the organisation.

Practice saying your answers out loud, with a friend or in front of a mirror.

Aim to back-up your answer to every question with evidence of a CAR achievement or work example. If the interview is 'competency based' it is essential that you provide evidence, since the interviewer(s) will be scoring your suitability for the role based entirely on the evidence you give.



## careers advice pack

Keep your responses **positive** and **brief**. If you are wondering if you have given enough information, you can ask 'Does that answer your question, or would you like me to give a further example?'

When talking about what you have done in previous jobs, use 'I' not 'we' in your answers – the employer wants to know about you, not the rest of your team.

**Never criticise** former employers or colleagues, even if you think you have good reason.

### Some possible questions

#### Q: 'Tell me about yourself':

This question is a great opportunity to focus on the key reasons why you are right for the role.

- Prepare a brief (max 2 minute) response that covers some of the main skill and experience areas relevant for this job. The profile you prepared for your CV may provide a good basis.

#### Q: 'What are your strengths?'

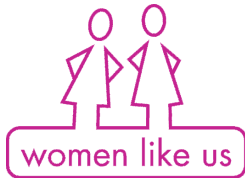
The interviewer will want you to demonstrate that you have the strengths that are key to doing the job as well as possible.

- Prepare 3 strengths that are relevant to the job. It's a good idea to choose words from the job description or advertisement.
- Back each strength up with the evidence of a CAR achievement or work example.

#### Q: 'What are your weaknesses?' OR 'What is your greatest weakness?'

Consider your response carefully, as to imply that you have no weaknesses might be interpreted as a lack of self-awareness on your part.

- Don't potentially eliminate yourself by describing a weakness in an area that is crucial to the role.
- Choosing a weakness that is really a strength, e.g. 'I'm a bit of a perfectionist', can look a bit obvious and over rehearsed.



## careers advice pack

- The best way to deal with this question is to use a weakness you have been aware of in the past, that isn't crucial to the role and that you are in the process of dealing with by training or self-monitoring.

### **Q: 'What attracts you to this job/company?'**

This is where your preparation counts. Be genuine.

- Focus on things you will be doing or the performance of the organisation.
- Don't talk about pay or benefits at this stage.

### **Q: 'Tell me about a time when you used your skills in .....'**

For each skill, quality and area of experience in the job description you can be asked this type of question, though it will probably be put in different ways.

- Prepare at least two CAR examples for each area (see the Coffee Break Exercise for CAR, provided separately on the Women Like Us website).

### **Other questions**

Here are some examples of other questions that you could face. Add your own ideas to the list and prepare a brief answer.

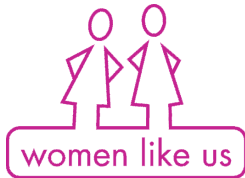
- Why did you leave X Ltd?
- How do you work as part of a team?
- What will you bring to this organisation?
- What has been your most rewarding achievement?
- How would others describe you?
- What motivates you to do your best?
- How do you manage your time?



## careers advice pack

- How have you maintained your skills and knowledge during your career break?
- Tell me about a challenge you recently handled? Were you successful in resolving it?
- What do you know about our industry and competitors?
- How have you handled conflict at work?
- Where would you like to see yourself in the organisation in five years' time?
- Tell us about a time when you used your communication skills to influence others?
- Give an example of a time when you had to be quick in coming to a decision.
- Describe a situation when you had to plan and organise something. How did you go about this?
- Give an example of a time when you worked on your own initiative.
- Which work have you found most satisfying? Which work have you found least satisfying?
- Give an example of a difficult customer service experience you've had to handle.
- How do you motivate others?
- Give me an example of a time you had to persuade other people to take action.
- What training or skills do think you might need for this position?
- What salary range would you be looking for?
- If offered the post, when could you start?





## careers advice pack

Practice your responses and your questions by writing down your evidence and sample answers and then running through them with a friend, partner or career coach. Do this even if it seems false at first.

Practising out loud will help you get used to your responses and make you all the more relaxed on the day. Get feedback from the person you practice with about how you came across, and keep on practicing!

### **Difficult questions**

Everyone has certain questions they feel less confident answering at interview. Consider what yours are and prepare a brief, positive response so that you won't be caught out.

Remember – you have been asked to the interview because **they like your CV** and think you might be the right candidate. They won't try and catch you out.

### **Interview questions to ask**

In an interview it is extremely important that you ask questions too. If you don't ask questions at all, they may decide you are not interested in the job. It's all too easy for your mind to go blank when asked what questions you have, so it can help to have some written down to take in with you.

Here are a few suggestions:

- How would you describe a typical day/week in this position?
- What is the company's management style?
- Who does this position report to? If I am offered the position, can I meet him/her? (If this is not clear from the particulars/job specification)
- How many staff will I be line-managing?
- How much travel is expected?



## careers advice pack

- What are the prospects for training/growth and development?
- What system of appraisal/performance review do you operate?
- What do you like about working here?
- If I am offered the position, how soon would you like me to start?
- When can I expect to hear from you?

And here are a few questions NOT to ask

- What does this company do? (Do your research ahead of time!)
- If I get the job when can I take time off for holiday?
- If I get the job when would I get my first pay rise?
- Did I get the job?

### Performance

You've done your preparation. You've practiced answering the questions you think you'll be asked. You'll perform at your best if you trust in the preparation work that you have done and are not distracted by thoughts of whether or not you'll remember the 'correct' answers.

Be yourself. Go into the interview ready to be completely focused on the person or people you're meeting, and the relationship you are hoping to form. Nerves are natural, but they will pass.



## careers advice pack

The first few moments of the interview are important. It is said that over fifty percent of the decision whether or not to appoint a candidate depends on whether the interviewer 'takes' to the candidate in those early moments.

It's important to build rapport with the interviewer. Listen to what he or she is saying.

### **Body language**

Remain relaxed and ready to listen. Try not to fidget, e.g. with a pen, as this can distract or irritate. Sit straight in your seat so that you can maintain good eye contact with your interviewer(s) and be comfortable. Remember to breathe!

If you are offered a cup of coffee accept it if you feel comfortable, but remember a cup and saucer may rattle if you are nervous, and a biscuit, if you are offered one, may drop crumbs on your clothes. If you would like a drink it may be safer to ask for a glass of water.

### **Listening**

At the beginning of the interview be prepared to listen to the interviewer's opening remarks in which she/he may choose to tell you something about the organisation and/or about the job. You may learn something that you could use later in the interview.

When nervous, listening can be hard, so you may need to pay real attention to this. If you do miss something, it's not the end of the world, but do ask for it to be repeated.

### **Responding to the questions**

Really listen to the questions and try to relax. What are they asking? Some interviewers are not very skilled. They may be nervous too, or have had little time to prepare. Their question may be awkwardly phrased and not really ask the question they want answered.

Any time you are not clear about a question, or you are not sure how detailed an answer you should be giving, check it out by asking a question, e.g. 'Does that answer your question sufficiently, or would you like me to go into more detail about this project?'



## careers advice pack

Don't be afraid of leaving small silences – just enough time to collect your thoughts, but not so long it becomes awkward.

### **Closing the interview**

Make sure that you end on a positive note with good eye contact and saying something like 'Thank you for your time, it has been good to meet you.'

### Panel interviews

A panel interview means that you are to be interviewed by two or probably more interviewers in a single interview. They are more often used in the public sector. Each member of the panel will be there for a different reason e.g. a human resources person, the team leader, the department manager. The interview room may be set up in a fairly formal way with the interviewers behind a table.

Behave as you would when being interviewed by one person. Listen well to the person asking the question. Address your answers to the person who has asked you the question, but when appropriate look at the other interviewers, showing that you are aware of them and are including them in your answers.

Sometimes a question from one person seems to repeat something you have already answered. If this happens, answer with a different example if you can.

### After the interview

Keep a record of how the interview went - what they asked you, how you answered, what went well, what went less well, what went best. What would you do differently next time?

If you are turned down, try to get feedback. Some organisations offer this more willingly than others. It is essential not to sound annoyed at their decision or try to get them to change their



## careers advice pack

minds. Approach them, saying that 5 minutes of feedback by telephone would be helpful for you in your future job search so that you can improve your performance in future interviews.

Remember - if you're getting interviews your CV is working and you have skills people want. You will get better at performing in interviews and it is only a matter of time before you land the job you want, so don't be down hearted if you are turned down.

### **First Interview.... Second Interview...**

Many jobs will have a first round of interviews and then a second round for a short list of candidates.

Prepare equally thoroughly for all the interviews. Remember, if you have been picked for the short list and second interview, what you said in the first interview worked. Don't change it! You might want to think through some additional examples and evidence.