

Job Interview Preparation

When you've been invited for an interview you will naturally start to worry about giving a winning performance on the day. Interviews are a lot like exams, they can creep up on you, but good preparation is the key to success.

This checklist will cover everything you will need to prepare for an interview, so you will easily be able to signpost the areas you need to address the most. Although some of it may seem obvious, remember interviews are not something you do daily so it is worth reminding yourself of the process.

Plan as Far in Advance as Possible

A few days before your interview give yourself some time to work on possible answers to the most common interview questions. Interviewers will usually begin by saying "tell me about yourself" or "talk me through your CV" to ease you into the interview, so make sure you're ready to answer. Have a short, two or three minute response that you know you can give comfortably without forgetting any important points. Make sure you start your response with a strong statement such as "I am currently working as a Sales Manager with 10 years' of experience in the Digital Media sector". You should then follow this statement by giving a chronological summary of how you got to your current position, including any employment and education history. A limited career history is okay, but if you have gaps in your employment have a way of explaining this without coming across as defensive.

Read through the job description and person specification carefully, identifying your experiences that demonstrate the skills or knowledge required. Again, practise articulating each one. Writing you're your answers is a really good way to do this — reading it aloud, recording yourself or having a mock interview is even better.

If it's not explicit in the invite, find out the format of the interview and the number of people involved beforehand. You won't have to prepare any differently, but if you're expecting a relaxed chat with one interviewer and you get five senior people grilling you, it's likely to throw you.

Take time to research the company, paying attention to news stories, their website, and their plans for the future. See if you can also speak to someone in your network that either works or has worked there.

Before the Interview

Dressing well can increase your confidence as well as boosting your professional image so make sure that you prepare your interview outfit. Shine your shoes and plan things like getting a haircut, it will really make a difference.

Work out where you're going, travelling times and transport options. If you can factor in more time find a coffee shop nearby, it may help to reduce travelling anxiety. Have a copy of the job description and the person specification on you so that you can read them again before you go in. Don't forget to take a couple of copies of your CV too and store them in a neat folder or portfolio case.

During the Interview

It's easy to be so focused on giving a good interview that you can forget that it's a two-way process. Pay attention to the interviewer's responses and listen to what they have to say. You may even want to ask them questions, for example: "What do you enjoy most about working here?"

Don't be afraid to pause and think. You don't need to fire back an answer in an instant. In general, people speak too quickly in interviews because they're nervous, so slow down if you notice yourself racing.

Make sure you're clear about the next steps following the interview. Many organisations take a lot longer than they say to get back to you, so it may be worth saying: "So you'll let me know by next Monday? If I don't hear by Wednesday is it ok to drop you a line?"

After the Interview

As soon after the interview as you can, find a quiet place and write down as many of the questions that you were asked as you can remember. Rank how you answered them on a scale of one to ten. Set yourself some time to work on the answers in order from lowest to highest so that you can improve for future interviews.

Whether or not you are successful in securing the role, look at it as a good opportunity to engage people, grow your network and get better for next time round. If you're not successful then ask for feedback, although many organisations are coy in case feedback is used against them.

Top Ten Things Not to Do in an Interview

1. "Sorry I'm late."

It goes without saying that punctuality is key when attending an interview. Your interviewer doesn't want you to arrive for work 20 minutes late every morning, so don't give them the impression that you will.

2. "What is your annual leave and sickness policy?"

It doesn't look good if, before you've even been hired, you're planning your absence from the company.

3. "I just need to take this call."

A large number of candidates think that it is OK to take telephone calls or text during an interview. It isn't! Ensure your mobile phone is switched off before you enter the company premises.

4. "Where do you see yourself in five years?"

Never say, "Doing your job." As much as this might seem like a genuine answer, you should try to build a response around the experience you would like to have gained and the level of responsibility you would like to have, rather than threatening the interviewer's job.

5. "I didn't like my last employer."

No matter how mind-numbingly boring those roles might have been, speaking badly of a previous employer is not only unprofessional, but also reflects on your character. Your new employer will contact your former employer for references following an interview, so it's never wise to burn your bridges.

6. "You make widgets? I thought you made cricket bats."

Failing to research your prospective employer fully is a big faux pas. Saying you've looked at their website is only marginally better – employers expect far more research. They will be taking the interview process seriously and they want to see that you are too.

7. "Bloody hell."

Never ever swear in your interview. It can happen, especially if your interviewer is themselves prolific with profanities, but don't let them set the standard of the interview and remain professional at all times.

8. *"I was very good at sorting out PEBs by using ARCs."*

Don't fall into the industry jargon of your previous employer or assume the interviewer knows anything about your experience. Instead, speak clearly about your skills and experience to avoid any confusion or misunderstanding.

9. *"Do I really have to wear that uniform?"*

Any criticism of staff uniform will go down like a lead balloon. Do you think your interviewer enjoyed wearing that fluorescent green ensemble when they performed your role?

10. *"What do you expect to enjoy most about this role?"*

When asked this question never reply with any of the following: the perks, the pay, lunchtimes, my co-workers, or the holidays!

Top Ten Questions to Ask in an Interview

Although job interviews often feel like an interrogation, they're meant to be a conversation between you and a potential employer. Asking plenty of questions during a job interview can not only help you build a dialogue, but it can also help you evaluate if the job is right for you.

Before you pick and choose from the following top 10, be sure to consider the culture of the organisation and the interviewer doing the selecting. Adopt the right tone and convey a positive attitude – you want to ensure this opportunity works for you, not against you.

1. *"What are the most enjoyable and the least enjoyable aspects of the role?"*

This can show that you like to know what sort of challenge you are going to face and that you like to get properly prepared for it, all in the expectation of being able to rise to it.

2. *"You mentioned there will be a lot of presenting/researching/liasing; what do your most successful people find satisfying about this part of the role?"*

This question can serve two purpose; it demonstrates your listening skills and associates you with being successful in the role and finding it satisfying.

3. *"What types of training opportunities do you offer?"*

This is a classic question – it highlights that you're keen to advance your skills and add further value to the organisation.

4. "Is there scope for promotion in the future?"

This is another classic question. In a similar vein, it emphasises a determination to make progress and over the long term.

5. "Can you tell me how the role relates to the overall structure of the organisation?"

With this question you're drawing attention to a preference for teamwork. It looks as though you want to know where you would fit in and how your contribution would affect the rest of the company.

6. "How would you describe the work culture here?"

This signals that you want to operate at your optimum and understand that for this you require a positive environment.

This indicates you're a good self-manager who is aware of how to get the best out of yourself.

7. "In what way is performance measured and reviewed?"

This question flags up that you appreciate the importance of delivering real results. You will be seen as someone who understands the value of commitment, reliability and returns.

8. "What are the most important issues that you think your organisation will face? Or You have recently introduced a new product/service/division/project; how will this benefit the organisation?"

These variations both show that you are interested in the job and employer behind it too. It will be apparent you have done some research, done some thinking, and are now eager to hear their analysis.

9. "May I tell you a little more about my particular interest in communicating with clients/developing new ideas/implementing better systems?"

This is a cheeky and obvious way of getting permission to blow your own trumpet but then that's what this interview is all about.

10. "Do you have any doubts about whether I am suited to this position?"

This is a rather more brazen way of emphasising some of your strengths. It suggests you are open to constructive criticism and willing to learn from the experience of others. It also gives you a real chance to address any weaknesses the interviewee may think you have. Finally, it allows you to finish on a high, re-stating why you think you are the right person.