

The success of an interview is largely dependent upon the planning and preparation carried out beforehand. Remember that an interview is a two-way communication between an employer or their representative and a potential employee.

This guide is designed for candidates who are both experienced and new to attending job interviews. Some readers might think they've heard it all before but there just might be one or two points that you have forgotten. For those who are inexperienced interviewees, please read and digest this information, we promise it will help you!

Research the company

In the internet age, there are no excuses for not fully researching the company where you are interviewing. The interviewer will not expect you to know chapter and verse but understanding the basics of most if not all of the following points is essential:

- Age of company and history
- Number of employees
- Related companies (parent, subsidiary, associate)
- Approximate turnover
- Product range
- Status (family owned, private, public)
- Key people
- Latest news items about the company
- Competitors
- Market conditions in their sector

Much of this information will be available from the company's own web site but you could also use trade directories, industry specific magazines or company brochures. Most companies now have a presence on LinkedIn where you will find information on key personnel and even recent hires / leavers.

By gathering this information you will show a genuine interest in the company and their vacancy. It will make you stand out from other candidates and it assists you with your decision regarding the suitability of the company and position for you. It will also allow you to understand the client better and answer their questions with more relevant answers.

Never go to an interview without a notepad and pen, take your information with you and let the interviewer know about the research you have done.

Research the vacancy

By the time you reach the interview stage you should have a clear understanding of the position the interviewer needs to fill. Your Recruitment Consultant should have furnished you with a copy of the Job Description but these can often be quite brief. Make sure you know the following information before you meet the interviewer:

- Job Title
- The nature of the role
- Specific skills required
- Why does the vacancy exist?
- Is the salary and benefits package acceptable?
- Location of the role (it isn't always the same as the interview location)

- Most importantly, can you do it?

If you don't have answers to these questions before you attend an interview, there is a chance that you could waste both your time and the interviewer's time.

Preparing questions about specific projects within the role or what the team is like is good idea but we'll cover this later on.

Dress code for an interview

The adage that you never get a second chance to make a first impression was never truer than in an interview situation. Each interviewer has a specific stereotype of their ideal candidate, and they usually form opinions about an applicant early in the interview, often based on instinct. This is why it is important to make a professional first impression.

Unless you are specifically instructed by your Recruitment Consultant, business dress is required for all interviews.

The following will make a professional first impression:

Males

- A clean and pressed suit
- A polished pair of shoes
- A clean pair of plain socks (contrary to popular belief, comedy socks are not actually funny)
- An ironed plain shirt (Ensuring all buttons are done up)
- A tie that compliments your suit and your shirt (Red, Yellow, Blue, Stripy but NOT Homer Simpson!).
- Clean nails
- A hair cut is always a good idea and if you have facial hair make sure it is trimmed and tidy

Females

- A clean and pressed suit
- Clean nails
- Polished shoes – leave the clubbing heels at home though
- Minimal jewellery (large and / or elaborate jewellery can be a distraction)
- Clean and pressed blouse
- Minimal make up (overuse of make up can be a distraction and research has shown that it can leave interviewers feeling that you have something to hide)

All these points will help you before you have even started your interview; you will appear and feel more focused and professional.

The interview itself

As part of your research into the interview, you should plan your travel and ensure that you arrive in good time. A late arrival can result in an interview being postponed or even cancelled.

You should plan to arrive at the interview location between five and ten minutes before the interview is scheduled to start. Too early and you risk interrupting the interviewer with whatever they were doing before your meeting, this might cause annoyance and get things off to a bad start. Five to Ten Minutes ensures that the interviewer has time to meet you, move to the interview room and start the meeting as scheduled.

When you first meet your interviewer, offer them a firm and confident handshake (a limp or weak handshake implies lack of confidence or worse, a lack of sincerity) and thank them for giving you the opportunity to meet with them.

Set objectives before the interview. What do you want to achieve from this interview? For example, obtain a second interview or a job offer. Your Recruitment Consultant should have briefed you on the interview process and you should set your goal for each interview accordingly.

Ask questions early in the interview to establish areas of importance from the company's point of view and relate information of interest from your background.

Focus on the question – Answer the question, and try not to digress. You can always be asked to add further information. Be specific in your response and be honest if you can't answer a question.

If your interviewer asks a technical question to which you do not know the answer, it is always best to admit that you do not know the answer before taking your best shot rather than trying to bluff your way through and getting it wrong.

Do not lie or imply false attributes.

Listen and consider where the questions are heading.

You only have a limited time to show you are the best person for the job so listen carefully to the questions being asked and don't waste time with irrelevant information or answering a different question. If you are unsure or the question is vague don't be afraid to clarify the question with the interviewer e.g.: in what context do you mean?

Never be afraid to ask, "does that answer your question?"

Make notes in the interview. This conveys interest and will help if you get a second interview and with questions at the end.

Confidence is the key thing in an interview. Your interviewer will expect some nerves at the beginning of an interview but this soon goes away as you become more comfortable with that person. The key thing to avoid is over confidence or cockiness.

Take with you any relevant certificates, references or portfolios you have as proof of your skills and take photocopies to leave. These will jog the client's memory when they are reviewing applicants after the interviews.

Body language during an interview

Having a slick CV and all the right answers to tricky interview questions won't get you anywhere if your body language gives an entirely different message.

Research has shown that:

- Tone of voice and body language accounts for 65 per cent of what's communicated. Words only account for 35 per cent of the message that's communicated.
- Body language can give away a lot of our feelings. Regardless of whether we keep our mouths shut or not, and without an awareness of our actions, nervousness, dishonesty, boredom and other negative attributes can become dead give-aways.

Before taking a seat, be mindful of what you'll be staring at. If you have a choice, avoid facing a bright window or out into an office or common area where there might be distractions. If you don't apparently have a choice, don't be afraid to ask. Ensure that you have room to move and re-position yourself if you become stiff or restless.

To begin with, you need to set yourself up in a confident and comfortable position to help avoid negative body language habits. Make sure you are comfortably seated in an upright position ensuring that no part of your body is under strain (e.g. your neck). Keep your hands rested in your lap, your head raised, showing an expression of interest and relax your shoulders, without slumping into the seat.

Although we'll cover specific body language signs later, here are the obvious ones to watch out for.

- Fidgeting shows boredom and restlessness
- Crossing arms indicates an unwillingness to listen
- Tapping your foot, is distracting and a sure sign of boredom
- Doodling on paper shows you're not paying attention
- Touching your face or playing with your hair can be a sign that you're hiding something
- Looking away or hesitating before or while speaking indicates that you're unsure of what you're saying
- A fixed, unfocused stare shows your attention is elsewhere

Voice

A good CV and all the right answers to the toughest interview questions won't land you the job if your voice gives off an entirely different impression. It is important to project yourself confidently in a clear, controlled and steady voice that can be easily understood.

Take some time to practise, even staging a mock interview with a friend or colleague. Try to be aware of the following:

- Speak clearly in a controlled range of tones, avoid a monotone
- Always pause very briefly before speaking. This avoids instinctively reacting and saying the wrong things and ensures that the interviewer has finished what they were saying
- Speak slightly slower than normal, don't over do it though
- Vary your tone and dynamics, but try not to speak too loudly or too softly
- Don't mumble or gabble on excitedly
- Keep your hands away from your mouth as you speak
- Watch your pitch (high-pitched voices are tough on the ears) and avoid a 'sing-song' tone
- Let your voice show your enthusiasm and keenness

Body signals

Whether we intend it or not, our body language gives off very subtle signs which are subconsciously interpreted by the other party. We likewise read the same into other people's behaviour. Imagine conducting an interview with someone behind a two-way mirror, we wouldn't have the benefit of responding to their facial expressions and would feel quite unnerved by the experience. Every little frown or smile gives us the caution or confidence to make our next statement and it is a sublime skill which every human being has developed since childhood.

Some people are more receptive to body language than others, but as a candidate striving to make a good impression, it is important to be aware at all times of the body language that may give out a negative impression.

Guide to body language

Positive

- Responsive/eager: Leaning forward, open arms, nodding
- Listening: Head tilted, constant eye contact, nodding and verbal acknowledgement
- Attentive: Smiling, acknowledging certain comments

Negative

- Bored: Slumped posture, foot tapping, doodling
- Rejection: Arms folded, head down, subconscious frowning
- Aggression: Leaning too far forward, finger pointing, grinding teeth
- Lying: Touching face, hands over mouth, eyes averted, shifting uncomfortably in your seat, glancing

Seven body signals for a successful interview

1. A **smile** is the most positive signal you can give, it re-affirms your enthusiasm and good nature, but be careful of over-grinning stupidly.
2. Maintain regular, attentive **eye contact**, but remember to avert your gaze from time to time to avoid staring.
3. **Relax!** Give off calm signals and don't rush through the interview, be mindful of time, but let the interviewer dictate the pace of the interview.
4. **Mirror** the interviewer's techniques. If they laugh, laugh with them, if they lean forward to impress a point, respond by leaning forward to show your attention.
5. **Do not hurry** any movement, if you're challenged with a difficult question, remind yourself about negative body language habits before answering the question.
6. Try to maintain an **alert position**, sit up straight, don't slump, and adjust your position slightly if you get uncomfortable but don't fidget.
7. Always try to adopt an open, honest and **confident** attitude: this is the starting point of managing subconscious body language.

Preparing for the interviewer's questions

Take some time to go through the requirements for the role (you should have had a Job Spec) and your CV, think about the kinds of technical questions you would ask yourself and write down some evidenced based answers.

Make sure you're able to talk in detail about projects, environments or incidents which reflect your experience in the essential and desired skills and experience fields on the Job Spec;

- Think of an example of when you've had to make a decision which has influenced a project or other important area of your work.
- Think of an example of when you have had to change from the plans you had made for a project or piece of work.
- think of an example of when you have had to influence another person to change plans or opinions on a technical situation

It is important to give evidence based answers to questions where possible, as opposed to just giving the answer. i.e. where you encountered such a problem, technology, methodology, situation and what happened, your responsibilities and outcomes.

If you've taken time to think about your experience and work history your interview will be more fluid with less pauses or even "erms". If you are giving good detailed answers, with confident delivery in an interview situation you will come across considerably better than the candidate who stumbles through with "erms"

If you do need to take time to think, silence is better than "erm" or a hastily put together answer. After giving your answer, consider asking how they do things there? Use your judgement on how appropriate it is to get into a conversation about some of the technical issues you are being questioned on though.

Be prepared to take control of the interview. Many interviewers are inexperienced or unstructured and will greatly appreciate the candidate making the process easier for them.

Use open-ended questions – who, what, why, where, when and how.

It is very difficult to over sell yourself in an interview. Do not be afraid of highlighting your achievements but ensure that you can explain clearly how you achieved them.

Have you got any questions for me?

It's amazing how many interviews fail at this final hurdle and the reason is largely down to preparation. Here is our guide to effective Questioning at interviews.

How to prepare:

Always prepare your questions. Write them down or print them out and take them with you.

When the interviewer asks the inevitable "do you have any questions for me?" you can reply "yes I have been able to prepare some" and pull out your list.

This will show the interviewer that you have approached the interview with some clear goals and make you look professional, organised and enthusiastic. It also avoids your mind going blank or the interviewers hated response of "no, we've covered everything". In the unlikely event that they have covered everything the interviewer can clearly see that you have prepared adequately.

Good questions

The key to effective questioning is to always keep in mind that the questions are an opportunity to add value to your application and help you get the job, AND NOT about me, me, me. What's in it for me questions i.e. things such as money, how many holidays etc only become relevant if you get offered the job and certainly won't help you get the offer. Your Consultant will handle these on your behalf after the interview.

If you are forced to ask a "what's in it for me" question it is important how you phrase it, for example; Training.

Rather than asking "What training will I receive?" It is best to phrase it such as "What is the company's standpoint on training to keep a long-term employee's skills up to date?" This way you are making your question a positive by saying that you are loyal and hardworking as well as getting the information you need.

Team Questions

All employers look for strong team players, even if you are working on your own it is always important that you fit in with the broader team. It makes sense to ask some good questions around the team because when you show interest in the team it suggests that you are a team player and also gets the interviewer thinking of you as part of the team which is obviously a good thing

- What's the background and structure of the team?
- How long has the team been together?
- Are there any common interests such as football, music, motor sport etc?
- Is there a social scene?
- What's the atmosphere like in the office?

Company Questions

Your potential new employer wants to know that you are interested in their company. A couple of well phrased questions about the company culture will be well received and will give them an opportunity to brag a little.

- How would you define the working culture?
- How would you describe a typical working day?
- What would you say are the Pros and cons of working for this company

Systems specific questions

If you are interviewing for a technical position, prepare some questions about the technical environment. Use this opportunity to put yourself in their shoes.

- How many users?
- How many server / client machines?
- Recent / planned projects?
- What's the most common issue you have to deal with?

This is not intended to be a definitive list but rather to stimulate you in to thinking about some good questions to ask.

Closing the interview

This is often the toughest part of the interview. As the interview reaches a close it is a good idea to obtain feedback regarding your performance and suitability for the role.

At the end of the interview:

- Tell the interviewer why you are keen on the position e.g. company profile, opportunity, training, earning potential etc. Two or three reasons that will reinforce their belief in your interest.
- Ask the interviewer how they view you for the role? If you feel it's appropriate ask;
- Do they have any reservations on your experience or suitability?
- Does anything need clarifying or would they feel happy in employing you?

You need to take a judgement on the person who is interviewing you and how you think they will react to these questions. Some people won't like the presumptive questions such as does anything need clarifying? Or would they feel happy in employing you?

Lastly, before you part company with the interviewer, offer a firm and confident handshake, thank them for their time and tell them that you look forward to seeing them again soon.