



## Performing At Interview Guide

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### Introduction

For all the many flaws that we all know exist with interviews, it remains the most commonly used selection tool in any recruitment process. Good interview technique based on limited skills or experience is unlikely to make much difference but an ineffective approach can prevent a well-positioned candidate from performing at their best. As a result, knowing what makes for effective and ineffective interview technique is an important aspect of any career transition process.

This guide is deliberately focussed on helping you deliver the best performance you can give during an interview and, not making any promises about what jobs you might get, as only one of these things is under your control and sometimes there will just be someone better suited to a role than you.

### Job Criteria

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Before looking at the interview itself in detail, an obvious but often overlooked place to start, is the criteria for the role. This might be defined in a Role Profile, Job Description, Personal Specification or a related document such as the Job Advert. These should have formed a key part of any application or pre-assessment to reach the interview but either way ensuring that you have a clear understanding of these is the key starting point and something that will be returned to throughout the guide.

### Types of Interview

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There are many different forms that an interview can take and so having an idea of what type of interview you are likely to face can provide a useful starting point. Interviews can differ in the format of their delivery, the approach to questioning as well as the type of interviewers. To assist with understanding the different approaches, some of the common types of interview are outlined below:

#### *Interview Formats*

The most critical difference that you are likely to experience here is the extent to which the interview is 'structured' or not. Structured interviews would typically see the interviewer ask every candidate the same questions and use a standardised approach to setting up and timing the interview. Structured interviews can then still vary to the extent to which they are structured; for example the latitude provided to interviewers around personalised probing or how the questions are timed.

An unstructured interview may be as informal as a chat about you and your interests. Unstructured interviews may be favoured where the employer is keen to get a better idea about how well you may or may not 'fit' into their existing team. Despite the

relaxed feel of this type of interview it is still just as important to be well prepared and remember that you are still being assessed!

### ***Interview Questioning***

*Competency based interviews* – this approach is probably the most widely used, especially across the public sector, and focuses on the competencies and qualities required to perform effectively in the role. Often the questions will ask you to describe a time when you have demonstrated a specific competency or quality based on the premise that 'past behaviour is the best predictor of future behaviour'. Competency based interviews can also cover hypothetical or future-focussed questions which seek your views on how you might approach a specific challenge or situation in the future.

*Technical interviews* – questions of a more technical nature are often used either alongside a competency based interview or separately as a technical interview for roles where specific technical knowledge is required. As with competency based interviews, the question may focus on your specific experience of a technical scenario or on hypothetical ones.

*Strength Based Interviews* – the focus of this type of interview is on a candidate's interests. The premise behind this approach is that 'individuals perform at their best when they use their strengths'. The ultimate focus still has to be on finding the right person to do the job but by also considering who might enjoy the role and organisation this can help with future retention. There is a perception that this type of interview also gets a more genuine and honest view of the candidate which is attractive to employers. For this reason it is often used in a graduate context where practical work experience might be a less important factor.

*Values Based Interviewing* – building on the strengths based approaches above, this type of interview links the questions back to the organisations values and desired culture. The rationale behind this is that identifying candidates who reflect and uphold an organisation's values can be even more important in delivering against the organisational aims than just someone capable of demonstrating the required skills or competencies. For this reason, values based interviewing for example has been introduced widely across the health sector in response to the recent Mid-Staffordshire crisis.

*Scenario/case study interviews* – similar to the future focussed questions referenced above under the competency based approach, this type of interview builds on a specific scenario that you would be presented with to seek your views on how you might deal/respond to it. In this instance this is likely to be more detailed than a simple scenario described within a question for example, a detailed analysis of a hypothetical business problem.

### ***Types of Interviews***

*Telephone Interviews* – these are most often used as part of a screening process rather than the final selection interview. As a result they may be conducted by a member of the organisation's resourcing team or even an outsourced provider. The main approach to these is to identify and sift out candidates who are not suitable for the role so questions may cover eligibility criteria, your knowledge of the organisation, as well as specific requirements for the role.

*Internet/Video Interviews* – access to modern communications technology has made this type of interview all the more common. Sometimes this may just reflect the format of the interview e.g. being conducted via Skype rather than face-to-face which can be more practical and cost effective especially in an increasing global world of work. However, this approach can also see candidates asked to video record responses to a pre-recorded

question rather than participate in a personal interaction. This approach is more likely to be used in-place of a telephone screening interview and has the benefit of reducing resource costs even further.

*Panel interviews* – these are most often used for public appointments or where there are difficulties aligning key decision makers in a recruitment context. Most interviews will involve more than one interviewer but in this context a 'panel' refers to three or more interviewers. The questions are likely to come from a number, if not all, the panel who will each have their own style and approach which may lead to a range of different questioning experiences. As all members of the panel are likely to have a input to the ultimate decision it is important to acknowledge the whole panel when answering whilst also trying to focus the finish of each answer by looking at the person who asked the question.

*Group interviews* – this approach is far less common nowadays but would see several candidates interviewed at the same time and will often be asked a question in turn. In fact, candidates may be asked to comment or build on other candidate's responses to generate a group discussion context a bit like a 'TV debate'.

## Interview Advice

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There is a vast range of advice and guidance available for anyone going through an interview and the following section has been developed to pull out **FIVE** key points that can be applied to almost any interview situation.

### 1. Preparation

It goes without saying that preparation is a key stage in enabling you to perform at your best. However, this doesn't mean spending hours rehearsing and learning examples or potential responses as this can be counter-productive. Preparation is a very personal thing and needs to be tailored to not only the requirements for the role but also the type of interview and your personal preferences.

### 2. Get the basics right

In addition to the above points around preparation, it is also important to make sure you avoid the potential pitfalls which could undo all your hard work. This includes; dressing appropriately for the role/organisation, knowing where to go and turning up on time, and making sure your mobile phone is turned off.

### 3. Answer the question

Linked to the above point, it is amazing how often candidates fail to answer the question asked or more often provide the response to the question they 'wanted to be asked'. This not only makes the interviewer's job a lot harder but will place you at a significant disadvantage when it comes to rating or assessing your performance. A common but effective technique is to take your time when answering a question to make sure you understand what is being asked. Are a number of standard approaches to structuring interview answers that can be particularly effective in response to competency based questions (the STAR approach is discussed in more detail below).

### 4. Be yourself

An interview is for most people a stressful experience and so trying to act like someone else is unlikely to be an effective strategy. Being yourself means answering questions about your personal strengths and weaknesses honestly. Being able to admit to what you do not know can be an attractive quality for employers but it is just as important to

then be able to articulate how you would mitigate against this development need or are trying to address any gap.

One exception to this is where individuals struggle to sell themselves, as this can be a fundamental barrier to effective interview performance. As uncomfortable as it may be, it is important to be positive about yourself, your experiences and what you can bring to the role. In line with this, remember that you are selling yourself and not your past role, employer or team. Emphasise your contribution so that the interviewer understands why they should offer you the role over someone else.

## 5. Remember it's a two way process

This becomes important from a number of perspectives. Firstly, the interview process will tell you a bit about the organisation, or some key personnel within it at least. Part of any selection process is also about attracting the right candidate as much as sifting out those who aren't suitable so make sure you assess how right the organisation is for you. Unless you are involved in a very structured interview, you will be given the opportunity to ask any questions at the end and this should be used as a chance to find out any outstanding queries you have about the role although the interview is unlikely to be the best time to start salary negotiations.

## Competency Based Interviews

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As described earlier, one of the most commonly used types of interviews is a competency-based interview. Therefore further attention is given to this type of interview here.

Although most competency based questions tend to ask for examples of situations where you have demonstrated specific skills or behaviour, these questions can appear in different formats. In many cases, the interviewers will start with a general question, which they will then follow-up with more specific, example-based questions. For example, 'how do you manage upwards?'

The key in answering all these questions is that you are required to 'demonstrate' that you have the right skills by using examples based on your prior experience, and not just talk about the topic in a theoretical and hypothetical way.

It is also important to recognise that competency frameworks will differ between organisations and therefore the competency-based interview questions asked will also vary widely between sectors, professions, organisations, role and level of responsibility. There are a wide range of competency labels and descriptions that are used, so it is important to check the person specification or role profile so you are clear about the competencies that are relevant to the organisation and might be assessed during your interview.

We have provided some example competencies and associated questions below to provide an idea of what to expect:

**Decision-making** - Makes well-informed, effective, and timely decisions, even when data are limited or solutions produce unpleasant consequences; perceives the impact and implications of decisions.

- What big decision did you make recently. How did you go about it?
- How did you reach the decision that you wanted to change your job?

**Teamwork** - Develops strong working relationships inside and outside the team to achieve common goals. Breaks down barriers between groups and involves others in discussions and decisions:

- Describe a situation in which you were a member of team. What did you do to positively contribute to it?
- Give us an example where you worked in a dysfunctional team. Why was it dysfunctional and how did you attempt to change things?

## Structuring Your Responses To Interview Questions

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One thing that interviewees often worry about is how to structure their response. In line with the points above though, a structured answer is no substitute for a response that actually answers the question!

In considering your response to a question, if it is a role that you are well suited to, then you are likely to more than one example to consider. Some tips on what to consider in choosing which example to use include:

- does it describe the particular behaviour or action being asked for
- does it demonstrates action and is something you actually did
- does it highlight your personal role as opposed to saying what other people did
- does it reflect a scenario where you had a significant impact or influence rather than just a really interesting or impressive piece of work
- does it lead to a specific outcome
- is there a clear read across between the context in the example and the demands of the role you are applying for
- is it an example you can talk confidently about if asked for more detail

A commonly used approach to structuring interview question responses, especially in relation to competency based interviews, is the **STAR** technique. STAR stands for:

### **S – Situation:**

Put the example in context. Firstly outline what was the situation and briefly describe the background to it.

This is an important opportunity to set the level of your example so make sure that if you are applying for a management level role then the context you outline makes your experience at this level clear. However, you should aim to keep this section brief to allow you to focus the majority of your response on what contribution you made to the situation.

### **T – Task:**

Explain what the problem or situation was. Building on the context above, you need to articulate clearly what the task or the specific objective that you were setting out to achieve was.

This is also an opportunity to set the organisational or strategic drivers as part of the context for your example. So think about how your example fitted in with the organisations or wider objectives at the time or what made the context so challenging (if it was).

In considering how much detail to give, make sure you keep it concise and informative, concentrating on what is useful to the example you are describing. This section is still more scene setting than describing your personal actions and so less likely to be positively scored by the interviewers.

This is also a good place to make the clear link between the question asked and the example you are providing. This can be a useful check for yourself to make sure you are staying on track and can also help establish this link in the interviewers who might have missed it otherwise.

### **A – Action:**

Now that you have set the context of your story, you need to explain what you did to resolve or address the situation.

This is the most important section of your response as it is where you have the chance to demonstrate and highlight the skills and personal attributes that you have.

Some key points to remember in describing what you did include:

- *Keep it personal* – remember to talk about what you did and not describe the wider team. This is a point where using **'I' and not 'we'** can be important even if uncomfortable for some people. In instances where the question leads to a team focussed response then remember to describe what you did to create a positive set of relationship or keep the team on track. The interview is about convincing the employer to recruit you and not someone else.
- *Provide sufficient detail* – A common mistake is that interviewees assume that the interviewer knows what you mean or what happened. In particular outline your thought processes and why you took specific actions (as well as why you dismissed other options) as this key evidence is hidden otherwise.
- *Avoid jargon* – unless relevant to a technical role and you are confident that everyone knows what you mean, remember to explain acronyms or jargon. This can be a particular issue when moving between organisations or even more so between industries as this type of language is something we very quickly pick up and don't recognise that we are using it.

### **R – Result:**

Explain what the outcome was and what happened as a result of your action.

In some ways this is part of bringing your example to a natural conclusion and if you have been successful in outlining an engaging scenario then the interviewers may actually be interested in knowing how it ended. However, this is also about showing that there is an outcome or an impact of your actions which is ultimately the purpose of why we do things.

Some people might argue that this should always be a positive outcome although there is a strong argument that interviewers are clever enough to see through overly successful achievements when knowing the reality of work. Unrealistic sounding outcomes can impact on the perception of your credibility and honesty.

A further opportunity this part of your example provides is for you to describe what you learned from the situation or how you developed your personal practices. Demonstrating a commitment to on-going personal development and learning is likely to be a more persuasive bit of evidence than an overly positive achievement every time. However, again this can come across as 'staged' if not genuine so stick to what you know and have done.

## Summary

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In spite of all the information and advice above, the realities of how the interview runs in practice will depend on the internal approach of the employer and the specific interviewers on the day. For this reason the most important bit of advice is to be ready to flex your approach and be prepared for the unexpected.

Following the advice above will support you in being as well prepared as you can be and achieving your aim of performing at your best.

### Review of key points

- **Prepare for the specific requirements of the role you are applying for.**
- **Don't forget the basics (timing, appearance, names, etc).**
- **Focus on answering the specific question asked.**
- **Use it to gather any information you need.**
- **Be yourself.**
- **Keep flexible and be prepared for anything!**