

Interview Tips

Fail to plan, plan to fail. You are certain to be asked specific questions about your potential employer, so make sure you've done your homework. Nothing is as disappointing as when a candidate oozes enthusiasm and then doesn't even know the most basic facts and figures about a company.

Here are a few places you can find some useful information:

An online search

The company's website is the best place to start. It shows the company as it would like to be seen and the products and services they offer. You'll get a feel for the corporate style, culture and tone of voice. Check out the annual report and look for a press or company news page.

As you filter all this information, consider how the role you're applying for relates to the company's mission. You may also be able to use the site's search facility to discover more about the person or people who will be interviewing you.

You should spend some time looking online for any other information you can find about the company. Put their name into Google News to see if they've had any recent interesting stories written about them. You could also discover some information written by their current employees on what it's like to work there.

It's also worth searching for your own name to see what crops up – your potential employer may be doing the same thing.

Industry sources

It's not just information about the company you need – you should also have a good background knowledge of the industry so you can impress at the interview. Browse through business publications and websites to see what they are writing about your potential employer and their industry. Have a look on the newsstands at the big magazine retailers - there's an amazing list of publications out there.

You may find back issues of trade publications at university or public libraries, or you might be able to access them online. Some journals are even available for free or by subscription through their own websites.

If you're already in the same industry as your potential employer, it may be possible to discreetly ask colleagues or your suppliers if they know anything about the company you're interested in.

Preparing yourself

This is the bit most people forget to give enough time to, so don't get caught out. Just like when you're going into an exam, feel confident that you can field any question they throw at you, and try to feel as good about yourself as you can. It shines through.

Here are a few top tips:

- Have a mock interview with a friend based on the common interview questions you're likely to face.
- Be sure you know the time, date and location of the interview and the name of interviewers.
- Decide how you will get there and when you need to set off to arrive in good time, anticipating any delays. Do a dummy run if necessary.
- If you look good, you tend to feel good too. Avoid any last minute panic by preparing what you're going to wear the night before.
- Don't go into the interview with lots of baggage - psychological or physical. Take the bare minimum with you so you can concentrate on the interview, and nothing else.
- If you are asked to bring certificates, references, etc, get them ready well in advance to avoid having to chase around on the morning of the big day.
- It may sound patronising, but make sure you use the toilet before you go in – you don't want to be bursting to go when you're mid-interview.

Be methodical

Sit down with your CV and make notes, just as if you were preparing for an exam. Study your work record and what you have achieved. How do you see yourself? What have you done? What ambitions do you have? Make notes and prepare and rehearse sound bites about yourself. Do this out loud, even if it makes you feel weird.

Try to relate specific areas of your CV back to the job description. It will make it clear to the interviewer why they should hire you.

Remember, one of the most common interview questions is "Tell me about yourself". Prepare a balanced and succinct answer to this question, not a life history. Keep it businesslike and don't stray into personal feelings or family relationships. Avoid anything to do with politics or religion like the plague. Interviewers use this question to learn about your personal qualities, not your achievements - they should already have those from your CV.

Common Questions

Although there is no set format that every job interview will follow, there are some questions that you can almost guarantee will crop up. Here's a list of the most common questions and a guide to the kind of answers your interviewer wants to hear.

- **Tell me about yourself...**

This is usually the opening question and, as first impressions are key, one of the most important. Keep your answer to under five minutes, beginning with an overview of your highest qualification then running through the jobs you've held so far in your career. You can follow the same structure of your CV, giving examples of achievements and the skills you've picked up along the way. Don't go into too much detail – your interviewer will probably take notes and ask for you to expand on any areas where they'd like more information. If you're interviewing for your first job since leaving education, focus on the areas of your studies you most enjoyed and how that has led to you wanting this particular role.

- **What are your strengths?**

Pick the three biggest attributes that you think will get you the job and give examples of how you have used these strengths in a work situation. They could be tangible skills, such as proficiency in a particular computer language, or intangible skills such as good management. If you're not sure where to start, take a look at the job description. There is usually a section listing candidate requirements, which should give you an idea of what they are looking for.

- **What are your weaknesses?**

The dreaded question, which is best handled by picking something that you have made positive steps to redress. For example, if your IT ability is not at the level it could be, state it as a weakness but tell the interviewer about training courses or time spent outside work hours you have used to improve your skills. Your initiative could actually be perceived as a strength. On no accounts say "I don't have any weaknesses", your interviewer won't believe you, or "I have a tendency to work too hard", which is seen as avoiding the question.

- **Why should we hire you? or What can you do for us that other candidates can't?**

What makes you special and where do your major strengths lie? You should be able to find out what they are looking for from the job description. "I have a unique combination of strong technical skills and the ability to build long-term customer relationships" is a good opening sentence, which can then lead onto a more specific example of something you have done so far in your career. State your biggest achievement and the benefit it made to the business, then finish with "Given the opportunity, I could bring this success to your company."

- **What are your goals? or Where do you see yourself in five years time?**

It's best to talk about both short-term and long-term goals. Talk about the kind of job you'd eventually like to do and the various steps you will need to get there, relating this in some way

back to the position you're interviewing for. Show the employer you have ambition, and that you have the determination to make the most of every job you have to get where you want to be.

- **Why do you want to work here?**

The interviewer is listening for an answer that indicates you've given this some thought. If you've prepared for the interview properly, you should have a good inside knowledge of the company's values, mission statement, development plans and products. Use this information to describe how your goals and ambition matches their company ethos and how you would relish the opportunity to work for them. Never utter the phrase "I just need a job."

- **What are three positive things your last boss would say about you?**

This is a great time to brag about yourself through someone else's words. Try to include one thing that shows your ability to do the job, one thing that shows your commitment to the work, and one thing that shows you are a good person to have in a team. For example, "My boss has told me that I am the best designer he has ever had. He knows he can always rely on me, and he likes my sense of humour."

- **What salary are you seeking?**

You can prepare for this by knowing the value of someone with your skills. Try not to give any specific numbers in the heat of the moment – it could put you in a poor position when negotiating later on. Your interviewer will understand if you don't want to discuss this until you are offered the job. If they have provided a guideline salary with the job description, you could mention this and say it's around the same area you're looking for.

- **If you were an animal, which one would you want to be?**

Interviewers use this type of psychological question to see if you can think quickly. If you answer 'a bunny', you will make a soft, passive impression. If you answer 'a lion', you will be seen as aggressive. What type of personality will it take to get the job done?

You should always have some questions for your interviewer to demonstrate your interest in the position. Prepare a minimum of five questions, some which will give you more information about the job, and some which delve deeper into the culture and goals of the company.

Tips For The Second Interview

Once you've reached the second interview stage, it can be tempting to think you're almost there and that the job's there for the taking. It is, but there's still a lot of work to do. Prepare as well for the second interview as you did for the first. Think about what it is about you that makes them want to consider you for the job.

They may want to delve deeper into your personal skills and interests to see if you're the right fit for the team, or they may have brought someone in to play the tough guy to see how you handle pressure. If you do have a new interviewer, be prepared to go over some old ground using notes from your first interview.

As before, plan your answers to their likely questions, and be clear in your own mind where your cut off point is in terms of sharing views or talking about your private life.

Expect more open-ended or challenging questions about your experience. Have some examples in your head about specific projects you have managed or challenges you have met. It may be worth preparing some cue cards of your key work achievements to keep them fresh and organised in your head ready for when you go in.

If you've been asked to give a formal interview presentation, request that all the equipment you need is ready and waiting for you when you turn up.

Making your mind up

Second interviews are a good opportunity to deal with the second thoughts you had on the way back from the first. Go through any notes you took first time around, during or after the interview, and draw up a list of things you'd like to clear up when they offer you the chance to ask questions.

This is also a great time to really think hard about whether you'd want to work for these people or not. Do you like them? Is there something deep down that doesn't feel right? Try to pick up as many signals as you can. Don't fight a powerful instinct that tells you this role just isn't for you, no matter how attractive the offices or the salary package.

We're going where?

Occasionally, second interviews will take place off-site, in a bar or restaurant, for example. There's a very good reason for this - your interviewer may want to check out your interpersonal skills by seeing how you react in an informal setting. This technique is also used to catch you off guard and tempt you into saying something you might not say in a more formal environment. Be on your guard. Alcohol can often make you say something you regret so wait to see what

your interviewer is drinking before ordering yours, and never fall into a trap of drinking too much too quickly.

We're delighted to say...

You may be offered the job on the spot. Regardless of how much you want the job, express your gratitude, but don't accept...yet. It's very reasonable to ask for time to consider. Ask when they would like a decision from you. You're making a big step, so you want to be sure you don't land on boggy ground. You need to get used to the idea that you could be walking through those doors again as part of the team on a daily basis.

Think the offer over in your head and discuss it with friends to make sure you're totally comfortable with the idea. Did the atmosphere feel right? Did you like your interviewers? Did the people you saw while you were there look focused and motivated? Use your common sense and experience, and don't go all glassy-eyed and lose your judgement in the thrill of the moment. Take this as an opportunity to negotiate a deal that's right for you.

You're talking about making a commitment that will probably last for years rather than months so take your time.

Questions For The Interviewer

Most interviewers will give you an opportunity to ask questions after they've finished grilling you, so be prepared to make the most of it. Try to concentrate on issues that are important to you and combine an interest in the company with an interest in the job.

With a wide variety of interview styles and structures, there's every possibility that everything you want or need to know about the job will have been covered over the course of the interview. There is always more information available though and if you don't have at least five questions prepared, you'll come across as passive rather than curious and interested.

Regarding role specific questions, look through the job description to see if there are any areas that you would like more information about. Here are some good examples of the questions you could ask about the role:

- Why has the position become available?
- What are the main objectives and responsibilities of the position?
- How does the company expect these objectives to be met?

- What are the measures used to judge how successful I am in the role?
- What obstacles are commonly encountered in reaching these objectives?
- What is the desired time frame for reaching the objectives?
- What can I expect from you in terms of development and support?
- What aspirations do you have for me at the company?
- Where will the job fit into the team structure?

Good interview preparation should have given you an insight into what it's like to work for a company, but it's good to get answers straight from the horse's mouth in case you've misinterpreted anything. These questions are a good place to start:

- What's the best thing about working at your company?
- What is the main thing the organisation expects from its employees?
- How do you build good relationships within teams?
- What is the turnover of staff like throughout the company?
- Are there any plans for expansion?
- How would you describe the company culture and management style?

To show your interest and knowledge of the industry the company operates in, it's also a good idea to have a question ready regarding a current event or issue in the market. For example, "How do you think the recent merger between your two main competitors will affect the future of the industry?"

How well your interviewer reacts and answers your questions gives you a great insight into the company. The interview isn't just for them to see if you're the right fit for the organisation – if you're confident about your skills and ability to do the job, you should also be making sure they're the right fit for you.

Generally, it's not a good idea to ask about pay or benefits, as this can make you seem more interested in what the organisation can do for you, rather than what you can do for them.