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ask

# Preparing for Interviews

## Career KnowHow Series

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If you are reading this it may be that you have been invited to an interview. This is good news; the employer thinks that you look good on paper and look like a person that potentially can do the job that they are looking to fill. You are probably feeling pleased but also a little nervous about the interview. You might also be wondering what to expect and how to prepare; this guide will help you to understand what makes the interview the most important part of the recruitment process and how you can ensure that you perform at your best on the big day. .

A key point to remember is that an interview is a two-way process. The employer will use the process to make assessments of your skills, knowledge and experience and how they fit with the criteria of the job. You, on the other hand, can assess whether the job is really what you are looking and if the company is right for you. Understanding this will help to lessen some of the nerves you might be feeling.

## **Types of interviews:**

**1-2-1** which are sometimes used by SMEs, or as a result of speculative approaches to a company. Whilst the interview may seem informal, it is still an interview and it is best to prepare in the same way as you would for any other interview.

**Panel** – A common interview format. This is used by both public and private sector organizations. Panels may consist of two or more people e.g. the Line Manager and HR representative. Each member of the panel will ask questions.

**Group** – This may mean working with other interviewees in group scenarios. The objective is to showcase your team work, interpersonal, problem-solving and leadership qualities. This interviewing approach is becoming more common and may well form part of a larger assessment centre day that may still include an individual interview.

**Telephone** – These are commonly used by larger recruiters or in situations where the job advertised has attracted a large number of applicants. Employers will inform you about their recruitment cycle, and if you are likely to have a telephone interview, this will be the first formal assessment of the recruitment process after submitting your application, CV or completing aptitude tests.

**Skype** – Usually used when location is an issue, e.g. you may be on holiday, on a year abroad or gap year and not returning to the UK for some time; alternatively, the employer may well be based outside of the UK. A key issue around Skype interviews is still appearance – that goes for what you wear and what the surroundings look like in the room behind you.

### **Strengths-based interviews**

Some graduate recruiters, such as Aviva, Standard Chartered, Morrisons and Ernst & Young now use “strengths-based interviews” in their graduate recruitment process. Others using it include Royal Mail, BAE Systems and Unilever. Usually employers are open about this method of recruitment but won’t always make it clear what strengths they are looking for. So do your homework! Underpinning ideas around this concept are about recruiting for attitude, energy and motivation as well as competencies. This is a developing area for selection interviewing.

### **Video interviews**

Video interviews are also a developing trend in the graduate recruitment market. This may be a live interview over Skype (see above), or it could be a screening interview in which you have to record yourself onto a video answering a number of standard questions. The preparation you would need to do for this would be fundamentally the same as for any interview and you should dress in suitable interview attire while on camera. An additional note here it to consider what will be on screen at the time of the recording. Think about venue and if you intend to use your flat/room make sure that things look tidy or at least neutral in the background.

## Preparation

Getting your preparation right is the best way to reduce nerves and to ensure that you perform well on the day.

Key aspects of preparation include:

1. Understanding what the employer is looking for and how you meet the criteria specified and importantly, what evidence you can present that proves this to be the case
2. Understanding your strengths as a candidate and again, having the evidence to prove them
3. Understanding the organisation, the nature of their business, the culture of the organisation, their customers, the marketplace and who their competitors are
4. Knowing the details around the interview, i.e. location, travel, dress code, contact details in case of problems etc.

## Understanding what the employer is looking for

When recruiting for any post the employer will draw up 2 documents.

1. Job description: This is a document that outlines the duties and responsibilities of **the job** itself. It will describe the typical duties that typically you would be required to undertake if successful.
2. Person specification: This is a key document as it will clearly set out the mix of skills, knowledge and experience being sought. In other words this describes **the person** they are looking for.

Job descriptions and person specifications are readily available when applying for jobs within the public sector but may not be as available when applying for jobs within the private sector or for graduate programmes. If this is the case, then it will be necessary to analyse the job advertisement or the graduate recruitment web pages to discern the mix of skills, knowledge and experience being sought. Alternatively, the recruiter will clearly state the competences and personality factors that

they will be assessing candidates against, this will be usually found in specific section of the graduate website or brochure.

Understanding what the organisation is looking for and identifying the evidence to show how you meet their criteria is perhaps the most important aspect to your preparation.

The questions asked at interview will focus on these criteria and the expectation is that you will provide some specific evidence that illustrates the competency or quality being focused upon.

The **STAR** approach is a tried and trusted way to help you to reflect on the range of your experience and to identify specific examples that could be used at interview. It is an effective method to demonstrate how you have developed and applied the skill, competency or quality that the recruiter is looking for.

*Use the **STAR** technique to help you organize your thoughts and provide more coherent answers to the questions that you are likely to be asked.*

**S – Situation.** Set the scene, e.g. in the second year of my marketing degree, a major part of assessment involved working within a small project team on behalf of an external client, in this case a local charity that provided services to disabled people in the community.

**T – Task.** What was your role e.g. A key challenge for the charity was funding and it was decided that the project would focus on developing a marketing strategy that would assist the charity in raising funds in the short-term as well as providing a viable fundraising plan for the future. As a group, key tasks and roles within the project were identified. I led on the design of the posters as well as the marketing and promotion of the charity event that was identified as a key project outcome for the short-term.

**A – Action.** What action did you take e.g. I spoke with a graphic design friend who helped me to produce posters and displayed them around University. I then developed a social media marketing plan, publicizing the event on Facebook, Twitter and the University website as well as the Charity’s website. In addition, I was able to secure interviews with our local radio and local community newspaper.

**R – Result** e.g. The project team was successful in securing donations from local businesses and a rugby player from the local premier league team helped to compère the evening. We raised money by selling tickets and holding raffles for prizes donated by local businesses. The event was well attended raising over £1500. We were acknowledged for the effort we had put into promoting the event, and for being able to use our negotiation skills to persuade local businesses to make donations to the raffle.

In addition to outlining the result it can also be useful to include some level of evaluation of the example that you are discussing; was the approach taken effective? What key issues did you have to address in order to complete the task? Would you do things differently next time?

Using and applying the STAR approach takes time and practice. Why not book a mock interview with one of our Careers Consultants to help you practice? These are most effective when you have an interview coming up and want to hone your performance before the real thing. All we need are the details of the job you are being interviewed for and we will draw up questions to ask you – it’s that simple. After the ‘interview’ has been conducted we will provide you with feedback on specific aspects of your performance. If you bring your smartphone you can even video yourself and review your performance more precisely.

## Types of questions

The questions asked at interview can take a variety of forms but would generally include the following types:

- Checking questions, 'Can you confirm your contact address?'
- Warm-up questions, e.g. 'Tell me a little bit about yourself'
- Competency questions, e.g. 'Tell me about a time when you have made an effective contribution to a team?'
- Scenario/Hypothetical questions, e.g. 'what would you do in a situation where...'
- Challenging questions, e.g. 'Tell me about something that hasn't gone well – how did you handle this'

There are many others and variations on the themes outlined above but you can generally be sure that you will be asked a number of questions that will fall under the types outlined above.

With the exception of the checking questions it helps to have prepared how you would answer some of the more predictable questions in advance, as it would take a lot to think of examples off the top of your head on the day. Understanding what employer is looking for and marshalling your evidence is the key.

Here are some example questions to help with your preparation:

'Tell me about yourself'

'What are you most proud of?'

'What made you apply to this company?'

'What makes you the best candidate for this job?'

'Tell me about a business/news story that has caught your eye recently'

'What are the key issues facing companies in this industry at present?'

'Who do you think are our competitors and what makes us different?'

‘What factors led you to choosing (your subject) for your degree?’

‘What has been the most challenging aspect of your studies?’

‘How has your degree prepared you for the role you have applied for?’

‘What are the 3 key things you have gained from your degree?’

‘Tell me about a time when you have persuaded somebody to your point of view – how did you approach this?’

‘Describe a time when you have made a significant contribution to the work of a team’

‘What have you learned from your part-time jobs/work experience that would help you in this role?’

‘How does this job fit into your career plan?’

‘How would your friends describe you?’

‘Tell me about a challenge that you have had to overcome – how did you do this?’

‘What de-motivates you?’

‘Tell me about a time when you have worked with someone you found difficult to get along with – how did you handle the situation?’

This is just a small sample of possible questions; there are literally hundreds of potential interview questions and it would be impossible to prepare for them all. The best preparation that you can do relates back to understanding what the company is looking for – the job advertisement, job description and person specification. This is the information that will lead you to the evidence that you can present.



Here are some questions that are typical of a strengths based approach to interviewing:

What do you do well?

What activities energise you?

When do you feel that you are most like “yourself“?

When are you at your best?

How can you capitalise on your strengths more?

What comes easily to you?

What do you learn quickly?

What did you find easiest to learn at school or university?

What subjects do you most enjoy studying?

What things give you energy?

Describe a successful day you have had.

When did you achieve something you were really proud of?

Do you prefer to start tasks or to finish them?

Do you find you have enough hours in the day to complete all the things you want to do?

What things are always left on your to-do list and not finished? (These are probably weaknesses: things you dislike doing)

What do you enjoy doing the least? (These are likely to be areas where you lack natural aptitude or skills.)

## Asking questions

It is normal practice to be given the opportunity to ask the panel any questions. Preparing your questions is a good idea and it can be useful to take them into the interview with you. This will save you the trouble of trying to remember them and will also communicate that you have taken some time to think about and prepare what you want to ask. Questions that you may consider asking could cover the following areas:

- Questions around the job itself – what are key tasks? What would typically be done by a new entrant to the firm? What would they like to see in terms of achievement after the first 6 months?
- Questions around development within the role, e.g. ‘What support do you offer in relation professional development?’ ‘Do you have a mentoring programme in place to support new graduates?’ ‘What’s the typical career path taken by graduates who start in this role?’

## Disclosing a Disability

Preparing for an interview can be daunting for anyone, particularly if you have additional support needs. You may feel apprehensive about disclosing your disability for fear of a negative reaction from an employer. If it has not been addressed in your application form already, you may wish to contact the HR department before the interview if you have questions about access or you need a support worker or sign language interpreter.

Employers and HR departments may already be well versed in providing support, and will have policies in place under the Equality Act (2010) to support new and existing staff members with learning difficulties and disabilities. Telling an employer about your disability gives you control over how and what you choose to tell them. Anticipate likely questions around support needs and make clear your achievements, how you have managed your needs and succeeded in your studies and work. You may also wish to let employers know about schemes such as

‘Access to Work’ which can help to meet the costs of resources you may need in the workplace.

For more information or to talk through disclosure, please speak with a Careers Consultant or visit the **SKILL** (National Bureau for students with disabilities) website [www.skill.org.uk](http://www.skill.org.uk).

## **Final preparation**

- Prepare questions to ask, this shows you are keen on securing the position. You might wish to ask for more information about the job, your training and future developments of the organisation.
- Re-read your application form and/or CV.
- Decide which examples of your skills and experience to use in the interview.
- Re-read the invitation letter to ensure that you have prepared everything needed for the day.

## **After the interview**

It is always useful to seek feedback on your interview performance – even when you have been successful. By contacting the interviewers in the days following the interview you may get some information on how you came across and how you can improve your performance. Not all organisations will provide detailed feedback, but it is always worth asking.

## **Further help**

Book a mock interview with a Careers Consultant. This will give you the opportunity to test yourself in an interview situation and receive feedback on your performance. Contact us for more information at: [askUSa@salford.ac.uk](mailto:askUSa@salford.ac.uk)

**Careers also have the following reference book resources which will be useful:**

Job Interviews: Top Answers to Tough Questions by Matthew DeLuca & John Lees

Communicating With Impact by S.D.Probert and J.R.Jammes

Successful Interview Skills by Rebecca Corfield

You're Hired! Interview Tips & Techniques for a Brilliant Interview, by Judi James

What Color Is Your Parachute by R.N.Bolles

How to interview like a top MBA, Dr Shel Leanne

How To Succeed At Interviews & Other Selection Methods published by University of London Careers Service

**The Careers & Employability website** provides online resources to help you prepare for interviews, including a streamed related film 'Making an Impact' - a series of interviews conducted in different organisations. The films can be viewed from any University computer.

<http://www.careers.salford.ac.uk/jobapplicationsandinterviews>

<http://www.careers.salford.ac.uk/downloadzone>

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