

Interview Preparation, Formats and Skills

What is an interview?

The interview is the last step in the selection process where you have the opportunity to “sell” yourself to the prospective employer. At this stage the employer is ascertaining whether you have the capabilities to fulfil the role and to assess your ability to contribute to the organisation. You will need to convince them you are the right person for the job. Adequate preparation is vital to ensure you present in a confident manner and to assist you in anticipating questions which may be asked. There are three steps to the interview process, “*Preparation*”, “*The Interview*”, and “*Post Interview*”.

Preparation

Preparation is considered the most important step and the key to impressing the interviewer. You will need to have knowledge of the prospective organisation, be able to articulate what the role involves and know how your experience, skills and abilities translate into the best candidate for the job.

Consider the following steps to assist you with your preparation:

1. Make enquiries as to what the position entails, especially any key selection criteria that are required for the role. You may have had to answer these criteria in your initial application but further information can be obtained through the organisation’s Human Resource Division and careful examination of the Position Description. Conduct informational interviewing (speaking to people who are currently in the position, organisation or similar field) to develop an understanding of the specific job tasks and how your skills and abilities can relate to that role.
2. Research the organisation thoroughly. An employer looks for applicants who have taken the initiative to research the company, can show a clear understanding of the operation, strategic direction and future plans for the organisation. This will demonstrate your eagerness to gain employment with them. Suggested avenues of enquiry are:
 - ❖ Company Websites;
 - ❖ HR Departments;
 - ❖ Publications ie. Newspapers, Business Magazines, Professional Journals;
 - ❖ Professional Associations;
 - ❖ Annual Reports; and
 - ❖ Employees (anyone who has knowledge of the organisation).
3. Thoroughly understand what your skills and abilities, personal attributes and experience are. Employers will want to know how these translate to the applied for position. You will need to brain storm all areas of your life, personal, educational and employment (paid and unpaid) and examine your strengths and weaknesses. If Key Selection Criteria were required as part of the initial application, ensure you review this document along with your resume.
4. Pre-empting possible interview questions is essential in your preparation. Questions can be based on Key Selection Criteria and generally the interviewer will be trying to ascertain leadership qualities, analytical skills, ability to work under pressure, drive, self-discipline, high level of motivation and initiative. Practice some responses to the following questions:

- ❖ Tell me about yourself.
- ❖ Why do you think you are suitable for this position?
- ❖ Why would you like this job?
- ❖ What qualifications do you have for this job?
- ❖ Why have you applied for this job?
- ❖ What are your strengths/weaknesses/faults?
- ❖ What did you like/dislike about your last job?
- ❖ Do you work well with others, as part of a team?
- ❖ Does future study appeal to you?
- ❖ Do you have any career plans?
- ❖ Why do you think we should employ you?
- ❖ What have you got to offer us?
- ❖ What do you know about this organisation?
- ❖ Are you a member of any clubs or organisations?
- ❖ Where do you see yourself in five years time?
- ❖ How do you handle pressure?
- ❖ What is the most difficult situation you have faced?

Interview questions can also be based in a behavioural format. Employers will often look for past behaviour to predict how you are going to perform in the future. You will need to draw on previous experience to answer these questions. Questions should be answered using the **STAR** model (**S**ituation, **T**ask, **A**ction and **R**esponse) followed by a concluding remark.

Customer service is very important in this role – tell us a situation where you have been proud of your customer service skills?

I believe delivering exceptional customer service skills provide an organisation with a leading edge. Two important skills besides your attitude and manner are providing customers with alternatives and displaying empathy. **(Situation)** Recently I served a client who was very frustrated at not being able to access information because of a technology problem. **(Task)** I offered to take the customer's name and details and telephone him when the problem was rectified. **(Action)** After I had followed through with this he was very appreciative and wrote a formal compliment to the organisation, thanking me for the service I provided. **(Response)** This example illustrates my attitude of providing friendly, value added customer service. **(Concluding Remark)**

Examples of behavioural questions are as follows:

- ❖ Give me an example of a stressful situation you dealt with that demonstrates your coping skills?
 - ❖ Describe a time when you had to deal with a difficult co-worker or customer? How did you behave? What did you do?
 - ❖ Tell me about a time when you took the initiative/lead to head off a problem?
 - ❖ Tell me a time when you failed and the lesson you learnt from the experience?
 - ❖ Give me an example of a time when you had to analyse an established work process. What were the problems? What were the solutions? What was the result of your work?
 - ❖ Summarise a situation where you displayed leadership and initiative to motivate others. Did you achieve an outcome? What did you learn?
5. Interview formats can differ depending on the organisation. If possible make some enquiries as to the style in which your interview will be conducted, how long it will take and the job role of the person(s) interviewing.
- ❖ **One-on-one** – this interview is conducted by one person and usually is less stressful. Spend some time at the beginning of this interview to build a rapport with the interviewer.

- ❖ **Panel** – a panel usually involves up to three people from various areas within the company ie. HR department, the area manager that you may be reporting to and someone from another department. The panel may take it in turns to ask questions or this role may be dedicated to one person only, while someone observes and the other records your responses to the questions. Although one person may ask the questions it is important to maintain eye contact with all those involved.
- ❖ **Group Interviews** – group interviews are designed to gauge how you interact in a group setting, leadership and team skills. Often there will be a set task to complete in the group to see how you think on your feet and react with new people under pressure.
- ❖ **Telephone Interview** – an interview of this style is sometimes adopted when you are short listed for a position but live some distance away. As you cannot rely on body language to assess for visual responses you must listen carefully to what is being said. Your language and clarity of conversation is of vital importance, speak slowly and clearly.
- ❖ **Assessment Selections** – some organisations will require you to demonstrate your skills through aptitude testing, computer skills analysis, and any other skills relevant to the position you have applied for.

The Interview

Now that you have adequately prepared for the interview it is time to attend your “performance”. Dressing appropriately and being well groomed will create a positive first impression. It is advised that you wear conservative office attire, usually a suit/skirt & shirt in neutral or dark tonings. Avoid “loud” clothes and keep jewellery simple. Your hair should be styled neatly and don’t over-do makeup.

It is advised that you research the location of your appointment before the day and ensure you leave adequate time in case of last minute transport issues. Arrive at the interview about 15 minutes prior to the scheduled time to allow a moment to collect your thoughts. When you are greeted by the interviewer(s) shake hands firmly (not limp or crushing!!), maintain eye contact and repeat the interviewer’s name after the introduction.

During the interview consider the following:

- ❖ Maintain good posture, smile and appear to be relaxed;
- ❖ Do not fidget with clothing or hands as this will be distracting to the interviewer and make you appear unconfident;
- ❖ Maintain eye contact with all those involved in the process;
- ❖ Allow the interviewer to guide the questioning and you guide the content by giving specific examples relating to your experience as opposed to general responses;
- ❖ If you are unable to understand a question ask them to repeat or rephrase;
- ❖ Allow yourself a little time to formulate the answer rather than jumping in with the first thing that comes to you;
- ❖ Never comment negatively about yourself or past employers/employees; and
- ❖ Ensure you cover all your strengths that are relevant to the position as this is the time to sell yourself as the best candidate for the role.

The interviewer will usually allow some time for you to present your own questions relating to the organisation or role. As the interview is a two way process this will demonstrate that you are interested and well prepared and also allow you the opportunity to establish whether the organisation can offer you the growth and development you seek.

Examples of question you may ask are:

- ❖ Culture of the organisation;
- ❖ More specific details about the role if not already covered, including the hours of work;
- ❖ What the prospects are for advancement and for training?;
- ❖ Does the company promote personal and professional growth?;
- ❖ Why the position is vacant and average length of employment for staff;
- ❖ What types of people seem to do well in the department?;
- ❖ What are the time lines for the selection process and the next stages?; and
- ❖ When could I expect to be contacted?

At the conclusion of the interview, thank the interviewers for the opportunity and once again express interest in the position.

Post Interview

Interviews are a learning tool and your goal should be to improve with each one. After the interview try to recall the questions and your responses and take some time to think how these may have been improved. Keep a record of your interviews to use as part of the preparation process for your next experience. If unsuccessful with the process ask the interviewer for constructive feedback to ensure you can maximise your chance with the next opportunity. If successful ensure you receive written confirmation of this, including all employment conditions such as pay structure, commencement date etc.