



Interview Preparation and Practice

The purpose of the interview

Interviews have a dual purpose. They offer you the opportunity to personally convince employers that your skills, experience, interests and potential make you the most appropriate candidate for the role. In turn, the employer has the opportunity to assess the suitability of your capabilities, experience and fit against the selection criteria for the position.

Interviews provide an opportunity for you to convince the employer that you want the job, you have the ability to do it and you'll fit in with the culture of the organisation. To do this, you need to understand what you have to offer and how this relates to the job and the organisation.

In addition, an interview is as much about your making a choice about the organisation as it is about the organisation making a choice about you.

Types of interviews

Informal Interviews

Many interviews are quite formal in nature, however some organisations may invite you for an informal meeting or conduct the interview in an unstructured way. The interviewer may ask various questions about you and your interests to assess your possible fit with the organisation. An unstructured interview may seem quite relaxed, but don't be seduced into thinking it is simply a friendly chat in a café.

Be courteous and professional, as you would in a more traditional interview situation. You sometimes need to attend a second interview with either a different person, or with the first interviewer and another staff member. You could also be asked to attend a function to meet other staff. Remember that this is also an interview, so act accordingly.

One-to-one Interviews

In many cases, your interview will be conducted by just one person, particularly if you're applying to a small or medium-size organisation or initially through a recruitment agency. With only one interviewer, one-to-one interviews are relatively inexpensive for the organisation, easier to organise and often more

relaxed than panel interviews.

Telephone Interviews

These may be short screening exercises used by employers and recruitment agencies to make up shortlists for interview. Some long-distance selection interviews are also conducted by telephone.

Because you can't see or smile at the interviewer, shake hands or in general assist your communication through body language, telephone interviews can sometimes be daunting. You can still make a good first impression. Prepare for the interview by reading the job advertisement carefully, noting the key criteria and how you meet them. This will give you a fair idea of the sort of questions you could be asked. Have your written application and the job description beside you in case you need to refer to these.

Make sure you're in a quiet place where you won't be disturbed. Turn off any background music or the TV. Even though the interviewer can't see you, wear something that makes you feel like a professional. If you dress a bit more formally you're more likely to feel the part and perform effectively. If you wear your pyjamas you may interview less formally too.

When being interviewed by phone, be professional. Listen carefully, speak slowly and clearly, and try to sound confident and enthusiastic. Imagine that the person is in the room with you and that you're speaking directly to him or her.

Ask for information to be repeated if you don't hear properly, and seek confirmation of the meaning of questions if needed. Make sure you repeat names, phone numbers and directions to confirm you have the correct information. Don't eat, drink, chew gum or work on the computer while on the phone. Greet the interviewer courteously, and thank him or her at the end of the interview.

Phone interviews may be pre-arranged by the employer to occur at a mutually agreed time. Employers prefer to speak with you on a land line rather than a mobile phone. If you receive a job-related phone call at a time and place not conducive to conversation, courteously arrange with the caller to speak at an agreed time.

Behavioural Interviews

A common interview technique amongst graduate recruiters is to ask behavioural-based questions. These are questions based on the role's selection criteria and invite you to give specific examples of relevant experience in order to predict how you'd perform in the advertised job. For further information see the handout **Behavioural Interviews**.

Panel Interviews

It's likely that you'll encounter panel interviews for the Public Service, graduate recruitment programs and for positions in health, welfare, professional associations and educational institutions.

While the prospect of a panel interview might seem daunting, handling the interview is easier if you can find out the panel members' names and job titles before the interview. You can then refer to interviewers by name, have time to consider the recruitment process from their perspective and prepare questions to ask based on their various areas of responsibility or interest. When asked a question, look mainly at the questioner and occasionally glance at the other panel members to include them in your answer.

Panels may include a community member and staff members from other departments in the organisation. Don't worry if one (or more) of the panel members doesn't speak. That person's task may be to ensure equity in recruitment or to take notes.

Group Interviews and Assessment Centres

At an assessment centre groups of job applicants complete a strategic set of tasks in a simulated business environment. For further information see the handout **Assessment Centres**.

Second and subsequent round of interviews

Some organisations choose the successful applicant after just one interview; others require two, or even a series of interviews. The sort of questions you could be asked in the interview rounds may appear similar, however, you might be meeting more senior and/or technical specialists within the organisation.

Case Study Interviews

Most management consulting firms that recruit graduates conduct case study interviews, which can also be used as assessment centre exercises by other industries.

Case study interviews outline a business problem and candidates are required to work through the case in a logical manner to come up with recommendations for solving the problem. For further information see the handout **Case Study Interviews**.

Interview Preparation

Effective interview preparation links an understanding of yourself and your abilities with research about the job and the organisation you're applying to. The aim is to demonstrate the benefits of employing you to the interviewer/s.

Research the role and the organisation

- Find out all you can about the industry, the organisation and the job role in order to convince the employer that you want the job, you can do it and you'd fit with the organisation's culture. You may be expected to indicate which part of the organisation you wish to work in. Although you should already have done your research when putting together your application, additional information may have come to light since you applied for the job. Use the internet, newspapers, related publications and personal contacts to assist you. The sort of company information you're looking for would include the organisation's products or services, location (global or Australian-based only), size, structure and how it differs from its rivals.
- Reread the job advertisement and your copy of your job application. You were chosen for interview on the basis of your application. Be clear about your claims to the required skills and qualities for the job. This is because your answers (and perhaps some of the questions you ask the interviewer/s) will be an expansion of the information on your application.
- Go over the selection criteria you addressed in your application and think about examples where you demonstrated the skills and personal attributes required for the job. For example, if one of the main criteria for a role is teamwork, it's likely that you'll be asked at least one question about your ability to work in a team. The more specific you are the better. The example you provide at interview may be drawn from a number of contexts - your studies, your workplace, your interests or your extra-curricular activities - as the skills gained from that example are highly transferable.
- Compile a list of commonly asked questions and add other possible questions based on the employer's selection criteria or information on your application.
- Prepare some well thought out questions to ask that show your initiative in researching the organisation and industry, and to demonstrate your interest in the role.

Plan to be punctual

- Make sure you receive and record all relevant details from the person who contacts you by phone or e-mail about the interview, including the exact location, time and the name/s and job title/s of the interviewer/s.
- Check a map, plan your trip carefully so that you don't arrive late and flustered.
- Don't overcommit yourself on the day with other appointments.
- Arrive at an interview 10 minutes early in case you have to fill in an application form.

What to take with you

Place documents in a folder convenient to take to interviews and to draw from during the interview. Useful documents include:

- A copy of your job application and resume
- Originals of your academic transcript and Higher School Certificate or equivalent (and photocopies in case they're requested)
- References/testimonials from previous employers (and photocopies in case they're requested)
- A list for the interviewer/s of referees and contact details (if these are not listed on your resume)
- Examples of your work e.g. reports you've written, projects you've worked on
- A list of questions you'd like to ask

What to wear

- Dress appropriately and, in general, conservatively. Everything about your appearance should reflect your professionalism and attention to detail. Employers don't expect you to wear expensive clothes but they frequently notice details like ironed shirts, polished shoes and clean nails and hair.
- Jewellery and makeup also need to be conservative. Before you go into the organisation's reception area, it's a good idea to check your appearance in the mirror.
- Turn off your mobile phone before you go into an interview.

Understand interview structures

While interviews don't necessarily have a set structure with a specific order, many include the following stages, types of questions and information:

- The greeting, with introductions and handshake
- Icebreaker questions such as 'How did you get here today?' or 'Did you have trouble finding us?'

- At some point in the interview the interviewer/s will probably tell you about the organisation and/or the particular position; however, you may first be asked what you know about the particular organisation or job role. General questions may include 'Why did you apply for this position?' or 'Why would you like to work for this organisation?' or 'Tell me about yourself'
- Specific, position-related behavioural questions such as 'What experience do you have in managing a team?'
- Candidate-related questions such as 'What sort of management style do you best respond to?'
- An invitation to the candidate to add anything that hasn't yet been covered
- Questions from the candidate to the interviewer/s
- Information relating to the next step in the recruitment process e.g. when and how candidates will be contacted, if further interviews are required etc.
- Interview close – the interviewer/s and candidate thank each other and shake hands

Interview Practice

Be positive

Concentrate on what you can do rather than on what you can't. For instance, if you are unfamiliar with a particular computer application, you could express your willingness to learn the new computer application and provide an example demonstrating how you quickly mastered another computer application or a related technical skill.

Provide examples

If you're asked what appears to be a closed question e.g. 'Do you manage your time well?', don't just give the answer 'Yes'. Give an example of your ability, for instance, you may have received above-average grades while studying full time, working part time and playing competition tennis twice a week and this demonstrates your time management skills.

Be confident

Using examples can also help you to feel more confident about highlighting your abilities and achievements. You may feel that mentioning your achievements is boasting, yet outlining your relevant achievements is what you're expected to do when applying for a job.

Take your time

Avoid rushing your answers. Pay attention to your tone of voice and remember to breathe. Don't try to memorise answers. Learn techniques to avoid distracting mannerisms and fidgeting.

The handshake

Practise your introduction to the interviewer by standing up, smiling, introducing yourself and shaking hands (with a friend if possible). This is a business situation and it's appropriate for both men and women to shake hands. Your handshake should be confident but not too firm, and definitely not 'limp'.

Telephone interviews

You can practise telephone interviews by sitting back to back with a friend or relative. This creates a relatively authentic situation in that you can practise the interview without the benefits of seeing the other person's body language. Ask your practice partner to provide constructive feedback, including the content of your responses, your tone of voice and the accurate confirmation of any information given to you.

Record a practice interview

Practise your interview skills in front of the mirror or ideally record it so you can play back and see your body language and hear your answers.

Commonly asked interview questions

Be familiar with commonly asked questions and practise your responses.

- Why did you choose your degree/particular courses?
- What did you enjoy most/least about your studies?
- Why did you apply for this particular position?
- Why would you like to work for this organisation?
- What do you expect from your first graduate job?
- Under what conditions do you work best?
- What do you expect to be doing in three to five years' time?
- Why should we hire you?
- What are your greatest strengths?
- What are your weaknesses? (choose something that you've worked on to improve)
- Tell me about some responsibilities that you've taken on recently.
- Tell us more about the supervisory responsibilities you had in your part-time job.
- Tell us about a significant achievement?
- Sum yourself up in five short phrases or five adjectives.
- What skills can you bring from your current

employment to our organisation?

- How would you describe your teamwork style?
- What leadership roles have you undertaken?
- How do you manage your time?
- How do you deal with a situation where there is a clash or 'double booking'?
- How do you manage ambiguity?
- How do you take criticism?
- What current issues affecting our industry are of interest to you?
- Do you know which part of our organisation or industry you'd like to get into?
- How do you confront change?
- How do others describe you?

Do you have any questions?

Candidates are often given an opportunity to ask questions at the end. You may have a question based on your research of the organisation's website or its annual report. You could ask about the types of projects you'd be working on and the mentoring or training opportunities. You may have specific questions about the tasks you'd be involved in on a day-to-day basis or about the team that you would be joining. Make sure that all your questions are not about the benefits such as travel, leave entitlements and promotions.

Don't ask questions about information you've already been given although you can ask for clarification. Concentrate on relevant questions that show your enthusiasm e.g. when the interviewer/s might make a decision on the successful candidate or, in the case of a series of interviews, the next stage of the recruitment process.

Negotiating salary

It's not a good idea to be asking about salary at the first interview. If an employer makes you a job offer with a salary below what you think a new graduate should be earning, you can always negotiate. First, have information about current starting salaries for new graduates. Go to the Graduate Careers Australia website (www.graduatecareers.com.au) and click on Gradsonline.

Professional Associations can also provide information about appropriate salaries for professionals in their area. Additionally, major recruitment agencies often publish salary surveys on their websites.