



GOING FOR INTERVIEWS

Employers frequently tell us that applicants are under prepared for their interviews. This guide will help you to learn what to expect and consider how to prepare effectively. Feeling nervous before an interview is normal, but thorough preparation can minimise this and a little nervousness may even enhance your performance!

In this guide:

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Practicalities

- Be certain of date, time and location
- Plan travel, aiming to arrive early
- Plan your outfit – usually business dress
- Find out all you can: interview length and format, interviewers.

Preparation

- Revisit your application
- Revisit the job/person specification
- Research the employer and sector. This isn't a memory test of facts and figures – *critically* research. Reflect, relate what you discover to yourself and form opinions. *Don't* just use information given by the employer
- Reflect on your experiences and consider how you would approach the most typical interview questions
- Be ready to talk positively about your achievements and attributes. Too much modesty can be self defeating in an interview situation
- Practice and prepare mentally. Think about the impact nerves have on you and anything you are likely to find particularly difficult. Seek support: see a Careers Adviser, record yourself using our interview software and practice with friends.

Interview formats

The most likely interview or question style is competency based. But biographical, case study, technical and strength based interviews are among the other possible formats. You are most likely to encounter a combination of several styles, e.g. a competency style interview that includes some biographical, strength and technical questions.

Information on commercial awareness is included in this section not because many interviews are solely made up of commercially orientated questions but because it is a hugely important area of knowledge commonly tested in interviews but often overlooked by candidates in their preparation.

Biographical interviews

The questions will be based on the information you provided in your application, such as choices you've made and work experience you have. Every interview is likely to have some biographical questions, so always read through your application form or CV beforehand to predict questions that might arise from it. Be prepared to give information about yourself in more depth and try to remember at all times to think about yourself in relation to the job function and the employer. For example, if asked about your interests, emphasise those which give a positive indication of your suitability for the job, highlighting relevant skills or personal qualities. Think in advance about any relevant university projects and also your most significant experiences and achievements.

Competency interviews

Many employers use questions to assess your skills (or competencies), based on past behaviour. The employer has a list of competencies (read the advertised job description carefully!), usually between six and eight. For example, if one of the competencies is innovation, a related question might be:

Tell us about a time when you have taken a different approach or tried something new?

- What was the situation?
- How was your approach different?
- What was the outcome?
- Anything you'd do differently next time?

For any interview it is important to be aware of how you can use your experiences to illustrate your skills, but in a competency-based interview it is **vital** that you have thought about your examples very thoroughly and in depth. You will need one example, or preferably two (from different aspects of your life and preferably taken from the last three years), to demonstrate each skill or competency, and your examples must stand up to detailed challenging questions. Use the acronym STAR to structure your answer:

S – Situation

Briefly give background to the situation

T – Task

What was your (and team's) purpose, task or responsibility

A – Action

What did YOU do, how did you do it and what effect did your actions have? How did you identify and respond to problems or changes

R – Result

What was the outcome: real facts and figures can be very persuasive. What were the reasons for your success and what did you learn? Would you do it differently next time?

The ability to **reflect** on the experience can make the difference between a good answer and an excellent answer – some questions are worded to ask for the reflection but it can be a good idea to add it anyway if the example is appropriate. Reflection is usually about what you learned from an experience and how that changed your approach, behaviour or ideas afterwards.

Strength based interviews

The basis is that everyone has natural strengths. This format is about identifying those strengths in order to match candidates to a role. The term 'strengths' can be a little misleading as it sounds very much like competencies. 'Preferences' might be a more useful word. The theory is that working to your strengths means you will enjoy the role more and perform better.

Some employers have adopted this method of interviewing because they found candidates were too rehearsed in their preparation for competency interviews. For the recruiter, spotting strengths doesn't come from the candidate reciting rigid examples of their past behaviour. Instead it comes from seeing the energy and enthusiasm of a candidate. Employers will more consciously read your body language and tone of voice as these are strong indicators of enthusiasm (even though these are important in any interview). You're also likely to face a broader range of questions at a faster pace with this interview style.

Examples of strength based questions:

- What activities give you the most satisfaction?
- When are you at your best?
- When did you achieve something you were really proud of?

Some personal reflection is especially important to prepare for this type of interview. You might find it helpful to reflect on the activities detailed on your CV, asking yourself the following questions to raise your awareness of your strengths and preferences:

- When have I experienced a real sense of energy and engagement?
- When have I lost track of time because of being so engrossed in a task?
- When have I rapidly learned something new? Why was this?
- When have I shown high levels of performance?
- Which activities have I found it difficult to engage in and why?

If you find this a challenge on your own, speak to a Careers Adviser for some advice on learning about your strengths.

Technical interviews

This format is likely to be conducted by a manager from the function you're applying to. The questions will be specific to that area of work. Traditionally that meant applicants faced discipline related questions if applying for a job within their subject area – so engineering questions for Engineers, IT questions for Computer Scientists. However, the term 'technical' is now used to cover any function and may not be related to your degree discipline. So imagine you are applying for a finance role in an investment bank and you are a Chemist. A technical interview with that employer will be questions relating to finance, not chemistry! So you will need to understand how a bank works and get to grips with some of the key topics and trends over the past few months. Don't panic; if you didn't need an Economics degree to apply then they won't expect you to be an Economist in the interview. What they will expect your answers to demonstrate is genuine interest, understanding and opinions.

Case study interviews

Case studies are a series of questions centred on a hypothetical business problem or scenario and are used largely by consulting firms. Most do not have a single right answer and the interviewer is more interested in your ability to analyse the problem, identify the key issues, and think through the consequences. They will also note whether you ask the right questions so do ask for further information, clarify and summarise as you go.

Sequential interviews

This approach can be used when applicants are applying to a broad programme which offers the potential to be placed in one of a number of different teams. Each interviewer will ask questions that relate to their area of work and their needs. They are also likely to be particularly concerned with finding people who will fit their existing team, which might be quite small. The process can feel quite repetitive and, since candidates could feasibly attend several interviews in one day, quite tiring. Sequential interviews can be common within banking and law.

Group interviews

Some selectors may find value or efficiency in interviewing several candidates within a group setting. It can also provide an opportunity to see how candidates relate to one another and perform in a group setting, similar to group exercises that form part of assessment centres. The assessor might guide a group discussion, ask questions directly to individuals or to the group which anyone can respond to. Alternatively, candidates might be asked to discuss a topic in pairs or small groups then report back to the wider group. This style of interview is particularly common for teacher training.

To learn more about group assessments, see our *Assessment centres* guide, available on our website: www.bath.ac.uk/careers/applications&interviews/assessmentcentres.pdf.

Telephone interviews

Telephone interviews have become increasingly common for first round interviews. It could be a short screening interview, checking some facts from your application and your reasons for applying. Or it could be as in depth as a first face to face interview, so prepare as you would for any interview.

Here are some specific tips:

- You can have prompts of your examples to hand
- Bias relating to physical appearance is removed, although some people still find it helps to dress smartly
- In the absence of facial expression and body language you may have to work harder to convey interest and enthusiasm
- Don't be thrown by lack of feedback and encouragement, it can happen in any interview but is more noticeable on the telephone
- Visual cues can tell you if your answers are on the right track so you'll need to pause now and then to give the interviewer chance to interrupt. On the other hand if you are thinking about an answer you may need to let the interviewer know you are still there!
- Don't eat or smoke – you wouldn't in a face-to-face interview and telephones can amplify noise
- Although not seen, a smile and comfortable posture will impact on your anxiety levels, breathing and therefore your voice.

Typical questions

You should be able to predict a good proportion of the question themes covered in your interview, but it would be impossible to prepare for every potential question. To prepare for your interview reflect on your experiences so that you are comfortable answering questions on the most common interview question themes covered here. The exact questions you will be asked can vary quite a lot between interviews and the examples featured here do not present a complete list. The types of questions you are asked and the style of your interview can vary considerably depending on the role and sector you are applying to.

Your motivation

Applicants often underestimate the importance of these questions and ultimately fail to prepare adequately. As well as the skills, experience and personal qualities for the job, you will be judged on your motivation and interest in the job and the organisation. Much of an interview is about deciding if you would fit into the organisation.

Expect to be asked about why you want the job and why you are applying to that particular organisation. Here you should try to focus on showing a good match between what motivates you/ what you're good at and what the organisation does, show that you have ideas about what you want to achieve and are keen to get started. Your hopes and ambitions being a good match to what the employer hopes from you is much more convincing than simply reciting a catalogue of the employer's virtues. A little flattery, with evidence that you have researched the organisation, never

goes amiss. But **be specific**; don't just say 'because you're the biggest' without being able to explain why that is important to you.

Don't be afraid to show your enthusiasm and to let the employer get to know you. Talk about what you've found you're good at, what you've found rewarding/ fascinating/ fun and how that relates to them. If you sound convinced of the match so will the interviewer, they will find the interview less tedious and they'll imagine getting more from you because you really want to be there.

Common questions include:

- Why do you want this job?
- What influenced you to apply to us/this role?
- Why do you want to work for us?

Knowledge of the role/organisation/sector

Employers want to be confident you have done your research and know what you are applying for.

Your knowledge and understanding can be tested with questions like:

- What have you done to research the organisation?
- What do you think the job involves?
- Who are our main competitors and how are we different from them?
- What do you know about the services we offer?
- Give me three facts that you have found about [the organisation] and tell me why they are interesting to you.
- What do you think of our website/ branding/latest product?
- What was our share price this morning?

Your career plans

Employers like to know that you are focussed on the area you are applying to, that you have considered your future options and that you have some aims – even if these are still quite general.

Questions could include:

- Where do you see yourself in five/ten years?
- How do you hope this placement/internship will help your future career?
- Who else are you applying to?
- What do you think you will be doing in your first year in the role?

Competencies/skills

As described earlier, competency questions can be a key feature in interviews. The section on *Interview formats* on pages 1 and 2 of this guide describe some typical questions and how to structure your answers.

Other typical questions include:

- Give me an example of where you have worked as part of a team
- When have you successfully led others?
- Tell me about a problem you solved. What did you do, and what was the outcome?
- Tell me about a time when you have had to build a relationship with someone you'd never met before
- You have pursued a number of interests whilst studying. Can you explain how you managed your time effectively?

Strengths and weaknesses

Most interviews include questions to check how well you know yourself, whether you will fit into the organisation/role as well as your awareness of your development needs. With your weaknesses, it is best to avoid talking about something that could prevent you performing well in the role; choose

something that would be appropriate to develop in the workplace or, something you are taking steps to improve/have developed strategies to manage.

- How might your friends describe you?
- What are you good at?
- What sort of activities do you avoid?
- What is your main weakness?
- What are your three main strengths?
- Are there areas in which you feel you would benefit from further training/development?

Education, work & extra-curricular activities

Questions about these activities are often designed to gather insight into your preferences, what motivates you, your reasons for taking particular decisions, your self awareness as well as your ability to reflect on past situations.

Examples might include:

- Why did you choose to study at Bath/in the UK?
- Why did you leave your last job?
- Why have you decided to change career path/move away from your studied subject?
- Your results in a couple of subjects look poor – why is this? What have you done to improve?
- What do you feel you have gained from attending University, apart from academic qualifications?
- How has your part time work/placement/degree prepared you for the role you are applying for?
- What do you hope to gain from undertaking a one year placement?
- What skills did you gain from?
- What are your main interests, and how have they contributed to your personal development?

Achievements

Employers also like to know what you have achieved and whether you can recognise your achievements.

Your answer should cover why the achievement is meaningful to you and the steps you took to achieve it.

- What is your greatest achievement?
- What have you achieved in the last two years?
- Besides your academic achievements, which achievements are you most proud of and why?

Things that have gone wrong

You are likely to encounter difficulties in any workplace. Therefore, you may be asked direct questions about things that have not gone well in the past in order to establish how you react to problems. It is important to be positive and avoid blaming others. Also, explain what you learned from the situation you are describing and what you would do differently in the future.

- Can you tell me about a specific time when you felt dissatisfied about something you were working on?
- Tell me about a situation at work where something went wrong. What did you do and what did you learn?
- How do you cope with disappointment?
- When have you failed to achieve something?

Hypothetical problems/ situational judgement

These questions test your ability to apply logic and react under pressure and often, your understanding of the requirements for the role you are applying for. They may even aim to assess your integrity.

An employer might present you with a scenario that you could be faced with in the role and ask you what action you would take. Alternatively, they could outline a logical/numerical problem for you to solve.

It is helpful to show your thought process in your answer. Talk your interviewer through the steps you would take to resolve the problem and highlight any important issues that you recognise.

- Imagine What would you do in this situation?
- How would you deal with an angry customer?
- What would you do if you found out one of your colleagues was breaking an important rule/stealing?

Stress/challenging questions

These difficult to prepare for questions test your creativity and ability to apply logic under pressure. In general, it is unlikely that there will be one correct answer. However, if you are applying for a role with a strong numerical focus, it is quite common for interviewers to include some calculation questions that will require a precise answer.

Examples we have heard of include:

- How many alarms clocks are there in France?
- If you could change something about your life, what would it be?
- If you were an animal, what would you be and why?

Topical issues

You may be asked questions on a range of current affairs so be prepared to talk about your opinions on a range of issues, particularly in relation to the impact on your chosen sector. You may well be asked to defend a point of view, or be challenged on a particular issue. Do not be afraid to disagree with the interviewer, or defend your view in a discussion. Having an opinion you can defend is more impressive than agreeing but not being able to say why!

It is a good idea to keep up to date with the news on an ongoing basis and monitor sector specific websites/journals. Social networking sites such as Twitter are useful for receiving updates from your favourite information sources.

Business/commercial awareness

Regardless of the predominant style of interview, virtually all employers will expect you to demonstrate an understanding of and interest in their world. Candidates are often underprepared and perform poorly in this area. It takes significant work – particularly if your degree is unrelated.

Questions on this topic are designed to assess your awareness of what is going on in the business world, your interest and understanding of business issues and/or your ability to analyse business problems and present ideas or solutions. You may be asked about a recent business news item that has interested you, or about a current issue that might have an impact on the organisation you are applying to. For public and charity sectors you will need to understand how those organisations run – how they're funded and what factors may impact on their operations.

If asked when you have demonstrated your business awareness you could talk about situations where you have, for example, noticed a way to improve something or identified trends. Try to show your enthusiasm in your answers. It is a good idea to keep up to date of the news in general as well as your preferred sector.

- Tell me about a recent story in the business news that has interested you
- How did you demonstrate your business acumen when working at?
- Choose an organisation that has grown and become more successful in the last few years. Name the organisation and explain some of the reasons for their success
- Tell me about a business you feel could be improved in some way, and explain why
- How do you keep up with the business news?

For sources of information on different organisations and sectors, look at the *Find out about employers* section of the *Find a graduate job* pages of our website. Also look at the *Find out about occupations* section of the *Choose a career* pages. Professional bodies and some television and radio programmes offer very useful sources of views and information.

How you say it

Communicating persuasively has never been all about the facts you convey or even the exact words you use. If you transcribed interviews it probably wouldn't be the most articulate, fluent interviewee on paper who got through. Appearance, body language and voice all play a huge part in conveying your intelligence, confidence, passion and personality. In fact the first impressions are even before you speak: how you enter the room, your smile, appropriate eye contact and a firm positive handshake.

Once it's made, maintaining the first impression is easier than changing it. Throughout the interview (indeed whole visit if given a tour) speak clearly, listen attentively maintaining good eye contact, and do not be afraid to ask for clarification if you do not understand the point the interviewer is making. Don't give one-word answers, make the interview a conversation not an interrogation. Do not hesitate to volunteer information if you feel it is relevant. On the other hand, don't talk non-stop. If you feel you have made your point wait for the interviewer to make the next move. Have the confidence to ask 'does that answer your question' if you've forgotten what the question was or suspect you've wandered off topic.

What to ask your interviewer

You are usually asked if you have any questions at the end of the interview so it's a good idea to have some prepared beforehand. Beware - it is usually easy for the employer to tell when someone has questions they don't really need the answer to or aren't interested in. For that reason better questions may arise from what you've picked up during the interview and tour/introductions. It shows you are taking in new information and developing your interest, knowledge and opinions.

Questions about training opportunities and career patterns or detail about specific activities/projects you might work on are usually safe ground. It is less advisable to ask questions about pay and benefits at this stage. An employer might ask you what sort of salary you expect, but otherwise, it may be best to wait until you are being offered a job before approaching this topic.

If all your questions are answered during the interview, don't be afraid to say so. However, because some interviewers prefer you to ask a question you can always ask your interviewer what they like about working for the organisation.

Other exercises/activities

Employers often design assessment centres to test candidates' suitability for a job. Assessment centres usually include several different activities and can take from a half day to two days to complete. Even if you are not invited to attend an assessment centre, you may still be asked to undertake one or more additional activities on your interview day that will assess your suitability for the role.

Typical examples include presentations and role play exercises. To learn how to prepare for these additional tasks look at our assessment centre resources online:

www.bath.ac.uk/careers/catalogue/skills.html#assessment.

After the interview

Think over the questions asked; the way you approached the answers and how you could improve. But don't dwell too long; there will always be something you could have answered better after the event. Interviewing, like everything else, gets easier with practice. If you have been unsuccessful, don't forget to ask for any feedback that might be offered. Good luck!

Further information

Interview talks/workshops form part of our *My Future* events programme. Details can be found on our website.

Some students give feedback on their experience of applying and going through the selection process for a particular organisation. Those reports are available on file for you to look at.

If you are concerned about the way you sound answering questions or your non-verbal behaviour you might like to try our *Interviewer* practice software. This programme takes a webcam and sound recording of you answering some typical questions that you can replay to observe yourself. Ask at reception for details.

Other resources including our skills files, books and DVDs are available. Ask or have a look at our online catalogue www.bath.ac.uk/careers/catalogue under *Job search and the selection process*.

Careers Advisory Service

June 2011

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