

INTERVIEW TIPS



If you've been invited to interview, it means you've passed the first part of the screening process. Congratulations! Your CV must have demonstrated that you have relevant experience for the role. The next stage is likely to be a face-to-face interview, and this is when it's crucially important to plan and prepare for the interview to make sure you're successful.

Nothing is worse than looking back on the interview for the dream job you didn't get and wishing you had been more prepared. Here are some top tips to make sure you get ahead of the game.

I. PREPARING BEFORE THE INTERVIEW

Preparation for an interview is a must-do and can be the difference between success and failure. Good preparation boosts your confidence and gives you an insight into the organisation you're meeting.

PRINT OFF YOUR JOB APPLICATION

Take a copy of your application form, cover letter or CV and the original job specification so you can read over everything when travelling to the interview. Read and re-read the job spec and make sure you're fully familiar with the detail. If you're planning to take the documents into the meeting, make sure you put them into a professional folder – loose pieces of paper can give an impression of disorganisation.

RESEARCH THE COMPANY

Before your interview, make sure you spend some time looking at the company's website (especially their news pages, press releases and annual report). The interviewer will expect you to know about their business, and it shows a genuine interest in their company if you can demonstrate your knowledge. It's also beneficial to know who the company's main competitors are, as this is a common question and can be a great talking point.

PLAN YOUR JOURNEY

The worst start to a job interview is arriving late and it can immediately make the interviewer discount you for the position. Half of recruiters won't give a candidate a job if they are more than 10 minutes late for interview, regardless of how well they perform. Of course, there are always situations when unexpected circumstances affect your journey. In these cases, make sure you call either the interviewer or your Harvey Nash consultant no later than ten minutes before the start of your interview to let them know you're delayed.

Plan your journey well in advance, especially if the interview's in an area you're not familiar with. If you can, print a map off or make sure your smart phone is fully charged with Google Maps enabled. Work out how long it will take you to get there and – if you have time – do a practice run a few days before. You should aim to arrive at least ten minutes before the start of your interview. As well as looking professional, it'll give you the opportunity to slightly relax once you arrive.

PRACTICE YOUR INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Make sure you're confident answering typical interview questions. You can practice alone, or with a friend, and be ready for unexpected interview questions. Tricky questions like 'How would your colleagues describe you?' are popular with interviewers as they may throw you off balance. If the job spec you have details the required competencies for the role, you can focus on preparing your answers around these key areas (see Competency Interviewing below for more information).

CLARIFY THE TYPE OF INTERVIEW

Make sure you clarify what kind of interview you're being invited to. There's a big difference between competency and other kinds of interviews, and it's useful to know what you need to prepare for.

LOOK PROFESSIONAL

Unless you're specifically told otherwise, all interviews should be attended in formal business attire. Even a company with a dress-down policy will expect interviewees to be smartly presented, as it shows you're taking the meeting seriously and supports your professional credibility. It'll also help you to feel confident. Remember to dress comfortably and keep your appearance smart and uncluttered. For men, make sure you're clean shaven and well groomed. For ladies, we advise tying back long hair and keeping make-up and accessories discreet. You don't want to be in discomfort, or risk distracting the interviewer with a noisy piece of jewellery.

EATING/DRINKING/SMOKING

It's obvious, but you should not drink alcohol before a job interview. The interviewers may smell it on you and it can affect your judgement. If you need to eat before the interview, then avoid anything smelly and chew some mints before you go in. If you chew gum, make sure you remember to throw it away before the interview. If you're a smoker, avoid having a cigarette prior to the meeting. The smell of smoke can linger on your clothes and create a bad impression so. If you can, wait until after the interview.

MOBILE PHONES

Surveys show that having a mobile phone ring during an interview (or, worse, answering a mobile phone during an interview) is a common reason for employers to decline candidates. It shows a complete lack of professional courtesy and can be perceived as simply rude. Make sure you turn off your phone before going into the interview.

2. COMPETENCY-BASED INTERVIEWS

A ‘traditional’ interview, (sometimes called unstructured interviews) is free-flowing and more like a conversation. An interviewer won’t have a particular script but will ask questions relevant to the job and will be trying to get an overall impression of what you’re like as a person, including what your strengths and weaknesses are.

A Competency Based Interview (CBI) is scripted and is based around the idea that past performance is an excellent indicator of future performance. Increasingly used as the standard for first stage interviews, competency interviews are based around structured scenario-based questions that require specific example answers. While the initial preparation can take some time, the standardisation of competency interview questions for the same kind of role means that candidates can re-use their preparation for every interview.

WHAT COMPETENCIES ARE SOUGHT AFTER?

The list of skills and competencies that will be tested will change depending on the post you’re applying for. Often job specs will list the competencies or key words in the body of the role profile, such as ‘communication’.

- **Analytical competencies**

These questions assess decision-making abilities and try to unearth innovation, analytical skills, problem solving, practical learning and attention to detail. A typical question would be “Tell me about a time when you identified a new approach to a problem”.

- **Interpersonal competencies**

These questions assess social competence. Many workplaces function on project teams, so the more collaborative a candidate is, the more likely they will thrive in the company. A typical question would be: “Describe a situation where you got people to work together”.

- **Motivational competencies**

These questions assess the level of drive and examine your energy, motivation, result orientation, initiative and quality focus. A typical question might be: “When did you work the hardest and feel the greatest sense of achievement?”

HOW DO I PREPARE?

Preparing for a competency based interview is straightforward.

Firstly, research all the likely questions around the competencies related to the job you are applying for. In some situations the competencies are listed on the job spec, but this isn’t standard. Go through your employment and personal history to find examples that show you’ve got the relevant skills and abilities for each competency and write them down.

Answers should be structured using the STAR technique: Situation, Task, Action and Result. It’s effectively like telling a short, concise story with a beginning, middle and end. Use a sentence to

describe each of the STAR sections and remember the result or outcome is the most important part. It should have a positive outcome that can either be a successful result or a practical lesson you learned for next time.

WHY IS THE STAR METHOD USEFUL?

A structured STAR answer clearly shows how you demonstrated a skill in a particular context, so the potential employer can imagine how you might operate in their workplace. Make sure answers are concise and that you talk about 'I' (what you did) rather than 'we' (what your team or department did).

ST: Situation and Task

Describe the situation that you were in, or the task that you needed to accomplish. Give enough detail so that an interviewer can understand your scenario.

A: Action

Describe the actions that you took. Focus on what you did, even if you were working in a team. Be specific and present your information in a logical manner. For example:

- What action or actions did you take? Why did you decide on those actions?
- How did you go about putting them into action?
- What you were thinking at the time? How did you feel?

R: Result

Describe the results. What happened? What was the result? Remember this should relate back to the situation.

HOW COMPETENCY QUESTIONS ARE MARKED

- **Positive indicators**
 - Demonstrates a positive approach towards a problem
 - Considers the wider need of the situation
- **Negative indicators**
 - Perceives challenges as problems
 - Attempts unsuccessfully to deal with a situation alone

EXAMPLE QUESTIONS AND RESPONSES

Q: "Describe a situation in which you led a team."

Outline the situation, your role and the task of the group overall. Describe any problems which arose and how they were tackled. Say what the result was and what you learned from it.

Q: “What has been your greatest achievement?”

Reciting academic or obvious work achievements are not the best answers – they won’t distinguish you from the crowd. Instead, say something that will set you apart, that speaks about your aspirations and values.

Q: “How do you cope in adversity?”

This is a clever question that opens up further conversation. Whatever you choose to talk about, employers will be looking at your coping mechanisms and at how robust you are. Did you learn from it, and build on the experience for future?

3. COMPETENCY-BASED INTERVIEW TIPS

- Think of at least one example to illustrate each of the critical capabilities/competencies relating to the role.
- Be specific and detailed in your response – but don’t waffle!
- Talk in the past tense. Say ‘I did this’, not ‘I would do this’.
- Talk about **your** actions and behaviour. Say ‘**I** did this’, not ‘**we** did this’.
- Use recent examples where possible (the past two years), unless you have older examples that are more relevant to the role you’re applying for.
- Spend about 70% of your time describing the actions that you took and the behaviour that you displayed (i.e. the “A” part of the STAR).
- Listen to the interviewer – make sure they have finished asking the question before you answer and make sure you answer **exactly** what they’re asking. Clarify the question if you need to.
- Take your time. It’s better to think of a good example before you start talking rather than give an ineffective answer
- Take your cues from the interviewer. If they’re probing for more detail, give further information. If they’re hurrying you along, give briefer responses
- Ask for a drink of water. If you get stuck for something to say when asked a difficult question, or you find your mouth is getting irritably dry, it’s a good excuse to take a sip. While it doesn’t buy you a great deal of time, it does give you chance to pause and reflect on the question a few moments before you give an answer.
- You can take notes into an interview if they are presented in a professional business folder. But only use them for reference rather than reading your answers from the sheet, as this undermines your credibility.