



Careers Centre

Interviews

Interviews are an integral part of the selection process and an experience that you will inevitably go through as a jobseeker. Many people find interviews nerve racking experiences, with success depending just as much upon the personal impression that you make and how you perform on the day as on your suitability for the job.

However, by preparing well you can significantly improve your interview performance and your chance of getting the job. This booklet describes what you need to know about interviews so that you are aware of what to expect and can prepare well and present yourself with confidence.

Types of Interview

Interviews can take several formats and include a variety of activities. Some of these activities are covered in other booklets in this series; see **Psychometric Tests** and **Assessment Centres**.

Structured interviews

Some interviews are highly structured with interviewers aiming to select in a scientific and unbiased way by asking all candidates the same prescribed questions. These questions will aim to find out whether you have the skills and qualities to match those outlined on the person specification you will have already seen when making your application, and the potential to carry out the tasks listed in the job description. You should be able to predict what you will be asked by carefully studying the job description and person specification. You will also be asked about the company and the department you would be working in, so you will be expected to have read any information sent to you and done further research.

Some interviewers will also react to the answers you give by asking subsequent questions to draw out the information that they're looking for. Sometimes this makes the interview feel more like a conversation, and the employer may adopt this style purposefully to help you to relax. Remember that, even if the employer seems very approachable and friendly, the interview is still a formal situation so avoid becoming complacent.

Other interviewers don't ask subsequent questions, sticking only to the questions they

prepared in advance. This can give the interview a very formal feel but don't let this put you off. In this situation, you must ensure that you answer each question as fully as possible as the employer won't give you a second chance to elaborate and therefore really showcase what you've got to offer.

Unstructured interviews

Some employers may appear more informal, inviting you in for 'just a chat' or a 'chance to get to know each other.' You may or may not have been given a job description or specification to use to prepare and the interviewer may or may not have planned questions to ask you in advance.

Although this type of interview may seem like a relaxed conversation, remember that it *is* an interview and therefore a formal occasion. Even if the interviewer genuinely believes that it is informal, he or she is nevertheless assessing your suitability for the job. Remember that the person interviewing is not your friend and is looking for somebody to add value to his or her organisation. The general rules about interviews still apply and you should put as much effort into preparing as you would for a structured interview.

Always behave in the most professional manner. Don't be tempted into ordering alcoholic drinks or smoking because you feel this is just a casual conversation.

If you have not been told what format the interview will take, you should contact the employer and ask. This shows initiative and that you want to be well prepared.

Telephone interviews

These are on the increase, particularly as an initial sift of candidates. They save an employer both time and money, and are often contracted out to another company.

Sometimes, where communication, in particular telephone communication, is part of the job (eg. sales and customer care roles), the telephone interview is used as a reliable way of testing whether you have the skills for the job or not. In any case, you should not underestimate a telephone interview – it is no good thinking it doesn't matter too much as you will get the chance to show them what you are really like at a face-to-face interview. If you don't perform well in the telephone interview your application will not progress any further.

You should be prepared for some questions even when you phone for an application form. Some companies will not send you an application form if you do not succeed at this stage.

See our separate booklet on **Telephone Interviews**.

Preparation

Sometimes people claim they can't really prepare for an interview because they don't know what they will be asked. This is wrong; you can guess the vast majority of what you will be asked, which will typically be based on the topics described below. You should predict the sort of questions that you think you'll be asked and practice answering them out loud. It is beneficial to practice in front of someone else who can give you feedback. Consider arranging a mock interview with one of our Careers Advisers to help with this.

You should make sure you can talk about the following things.

Motivation

You need to articulate why you want this specific job with this specific organisation and how it fits into your longer term career plans. Think about the experiences that have confirmed you in this ambition and the research you have carried out. At this level you are expected to have mature and logical reasons for applying for a job. You should have got beyond 'I've always wanted to travel' or 'I really love children'. If you aren't sure why you want to enter the profession you will not sound

convincing. List your reasons. Try to give positive reasons rather than saying, "Well, I knew I didn't want", or the hopelessly vague, "I want something interesting."

Qualities required

You need to have an in depth understanding of the skills and qualities needed in this job, and to match your own skills and qualities to those required. Analyse in detail the job advert, job description and person specification and be ready with *evidence* that you can match to what they are asking for. You can also look at generic occupational profiles such as those on the Prospects website www.prospects.ac.uk to gain further ideas of the skills and qualities required in different roles. Never just say that you have good communication skills, you must give examples of how you have demonstrated these and show that you know what 'good communication skills' actually means. Go beyond the clichés – it is a cliché that teachers have to have patience. Of course it is true but there is so much more.

Why this organisation?

You need to have a convincing reason for wanting to work for this organisation, even if in reality you have applied to every similar organisation in the West Midlands. You must show that you know about them; about their products, their market, their ethos, their development, their structure and their competitors. Read the business pages of local and national newspapers, as well as professional journals to keep up with the sector and the employer's role within it. Most organisations will have a website which you should know inside out before interview. Let them know you have done your research and have clear ideas about the contribution you can make.

Your application

Re-read and become familiar with your application before the interview – a good application prompts many of the questions you are asked in the interview.

What you want to find out?

You should be clear about what you want to know by the end of the interview, as you will normally be asked if you have any questions. Your questions should be about things that are not available on line or in printed information you have been given or could reasonably be expected to get hold of.

First Impressions

First impressions count. People make their mind up about you in a few seconds and if the impression you make is poor, it is very difficult to change their mind within the time span of an interview which is typically only half an hour. It is essential to prepare carefully to make a good initial impact.

Appearance

Plan what you are going to wear and get everything ready the day before. You don't want to find on the day of your interview that you have a button dropping off or a dirty mark on your interview shirt. You should definitely dress formally, even if you have been told it is a casual interview. This would normally mean a dark suit or matching jacket and skirt/trousers. It does not matter if you find you are dressed more smartly than the other candidates or even the interviewer.

You could try wearing a splash of colour (e.g. a red tie) as this helps the interviewer to remember you and can help you look confident. You will often see advice to judge what is appropriate for a particular employer by studying their corporate literature or website. This can be helpful but be warned that work-wear in some jobs has to be practical rather than formal so if in doubt dress formally.

Just as your clothes contribute to the first impression you make, so too will any jewellery, studs, piercings or tattoos that you have on show. If you choose to wear jewellery, ensure that it is discreet and businesslike. It is advisable to remove studs and piercings and to cover up tattoos. Although body adornments may be acceptable in some contexts, they are viewed very negatively in most work settings; especially in conservative workplaces. In an interview remember that you are competing with others and it is imperative to create a good first impression; why run the risk of putting yourself at a disadvantage by displaying a piercing or tattoo?

Arrival

It is important that you arrive to your interview on time as some employers simply refuse to interview someone who is so much as a minute late, even if they have travelled a long distance to the interview. If you are late, many employers perceive this to be disrespectful and disorganised and as evidence that you aren't really interested in the job. If you are late, you are also likely to be flustered or even short of

breath and sweaty from running which can undermine the good first impression that you want to make.

Before entering the interview, you should give yourself the best opportunity to get focused and to feel positive; this is best achieved by being slightly early. Therefore be sure you know where the interview is, when you have to be there and your travel arrangements. It always takes longer than you think and having to rush can affect your confidence. Also ensure you take the employer's phone number in case you *do* run late and make sure your phone is charged. As soon as you arrive at the building where the interview is to be held, *turn your phone off*.

Meeting people

At some interviews you have an opportunity to meet the people that you'll be working with. At the very least, you will meet the receptionist. Ensure that you are polite and friendly to everyone you meet. Often staff who are not formally involved in the interview will be asked for their impressions. You never know, the person sitting behind the reception desk who escorts you to the interview room may turn out to be the interviewer.

You may also meet the other candidates as you wait for your interview slot. Some employers may even arrange for you to spend the whole day with the other candidates and you may be asked to complete group tasks with them. For more details see our handout **Assessment Centres**. If you do meet the other candidates be polite and friendly, but do not feel that you have to engage with them in lengthy conversation as this may not be the best way for you to prepare mentally for your interview.

If other candidates tell you about their previous experience and suitability for the job, don't let this put you off and certainly don't assume that they are better candidates. Remember that the employer wouldn't have invited you to the interview if he or she didn't think that you were potentially suitable and you don't *really* know how the other candidates will come across in the interview.

Shaking hands

If someone offers you their hand ensure that you take it, as one of the quickest ways to offend someone is by refusing to shake their hand. How you do it also affects how you will be perceived by the other person. Ensure that your

handshake is firm, but not overbearing and that you accompany your handshake with a smile.

Nerves

If you want the job, you will almost certainly be nervous; this is only natural. A small dose of nerves can actually help you to become more focused, feel more determined and put you in a positive mental state where you can perform at your optimum. The adrenalin released by your nervousness can be energising.

It is important however, that you don't become so nervous that you feel paralysed and unable to cope with the interview situation. Preparing well before the interview (see the sections on preparation and typical interview questions) will ensure that you are not faced with anything totally unexpected and that you feel in control.

Avoiding situations which may create last minute panic such as getting lost, being late or having nothing appropriate to wear can also keep nerves at bay (see the previous section on first impressions).

A great deal of research shows that our mental state is intrinsically linked to our physical well being. Ensure that you get enough sleep the night before your interview and make sure that you are sufficiently fed and hydrated. Also see the section on body language for tips about how to adopt positive body language which will help you to feel more in control and less nervous.

Practise breathing deeply and slowly, focusing on every breath. Before you go in for your interview, find a quiet place where you can sit quietly and do this breathing exercise to calm yourself.

Typical questions and how to answer them

As stated in the previous sections, most of the questions that you will be asked can easily be predicted and therefore prepared for. The categories below describe the typical *types* of questions that you may face with example questions and advice on how to answer.

Opening questions

- *Why would you like this job?*
- *Tell me about yourself*

- *Tell me about your achievements to date*
- *What could you bring to this role?*
- *What skills and qualities do you have which makes you suitable for this role?*

It is very likely that you will be asked a broad opening question at the beginning of the interview. When answering these questions remember that it costs a lot in terms of time and money to train a new recruit and even those who have studied quite vocationally specific subjects take a long time before they really earn their salary. The employer therefore needs to be sure that you really *want* the job and that you have the potential to *do* the job effectively. Broad opening questions offer a wonderful opportunity to show the employer that you are both competent and enthusiastic and therefore meet these two fundamental requirements.

In order to demonstrate that you can *do* the job, answer the question by giving a well structured overview of your education, work experience and interests to date, picking out skills, qualities and achievements that directly relate to the job that you are being interviewed for. At this stage you don't need to go into detail about any particular experience, instead simply give the employer a flavour of your experience to date.

Whilst it is advisable to focus on your education and work experience, don't assume that leisure activities are irrelevant; people often develop employability skills through unpaid activities and can assume a high level of responsibility. Mentioning your interests and hobbies can also indicate what you value and show that you are committed and energetic.

To demonstrate that you really *want* the job, highlight the aspects of your previous employment and education that you have enjoyed and which are a central part of the job you've applied for. Also show your enthusiasm by demonstrating that you have researched the job and the company thoroughly. Give reasons why you want to work for that particular employer, explain what attracts you to the sector in question and show how the job fits in with your long term goals.

Avoid focusing on the benefits that you'll get from the job. For instance, avoid saying something like, 'I've applied for the job because I've heard that the training I'll receive is exceptional and I'm certain that it will launch my career as a civil engineer.' An answer like this may create a negative impression because it

suggests that you have applied for the job because of what you want to *get from* the employer rather than what you can do *for* the employer.

Also avoid making isolated, idealistic statements such as 'I want to teach children because I want to inspire them and encourage them to fulfil their potential'. Idealistic statements without further elaboration make you sound as if you aren't aware of the realities of the position and suggest that you aren't interested in the job enough to research it thoroughly.

Competency based questions

- *Give me an example of a time when you had to solve a problem*
- *Tell me about a time when you managed others successfully*
- *Give an example of when you managed a project through to conclusion*
- *Tell me about your team work skills*

As described earlier, it is likely that the employer has supplied a job description and person specification outlining the skills and competencies that they are looking for. Be prepared to answer questions that directly refer to the skills listed in these documents, giving concrete examples of when you have used each skill to demonstrate your competence.

When answering competency questions the STAR (situation, task, action, results) format can help you to describe your experiences in a clear and structured way.

Firstly give an overview of the **situation** in which you demonstrated the skill that the employer has asked about. For example when answering a question about management capabilities you could say: 'Whilst at university I had a part time job in a restaurant where I worked front of house in a management capacity.'

Next describe the **task** that you completed. For example: 'I supervised other team members to ensure that all customers were served to a high standard in a timely way.'

Then describe the **action** that you took to complete the task. This should form the bulk of your answer and it should follow a logical, step by step order. For example: 'When supervising

staff I ensured that we had a group briefing session at the beginning of the shift where I allocated specific jobs to individuals and ensured that everyone knew what their responsibilities were. Throughout the service I kept track of how each team member was doing, allocating more support to those who needed it. I motivated staff members to maintain standards and speed by praising them for their progress and by passing on compliments from customers. I also intervened when staff faced difficult and time consuming problems such as customers complaining.'

Lastly describe what the **result** of your action was and point out how this experience will help you in the job that you are being interviewed for. For example: 'My leadership skills were commented upon favourably by staff resulting in my manager giving me an increase in supervisory responsibilities. I feel that I learnt a great deal about how to motivate other people and how to co-ordinate them which will be beneficial in this role.'

Most employers recruit using employability skills (sometimes called transferable skills) as competencies. It is therefore very useful to understand these skills thoroughly and to think of examples that demonstrate that you possess these skills. For a list of employability skills see www.prospects.ac.uk/links/wdgdenhance

Questions about your education

- *Why did you choose this subject?*
- *Why did you choose the University of Wolverhampton?*
- *Tell us about your A levels*
- *How is your degree relevant to this job?*
- *What have you got out of your time at university?*
- *Why did you choose that subject for your final year project?*
- *Why did you change course after your first year?*
- *Why did you choose to return to education?*

Here the employer wants to see that you have made rational decisions and choices rather than just drifting into the options that are easiest.

They want to see positive reasons for these choices so don't talk about failure and certainly never blame someone else for any failure. Give positive reasons for choosing this university (you could talk about having an interest in the nature of your course or the career related skills/ knowledge that you wanted to build); never say you chose it for the sake of convenience or because of low entry requirements. Show that you have planned your course with your career in mind by giving examples of relevant modules or information about projects you have undertaken.

You need to be clear about the vocational and transferable skills gained from your subject. Transferable skills may not be immediately apparent. For example a history graduate applying for police work could explain how studying history has developed their ability to evaluate and make judgements when there aren't enough facts or when there is too much conflicting information.

Questions about your work experience

- *What have you learnt from your work experience?*
- *Tell me about your last job/part-time job/placement*
- *Why did you leave?*
- *What did you gain from your last job?*
- *What did you like and dislike about your last job?*
- *What is your best achievement at work?*
- *What did you do in your last job that showed initiative?*

When answering questions about your work experience, highlight the tasks you've completed, the knowledge you've gained and the skills you've developed which are relevant to the job in question. Also tell the employer about the things you have learnt as a result of your work experience and how those insights will help you to be effective in the role that you've applied for.

Even if you don't have work experience similar to the job you are being interviewed for, you can still show that your experience is relevant by

highlighting the transferable skills underpinning your previous roles. For example, if you are being interviewed for a position as a police officer but your previous experience is in bar tending, you could highlight how bar work has developed your ability to deal with many kinds of people. You could also say that bar tending has shown that you can use your initiative to defuse difficult and potentially violent situations caused by too much alcohol consumption.

It is important that you always speak positively about your previous employment. Even if you didn't enjoy your last job you will have gained skills and experience which may be useful in the future. Your previous employment may also have helped you to clarify your career ambitions and goals.

Questions about items in your CV or application form

On your personal statement you say that you ran a university sports society. Can you tell me more about it?

In your CV you say that you completed a final year project on effective PR within the voluntary sector. Can you tell me more?

I see from your application form that you set up a website for the family business. Can you tell me more about that?

I see from your CV that you like reading. What books have you read lately?

The employer may ask you questions about any information that you include in your CV or application form, even your hobbies and interests. It is therefore important to be truthful in your applications and to avoid excessive exaggeration. If you are caught out in one lie it will undermine everything else in your application.

Ensure that you can talk fluently about all of the items you chose to include in your application and describe everything that you've done in a positive manner. Emphasise what you did well, your achievements, what you learnt and how each item will help you to be effective in the job you're going for.

Questions about your knowledge of the job

- *Why did you apply for this job?*

- *Tell us what you know about recruitment legislation.*
- *How would you define the term marketing?*
- *What qualities and skills do you have which make you suitable for the job?*
- *What makes a good accountant/ solicitor/ teacher etc?*

Employers quite reasonably take it for granted that you have read and understood the job description (so make sure you have!) and will want to know how you respond to it, which aspects particularly attract you and how it matches up with your skills and experience. You should read general profiles about this type of career as well as the job description from the employer, as these will give you additional information. Use the *Occupational Profiles* on the Prospects site at www.prospects.ac.uk/links/occupations

Questions testing your knowledge of the organisation

- *What do you know about our business?*
- *Why did you apply to us?*
- *What do you think of our products/service?*
- *Who do you see as our major competitors?*
- *Which sectors of the market do we target?*
- *What do you consider to be the main difficulties/issues facing the industry/profession?*

You must show that you have carried out research into the company and, if applicable, the department that you would be based in. You should know the company's website inside out and be able to talk about their origins, their business, their market, projects they are currently involved in and their ethos.

You need to show that you have thought about the issues that they face and that you have ideas about how you can help them to tackle these challenges in the role that you've applied for. Showing that you are interested in the company's challenges will demonstrate that you would fit in with their aims and that you have specific, well thought out reasons for applying to them.

Questions on current affairs

- *What is your opinion on (topical story in the news related to the company's sector)?*
- *Tell us about a news story that has interested you recently.*
- *How do you think (specific new technological development/new legislation) may affect our service provision in the next few years?*
- *How do you keep up with new developments in your career area?*

You are expected to have an awareness of current events, policies, trends and initiatives affecting the job sector of the employing organisation. At this stage you would probably not be expected to have an in depth knowledge of the sector and it might not be crucial that your knowledge is completely accurate, but you should be aware of major events and be able to express an opinion. This means watching the news for relevant items, reading a quality newspaper and looking at websites of professional bodies related to your chosen career.

Questions about your career focus and ambitions

- *What made you decide on this career?*
- *What are your career ambitions?*
- *Where do you see yourself in 5 years time?*
- *What would you like to achieve in the next few years?*
- *What other jobs have you applied for?*
- *Do you consider there to be any drawbacks in being a police officer/sales manager/librarian?*
- *How mobile are you?*

You need to show that you have a clear and consistent career aim and that this job is a key step in your career plan. It is also important to show that you understand the demands and challenges of the job and that your application is therefore realistic.

Employers may ask about mobility because career progression with them entails being flexible enough to move to where training and promotion opportunities are. You should show that you have thought about how the job will fit with your life on a practical level and that you are able and willing to meet the basic practical requirements.

Questions with an apparently negative focus

- *What is your biggest weakness?*
- *What would you say has been your greatest failure?*
- *What angers you?*
- *What kind of things do you worry about?*
- *What sort of people do you find it hardest to work with?*
- *Why should we employ you rather than any of the other candidates here today?*

Some questions may encourage you to speak negatively about yourself or about other people.

If asked a negative question about your experience, qualities or skills it is inadvisable to say that you have no weaknesses and that you've never been involved in something that's gone wrong. Employers know that nobody is perfect so an answer like this will make you sound dishonest or arrogant. Answering these sorts of questions by describing something that you've found difficult in the past, but that you've been improving shows that you possess self awareness, that you are willing to change and that you take responsibility for your own self development; all qualities that are highly desirable to employers.

It is a good idea to name a skill as your weakness rather than a character trait, as it is easier to describe a plan for gaining a skill and to give measurable outcomes.

It is important however, that you don't highlight something as a weakness which is fundamental to the job you've applied for as this will undermine the employer's confidence in your capability. For example it would be unwise to say that you are irritated by people if you are applying for a customer service job.

Some questions may encourage you to speak negatively about other people, but avoid doing so as this suggests that you lack team work skills which are usually an essential competency for any job.

Instead, demonstrate your awareness that people have different strengths and weaknesses and describe your experience of working effectively with people who are different from you. Emphasise your strengths and how your unique experiences, achievements, knowledge and skills would enable your success in the role. Ensure that you back up any claims that you make with concrete examples to prove that you possess the skills or qualities that you choose to mention.

Questions which are difficult to prepare for

Whilst the majority of questions can be predicted and therefore prepared for, there will always be some questions which will come as a surprise. These will usually fit into two categories: situational questions and questions which test whether you can think on your feet.

Situational questions

The employer may describe a situation that might happen in the organisation and ask how you would respond. Here are a couple of examples:

You are a primary teacher about to take the register one morning, when a man storms into the classroom shouting that one of the other children in your class has bullied his daughter. What do you do?

As a supermarket manager you are presented with four times the usual number of staff ringing in sick. It is Saturday morning. What do you do?

What would you do if you found out that a colleague was breaking the rules?

You have a doctor's appointment arranged for noon. You've waited two weeks to get in. An urgent meeting is scheduled at the last moment though. What do you do?

Employers do not ask scenario questions to test that you know what every day life in the role that you've applied for might be like. Neither do they ask these questions to see whether you can come up with the correct answer. In fact there may not even be one official way of handling the

situation they describe and therefore no single correct answer. What they *do* want to see is that you can think logically under pressure, that you can identify the main issues and sort out sensible priorities without panicking. Resist the temptation to rush an answer and do not be afraid to think out loud, highlighting the pros and cons of different approaches. Do ensure however, that when you give your final answer it is well structured.

Questions which test whether you can ‘think on your feet’

- *If you were an animal, what animal would you be?*
- *If you were a biscuit, what biscuit would you be?*
- *Tell me a story*
- *Describe a movie you’ve seen that really inspired you.*

These questions may seem strange, but the employer is assessing qualities that may be important to the job such as creativity, your ability to adapt and how you react to the unexpected.

The actual answer that you give therefore isn’t as important as your reasons for the choice. Ensure that you use the question as an opportunity to say something positive about yourself which relates to the company in some way. Also ensure that you remain unflustered and calm.

Difficult questions

If you don’t understand a question, always ask for clarification. Specify the word or phrase in the question which you don’t understand rather than letting an employer think you don’t understand any of it at all or weren’t listening properly. Better still, give your interpretation and check that that is what the employer meant. Never imply that the question was badly phrased.

Even if you think it is going badly, don’t give up and keep doing your best. It’s hard to judge how you are doing in the middle of an interview and it’s easy to assume the worst, especially if the interviewer appears to be unfriendly, formal and distant. Don’t panic if you give one bad answer because how successful you are usually

wouldn’t be decided on just one answer, but on a balance of many things. Also remember that you don’t know how the other candidates have performed.

Don’t respond to aggression (or what you think is aggression) on the part of the interviewer. Interviewers sometimes try to provoke you into defending an opinion by being confrontational, and some interviewers are just bad interviewers. It is essential that you demonstrate your ability to remain cool under pressure and that you can remain focused and articulate.

There are some questions that interviewers should not ask because they are discriminatory. Some examples of illegal questions are:

- *What religion do you practise?*
- *How old are you?*
- *Do you plan to have children?*

Some questions may be more subtly discriminatory as these such as:

- *This job requires you to work Saturdays. Is that going to be a problem?*

With awareness of anti-discrimination legislation growing it is unlikely that you will face questions such as these. However, if it does happen, you do not have to share personal information about yourself. If you feel the question is unfair do not answer in a confrontational way; instead retain the professional impression that you have built by responding assertively and calmly.

Try to get to the heart of what the question is about, for example a question about your age may reveal that the employer is worried that you aren’t experienced or mature enough to cope with the job in question. This is therefore an opportunity to alleviate their fear by describing the experience, skills, knowledge and other attributes that show that you are right for the job.

Body language and non-verbal communication

Research has shown that up to 55% of communication is made-up of non-verbal signs. It is therefore important to display positive body language so that you appear (and feel) confident, competent and relaxed.

Do

- Stand and sit with an upright posture: shoulders back and down
- Walk purposefully
- Smile
- Make eye contact with the interviewer
- Shake the interviewer's hand if they offer it, ensuring that your grip is neither limp nor crushing
- Address your replies to the person who asked the question if being interviewed by a panel but "include" the others by glancing at them as you speak
- Lean slightly towards the interviewer to show interest
- Keep your hands folded together or resting on your lap, using hand gestures only for emphasis or illustration
- Keep both feet firmly on the ground and facing forwards
- Speak clearly and at a steady pace, varying the tone of your voice to show interest

Avoid

- Leaning back in your chair which could suggest arrogance
- Creating a barrier between you and the interview panel, for example by folding your arms or placing a bag on your lap
- Displaying nervous habits, for example biting your nails, smoothing your hair or fiddling with a pen or jewellery
- Either sitting on your hands or using them over expressively
- Frowning or screwing your face up
- Drinks and biscuits if offered, as there is a danger of spilling if you are nervous

Positive language

Accuracy and vocabulary

Speak grammatically and use accurate, specific and appropriate vocabulary. In everyday speech with friends you might use casual vocabulary and a small range of verbs; this is unprofessional in an interview. Use the job description and person specification to give you

clues as to words you should be using. In some cases it will be appropriate to use technical language, but ensure that you know what it means and that you are using it correctly.

Avoid using meaningless phrases repetitively, such as 'basically,' 'if you know what I mean,' 'sort of', 'um ...er'. Never swear or use any words that might cause offence, even if these words are often used in everyday speech.

Be assertive

Avoid words like 'only' and 'just' in phrases such as 'It was only work experience' and 'I'm just a waitress'; these words undermine you. Don't be afraid to state what you are good at in a straightforward way, rather than preceded by 'I think', 'I believe' or 'I feel'. It is perfectly OK to say: 'I am an excellent communicator as I demonstrated by', rather than: 'I think I am quite good at communicating'. It is worth practising making such statements as many people find them difficult.

Be positive about your past employment

If you are negative about a previous manager, job role or employer (even if you have good reason to be negative) you may be perceived to be pessimistic and a potential destructive threat to the working environment.

Be positive about yourself

When you are nervous or if you lack confidence it can be easy to speak negatively about yourself; however, in doing this, you are giving the employer reasons not to offer you the job. Don't bring up something negative in the hope of pre-empting a difficult question as you could be making an issue of something which was not relevant.

Never offer excuses

Don't blame other people for your weaknesses or lack of success in a particular area as this will give the employer the impression that you don't take responsibility for your own actions. It is better to admit to your faults (if they really are there) and to talk about how you have handled them proactively.

Your questions

You are usually given an opportunity at the end of the interview to ask the interviewers some questions. As well as being able to get further information and the interviewer's perspective about the job, the company and future developments, asking questions suggests that

you are enthusiastic and can create a lasting good impression.

Two or three questions will usually be enough and the panel's answers will normally be brief. It can be hard to think of questions to ask on the spot so prepare them in advance. It is acceptable to refer to questions that you've noted down before the interview.

If all your questions have genuinely been covered during the course of the interview day (perhaps by a tour or presentation that the employer has given) don't ask your questions for the sake of it. Instead tell the interviewer that you had prepared some questions but that they had already been answered. This is less likely to be seen as an easy way of bringing the interview to an end if the employer can see that you actually have some questions written down.

Don't ask questions if the answer is obvious or if it is covered in the brochure or job description they sent you.

Instead ask questions which demonstrate that you have researched the job, the industry or profession. Asking pertinent questions about a specific aspect of the employer's company or about future developments can leave the interviewers with a very good impression of you.

Questions about your training, progression and career development within the company show your commitment and enthusiasm and can also create a lasting good impression.

It is also OK to ask the interviewers questions to get a more personal account of what the company is like, as long as this is done respectfully and non-intrusively. However, don't expect the interviewer to reveal anything negative about the company.

Avoid questions which focus on the benefits to you such as salary, pension contributions or company car allowances. This suggests that you are only interested in what you can get from the employer rather than what you can offer. Don't ask about relatively trivial things such as car parking or canteen facilities.

Finally, if this hasn't already been covered, it is ok to ask when and how you will be told whether you've been successful.

Here are some examples of suitable questions.

Questions about training and career progression

- *Could you tell me more about the training programme? I'm particularly interested in...*
- *What opportunities are there for staff training/professional development after initial training?*
- *How is performance measured?*
- *How would I be managed?*
- *What would be a typical career path for a recent graduate with your organisation?*

Questions about the interviewer's experience

Have you been through the management trainee scheme that I'm being interviewed for? How did you find it?

What do you like about working here?

Questions about the detailed activities of the company and future developments

I've read that (name of company) is contemplating expanding its product line to include.....How do you think that will affect the current operational systems?

I was reading in the Economist last month that you have increased market share in northern Europe. To what do you attribute this?

How do you see the company performing/ the profession developing over the next few years?

After the interview

Whatever the eventual outcome of the interview, you will be acutely aware of the questions you had difficulty in answering. Make notes as soon as possible after the interview and think of a better way to answer them for next time.

If you don't get the job

If you don't get the job, ask the interviewers for feedback as they could highlight something that you could improve for next time. There are typically a few main reasons that people do not get through the interview stage. However, these are all things that you can do something about, as explained below.

Firstly you may have been right for the job but you didn't perform well in the interview. Maybe you didn't explain yourself well enough or answer the questions fully. Maybe the examples that you chose weren't relevant or perhaps nerves got the better of you. These difficulties can all be alleviated by thorough preparation as described in this leaflet. Also consider booking a mock interview with one of our Careers Advisers who will be able to help you to improve your interview technique.

Maybe you didn't get the job because someone else was slightly more employable than you. In this situation, you need to develop your employability, perhaps by gaining more work experience or by undertaking further study. Our Careers Advisers can help you develop a plan of action.

Alternatively, it is possible that you weren't offered the job because you didn't meet the employer's criteria and the interviewer didn't think that you were right for the job or their company. In this scenario, think about whether the job really was right for you and whether you *actually* wanted it. Consider whether you may have more success in applying for a different *type* of employer. If you conclude that you'd like to apply for similar positions in similar companies you need to work out how you will improve both your employability *and* your interview technique as described above.

Remember that most people have been to at least one interview for a job they didn't get and when many people are going for a few (or even just one) job there will inevitably be more people that don't get offered the job than those that do. If you don't get the job it is not the end of the world and the interview will still be a positive experience if you learn from it.

If you do get the job

Most employers tend to call successful candidates to inform them that they've been offered a job, before confirming this in writing with a contract.

Whilst your decision to accept the job is not legally binding until you've signed the contract, it is bad practice to accept a job offer verbally and then turn it down at a later stage.

It is possible that you might not know whether you want to accept the job on the day that you are informed of your success. For example, you may be waiting for the outcome of a different

interview with an employer you'd prefer to work for. In this situation it is good practice to explain that you need some time to decide and to give the employer a deadline for your decision. This will give you an opportunity to contact your preferred employer to find out when they might let you know if you've got the job and to explain that you have another job offer. Your preferred employer is likely to be impressed that you have been so assertive and that you have already been offered a job with another company.

Before accepting the position, also take care to ask yourself if you really *want* the job. While it can be tempting to accept the first job that you're offered, particularly if you are a new graduate, it is important that your new employment is really right for you.

If you do decide to take the job also check the terms under which the job is offered (e.g. the offered salary, holiday allowance and other benefits). Decide whether you want to negotiate any of these aspects.

When negotiating your salary ensure that you have a salary bracket in mind that is reasonable for the position that you've applied. If you are unsure about typical salaries look at vacancies for similar jobs or use the occupational profiles on the prospects website at www.prospects.ac.uk/links/occupations.

When negotiating, ensure you clearly articulate the reasons why you should be offered a larger salary than the one offered in an assertive and professional manner. Reasons that you give could include:

- The salary not being in line with salaries offered by other companies for similar work
- The salary being less than the salary of your previous job
- That you have particular skills, knowledge, experience, contacts or in fact anything that was additional to the employer's selection criteria and therefore a significant added bonus to the employer

Do not negotiate with the employer about the salary unless you do have a reasonable and clearly thought out argument.

Further information and help

www.prospects.ac.uk/links/interviews

www.prospects.ac.uk/links/occupations (for Occupational Profiles)

<http://targetjobs.co.uk/graduate-jobs> >careers advice>interview techniques

<http://careersadvice.direct.gov.uk> >jobs and careers>interview skills

www.jobsite.co.uk/bemyinterviewer/

www.totaljobs.com/careers-advice/interviews

Reference books

We have many books and articles about Interviews in the Careers Centre including:

Rebecca Corfield *Successful Interview Skills*
Kogan Page, London, 2006

Martin John Yate *Great Answers to Tough Interview Questions*
Kogan Page, London, 2008

Susan Hodgson *Brilliant Answers to Tough Interview Questions* 2nd ed., Pearson, London, 2009

Peter Veruki *The 250 Job Interview Questions*
Adams Media Corporation, Massachusetts, 1999

DVDs

We have an AGCAS DVD *Making an Impact* which shows the progression of a typical interview. We also have a CD set *The 250 Job Interview Questions*. You can play both of these in the Careers Centre by arrangement.

Workshops

We run workshops on interview skills. Check our latest events programme on www.wlv.ac.uk/careers and book a place on line. If you are one of a group of students who would all like interview help, why not contact us about organising a session just for you, or ask your tutor to arrange it with us for you?

Speak to a Careers Adviser

Our Careers Advisers can talk you through what may happen in an interview and help you to prepare. We also offer mock interviews so that you can practise your interview technique and get constructive feedback on your interview skills. Advisers are available in the Careers Centre on MD Concourse from Monday to Friday: 11:00am – 4:00pm in term time and from 1:00pm – 4:00pm during vacation. Special arrangements operate on other campuses. Ring 321414 or visit our website www.wlv.ac.uk/careers for details.

Titles in the *Employability Skills* series

- Job seeking
- Your CV
- **Interview skills**
- Effective application forms
- Presentations
- Assessment Centres
- Psychometric Tests
- Making the most of volunteering
- Personal Branding
- Creative Job Search Strategies

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