

How to make an interview a success

A crucial element in any career change is inevitably the interview, and first impressions are invariably the most important, having made the short list, you now need to make the best of your interview opportunity! Our hints and tips document below will ensure you prepare effectively, and project a professional image when promoting yourself in person.

At the interview, your main aim is to reinforce the excellent impression made by your CV, your CV has successfully sold you as a potential new employee, if the company did not think you were suitable for the position, you would not have been invited for an interview. Now they want to find out more about the type of person you are, and whether you will fit into the company's working environment. Your success from this stage forward depends on how you present yourself in the interview, and that depends on preparation.

Before the interview

Firstly find out as much as possible about the company, you may know someone who works there, or someone who is engaged in business with the company, if so ask them questions around their knowledge and understanding of the business and culture. Visit their company website, if the opportunity to use this knowledge arises, you'll be able to demonstrate an impressive level of interest in the organisation.

Re-read the job description and your CV and then consider what questions you might expect to be asked on the day. Prepare articulate and honest answers that will promote you in a good light. There is a list of commonly asked interview questions below which you should prepare answers to.

To do well on the day, you need to show you:

- Have all the skills and attributes to do the job
- Are sufficiently motivated to get the job done well
- Are able to fit in with the company's structure and the team that you will be working in.

Ensure that your answers cover all these criteria.

How to make a good first impression

Unfortunately your appearance can affect the interviewer's opinion of your ability or suitability for the job. Take care to make that crucial first impression a good one. Here are a few things to remember:

- Be smart, clean and well groomed
- Unless advised otherwise always wear business attire (dark suit/shirt/blouse)
- Limit make-up, and jewellery
- Limit perfume/aftershave, this can be overpowering and will only distract the interviewer
- Do not smoke before an interview
- When first approached by your interviewer, be confident (not over-confident)
- Offer a firm handshake and make good eye contact
- It is advisable when you're in the office of a potential employer, to have a cheerful and friendly disposition (without being over-familiar).

Getting to the interview

- Make sure you have clear travel directions
- If possible try a dry run at around the same time of day prior to your interview date to gauge traffic situations and parking facilities
- Always allow plenty of time for any unexpected delays
- Becoming flustered by having to rush and arriving late creates a bad impression
- Never arrive more than 10 minutes earlier than expected, this can be as bad as arriving late! And can put your interviewer under pressure!

What should I do in the interview?

- Adopt a good posture, never cross your arms or slouch
- Your body language is crucial in presenting an open and honest image of yourself
- Stay calm, don't fidget or twiddle your thumbs
- Be polite
- Never chew chewing gum during an interview
- Accepting a drink is fine if offered, it shows that you're comfortable
- Be yourself and do your best to appear relaxed
- Show real enthusiasm for the job, but try not to be over-enthusiastic
- Don't answer a question you don't understand, ask for clarification first
- Speak clearly and offer clear and concise answers. Do not rush your answers
- Maintain some direct eye contact with your interviewer, this shows confidence.

Common interview questions

– prepare your answers

What do you know about our company?

- This is your opportunity to show the interviewer the level of research you have done.

What qualifications or experience do you have that would make you a success in this company?

- This is your opportunity to sell yourself, your qualifications and skills. To do this successfully, you will have to have prepared well to understand exactly what they're looking for.

What job in our company do you want to work towards?

- This is a tricky one. You do not want to come across over ambitious or unrealistic; however you do not want to lack ambition
- For a larger company, where the chance of progression is more likely, it's probably best to say that you would be looking to progress within the company, but only once yourself and your employer felt you were ready
- For a smaller company where progression is less likely, you do not want to appear too ambitious, as it could hinder your chances of getting the job
- In a sales-driven role, the interviewer could be looking for a more driven answer, i.e. 'I want your job!'
- You must tailor your answer to suit the company that you are meeting.

What jobs have you enjoyed the most? The least? Why?

- When discussing your least enjoyable role/s, be careful not to come across negatively.

What have you done that shows initiative?

- Think of a few scenarios here. Be sure to plan your answers well, i.e. set the scene, explain the situation you found yourself in, how you used your initiative and finish with the end result.

What motivates you? Why?

- This is your opportunity to sell yourself again! Don't just offer 1-word answers such as success, praise etc. Make sure you go into detail for example; explain why success and praise motivate you. For more commission-based role, be sure to mention money as a key motivator! This doesn't always work for non commission based roles though.

What is the greatest accomplishment of your career to date? Why?

- Sell this to the interviewer. Do not underestimate your biggest achievement!

Be sure to prepare 2-3 achievements, should they require more.

Describe a situation at your last job involving pressure. How did you handle it?

- Again, think of a few scenarios here. Be sure to plan your answers well, i.e. set the scene, explain the situation you found yourself in, how you managed the situation and finish with the end result.

In dealing with a customer, think of your most difficult situation and tell me how you handled it

- Again, think of a few scenarios here. Be sure to plan your answers well, i.e. set the scene, explain the situation you found yourself in, how you handled the situation and finish with the end result i.e. how was the customer in the end?

Where do you see yourself in 5 years time?

- This again is a case of playing it smart. You do not want to seem over ambitious or indeed under-ambitious. You have to tailor your answer to the specific role & company.

What are your strengths? Try to think of 3 or 4 prior to entering the interview

- Keep away from enthusiastic, hardworking, loyal and trustworthy. Think about the key strengths that a client is looking for in that specific role and use them! Be original, you need to stand out!

What are your weaknesses? Try to answer them positively.

- Right, this is difficult. Companies are tending to steer away from asking this question, as it's a little old-fashioned. You will see many websites advising you to use a weakness that can be turned into a positive i.e. "I am a perfectionist" or "I take on too much workload". These are both easily transferred into a positive, as a perfectionist is someone that obviously cares about the quality of their work and someone that takes on too much workload is obviously a person that wants to help their team / company. The best advice for us to give is to be honest. Give an actual true weakness that you have and also some information about how you are working to improve in this area. Of course, you do

not need to be so honest as to talk yourself out of a job, but a potential employer will appreciate honesty in this area and it could work in your favour.

How did you feel about your workload at you last company? How did you divide your time among your major areas of responsibility?

- Think about this. You need to tell the interviewer how you divided your time and prioritised your workload. Do not jump straight in saying that your workload was big in your last role or that you weren't paid enough for the amount of work you did! This could lead you down a negative path.

Describe a situation where you had to be relatively quick coming up with a decision

- Again, think of a few scenarios here. Be sure to plan your answers well, i.e. set the scene, explain the situation you were in, the decision that you came up with and the end result, i.e. was is the right decision?

Why are you seeking employment?

- Be honest. Speak from the heart and this will come across to the interviewer

Don't speak negatively about your current or last role and do not make it sound like you're treating this job as a 'stop-gap'.

Why do you want this position?

- This is where your research will tell. You must understand what the company are looking for, to be able to offer an answer that will excite the interviewer

Look them in the eye when delivering this answer, the interviewer must see some passion and has to believe what you are saying.

What has attracted you to this organisation?

- Use your research again here. If the company has a set of core values that match some of your ideals, then mention it. If you have an interest in what the company do, then mention it. If you know someone that works there and they've told you what a great company it is, tell the interviewer. It may just be that the job is a perfect match for your experience and if it is, tell the interviewer. Speak positively and sincerely.

What is important to you in your employment?

- Be honest and stay away from anything negative i.e. "I want to be valued, because I wasn't in my last job" or "I don't want to be under any pressure". Just use your common sense on this one.

Give an example of when you have coped well under pressure?

- Again, think of a few scenarios here. Be sure to plan your answers well, i.e. set the scene, explain the situation you were in and the end result, i.e. how did you cope in that situation?

How do you react when asked to work without supervision?

- The interviewer needs to know that you can cope when working under your own initiative, so you need to assure them that you are capable of doing this. Speak positively as if it is not a problem at all.

How would you describe yourself?

- Stay away from hardworking, reliable and trustworthy. They are all standard answers and are very boring! Think about the job you are applying for. If they need a go-getter, then you are a "go-getter". If they are looking for someone who is happy crunching numbers all day, then you are at your happiest when crunching numbers all day!

How would your current or previous manager describe you?

- You need to be honest here but again you need to think about the role / company that you are applying for. Be original, stand out!

What can you offer us? Why do you feel you would be an asset to our company?

- Use your experience. You will know from your research what the company are looking for. You would have researched the company and should have seen the job spec. You need to use your common sense to tailor an answer that you know will excite the interviewer.

Questions to ask the interviewer

Usually the interviewer will ask if you have any questions. They may have covered all of the information you feel necessary however here are some you may like to ask:

- Who will I report to?
- Who will I be working with?
- What training opportunities are there?
- What promotional prospects are there?
- Why has this job become available?
- What's the next stage of the interview process?
- When will you be making your final decision?

The above questions are pretty standard and in most interviews the majority of these areas could have been covered. If this does happen, it is advisable to have a question or 2 up your sleeve.

These questions have to be relevant to the level of role and type of company, i.e. you do not want to portray yourself as a super-ambitious individual in an admin / processing role within a company that doesn't offer progression. Equally, if you are going for a more senior role within a large corporate company that offers progression, you may want to prepare more in-depth questions regarding a company's 5-year plan or their (CSR) Corporate Social Responsibility commitment.

Do not ask questions that aren't relevant or too in-depth for the level of role that you are applying for.

Leaving the interview

You want them to remember you positively so:

- Smile and thank them for seeing you
- Offer a firm handshake
- Tell them that you look forward to hearing back from them.

After the interview

Call Pearson Whiffin Recruitment to let us know how you felt the interview went and whether or not you would take the job if offered.

Good Luck!