



Guidelines on preparing for your interview, including sample questions.

Preparation

Good preparation is essential, you will come across better and it's the best remedy for nerves.

Remind Yourself

The first step to great preparation is to remind yourself what you are offering this potential employer. Re-acquaint yourself with the fine details of your CV. Employers will be interested in hearing you talk intelligently about your current and previous role in some depth.

Research the Company

Find out more about organisation. Have a look on the employer's website, the press, annual reports or company newsletters. If you can turn up something interesting from these sources you will have an important advantage over other candidates.

Skills

Employers are also interested in the professional and personal skills you can bring to the organisation so draw up a list of the skills and abilities you feel meet the requirements of the role. For each skill, think of as many bits of evidence as you can that could persuade another person that you have what you claim you have.

What the Employer Wants

Most organisations these days are upfront with their selection criteria, usually in the form of a job description and/or person specification. It does pay to find out what they place special emphasis on. Walker Dendle will help you to identify the client's expectations.

Potential

The criteria that the employer is selecting against should be pretty similar to the list of skills you are offering. Don't be too dismayed if some of the things they seem to want are things you are uncertain about. After all, they're looking for potential. Just be confident demonstrating that you have recognised the importance of a particular criterion and you will impress the interviewer.

It's absolutely critical that you know what an employer is looking for because the interview will be based on these criteria.

Anticipating Questions

Most questions are pretty predictable. There are only three areas that you will be asked about: your career, the job that you are applying for and the organisation that you hope will employ you.



Your Career

You should be an expert on this first topic. Look at your career or studies as a series of key events and anticipate questions about each of them. Employers are most interested in your personal contribution, motivation and lessons learnt.

The Job

They will always ask about the job you are applying for.

- How do your skills meet the requirements of the role?
- Find out how your job will fit in to the bigger picture.
- Find out why your job is important to business.
- Look at competitor companies.
- Look at career progression within the organisation.
- Where do you hope to be in five years' time?

The Organisation

This deceptively simple and predictable area of questioning can be a minefield. There are two rules: never state the obvious and don't be negative about the competition.

Anticipate the question, think of the obvious answer and then avoid it. Now is your chance to impress the interviewer. Mention presentations, brochures, a chat you had with a recent recruit, something you read in the paper... Anything which shows you've put a bit of thought into it.

Three is the Magic Number

There are three questions that form the heart of every interview and you would be well advised to think about how to answer them.

1. Why should we employ you?
2. What interests you in this job?
3. Why are you applying to us?

Resist the temptation of learning answers parrot-fashion. Unless you have exceptional acting talent, you will come across poorly.

Practice!

However confident you are, it's never a waste of time to find another person to ask you questions and to hear yourself answer them. It won't be as rigorous as the real thing, but it will give you an opportunity to talk about yourself. Practising in a non-threatening environment will give you extra confidence when the big day dawns.



Attitude

Be Positive

This doesn't mean you should talk about your career as a series of wonderful experiences where nothing ever goes wrong. But it is important that you highlight the positive benefits of failure and that, throughout the interview, you operate with your optimistic side showing.

Be Enthusiastic

Enthusiasm has an infectious quality (as long as you don't go over the top) and it's one of the most natural ways to get someone to like you. If you find that nerves are making you rather buttoned-up at interview, try making a conscious effort to use the vocabulary of enthusiasm. Peppering your answers with phrases like 'I really enjoy this' can have the effect of dragging the enthusiasm quotient of the interview up to a healthy level. You may feel a bit self-conscious at first, but sometimes the words we choose to speak can affect the message we are giving.

Be Natural

Your best chance at interview is to be yourself. This doesn't mean that you should give no thought to how you come across. We all behave differently in different situations, we adapt our behaviour to suit the circumstances. An interview is just another social setting. Be yourself, but imagine the time in your life when you have been happiest.

Be Honest

If you start lying about what you've done you will probably be found out. However, if asked about your weaknesses you what you say should be the positive side of truthful. Try and keep the interviewer's mind focused on the most positive bits of your life

Finding the Right Answers

Here is a guide to some tough interview questions and how to answer them.

- **Would you say you were a follower or a leader?**
- Describe aspects of both - how you are capable of following directions and realise the importance of listening well and being part of a team effort, but you can also demonstrate leadership skills.
- **What do you consider your strengths/weaknesses?**
- Highlight several strengths you believe are relevant to the company and the job, but only one weakness. This weakness should not be closely related to the position for which you are being interviewed or it could be a technical skill that you can easily learn.
- **How well do you work under pressure?**
- Emphasise that you work as well under pressure as you do at any other time but that you prioritise tasks so that your workload is manageable.
- **How would you rate yourself from 1-10?**
- This question has a high discomfort factor and is better answered indirectly. Do not give a definite number. If you rate yourself as only a 7 they will question your ability and your confidence, if you say a 10 they will think you are arrogant with no room for growth or the right attitude to learn. Instead imply that you will strive to reach a 10.
- **Have you ever had a bad experience with an employer?**



- This is to test whether you can be discreet and tactful. Never talk negatively about a former employer. Try to explain methods you use to deal with difficult people and emphasise the importance of flexibility, perseverance and good communication.
- **Are you applying to other jobs?**
- You need to show that you are sufficiently interested in that particular industry or field of work and that you have not just been applying for any job, so only mention jobs that are closely related to the one you're at an interview for. You should also demonstrate a particular interest in and commitment to that company.

Different Types of Interview

The Chronological Interview

This is how all interviews used to be. A steady ramble through your life from school days (When did you decide to study Accountancy at university?) via the present day (How is your project going?) to the misty future (And how do you see yourself progressing in our company?). Based largely on your application form or CV, these interviews concentrate on getting you to explain, and expand upon, what you have written. Some interviews are still like this, but the trend is definitely towards something a bit more scientific.

The Structured, Criteria-Based Interview

Structured interviews ensure interviews are as objective as possible. In structured interviews, all candidates are asked more or less the same questions. The logic behind the move towards structured interviews is simple: Past performance is the best guide to future success. The organisation thinks up the selection criteria and then, in an interview, examines whether or not you have evidence that you possess them to some degree or other. This kind of interview can be taxing, but at least if you have already worked out their selection criteria so you shouldn't be caught unawares.

Because the main purpose of the interview is to explore your career against six or so set criteria, it follows that the questions are more detailed and the questioning more persistent. It may be helpful to imagine the whole process as a series of levels, each one slightly deeper than the last.

Interviewers will generally visit each of these levels during the course of a structured interview, though not necessarily in this order:

- Level one **The question** Would you describe yourself as able to deliver?
- Level two **The evidence** Be prepared to talk about several examples that illustrate each criterion, from different parts of your career.
- Level three **The personal contribution** Look at the significant events in your career and your personal contribution to each (your role, your feelings, what you learnt).
- Level four **The general** Be prepared to discuss criteria more generally. They may even relate criteria to current affairs, especially the business world (e.g., what makes a good Accountant, why is this important to businesses?)
- Level five **The challenge** Don't be shocked to have your ideas challenged. Despite what you may feel, they are not getting at you. Keep calm, look them in the eye and stick up for yourself.
- Level six **Back to the start** How else could you convince me that you're a good Accountant?



The Panel Interview

Occasionally you will push open the door to discover two or more people waiting to interview you. As long as you remain calm, panel interviews are often easier and sometimes fairer than the normal one-to-one. If a solitary interviewer doesn't take a shine to you, you're sunk, but in a panel, the same person could be overruled by others.

The rules of engagement are similar to one-to-one interviews, but there are some specific points to make.

- If you don't know who to look at during the interview, the safest thing is to give most of the answer back to the person who asked the question, with a few brief glances to the others.
- Don't be thrown if one of the panel starts scribbling notes or looks bored. The bigger the panel, the greater the likelihood that some of its members are not experienced interviewers.
- You will sometimes be asked the same question twice. This isn't a cunning ruse to test the honesty of your earlier answer, it's a mistake. Someone wasn't paying attention. Just get on with answering the question (again).
- Sometimes it's helpful to know who's who on the panel. There may be a mixture of personnel specialists, technical and line managers. Knowing who they are, and therefore their special interests, can determine how you answer their individual questions.

Technical Interviews

As you are applying for a technical or highly specialised position, the chances are you will get a first interview that contains a high proportion of technical questions. Even if they don't resort to visual aids, they will quiz you in depth about your current knowledge. There are a few things to look out for.

- When under pressure it is easy to forget experience in previous jobs. Make a big effort to remember.
- It's really embarrassing, after having listed your experience on your CV, to waffle unconvincingly.
- If you have any project work, or whatever that is particularly relevant, produce a short digest of the information and take it with you to the interview. You can use it to illustrate your answers or you can leave it with the interviewer when you finish.
- Even though it may be a technical interview, they will still be looking at other, more personal, skills.
- There aren't many jobs that require only technical skills.

Behavioural/Competency-based Interviews

Behavioural interviews are based on the idea that past behaviour is the best predictor of future behaviour. The interviewer will want specific examples of when and how you demonstrated particular behaviours. Prior to interview each position is assessed for the skills/competencies and characteristics that relate to job success. Interview questions are then developed to probe into these areas. All candidates are asked the same questions and notes are taken in order to evaluate candidates.



The word competency is widely used in business and personnel psychology and refers to the behaviours that are necessary to achieve the objectives of an organisation. A competency is also something you can measure and lists of competencies form a common language for describing how people perform in different situations. Every job can be described in terms of key competencies. This means that they can be used for all forms of assessment, including appraisals, training needs analysis and of course, selection.

- Individual competencies - your personal attributes: Flexibility, decisiveness, tenacity, independence, risk taking, personal integrity
- Managerial competencies - taking charge of other people: Leadership, empowerment, strategic planning, corporate sensitivity, project management, management control
- Analytical competencies - the elements of decision making: Innovation, analytical skills, numerical problem solving, problem solving, practical learning, detail consciousness
- Interpersonal competencies - dealing with other people: Communication, impact, persuasiveness, personal awareness, teamwork, openness
- Motivational competencies - the things that drive you: Resilience, energy, motivation, achievement orientation, initiative, quality focus

To prepare for this type of interview, first review the job description carefully and identify the skills and traits likely to be assessed. Next, identify the situations and experiences that you will refer to in the interview to demonstrate these skills and traits. Competency focused, well-structured answers are extremely powerful and will win you the interview. The STAR model will provide a structure to your answers:

Situation - describe a situation or problem that you have encountered

Task - describe the task that the situation required or your ideas for resolving the problem

Action - describe the action you took, obstacles that you had to overcome

Results - highlight outcomes achieved

Questions about ...

Influencing or Persuading Others

You may have strong verbal skills but can you influence another person to change their thinking or take some action - perhaps a colleague follows your advice or a client decides to buy a service or product. At management level have you the skills to persuade and involve rather than coerce and punish? Are you ethical in your dealings with people?

- Tell me about a time when you were able to change someone's viewpoint significantly.
- Tell me about a time when you were asked to do something that you disagreed with.
- Tell me about a person or event that has been influential in your personal development.



Interpersonal and Team Skills

Employers need people who are socially competent. The desire to build and maintain relationships in and beyond the workplace is critical. Many workplaces function on the basis of teams. These teams are task oriented and short lived. Those who are highly collaborative and co-operative are most likely to thrive in this type of environment.

- What experience have you had working on a team?
- What skills and personal qualities have you contributed to the teams you have been part of?
- Tell me about a time when you used tact and diplomacy.
- Tell me about the last time you had a disagreement with someone.
- Tell me about the most difficult person you have worked with.
- What have you disliked in your past jobs?
- What kinds of people do you enjoy working with?
- What kinds of people frustrate you?
- What qualities do you admire most in others?

Communication Skills

Are you an active listener, do you really listen and do you hear what is actually said. Are you able to read the non-verbal messages that others communicate? Do you communicate in an engaging and convincing way?

- Tell me about a time when you were successful in getting crucial information from another person.
- Tell me about a time when someone misunderstood what you were attempting to communicate to them.
- Tell me about a current event you have been following in the press.
- What do you think are the three most important things about communication?
- Tell me about a time when you worked with people from a culture unlike your own. What did you do to overcome any perceived barriers to communication?

Personal Adaptability, Energy and Resilience

How quickly and how positively will you adapt to changes in work practices, work roles and work environments and the general flux of the modern workplace? How do you manage or avoid stress?

- Tell me about a time when your work or an idea was criticised.
- Tell me about a time when you felt under pressure.
- Tell me about a time when you felt frustrated by your work.
- How would you respond if a project you had been working on was re-assigned to someone else or shelved?
- What do you do for enjoyment in your leisure time?
- What makes you laugh?
- Describe something creative that you've done.
- What has been your most satisfying / disappointing experience?



Self-Management, Self-Motivation and Self-Knowledge

Do you always strive to achieve a standard of excellence, use initiative at the appropriate time, and show persistence in pursuing goals? Accurate self-assessment skills will allow you to be objective and critical in evaluating your strengths and weaknesses. How will your personality and temperament affect the existing team or work group?

- Tell me about a time when you acted over and above the expectations of your role.
- What have you done that shows initiative and willingness to work?
- Tell me something about yourself.
- How would you describe yourself?
- How do you think a close friend who knows you well would describe you?
- How do you think an enemy would describe you?
- How would you describe your management style?
- What are the two most significant accomplishments in your career so far?
- What are your three major accomplishments?
- What are your greatest strengths/weaknesses?
- What's your greatest weakness?
- Why do you want to work for us?
- What does "success" mean to you?
- What does "failure" mean to you?
- In the past year, what have you been dissatisfied about in your performance?
- What are the most important rewards you expect in your career?
- What do you expect to be earning in 5 years?
- Why did you choose the career for which you are preparing?
- Which is more important to you, the money or the type of job?
- What motivates you to put forth your greatest effort?
- How do your skills relate to our needs?
- What are you passionate about?
- What are your interests outside work?
- Tell me about a major problem you have encountered and how you dealt with it?
- What have you learned from your mistakes?
- How do you cope with routine work?

Accounting & Administrative Skills

Generally checking that you have effective work habits, and the knowledge of workplace routines and some experience of common office administration systems.

- Tell me how you organise your work and schedule your time.
- Tell me about computer software packages you are familiar with and your experience in using them.
- Tell me about your experience of managing a budget.



Problem Solving and Decision Making

What's your problem-solving style? Do you manage your activities to minimise or avoid them? How do you behave in a crisis?

- Tell me about a difficult decision that you have made.
- Tell me about an unpopular decision you have made.
- What significant problems have you faced in the last year?
- How do you work under pressure?
- Tell me about a time when you had to make a quick decision. What were the circumstances and what did you do?
- What impact do you think ... will have on our business?
- How would you motivate an employee who was performing poorly?
- Tell me about a situation where you achieved a satisfactory outcome to a problem that others thought couldn't be solved. What did you do and what was the outcome?
- Tell me about a time when you had conflicting priorities and what you did to resolve them.
- What kind of problems do you handle best?

Conflict Management and Ethics

How do you behave in a crisis? What does it take to shake your poise or self-confidence? What approach do you take to problem solving?

- Tell me about a significant crisis you have faced.
- Tell me about a complaint that you have dealt with.
- How do you resolve conflict in the groups or teams that you have membership of?
- How would you resolve a dispute?
- Have you ever anticipated a difficult situation before it arose? Describe the situation, the action you took and the outcome.
- What would you do if your colleagues were complaining to you about the organisation?
- Tell me about a time when you bent the rules. When is it okay to do so?

Personal and Career Objectives

Employers are likely to invest money in your training and development and will want to ensure that your objectives don't conflict with theirs.

- What are your short and long-term goals?
- When and why did you establish these goals and how are you preparing yourself to achieve them?
- What do you see yourself doing 5 years from now?
- What do you really want to do in life?
- What are the most important things you are seeking in a career?
- Describe your ideal job.
- What salary are you looking for?
- What person do you admire most and why?
- Why do you want this position?



Knowledge of the Organisation and Role

What are your motives in applying to this organisation: Were they well thought out? Do you know enough about this work area and this organisation to be clear about how your skills fit into it?

- Why did you apply for this position?
- How would you measure your success or failure in this job?
- What skills and personal qualities are essential for success in this role?
- How do you plan to keep up with developments in your field?
- What would you like to know about this organisation?
- What do you believe you can contribute to this organisation?
- What do you know about our industry?
- What do you know about our organisation?
- Why are you interested in working for our organisation?
- Why should I hire you?
- In what kind of a work environment are you most comfortable?
- What two or three things are most important to you in a job?
- Which three of the competencies required for this position would you prioritise?
- Are you seeking employment in a company of a certain size? Why?
- What criteria are you using to evaluate the company for which you hope to work?
- Do you have a geographical preference? Why?
- Are you willing to travel?
- Can you work well to deadlines and under pressure?
- If you were offered this role, what would you expect to achieve in the first year?
- What hours would you like to work?
- How do you believe the performance of the Euro dollar impacts on our organisation?
- Tell me about a time when you have been managed in a good or bad way.
- What qualities should a successful manager possess?
- Describe the relationship that should exist between a supervisor and those reporting to him or her.
- What problems do you feel you will have fitting into the job?
- Do you know the location of our head office?
- What interests you about our product/services? How would you improve them?

Work Experience

Do you take responsibility for your own learning and career development? Do you have an understanding of the type of environments in which you are most effective?

- Tell me about the best job you've ever had.
- What did you enjoy most or least about your last job?
- What relevant work experiences have you had?
- What extra-curricular activities are you involved in?
- What accounting systems have you used?
- Have you ever been the leader of a team? What did you like and dislike about the role?



Academic Experience

An opportunity to find out about you as a person and encourage you to discuss your studies. If continuing study for professional qualifications or certification is expected then the employer may check that you have effective work and study habits.

- Tell me about your academic programme at university.
- How did you reach the decision to study at XX?
- Describe your most rewarding study experience.
- If you were hiring a part qualified for this position, what qualities would you look for?
- What led you to choose your study?
- What subjects did you like best/least? Why?
- What changes would you make at your study? Why?
- Do you have plans for continued study?
- Do you think that your pass record is an accurate reflection of your academic ability?
- What have you learned from participation in extra-curricular activities?

Ability, Competence and Achievement

- A chance to discover what inspires you and motivates you to achieve and whether you are a loner or a team person.
- What two or three accomplishments have given you the most satisfaction? Why?
- Describe a time when you led or motivated others.
- What do you feel qualifies you for this position?
- Tell us about a time when you had more to do than you could complete in the time allocated: tell us
- what you did about it and what the outcome was.

Stress Questions

Designed to test your resilience in the work environment. Are you able to maintain appropriate behaviour in the face of what may seem inappropriate behaviour in others? Are you able to keep inappropriate emotions in check and take responsibility for your own performance?

- How do you react to criticism?
- Can you accept criticism for poor work?
- Describe a time you failed.
- What causes you to lose your temper?
- Do you really feel that you have enough experience for this role?
- Aren't you overqualified for this role?
- Why have you decided to change careers?
- Why have you changed jobs frequently?
- Have you ever been sacked (fired)?
- Why should I hire you?
- What if I told you that you'd work very hard, but recognition of your contributions would be nil?
- How long would you expect to remain with this organisation?
- What salary are you expecting?
- How long do you see yourself staying with us?
- Are there any questions you were expecting that we haven't asked?
- Tell me about your diary commitments from Monday to Friday of this week?
- How would you describe your work style?



- How would you describe your personality type?

Some 'Interesting' Interview Questions

Often asked by employers to add a bit of interest or inspiration to the interview process to see how you cope with the unexpected or a change in direction. Tend not to have a right or wrong answer.

- What is the most difficult issue facing (America) today?
- It is the 15th Century. How do you convince the Pope that the Earth is round?
- If I gave you an elephant, where would you hide it?
- Why are soft drinks cans tapered on the top and bottom?
- You are in a boat on a fresh water lake. In your hand is a rock. You throw the rock into the lake. How is the lake's water level affected?
- Describe your best friend and what he or she does for a living.
- In what ways are you similar or different from your best friend?
- If you had a weekend to spend doing anything you wanted, how would you make the most of the time?