

# RACC

Richmond Adult Community College

## Guide to interviews



## Introduction

Interviews are an important part of the application procedure. They give the employer the opportunity to ask you questions, and to get to know you. They also give you the opportunity to get to know the company, line manager and the business ethos. This guide aims to prepare you for interviews so that you can be confident when the day approaches.

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## **What is an interview?**

An interview is a very sensible way for an employer and a prospective employee to have a face-to-face meeting in order to gather information. The employer needs to make sure that they employ the person who is right for the job and who can contribute the most to the organisation. You, as the prospective employee, have the opportunity to project yourself as the most suitable candidate, as well as find out what the role and the company can offer you.

## **What is the interviewer looking for?**

If you have been invited to attend a job interview, it means one thing: the employer has already decided that your skills and abilities look right for the job. They will have already seen your CV and the skills and experience you have to offer, so the purpose of the interview is not only to check some of the details, but also to look at your enthusiasm, commitment and the type of person you are. The employer wants to find out if you will fit into the organisation. They may want to test your knowledge and talk about your experience and ambitions. Specifically, they are likely to be looking for:

- Confirmation of your skills and ability to do the job
- Evidence that you have prepared for the interview
- Positive attitude towards past employers and colleagues
- Clean, tidy and smart appearance
- Reliability and trustworthiness
- Punctuality
- Ability to work well with others and fit in with the existing team
- A general idea of your personality.

The thought of attending an interview and being questioned and quizzed by one or more interviewers fills many people with dread. As long as you are well prepared you should have nothing to worry about. Remember this:

### **Prepare yourself. Relax yourself. Be yourself.**

So, how can you prepare yourself to make sure you create the best impression?

## **Preparation**

Preparation is the key to success at interviews. Employers like to know that you have researched the company, and that you have an interest in the company. However, where do you start and what should you look for?

## **How do I start preparing?**

To begin with you need to look at the company profile, for example:

- The main business of the company
- How many members of staff
- The company mission statement
- Recent press that the company has had
- Issues within the industry that might effect the company.

Find out as much as you can but be careful to check that the resources are not more than a few months old.

You can use several different resources to search for information on companies:

- Careers library
- Reference library
- Internet, company websites, industry websites
- Business directories
- Company literature.

Once you have done some company research you need to research the job position you applied for:

- Read the initial advert
- Read your application
- Read your CV
- Read the person specification and job specification.

You need to understand the position and type of person the company are looking for as they will ask questions regarding the skills required for the job.

Once you have completed this research it is time to practise! The old saying is “practice makes perfect”, but it is hard to practise something you don’t know! You need to look at all your research and think about the types of questions they might ask you. You will find some typical examples below (pp 8-10).

Once you have a few sample questions that are specific to the job and the company try to arrange a mock interview with a friend or relative (or even better someone you do not know as they will be more critical and it might prevent giggles!). Get them to ask you the ones that you feel less confident about answering well.

### **How do I prepare for tests and presentations?**

You might find that you have to take a test or give a presentation during your interview. These differ from company to company but can include writing an essay, a computer literacy test or a short PowerPoint presentation, or some other skill-based exercise relating to the role.

Look at your brief carefully for the interview; you don’t want to turn up without something crucial. If you are giving a presentation follow the tips below:

- Check what format is expected – flipchart/overhead projector/Powerpoint
- Don't overload the slides
- Try to brand the presentation like the company would
- Practise the presentation before hand so that you're not nervous on the day. This means not having to read straight from your notes. You will have much more impact if you can look the interviewer(s) in the eyes as you speak
- Take a couple of printouts of your presentation in case there is someone who has a disability or there is a technical problem
- Speak clearly and slowly, don't rush it even if you're nervous
- Don't forget your memory stick or disc!

If you have to take a test follow the tips below:

- If you have the information before – practise
- Don't rush the test
- Keep an eye on the time and allow 5 – 10 minutes at the end for checking
- Read through your work
- If you have to write an essay, sketch out a few bullet points first to get your thoughts into a logical list – the time taken will pay off
- Make sure you understand the question being asked, read it a few times before your start working on it.

### **How do I prepare to sell my skills?**

As well as preparing yourself for presentations, tests and company knowledge, you will also need to prepare information about yourself. You will already have completed an application form or submitted a CV and now you need to think about the following points:

- What do you want the interviewer to know about you?
- What are you good at?
- What can you contribute to the company?
- What special skills and abilities are you offering?
- What examples can you give the interviewer of your skills?

### **What should I wear?**

Believe it or not, it can be confusing what to wear for interview. First impressions count, so it is important. Should students going for a university interview go in jeans or a suit? Should a builder go in his steel capped boots or shoes? It can be quite hard to decide. There is one general rule of thumb, that is, unless it is stipulated in your letter to wear a particular form of clothing you should dress smart. The following guide should help you to decide.

#### **Men**

Wear a plain smart suit whenever possible for an interview. Always wear a shirt and tie, avoid jokey ties as they do not go down well. Make sure you polish your shoes as this sort of detail is usually noted.

## **Women**

Again, wear a plain dark suit whenever possible, plain top and not too low cut. Avoid anything that could be interpreted as evening or casual wear. Very short skirts are inappropriate, however, just above the knee is acceptable. Make sure you wear tights or stockings and take a spare pair in case they ladder. If you wear trousers make sure they are tailored: no jeans!

Neither men nor women should ever wear denim or corduroy.

## **Accessories**

Jewellery should be kept simple for women – long, dangly earrings are for eveningwear. Do not wear lots of visible neck or ankle chains as these are not generally accepted as business wear. Men should avoid jewellery altogether, since some companies do not consider it to be acceptable. Men should wear calf length socks the same colour as their shoes. Women should take only one bag: either a handbag or a briefcase, but not both. Facial piercing is not considered as acceptable by most companies, so take out any nose rings, tongue studs or anything similar.

## **Hair**

Your hair should be clean and recently cut. Men with long hair should tie it back for an interview. Facial hair must be well groomed and neat.

Remember that one sign of lying is fidgeting with your face, so tie long hair back and clip long fringes to the side, try to keep distractions to a minimum.

## **Make-up / Grooming**

If you wear make-up, make sure the colours do not look like you are going out for the evening. If you do not generally wear make-up you may find that a little mascara or lipstick gives extra confidence. Men and women should make sure their nails are clean and manicured. (If you put petrol in the car before the interview use the plastic gloves provided.) Do not eat in your interview clothes, you don't want to turn up with breakfast down your blouse or tie.

## **Smoking**

If you do smoke, do not smoke whilst wearing your clothes for interview. There is nothing worse at interview sitting in a small room with the smell of stale smoke.

## **The Interview**

**Timing:** Now you have prepared for the interview you want the time to run as smoothly as possible. Arrive promptly and not 10 minutes early or 5 minutes late. Aim to walk through the door 3 or 4 minutes before your interview time.

Having prepared and planned you should be ready for the big day itself. Remember you are selling yourself, so be positive.

**Manner:** Make sure you smile at your interviewer, shake their hand firmly and greet him or her with “good morning” or “good afternoon”. Try to relax and look confident, when you enter the room and wait until you are asked to sit down. If you are not, do not think that it’s a trick, the interviewer has probably just forgotten, ask politely “may I sit down”?

**Eye contact:** Maintain good eye contact throughout the interview. This means that you must not look away all the time and equally you must not stare the whole time either. Looking into the interviewer’s eyes when he or she is talking shows you are interested and that you are listening. If there is more than one person interviewing you, you must look at them individually as they talk to you.

**Posture:** How someone is sitting at an interview can project lots of messages to the interviewer, slouching shows lack of confidence and leaning too far back shows a lack of interest. When you sit down at an interview make sure your bottom is set well back on the seat. Sit up straight and perhaps lean slightly forward to show a keen attitude. It does not matter if you cross your legs or not, but if you do, ladies watch your skirt lengths. Don’t sit on the edge of your chair fidgeting, sit back, loosely cross your hands in your lap and make eye contact.

**Nerves:** Remember that some nervousness is a good thing, to carry you through the interview. Adrenaline should flow if you are excited about the job. If you are nervous to the point of shakiness try to breathe deeply and smile. Always remember that the interviewer is quite often as nervous as you.

### **Answering Questions**

If you have done your preparation you will find answering questions quite straightforward. Take your time answering questions; the interviewer is not trying to catch you out and it is okay to pause before answering to think about your response so as to ensure you answer it in the best way you can. There is no right or wrong answer to most interview questions. Don’t be afraid to say if you don’t understand a question, just ask if it can be repeated. If necessary, try to get some direction from the interviewer. You could say for example “That’s a difficult question, where would you like me to start?” When you answer a question the interviewer will not only be interested in your answer, but also how you answer it in terms of your communication skills, how you articulate, use of positive language, etc.

You should never waffle, but if you only say “yes” or “no” to everything, the employer is not going to find out much about you. Try to answer the questions clearly and if you do not know the answer say so.

You will undoubtedly be asked about your past jobs. Try to concentrate on the parts of those jobs that are most relevant to the position for which you are

applying. Always be positive about past positions and never run down your old boss or colleagues. Try to give specific examples of your experience from previous jobs when answering questions. Always be honest. If you come across as someone who has difficulty in getting on with people, you will not be considered. Think of positive reasons why you left a position or would like to leave. You may, for example, want to talk about seeking new challenges, or taking on new responsibilities. Obviously if you were made redundant the answer is clear cut, but again be positive by focusing on the skills and experience you gained while you were there which are now on offer to the prospective employer.

Some interviewers like to ask you to give examples of something you may have achieved or experienced in your career to date e.g.

“Could you give me an example of where you have had to overcome a problem within a team situation?”

Do not exaggerate when answering questions, just be yourself. Above all use your experience to illustrate how you would answer the question. Above all, do not lie about your experience and abilities, if you are offered the job and caught out you may be dismissed.

Try not to shape the interview, but if you feel that something important has not been covered, you ask the interviewer if you may briefly describe or explain something that you think is relevant to your application.

## Interview Questions

Some of the questions you are asked in an interview obviously depend on the training or work involved. However, there are some standard questions that are likely to be asked in a variety of interviews. Here are some examples of typical questions:

- Tell me about yourself
- What are your strengths and weaknesses?
- What interested you most about this job?
- Where do you see yourself in five years time?
- What can you do for us that someone else can't?
- Which aspects of our position do you find the most attractive? Least attractive?
- What do you enjoy most/least about your current job?
- Why are you leaving your current job?

You can use these questions and others to practise before you go into the interview. Write the answers down and practise saying them.

Around 30% of employers reported in a survey that they use behavioural interviewing to some extent in their selection process. These types of questions related very specifically to the key skills required of the post. The idea is that your future successful performance in a role can to some extent be predicted by your past behaviour. Examples of these types of questions include:

### *Motivation*

Give me an example of a time when you went above and beyond the call of duty.

### *Communication*

Tell me about a situation when you had to speak up (be assertive) in order to get a point across that was important to you.

### *Planning and Organization*

How do you decide what gets top priority when scheduling your time?

Other key questions might ask about you as a team player or team leader, managerial style, decision-making, interpersonal or networking skills, or how you have handled conflict.

In answering these types of questions it is useful to structure your answer using the three-step STAR process, describing:

1. The Situation or Task
2. Action – taken by you
3. Result or outcome – the impact of your action

For example, you might describe an occasion when communication within your work group had broken down (ST - situation). To resolve the problem, you organised informal lunch meetings for people to discuss relevant issues (A - action). Morale then improved, as did the lines of communication (R - result). Using this three-step STAR process is a powerful way for you to frame your experiences and accomplishments for the interviewer and ensures that you structure your answer effectively. You can practise this style of question/answer with your helper too.

### **What happens at the end of the interview?**

This is a good time to ask any questions you may have prepared that you have not already asked. You will quite often be invited to do so at this stage.

When you are asked if you have any questions refer to your list. Ask things such as whether you will receive any training, what sort of career prospects there are and what sort of people you will be working with. If you don't have any questions, tell the interviewer that you did have a couple, but that you feel they have already been answered fully. Don't ask about pay and conditions until you have been short listed or offered the job.

At the point where you have nothing left to ask you must try to ask, it closes the interview on a positive note if you make a closing statement, such as:

"Thank you very much for seeing me today, I am interested in this position; can you tell me what the next stage will be please?"

Afterwards, it is worth making a few notes about how it went, particularly if there were questions that didn't go so well. You can learn from these for next time.

If you are getting interviews but not getting the job offers you want, then you need to look carefully at your interview performance. You should try and get as much feedback as possible from the people who have interviewed you. If you thought you were close and are not sure where you could have improved your performance, ring up the interviewer and ask them where they think you fell down and how they think you could do better. Once you have got feedback you can modify your interview technique and hopefully do better next time.

### **Do's and Don'ts**

#### **Do**

- Be polite; good manners go a long way!
- Be yourself! Don't try to be someone else; you may end up in the wrong job. Let your personality shine.

- Speak up for yourself; tell them what you are good at.
- Speak as you would normally; there is no need to put on an accent.
- Keep your answers clear and simple.

### **Don't**

- Don't worry about nerves; try to stay relaxed.
- Don't drink or smoke in the interview.
- Don't smoke before the interview or you won't smell very nice!
- Don't assume that the interviewer knows what you are talking about. Explain things even if they seem obvious to you.
- Never lie about what you've done. If you don't know a particular aspect of the job, talk about similar things you've done.
- Don't ask about the packages in terms of benefits, holidays etc. This can be asked at a later stage, when you have been offered the job.

### **Interview preparation Check List**

**Check the location:** if you do not know where the interview will be, do a dry run. If you are getting public transport try it out at the time you will be travelling – remember buses and trains are far busier in the rush hour than mid-morning. Don't leave your map at home! Allow plenty of time for contingencies.

**Research the company:** be prepared and ask questions at the end of the interview, it looks like you really are interested in the company and the industry.

**Know your application form and CV:** Make sure you read through what you wrote on the application form and in your CV. Most interviewers ask questions relating to the things you stated so be prepared.

**Re-read the job description:** Make sure you understand the job and what is required. Look at the skills and attributes and relate your skills and experience to them. Think positively, you wouldn't have been called to interview if they didn't think you had the skills for the job.

**Prepare some questions:** Prepare some questions to ask at the interview. There is nothing worse than getting to the point of the interview when you are asked if you would like to ask a question and have nothing to say. You don't want to panic and say something daft and irrelevant, you want to leave a good lasting impression. Here are a few examples;

- Can you tell me a bit about the team I would be working with?
- How does this role fit in with the company structure?
- What training opportunities are available to me?
- What are the company's long term goals?

However, don't ask questions just for the sake of it. Make sure all your questions are meaningful and if you do run out, say something like this - "I've asked you all I can think of for the time being, thank you, but may I contact you at a later date if something else occurs to me?"

### **Finally...**

Get positive! Sometimes the nerves we feel before an interview can be strong enough to make us suddenly lack confidence, especially if we really do want the job. A good exercise to boost your confidence is to write down on a piece of paper all the things you do well and all the successes you have had in the past. This is not for anyone's eyes but yours, but will remind you of your worth and boost your confidence. It's good to be a bit nervous - it shows you are keen to get the job and some adrenaline may help you to perform at your best.

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