

How to prepare for an interview



Sandringham School
'Everybody can be Somebody'

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General interview guidance

Types of interview

There are several different types of interview:

- **Telephone** - Some graduate employers use an initial telephone interview to eliminate unsuitable candidates. Successful applicants are usually then invited to a face-to-face interview or an assessment centre. Telephone interviews usually last for around 30 minutes.
- **Video** - An alternative to the traditional telephone interview, some organisations, particularly those recruiting in sales, media and marketing, will screen candidates via Skype, Face Time or YouTube. Video interviews usually last for around 30 minutes.
- **Face-to-face** - The most common type of interview, face-to-face encounters can take place with either one interviewer or, more commonly, a panel. In some rare cases, you may interview alongside other candidates and questioning can either be **strengths-based** or **competency-based**. Face-to-face interviews can last for between 30 minutes and one hour, or even more.
- **Assessment centres** - Used primarily by large graduate employers to compare the performance of several candidates in a range of situations, **assessment centres** typically involve tasks such as presentations, group work, written tests and in-tray exercises. They usually last for one full working day.

Before the interview

Regardless of the type of interview you're preparing for, doing plenty of research and planning is key. Generally, you should:

- Consider how you'll explain problematic aspects of your career/education, such as any gaps.
- Identify the skills, interests and experiences that the organisation is looking for by looking at its website and social media channels.
- Plan your journey in advance, aiming to arrive ten minutes before your interview is scheduled and ideally completing a 'dry run' beforehand.
- Prepare answers to common interview questions, as well as your own questions to ask at the interview.
- Find out about the people who'll interview you.
- Research the issues, trends and opportunities affecting the organisation and the wider job sector.
- On the night before your interview, prepare your outfit and get plenty of sleep.

On the morning of your interview, eat a healthy breakfast and don't consume too much caffeine. You can combat nerves by exercising - if you have time, of course.

What to take

- a bottle of water
- a pen and notepad
- money
- photo ID (e.g. your passport or driving licence)
- the job description and person specification
- your academic certificates and work examples
- your CV, application form and interview invitation.

What to wear to an interview

The typical interview dress code is usually fairly straightforward for men: a dark suit and tie combination is the safest option. However, things are slightly more open for women. You could wear a dress, trouser suit, or a skirt and top. Of course, it does depend on the ethos of the company and if you're not sure make some enquiries before-hand.

You should also:

- avoid wearing too much jewellery or make-up
- cut and clean your fingernails!
- ensure that any bag you take is smart
- clean your shoes
- tidily arrange your hair
- use aftershave or perfume sparingly
- wash and iron your outfit.

4 ways to make a good impression

Winning interview techniques include:

1. **Positivity** - Be well-mannered with any staff you meet before or after the interview and, if you're feeling particularly nervous, remind yourself that the very worst thing that could happen is you simply not getting the job. During the interview, avoid talking about any personal problems unless completely necessary, and never badmouth your previous employers.
2. **Body language** - Give a firm handshake to your interviewer(s) before and after the session. Once you're seated, sit naturally without slouching in your chair or leaning on the desk. Throughout the interview, remember to smile frequently and retain eye contact.
3. **Clarity** - Answer all questions clearly and concisely, evidencing your most relevant skills, experiences and achievements. It's perfectly acceptable to pause before answering a difficult question to give yourself thinking time, or asking for clarification if, at first, you're unsure what the question means. When answering, don't speak too quickly.
4. **Enthusiasm** - It's important that you allow your personality to shine throughout, as well as ask thought-provoking questions at appropriate moments. Both of these strategies will demonstrate that you're genuinely interested in the role and listening closely to the interviewer.

After the interview

When leaving the organisation, let the interviewer know that you're available to answer any follow-up questions. If you feel things went particularly well, you could email the interviewer the next day, thanking them for their time.

In most cases, the organisation will now have enough evidence to make their decision. In some cases, however, you may be asked to attend a second interview, which aims to more closely scrutinise what you and any other remaining candidates can bring to the role. Prepare for your second interview just like your first, but you should also:

- Request feedback from your first interview, before addressing anything that caused you difficulty.
- Research the organisation in even greater detail than for the first interview, preparing examples that demonstrate how you can benefit the organisation.

Don't worry if you don't get the job. Ask the recruiter for feedback.

Interview Questions

Can you tell me a bit about yourself?

This question, usually the opener, tops the list of typical interview questions. It's incredibly important, as you can provide the interviewer with a great first impression. Preparation is key, but your answer mustn't sound rehearsed. Focus on your skills, characteristics and successes, and how they make you a strong candidate in terms of the job description.

Keep your answer to less than five minutes. Generally, you should begin with an overview of your highest qualification and greatest achievements, before running through your work experience and giving examples of the skills that you've developed. If you've little work history, focus on the areas of academia that you've most enjoyed and how this relates to the job.

Why do you want to work here?

Demonstrate that you've researched the role by discussing the skills and interests that led you to apply. Draw upon what you enjoy; use examples from your academic or extra-curricular life that suggest you're strongly motivated for the role and can relate closely to the organisation. Tell the interviewer what particular aspect of the job advertisement enticed you.

Similar questions include:

- What do you know about the company?
- What motivates you?

What are your strengths?

Pick three or four attributes desired by the employer in the person specification; teamwork, leadership, initiative and lateral thinking are common examples. Whatever strengths you pick, ensure that you can evidence them with examples.

Similar questions include:

- How would a friend describe you?
- How would you describe your personality?
- What are three positive things your last boss would say about you?

What are your weaknesses?

You can positively frame your answer by picking characteristics that you've taken steps to improve. For example, self-confidence issues could have previously led to difficulty accepting criticism; but tell the interviewer that you've learned to embrace constructive feedback as it allows self-improvement. Alternatively, discuss how you overcame a potential downside of your greatest strength; for example, you might have had to learn how to cope with conflict if you're a great team worker.

Never say that you have no weaknesses, that you're a perfectionist, or that you work too hard. These are clichéd responses that portray you as arrogant, dishonest or lacking in self-awareness.

Similar questions include:

- How do you respond to criticism?
- How would your worst enemy describe you?

Give an example of a time when you had to cope with a difficult situation

This question is one of the most popular competency-based interview questions. It allows the employer to assess how calm and reliable you are under pressure. Outline an instance where you've coped with an unexpected

problem, discussing how you reorganised and managed your time. Think about times where you've had to meet tight deadlines or handle difficult people.

Similar questions include:

- Give an example of a time when you had to cope under pressure.
- Give an example of a time when you've handled a major crisis.
- How do you manage your time and prioritise tasks?
- How do you respond to stress and pressure?

What has been your greatest achievement?

Ideally, your answer should evidence skills relevant to the job; teamwork, initiative, communication, determination and organisation, for example. For inspiration, think about a time when you've received an award, organised an event, learned something new or overcome a major fear. Always prepare several examples.

A similar question that you may be asked is 'What are you most proud of in your working life?'

What are your goals?

This is your chance to show the recruiter that you're ambitious and professionally determined. Talk enthusiastically about your realistic short- and long-term targets, basing your answers on the employer, the industry, and your skills and experiences.

Outline the various steps to your ideal job, but only in relation to the position that you're applying for and the company's career development offering. It's vital that you explain how your goals make you valuable to the organisation. You could even mention your knowledge of relevant professional bodies and qualifications, or reveal that you've researched the career paths followed by other school leavers.

A similar question is 'What do you expect to be doing in five years' time?'

Why should we hire you?

This question, often the closer, allows you to demonstrate your unique selling point and other major strengths, outlining how your skills, interests and experiences fit the job. Ensure that you're positive and perhaps even re-emphasise your greatest achievements - but don't boast.

Similar questions include:

- How would you improve our product or service?
- What can you bring to the team?
- What can you do for us that other candidates can't?
- Why do you think you'll be successful in this job?

Do you have any questions?

Anything that you ask should cover the work itself or career development. Prepare questions in advance; if all your queries have been answered, mention that the interviewer has covered everything you need to know. Remember to ask questions if the moment naturally arises during the actual interview.

Good interview questions to ask the employer include:

- How could I impress you in the first three months?
- How often is an employee's performance appraised?
- Is there anything that you would like to improve in your department?
- What are the travel requirements of this job?
- What development plans does the organisation have?
- What is a typical career path in this job?
- What training and development is provided?
- What's the proposed start date for the role?

Strength-based interviews

A strength-based interview focuses on what you enjoy doing, rather than what you can do like in a competency-based interview. But don't be fooled, while you're talking about what you like and dislike the employer is learning about what you're good at, and not so good at. Strength-based interviewing has its foundations in positive psychology. The theory is that by identifying your strengths and matching them to the role you'll be happier in your work, perform better, learn quicker and stay with the company for longer.

Unlike their competency counterparts, strengths interviews are more personal and allow recruiters to gain a genuine insight into the personalities of candidates and to see if they'd be a good 'fit' for the company. They also allow you, as the interviewee, to be selected on the basis of your natural abilities.

Why use strength interviews?

Competency-based may be the most common type of interview, but strength-based interviews are gaining in popularity as an increasing number of organisations recognise the benefits of such a method.

The strength-based approach is particularly useful when recruiting individuals who don't have a lot of work experience and companies such as Aviva, BAE Systems, Barclays, Cisco, EY, Nestle, Royal Mail and Unilever all use strength interviews as part of their graduate recruitment process.

Another reason that employers are beginning to favour strength interviews is that candidates have less opportunity to prepare and rehearse their answers, meaning that interview questions are more likely to bring out the genuine interest, motivation and aptitude of interviewees.

An added benefit is that most people come across best when they're talking about things they enjoy so strength-based interviewing makes for a more pleasurable interview experience all round, for both the interviewer and interviewee.

Strength-based interview questions

The strengths that employers look for depend on the job. For example, for a client or customer-facing role you'd be expected to enjoy, and be confident in, communicating with a variety of people and have experiences to back this up. Supporting examples could include volunteering with community groups, being a member of your school debate or social team or part-time retail work. As the recruiter is trying to get a sense of who you are in a short space of time, expect to answer a lot of questions. You could be asked as many as 30 questions in an hour-long interview.

Here are some examples of strength-based interview questions:

- What do you like to do in your spare time?
- What energises you?
- How would your close friends describe you?
- Do you most like starting tasks or finishing them?
- Do you prefer the big picture or the small details?
- Describe a successful day. What made it successful?
- What are you good at?
- What are your weaknesses?
- What did you enjoy studying at school or university?
- When did you achieve something you're really proud of?
- What do you enjoy doing the least?
- Do you find there are enough hours in the day to complete your to-do list?
- What tasks are always left on your to-do list?
- How do you stay motivated?
- How do you feel about deadlines?
- Have you ever done something differently the second time around?
- Do you think this role will play to your strengths?

How to answer strength-based interview questions

Strength questions don't have a right or wrong answer, so don't worry on that score. It is however important that you answer all questions honestly, failing to do so will give the interviewer a false impression of you.

Just like in any other interview you'll need to include examples to back up, and illustrate your responses. You can draw these examples from all areas of your life including your studies, work experience, previous employment, volunteering or extra-curricular activities.

If you're asked to identify your weaknesses stay away from generic responses such as 'I'm a perfectionist'. Think of things that you've struggled with in the past and select a real weakness, such as a lack of organisational skills which impacts on your ability to meet deadlines, or low confidence when it comes to networking or public speaking. Ensure that you explain how your strengths compensate for this weakness and what you're doing to overcome it. For example, for a lack in organisational skills you could explain how you're using alerts and apps on your smartphone to positive effect and how a combination of lists, spreadsheets and a day planner help keep you on track. End this response on an upbeat note.

When you're answering their questions interviewers will be taking note of your body language and tone of voice, which can provide clues to your sincerity. If you're genuinely describing something you enjoy you'll be animated and your enthusiasm and motivation will shine through.

Preparing for a strength-based interview

Many recruiters believe it's impossible to prepare for a strength-based interview. The technique is designed to prevent candidates from planning or rehearsing their responses, plus, you have no idea what you're going to be asked.

However, just because you can't practise your answers doesn't mean that there aren't other things you can do to make yourself interview ready.

Whatever interview technique is used, you still need to do your research into the company and the role. Read the person specification to identify what strengths and qualities the company is looking for. Then make a list of your own strengths. Include your academic, work and social achievements, when you're usually at your best and what motivates you. Think about activities you enjoy doing, subjects you've enjoyed learning about, and also about things you don't like doing and your weaknesses. Think about how all these strengths could be used to the advantage of the organisation you're hoping to work for.

Competency-based interviews

Competency-based interviews (also known as structured, behavioural or situational interviews) are designed to test one or more skills or competencies. The interviewer has a list of set questions (each focusing on a specific skill), and your answers will be compared to pre-determined criteria and marked accordingly.

Competency interviews work on the principle that past behaviour is the best indicator of future performance. They can be used by employers across all sectors but are particularly favoured by large recruiters, who may use them as part of an assessment centre.

They differ to normal or unstructured interviews, which tend to be more informal. In unstructured interviews recruiters often ask a set of random, open-ended questions relevant to the job, such as 'what can you do for the company?' to get an overall impression of who you are. A competency-based interview is more systematic and each question targets a skill needed for the job.

Key competencies regularly sought after by employers include:

- adaptability
- communication
- commercial awareness
- conflict resolution
- decisiveness
- independence
- flexibility
- leadership
- problem solving
- organisation
- team work.

Competency-based interview questions

Questions asked during a competency based interview aim to test a variety of skills and you'll need to answer in the context of actual events. Which skills are tested will depend largely on the job you're interviewing for and the sector you'll be working in.

Expect questions opening with 'Tell us about a time when you...', 'Give an example of...' or 'Describe how you...'

Competency questions you may be asked at interview include:

- Describe a situation in which you led a team
- Give an example of a time you handled conflict (in school or in the workplace)
- How do you maintain good working relationships with your peers/colleagues?
- Tell me about a big decision you've made recently. How did you go about it?
- What has been your biggest achievement to date?
- Describe a project where you had to use different leadership styles to reach you goal
- Tell me about a time when your communication skills improved a situation
- How do you cope in adversity?
- Give me an example of a challenge you have faced and tell me how you overcame it
- Tell me about a time when you showed integrity and professionalism
- How do you influence people in a situation with conflicting agendas?
- Give an example of a situation where you solved a problem in a creative way
- Tell me about a time that you made a decision and then changed your mind
- Describe a situation where you were asked to do something that you'd never attempted previously
- Tell me about a time when you achieved success even when the odds were stacked against you.

How to answer competency questions

Using the STAR (situation, task, action and result) method to structure your answers is a useful way to communicate important points clearly and concisely. For every answer you give identify the:

- **Situation/task** - Describe the task that needed to be completed or the situation you were confronted with. For example, 'I led a group of students in a team presentation as part of our Young Enterprise project'.
Action - Explain what you did and how and why you did it. For example 'We presented to around 5 big industry players in the hope of winning their business. I delegated sections of the presentation to each team member and we discussed our ideas in a series of meetings. After extensive research and practice sessions our group presentation went off without a hitch'.
- **Result** - Describe the outcome of your actions. For example 'As a result of this hard work and team effort we won the backing of 3 clients'.

Where possible, try to relate your answers to the role that you're interviewing for. While your responses to the interview questions are pre-prepared try to avoid sounding like you're reading from a script.

Don't attempt to wing it by thinking on your feet; the quality of your answers will suffer. Also avoid embellishing the truth at all costs. Any lies or invented examples can be easily checked.

Preparing for a competency-based interview

The key to providing successful answers to competency questions is preparation, and the good news is, competency-based interviews are relatively easy to prepare for. Firstly, it's essential that you read and understand the job advert. Next, from the job description or person specification pick out the main competencies that the employer is looking for and think of examples of when and how you've demonstrated each of these. Try to draw upon a variety of experiences from your studies, previous employment or any work experience you've undertaken.

Familiarise yourself with the STAR approach to answering questions and practise your responses with a friend or family member or see if you can practise through a mock competency interview.

Assessment centres

An assessment centre is a combination of tasks and activities that test your suitability for the job. It gives you the chance to demonstrate a wider range of skills than you would have been able to during a traditional face-to-face interview.

Hosted over anything from an afternoon to two days, assessment centres may require an overnight stay, which the employer will normally arrange. You'll usually be joined by other candidates but it's important to keep focused on your own performance. Assessment centres are often the final stage of the selection process for large recruiters.

What happens at an assessment centre?

Assessment days can be held anywhere from the employers offices to a hotel or training facility. You will work both individually and as part of a group on a variety of exercises including:

- case studies
- group discussions
- in-tray exercises
- presentations
- psychometric tests
- role play
- social events
- written tests.

Example assessment day

Assessment centres vary dramatically in length, style and content, but an example assessment day might be:

- 09.00 - Arrival and introduction
- 09.15 - Employer presentation and group ice-breaker exercise
- 10.00 - Psychometric tests
- 11.30 - Individual task: In-tray exercise
- 12.45 - Lunch
- 13.45 - Group exercise: Case study
- 14.45 - Assessment interviews
- 16.15 - Individual presentations
- 17.15 - Evaluation
- 17.30 - Finish

How will I be assessed?

Employers don't just assess you against job competencies; they also aim to ensure that you're the right fit. Being scrutinised for such a long time can be challenging, but assessment centres allow you to compensate for poor performance in one task by excelling in another. Key skills that employers look for include:

- adaptability
- analytical thinking
- commercial awareness
- communication
- creativity
- decision-making
- leadership
- negotiation
- organisation
- persuasion
- planning
- teamwork
- time management.

Assessors - usually a mix of HR consultants and line managers - score your actions against competency frameworks. They discuss all aspects of your performance before reaching a final decision on whether or not to hire you. All, several, one or none of the candidates could be successful.

You may find out there and then whether you've got the job or it could take a few days but the employer will let you know when you're likely to hear the result. If you are not successful in securing the position this time make sure you ask for feedback so that you know what you need to work on and improve for the next assessment day.

How do I prepare?

As with interviews, good preparation is vital. Before the assessment day, it's important that you:

- Call the organisation's recruitment team if something is unclear.
- Give yourself time to complete and practise any material that you've been asked to prepare.
- Identify which skills, interests and experiences the employer is looking for by revisiting the job description and any other material that the company has sent you.
- Practise potential exercises with a friend or family member.
- Read the organisation's website, social media profiles and key literature (e.g. business plan, financial reports and corporate social responsibility strategy), ensuring that you're prepared to share your views and ideas.
- Reflect on your first interview, asking the company for feedback, reviewing your performance, and noting any questions or situations that caused you difficulty.
- Research the news, trends, competitors, history and opportunities of the organisation and its job sector.
- Review your CV and application form.
- Make use of any advice and guidance offered at school - for example, one-on-one coaching and host mock assessment centre interviews.

Choose your outfit well in advance and get plenty of sleep. Plan your journey, aiming to arrive at least ten minutes early. Completing a 'dry run' if possible also combats nerves. On the day, eat a good, healthy breakfast.

Assessment centre tips

It's important that you:

- Are assertive during all exercises.
- Don't dwell on any mistakes, instead concentrate on performing well in the next task.
- Ensure that the assessors can see your working methodology.
- Don't worry about the other candidates, instead focus on putting your key skills forward.
- Draw others into group discussions.
- Ensure that you understand the requirements of each task by quickly digesting the brief - revisit this once you understand the overall challenge.
- Join in with discussions, even at 'informal' mealtimes - ask other candidates about school/work experience if you're struggling for conversation.
- Maintain a friendly and polite manner with everyone you meet, and remember that you're always being assessed.
- Relax and let your personality shine, as assessors warm to individuality.

Interview Tests & Exercises

Presentations

These assess your ability to communicate clearly and formally, testing your skills in timing, persuasion, analysis, public speaking and creativity. Interview presentations usually last 10 to 20 minutes.

Employers using assessment centres may set impromptu presentation tasks based on an exercise you've already completed. You'll be given around 30 minutes to prepare, which tests your response to pressure. Regardless of the scenario, ensure that you:

- discover how you'll be assessed
- focus on your primary aims and desired outcomes, tailoring your presentation accordingly
- include an introduction, main section and conclusion
- minimise visual prompts, highlighting key messages using figures, bullet points and short sentences
- prepare for questions by familiarising yourself with background information.

When giving your interview presentation, ensure that you:

- maintain eye contact with your audience
- remain calm
- speak loudly enough to grab everyone's attention
- stay within the allotted time, leaving room for questions
- use pauses to allow the audience to absorb your words.

In-tray exercises

Also known as inbox or e-tray exercises (if completed digitally), these synthesised business situations require you to organise your workload. They're a popular interview test with large recruiters as they're very reliable predictors of job performance, and assess key competencies such as analysis, decision-making, time management, accuracy, organisation and communication.

You'll have around 30 to 60 minutes to work through 10-30 items of paperwork such as emails, faxes, letters, memos, minutes, reports, organisation charts, policy documents and telephone messages. Your primary goal is to prioritise your items, explaining what action is required for each. This could involve responding to queries, drafting replies, making decisions or delegating tasks. You may also be given new material during the exercise.

Ensure that you:

- check how you'll be assessed, and whether you can write on the documents
- note actions in bullet form, paying attention to detail and referring to the material provided
- prepare to justify your decisions
- read all instructions and materials that accompany the in-tray exercise carefully before starting, making a rough plan based on any identifiable key issues
- work quickly, accurately, systematically and logically.

Group exercises

These usually involve 8 to 10 candidates, and are often used in assessment centres or when organisations have multiple vacancies. The recruiter will usually provide an industry or workplace-related problem that requires a solution.

Candidates are assessed to performance criteria that accounts for key competencies including teamwork, leadership, enthusiasm, decisiveness, persuasiveness, problem solving, critical thinking, communication and commercial awareness. Some typical group exercises are:

- **Ice-breakers** - Aimed at relaxing and bonding the team, these are one of the most common interview exercises. They often involve completing a task such as building a tower from straws, paper and pins.
- **Discussion** - You're usually given a business scenario and asked to reach a logical conclusion. Usually, no member is designated leader so candidates may be asked to lead the discussion in turn.
- **Role play** - Candidates are provided with a particular role, background information and a brief. One common example is a mock meeting, where each candidate assumes a specific function and is expected to fulfil individual and group objectives.

Throughout all group exercises, ensure that you:

- actively contribute, making your points clearly, concisely and confidently
- don't criticise, interrupt or undermine others, but do politely intervene if one member is dominating
- follow instructions carefully, relating everything to your brief
- include others and delegate appropriately, choosing the best person for each task
- offer praise and appreciation for others, understanding and building upon their comments
- stand up for your opinion if criticised
- stay calm, but work quickly and decisively.

Group interviews

Another common group exercise is an interview where you're interviewed alongside fellow candidates. Employers are interested in your engagement with others in a competitive situation. Stand out in a group interview by displaying your knowledge of what's being discussed, and highlighting the skills and experiences that make you unique. It's not only about performing well you'll need to think carefully about the way you answer questions and the answers that you give. Here are some suggestions of good ways to start your answer:

- **I agree and would like to add that...** - This gives you a chance to elaborate on a point that someone else in the group has made. Be careful not to just repeat their answer though.
- **Another approach would be...** - Here you're demonstrating that you can accept others points of view but that you also have an opinion on what should be done. Make sure to not just completely dismiss someone else's point.
- **We seem to be agreeing that we take the following action...** - You're showing the recruiter that you understand what's going on, want to drive the task forward and that you have some leadership skills. Be careful not to overpower others and make it seem like you're just rushing the task.
- **Does anyone want to add to this...?** - An important part of a group interview is teamwork and this is a great opportunity to show you can include others and are interested in their point of view.

Case studies

Particularly common for management, consulting and accountancy firms. Case studies test your analysis, creativity and problem-solving skills.

The recruiter will describe a situation and you'll need to respond with advice, in the form of a report or verbal explanation. Your conclusion is reached by collating and analysing provided information. Anticipate the type of case study you could receive by researching the organisation and sector. Also ensure that you:

- can justify and defend your decisions
- identify the real issue by looking for patterns, inconsistencies and contradictions
- manage your time carefully, but pay attention to detail
- read all instructions and materials before you start, to understand what's expected of you
- treat the task like a course assignment, arranging your material and drawing conclusions.

Written tests

These interview tasks usually involve writing an essay, email, letter or report on a given topic, though you may sometimes be asked to proofread, review or summarise a document. Tasks typically last 40 to 60 minutes, and your common sense, comprehension and written communication are being assessed. Ensure that you:

- read all the instructions and materials carefully
- use a combination of headings, bullet points and writing styles to add emphasis
- use acronyms only after you've explained them
- use correct spelling and grammar
- write for someone who doesn't have your knowledge.

Social events

These 'informal' sessions allow you to socialise with other candidates, assessors, recent graduates and senior management. They're excellent opportunities for you to learn more about the role. Remember that you're still being assessed - despite social events not being an obvious interview test. Try to appear socially confident and capable of relating to different people.

Telephone Interviews

A telephone interview is a pre-scheduled job interview, typically lasting half an hour. With technological advancements video interviews are becoming increasingly popular but recruiters such as BT, HSBC, Shell, Tesco and Vodaphone still use telephone interviews as part of their recruitment process.

Popular with recruiters as they save time and help to keep interview costs down, they also eliminate travel costs for the interviewee. However, telephone interviews do have a downside. In most cases you'll be answering questions under a strict time limit and this can increase nerves. Not being able to see the interviewer also presents its own difficulties, as you're unable to gauge their response.

How to prepare

A confident phone manner doesn't come naturally to all and some candidates may feel uncomfortable talking over the phone, but with the appropriate preparation this shouldn't affect your performance.

Just like in any other interview situation you need to research the industry, organisation and job. Visit the company website, competitor sites and read relevant journals and news articles. Do this in advance. Avoid surfing the web for information once you've answered the interviewer's call.

You can also plan your responses to frequently asked questions by preparing a list of examples of when and how you've demonstrated each skill or quality listed in the person specification.

To increase your confidence when talking over the phone ask family or friends to call you for a mock interview. Use your research and planned responses to answer their questions and treat this practise as the real thing. Try recording yourself and listening back to get a feel for how you come across over the phone.

Telephone interview questions

A member of the HR team usually conducts telephone interviews and you should expect the same questions as in a face-to-face interview.

When answering the call you need to be professional and upbeat. If you've pre-arranged an interview time, don't be caught off guard when the phone rings. Remember that this is not an informal chat with a friend. Answer with 'Good morning/good afternoon, (your name) speaking.' Avoid using slang or informal language and maintain this professional tone throughout the interview.

When answering questions be aware of the pace of your speech. Time is limited but don't rush or mumble, despite your nerves. Be succinct and to the point.

Your responses need to demonstrate your knowledge of, and enthusiasm for the role.

One of the downsides to telephone interviews is that without visual clues from the interviewer it can be hard to gauge how you're doing. In a face-to-face interview you're able to take direction from the employer's body language and visual responses but this is not possible over the phone. When you're being interviewed in person you're also able to smile and nod to show the interviewer that you're engaged.

During the interview use interjections such as 'Ok', 'I see' and 'I understand' to let the interviewer know you're listening. However, be careful not to interrupt them when they're talking.

Tips for telephone interviews

- **Pick a suitable location** - This is really important. Avoid noisy, public spaces and instead opt for a private, quiet location such as your home. If you live with family or friends warn them in advance of the call that you need some peace. Minimise background noise by closing windows and turning off televisions or radios. Unless your mobile is charged and receiving full reception, use a landline. Turn electronic devices to silent to avoid distraction.
- **Dress to impress** - It may sound strange as the recruiter can't see you, but dress for an interview. You shouldn't treat telephone interviews any differently than face-to-face interviews and you wouldn't turn up to meet a potential employer in your pyjamas. Dressing for the part helps to put you in a professional frame of mind and boosts confidence.

- **Stand up and smile** - Smile to ensure that the interviewer hears the enthusiasm in your voice from the start. To convey energy and confidence take the call standing up. At the very least make sure that you're sat upright at a table.
- **Refer to your notes** - Being able to have application documents and notes to hand is one of the main advantages of a telephone interview, but don't rely on them too heavily. The employer will hear if you're rustling papers and will be able to tell if you're reciting answers from pre-prepared notes. Instead of reams of paper use concise bullet points as prompts.
- **Have a glass of water nearby** - Interview nerves and lots of talking can lead to dry mouth, not ideal when you're trying to eloquently express yourself.
- **Don't be afraid to ask for clarification** - If you miss a particular question don't try to second guess what it might have been. Apologise and politely ask the interviewer if they can repeat it.
- **Take notes** - If you're able to multitask jot down any useful information provided by the employer and the questions you're asked during the interview. These notes could be a valuable resource if you're invited for a second interview.

Following up an interview

Don't end the interview with a polite thank-you and then hang up. Just like in face-to-face interviews employers expect you to have a couple of questions of your own. These could be about the role or the company. Stay away from questions about salary, holiday entitlement or start dates.

It's also perfectly acceptable, if the interviewer hasn't mentioned it previously, to enquire about the next stage of the process and when you should expect to hear from them.

If you don't hear back within a couple of weeks, give them a call or send a short email to follow up. Reiterate your interest in the role and thank them again for their time. If you've been unsuccessful on this occasion use this as a chance to ask for feedback on your performance so you can use the lessons learned in future applications.

Video Interviews

Often used in the early stages of the interview process to filter out large numbers of candidates, video interviews can vary in style and length. You may be asked to answer pre-recorded questions with an allotted time given for each response. Or the interview may be live, in a similar format to a traditional interview and carried out on a platform such as FaceTime or Skype.

The obvious benefits of a video interview are the money and time savings for both the recruiter and the candidate. It also means that the recruiter and their colleagues can watch the interview again rather than just relying on notes. They're not without their disadvantages though, the main one being connectivity problems and time delays. Also, not everyone is comfortable on camera and this may put some candidates at a disadvantage. With some preparation these issues can be overcome and help you move on to the next stage of the process.

1. Be prepared

Talking on camera doesn't come naturally to some people so it's important to do some test runs to help you get used to it. Record yourself and watch it back to see how you look and sound. This is also a good opportunity to review your body language and make sure the background and lighting are okay.

As with any interview you should research the company and prepare answers to some of the most common interview questions. Another benefit of a video interview is that you can have some notes to hand. These need to be kept away from the camera and you shouldn't fiddle with them during the interview as paper rustling will affect the sound and distract you from what's being said.

2. Choose your location

Plan well in advance where you're going to do the interview. Use a quiet location, where you won't be disturbed by noises and people. Make sure the room you choose is tidy and use a clean and simple background so that the recruiter focuses on you.

Close any software on your computer that might play notification sounds, and switch your phone to silent, to guarantee you won't be distracted. Also, let everyone in the house know you're about to start the interview so they don't interrupt.

3. Dress professionally

You may be at home but it's still a job interview and this is your opportunity to give a professional first impression - this means dressing appropriately. You should wear the same outfit you would have chosen for a face-to-face meeting with the employer. Although you should think about how your clothes will look on screen and avoid busy patterns and stripes for example.

4. Use positive body language

You should avoid slouching, moving too much or touching your face. Instead employers will be looking for you to make good eye contact, smile, listen and take an interest in what they're saying. To help you do this your camera should be at eye level and you should look into it rather than at the screen.

If you're nervous it can be easy to rush what you're saying but remember that the employer wants to hear your answers. So speak clearly, and be careful not to interrupt as this is more easily done with the slight delay over the internet than during a face-to-face meeting.

5. Get technical

You also need to think about the lighting as it won't be a great interview if you can't be properly seen. To ensure you don't get a shadow either use natural light from a window or put a lamp in front of the camera and adjust the distance to get the best result.

A few days before the interview you should test the computer, camera and any software that you've been asked to use. Make sure the picture is clear and the sound quality is good. It's also worth checking your internet connection and ensuring that nothing on the day will affect it.

On the day of the video interview make sure everything is fully charged or plugged in as you don't want the battery to run down. You don't want to be still sorting things out as the interview starts so switch everything on at least half an hour before the interview and sign in to any software that you'll need.

If there are any technical hitches, for example if you can't hear the questions very well, don't struggle through as you won't put in your best performance. Mention the problem. It may easily be fixed, or the interviewer may be happy to end the call and redial.

Psychometric tests

Psychometric tests help to identify a candidate's skills, knowledge and personality. They're often used during the preliminary screening stage, or as part of an assessment centre. They're objective, convenient and strong indicators of job performance; making them very popular with large graduate recruiters.

The majority of psychometric testing is completed online, though some paper questionnaires remain. Most tests are timed, but some can be completed in multiple sittings.

Types of psychometric testing

There are two main types: personality tests and aptitude tests.

Personality tests explore your interests, values and motivations, analysing how your character fits with the role and organisation. They analyse your emotions, behaviours and relationships in a variety of situations.

Aptitude tests assess your reasoning or cognitive ability, determining whether you've got the right skill-set for a role. Usually administered under exam conditions, you'll often be given one minute to answer each multiple choice question. Your 'intelligence' levels are compared to a standard, meaning that you must achieve a certain score to pass. Common tests include:

- diagrammatic reasoning
- error checking
- numerical reasoning
- spatial reasoning
- verbal reasoning.

Taking a personality test

There are lots of tests such as the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) which places you in one of sixteen personality groups and the Occupational Personality Questionnaire (OPQ) that tests your personality to check that it fits with the job.

You'll usually be presented with statements describing various ways of feeling or acting, and asked to record how much you agree on a two-, five- or seven-point scale. There are no right or wrong answers - this, plus the fact that enforced pressure reduces accuracy and discourages honesty, means that they're not typically completed under exam conditions. While there is generally no time limit you should expect to spend between 15 and 30 minutes answering anything from 50 to 200 questions, usually online. The best way to prepare is to practise personality tests so that you're familiar with their format and the questions they ask. Make sure you've read the job description, know what the employer is looking for and how the test you're taking will measure this.

When taking a personality test, make sure that you:

- take the test in a quiet, familiar environment
- read the instructions carefully, paying close attention to what you're being asked
- stay calm by breathing slowly and deeply
- work briskly and accurately, omitting any questions that you don't understand
- are honest and consistent in your responses
- trust your initial reactions, and don't simply try to guess the 'best' answer.

How to pass an aptitude test

- **Lots of practice** - The test will probably be online so get used to doing them on a screen. As well as giving you a feel for the questions practising will also highlight any gaps in your knowledge.
- **Have the right equipment** - You should take a few pens, rough paper, a calculator (you won't be able to use your phone in most cases), a watch and a dictionary. The employer may insist that you use their equipment but it's better to arrive prepared. Make sure you've practised with these tools as the more familiar you are the quicker you'll work and the more you'll get done.

- **Read the instructions** - Before you start make sure you understand what you're being asked to do and how long you've got to do it. Double check any graphs, tables or images to ensure that you haven't missed anything and know what they're showing.
- **Be aware of the time** - Make sure you know how long you've got for the overall test and each question. If you get stuck on a question just move on and come back as some questions can take longer than others.

Numerical reasoning

These tests assess your interpretation of charts, graphs, data or statistics, investigating your ability to deal with numbers quickly and accurately. Numerical reasoning tests may also challenge your knowledge of rates, trends, ratios, percentages and currency conversions.

Verbal reasoning

Your understanding of written information, evaluation of arguments, and communication of concepts is being tested here. You must read short passages of text before answering questions that assess your comprehension. Verbal psychometric tests challenge your ability to think constructively and use written information to construct accurate conclusions. Some tests also assess your spelling and grammar.

Abstract reasoning

This is your chance to demonstrate your ability to learn new things quickly. Abstract reasoning tests measure your ability to identify a set of rules and apply them to a new situation, judging how well you follow information or spot patterns. Questions often consist of a series of pictures, each of which is slightly different. You must then choose another picture from a number of options to complete the series. These aptitude tests are particularly common for IT, science and engineering roles.

Situational judgement

You'll be given a hypothetical work-related situation and asked to choose a preferred course of action from a list of options. You may be asked to choose the most and least effective response, rate the responses in order of effectiveness or choose only the most effective course of action, so make sure you read the instructions carefully.

Error checking

Data checking tests measure how quickly and accurately you can detect errors. They're common for clerical and data input vacancies. Fault-diagnosis tests, meanwhile, test your ability to approach problems logically. This method of psychometric assessment is often used to recruit for technical roles that must discover and repair faults in electronic and mechanical systems.

Practice psychometric tests

For advice, information and free psychometric tests, here are a few sites you could visit:

- <https://www.assessmentday.co.uk>
- <https://practicetests.cubiks.com>
- <https://www.graduatesfirst.com> (aptitude test practice)
- <https://www.psychometricinstitute.co.uk> (practice psychometric tests)
- https://downloads.pgwebtools.com/practice_reasoning_test.html (practice reasoning test)
- <https://www.psychometric-success.com> (psychometric & aptitude tests)