

An interview is a 2 way process for both the potential employer and employee to gauge how they would fit into a potential new role. When carried out properly it should be a comfortable transfer of information between the parties where both are aware of what information the other wants to find out.

It's important to remember though that many of the potential employers aren't trained interviewers and as such their skill and ability to successfully carry out an interview can vary dramatically. The person who best understands what information the potential employer is trying to get at, and has the best preparation is most likely to get the job. Below are a couple of hints/tips that previous placements have found handy.

Preparation

Know where you're going and give ample time to get there – based on the fact that typically interviews are 1st thing, lunchtimes or last thing at night employers are giving up their own personal time to see you. Arriving late therefore sets a very bad tone for the start of the interview, while just making it by the skin of your teeth doesn't give you the 5 minutes to compose yourself pre-interview either. Make sure that you have the company phone number with you as well, should you be held up by unforeseen circumstances you have the ability to let them know.

Research the organisation. Try and go beyond just a cursory glance on the website, use your own networks to try and find out recent projects that they may have been involved in, (its easy to drop this into the interview by saying something like – “the best way I can describe the project I was involved in here is that it's a bit like *project x* you won and award for recently...”). Use search tools like www.linkedin.com to search for current/previous employees who you may know that you can namedrop into the conversation which can add validity to your application and provide a level of comfort to the interviewer.

Know your resume. Remember that employers will base a lot of their questions on the information that you have already provided them (i.e. your resume), but they will want to know in more depth. Remind yourself what you have written and be comfortable talking for 1-2 minutes in more detail about key projects that you have outlined and your role in them. Where there is some specific synergy between what you have done and what they do remember that they are likely to ask specifically about this project so pay particular attention to this area.

Have supporting information with you. Take Extra copies of your resume in case other people are in the interview, have copies of reports that you have written that you can show the employer (it's the easiest way to demonstrate your written skills as well as giving you a quick and easy reference point

to describe an array of things such as site layout, concept designs, graphs to quickly show things like demographics etc.

The Interview

There are a number of different interview types that the employer may choose to utilise and are outlined below. It's a perfectly fair question to ask the potential employer before the interview as to what format the interview will take which best gives you the chance to prepare, but you can also have a fairly good idea as to the format based on who the client is:

Behavioural Interviews are more and more common and typically used by the bigger companies, or public sector organisations where there is a greater need to have a formal benchmarking system so they can directly compare one applicant to another.

Informal Interviews are more often used by Line Management or smaller companies who may not have formal "HR Systems" in place, or by larger groups where the aim of an interview is to ascertain what skills a person in general could bring to an organisation, and to check there is some synergy and agreement about both parties having some interest in pursuing things into a more formal arena, and as such can be used a lot for more senior appointments.

Case Studies used to work out how an interviewee thinks in a real-life practical scenario. Some interviewers will give you preparation materials in advance, others will spring the scenario at you on the day. In both cases they should make you aware that this is part of the interview process prior to you arriving so you can prepare yourself mentally.

Behavioural Interviews

The employer has a predetermined set of "skills/competencies" and asks you open ended questions that allow you to draw on examples of previous experiences where you have demonstrated these characteristics. Typical questions will be things like:

"Can you give me an example of your problem solving skills?"

Can you tell me a time when you had to work under a tight deadline – what was the result?"

Tips

Revise – The "competencies" and therefore questions that you will be asked are typically either listed in the job description or you can work them out by thinking about what the core skills of the role are going to be. You can therefore ensure you have the examples and key points prepared before you go into the interview

Stay on topic—The interviewer will be going to score each answer you give against each question, you don't get any bonus points for mentioning things that aren't responding to questions they ask, you simply waste your own time.

Ask yourself "How" and "What" – It's not just simply enough to say that you have skills, or you got them from such or such an experience – by asking yourself "How you demonstrated your skill you will come up with things like processes you used and approaches you took – while also remember to ask yourself "what" as in "what did I achieve"

Bad can be good – As much as you should highlight the end result, a project that didn't go exactly according to plan can still be beneficial. As long as it doesn't highlight your incompetence in an area, and you don't start blaming everyone else in the team they can be used as good examples as to how you adapted to try new approaches during the process. Still remember to think about "what", but use it more in terms of What you learned, and what you would have done differently.

Have a positive conclusion – Tell the employer the outcome of the situation and what using your skills in that area achieved, if it didn't have a positive conclusion (you can have good examples of where you have used your skills but things haven't gone according to plan), outline what you have learned and what you would change if put in that situation again.

Make it resonate – Try and choose examples that the employer can link back to their business, or envision you doing in their business.

Vary the scenario's – It's fine to use a scenario more than once but be aware of relying solely on that scenario as that will make your skills look limited. If you have to choose what question to use your main example in, examine the scenario in question and decide what skill it actually demonstrates most (ie gives you your strongest answer) in conjunction with what the main requirements of the role are. If in doubt use your stronger answers earlier where questions can be weighted higher, and also means that you're not worried about running out of time and not using your strong example.

The informal Interview

Establish a framework - Try and set some parameters around what they want to achieve/find out from you, as well as making them aware of what you want to know about them/the role at the beginning of the meeting. A good line is "I'm conscious that your time's valuable – is there anything in particular that you make sure you want me to cover during the chat". Remember you don't need to then dive into answering them in a list but just mentally tick them off as you go.

Follow their lead – An interviewer may start off an interview with a simple statement like "tell me about yourself" which gives you an open field to direct things as you want. Watch out for if their questioning becomes more direct/targeted as it means to slow down and cover those points in more

detail because you've hit an area of interest for them. Equally if the interviewer is writing a lot (good sign), leading forward (good sign), checking blackberry (bad sign) adjust your approach accordingly.

Tick off your points Before the meeting work out the 5 or 6 points that you feel will establish you as a leading contender for the job and ensure that you fit them into the conversation.

Establish common ground try and use the 1st couple of minutes of chit-chat to establish a common bond. It may be people you both know, projects you both worked on or even something not work related. It sets both parties at ease.

Quick Chronology – Remember it's not up to you to talk for an hour on the chronology of who you worked for, specific dates etc. Most the "proper" interview starts after that's completed and the interviewer has a rough idea of your skills and can then ask more targeted/specific questions relating to what they've heard. If the interviewer doesn't interrupt you try and keep the initial "speech" to no more than 5-10 minutes – but tell the interviewer that they are free to interrupt if they want.

Paint a picture – Rather than list your duties in a role or reel off all the projects that you worked on in a company, pick one or two of the more significant projects in your cv, (especially the more recent where your skills should be the most developed), and talk the client through them. Include things like the financial value of the project; who the client was; an overview of the site; constraints, potential issues; how big the team was, who you reported to, what your role was and how it changed over the project and any significant achievements or things that you did within the project that contributed to its success.

It's still an interview- Remember no matter how casual the chat feels, you are still being assessed – make sure you maintain a level of professionalism in what you say and how you say it.

Ask your own questions The informal interview is the best place to ask questions to the interviewer and get genuine responses, typically they are more relaxed as well as you, hopefully some rapport has been built up with them, and its likely to be just 1, maybe 2 in the interview rather than a panel interview so they are more likely to speak openly about culture/problems they may have had etc. Remember though that you are still being interviewed so if you need to ask any sensitive questions make sure you think about how you're going to word it prior to the interview.

Case Study Interview

Used by employers as a way of observing your analytical and problem solving skills and typically will involve asking you to solve a problem that you won't have had experience of dealing with (but are often drawn from projects the employer has experience of).

Don't panic – Remember the client isn't expecting you to have in-depth knowledge of the actual case study, or a 100% accurate answer. They are more interested in your approach and how you get to the answer.

Analyse the question – Be sure you understand what the interviewer is asking you. Don't be afraid to ask for clarification on any points, or rephrase the question back to the interviewer if it helps. Also listen to any additional information the interviewer gives you as this is likely to give you a hint as to how they are expecting you to answer the question.

Take Notes – It will help you put your thoughts in an orderly fashion, as well as reminding you of things to clarify/come back to without losing your current train of thought.

Think before you speak – The interviewer knows that you won't have covered many of the issues and will give you more leeway to collect your thoughts, its better to have a pause than to say something stupid or head down the wrong track.

Talk the interviewer through your thoughts. Don't be afraid to say things like "While I've not dealt with this, I presume the issues would be x,y and z, with the most important being "x" as it demonstrates your thought process, the ability to think about broader issues and allows the interviewer to subtly direct you down the right path.

Don't get bogged down in the detail – Use rough approximations where appropriate, the interviewer is interested in how you think not if you can quote legislation word for word or divide 2134 by 6.7 in your head.

If really stuck – ask for a hint – If your hopelessly lost, ask for a hint/help, at this stage you've got nothing to lose and by getting back on track you may get into a flow/rhythm that can redeem the situation.

Finally

- Remember to maintain a positive outlook all the way through, even if the job isn't for you now, you may well end up talking to the interviewer about another role in another company down the track.
- Make sure you know what their process for going forward will be – how many people are they interviewing, what the next step is, and when are you likely to hear will help you stay in control and manage timelines if talking to more than one interested party as well as giving you an indication how hard to negotiate on things like salary.
- Feel free to ask at the end of the interview – how you did and any areas that they felt you could have covered better – it gives you chance to address any areas of concern the interviewer may still have.
- Be open with the interviewer – tell them if you're in discussions with other groups if asked – (it allows for a more open negotiation/offer process if the employer is aware of their competition, as opposed to blindsiding them with other offers you may have at the end of the process). The interviewer will use this information though to try and understand/confirm your motivations for looking for a new role, so make sure that you can justify why you applied to the other company in a way that doesn't contradict anything you've said about why you want to work for the interviewers company.
- Don't avoid the salary question – by all means try and get the interviewer to discuss their proposed salary range first as it's a better negotiating stance, however if asked a direct question about salary – deal with it there and then. By avoiding the salary question altogether you appear evasive and the interviewer will be left feeling that money is your primary reason for moving.
- Don't forget about the future – remember to ask about how your role will progress over time in terms of career development, training, salary etc. Failure to ask this will mean that you could be back on the job market again in 12-18 months.
- Review your performance – if you're consistently not getting the job ask yourself why, and be critical of yourself in order to find areas to improve on.
- Remember at the end of the day an interview is only two people talking about a subject that you're the worldwide expert on (you)!