

The 10-minute guide to succeeding at interviews

Here's a quick summary of our interview section.

Preparing for an interview at short notice can leave you terribly nervous, and it's the last thing you need when trying to make a positive impression. To help you out, we've summarised our comprehensive interview section. Firstly, your primary aim is to convince the interviewer that:

- You would be able to do the job competently
- You can bring enhanced benefits to the company
- You are the best candidate on both of the above counts

Preparation

In order to approach this successfully you will need to conduct a mini-self assessment of your professional profile, your work experience so far, the qualifications you possess and where you want your career to go.

Write down a few points about your strengths and weaknesses so that you have a clear idea of what to say (and what not to say) in the interview. Here are some of the core traits to consider:

- Leadership by example
- Self-confidence
- Commitment and determination
- Enthusiasm and stamina
- Competitiveness
- Good judgement and confident decision making
- Willingness to take responsibility
- Initiative and creativity
- Organisational ability
- Sensitivity to people

Ask yourself:

- In which areas can I really improve?
- What were the tasks and situations I had the most difficulty with?
- In which instances did my colleagues react negatively towards me?
- Were there any reasons for hindering my progress and promotion?
- Why am I leaving my present job?

These will be some of the questions 'fired' at you in the interview and this task will help you formulate suitable answers. For more details visit our section on Interview preparation.

Positive thinking

The most important thing to take with you to the interview is a positive attitude. If you've recently been made redundant, then this will no doubt need particular attention.

If you don't believe in yourself, then how on earth are you going to convince the interviewer to believe in you?

Remind yourself that they've short-listed you from many other applicants, so you must stand a pretty good chance. Feeling a little nervous before the interview is perfectly natural.

It's sometimes surprisingly effective if you go into an interview with the attitude that they want you more than you want the job, but don't become over confident!

The core of positive thinking is your sense of self-esteem. In order to be positive in an interview you need to ensure that you have a buoyant self-esteem.

Take some time to reflect on how you see yourself and how you feel about your career successes so far. (Note that we have not mentioned career failures). There are basically two types of self-esteem:

Internal: which rests on your own beliefs about yourself.

External: which is based on your reaction to the environment around you. Always remember that ultimately you let others tell you how good you are.

Try to put everything in perspective and dwell on the positive aspects of your character. Ultimately you want to avoid leaving an impression that is less than you deserve.

The job brief

If you are preparing for a specific interview, it's worth familiarising yourself with the job description or brief before tackling this task. Ask the recruiter for as much information on the company as they can supply.

How big is the company? How long have they been operating? What are their key income revenues and core areas of business? Who are their major competitors? Have they recently had any major upheavals or successes?

Someone who goes to the effort to find all this out is likely to put the same effort into their job, and the sense of enthusiasm will certainly help you outscore other candidates. At a professional level, knowing this sort of information about the company is expected.

So, how do you research a prospective employer? The internet is an easy place to start, as most companies have a website. Calling their marketing department and asking for a company profile or press kit is also practical.

Your request may even filter back to the recruiter who will be impressed before you even step in the door. Alternatively you can pose as a potential customer and quiz one of their sales members over the phone.

Dress and body language

Although the acceptable style of dress varies according to the industry you work in, it is generally better to over dress rather than under dress, and a suit should almost always be worn.

Avoid arriving for an interview overloaded with bags, and try not to wear an item of apparel that hasn't been worn before, as it could turn out to be uncomfortable and distracting. Men should avoid white socks with dark suits, short sleeved shirts and cologne.

Ladies should remember a spare set of tights (just in case) and favour sensible shoes and styles. Remember: you are attending an interview not a date!

According to research, employers' impressions are made up in the following way:

- Body language and image (70%)
- Tone of voice (20%)
- What you say (10%)

Remember to speak clearly in a controlled range of tones. Avoid a monotone and always pause before speaking, as this avoids reacting instinctively and saying the wrong things.

Speak slightly slower than normal, and vary your tone and dynamics a little. Let your voice show your enthusiasm and keenness, but try to avoid a nervous 'sing-song' tone. Ultimately, you should try to be natural.

Fidgeting shows boredom and restlessness, crossing arms indicates an unwillingness to listen and tapping your foot is distracting and a sure sign of boredom.

Here are a few important points to remember:

- A smile is the most positive signal you can give, as it reaffirms your enthusiasm and good nature
- Maintain regular, attentive eye contact

- Relax! Give off calm signals and don't rush through the interview but be mindful of time. Let the interviewer dictate the pace of the interview
- Mirror the interviewer's techniques. If they laugh, laugh with them.
- Do not hurry any movement. If you're challenged with a difficult question, remind yourself about negative body language habits before answering the question.
- Try to maintain an alert position: sit up straight, don't slump, and adjust your position slightly if you get uncomfortable, but don't fidget.
- Always try to adopt an open, honest and confident attitude. This is the starting point of managing subconscious body language.

For more details, visit our sections on body language and dress codes for an interview.

The interview

A well-trained interviewer will usually break the ice by opening the interview with a few vague questions such as 'Did you find the place ok?'. It's good to try and build a rapport with the interviewer early on.

You should always adopt a professional and business-like manner, be honest, listen intently and use strong positive language. Try to avoid being over-enthusiastic, as it may suggest that you're desperate for a job.

It's a bad idea to get into discussions about your personal life, and decline the bait to mention any secrets concerning your present employer as this could be a trap. Also try to avoid negative phrases such as 'I don't know', 'I'm not sure' etc.

Respond by being persuasive, speak in terms of what benefit you can bring to the company rather than the other way around, and remember to remain calm. Don't rush your answers.

There are all sorts of difficult questions that can be potential minefields. For model answers please visit our comprehensive section, slick answers to tough questions.

Don't forget to interview them too. Firstly, it is an opportunity to impress a few points on them which may not have come up in the interview. More importantly you will want to find out if this is the right job for you.

Asking relevant questions is a good chance to make a further impact about your seriousness about joining their company.

Ask what sort of responsibilities the job entails, challenging or mundane aspects of the tasks, what support and guidance is available, how often your performance is reviewed and details on any bonus schemes, training and development opportunities, decision-making processes, future plans etc.

Make sure you give the interviewer your full attention Wait for them to finish speaking before you answer or ask questions. Remember:

- Be enthusiastic
- Speak with clarity and confidence
- Be positive with your answers
- Keep to the point and be mindful of time
- Try to be honest and open

For more details visit our section on interviewing the interviewer.

Salary negotiation

You'll have to get through the interview first before you're in a position to negotiate an offer, but the process isn't complete until you've settled on the right salary.

Negotiating this can sometimes be tougher than the interview, and if you can't get the deal you want there's no point taking the job. Remember that once you've accepted their offer, your salary is unlikely to change significantly until you get promoted.

In any negotiation, your two major objectives are:

- To change the other party's impression of the strength of YOUR position
- To change the other party's impression of the strength of THEIR position.

Before going into the negotiation make sure you've done your homework. This will add to your confidence, which is vital when negotiating.

Assess your market value based on advice from recruiters, adverts for similar jobs, the demand for people with your skills set, salary surveys in trade magazines and advice from colleagues who have a similar role to yours.

Firstly, never be the first party to mention a figure. Sometimes this can be difficult, but you can respond vaguely by talking about 'a package in the region of'

The purpose of this tactic is to avoid selling yourself short. Usually the job description carries a salary range, and you will obviously want to get as much as you possibly can.

Once they have mentioned a figure you can then begin leveraging them with comments such as 'how much room do we have for negotiation?', 'what perks does that include?', or even call their bluff by saying 'I'm really keen on the position, but I'll have to weigh it up against the other offer I have been made.'

If their opening gambit is extremely low try comments such as 'I'll have to go away and consider whether I can justify that salary to myself' or 'I'm not sure if that's a very competitive salary'.

Sometimes, a surprisingly effective tactic is to look them straight in the eye and ask 'Is that the best you can offer?'

Not all remuneration is made in hard cash alone, even if it is money that really talks. Some perks do have a genuine value, while others may even cost you more in the long-run. For a full list of pros and cons visit our section on salary negotiation.

Be well informed about common 'sweeteners' such as share options, profit share and pensions. Many of these are based on performance or the buoyancy of the economy.

Finally, take the time to consider and accept the right offer. Don't be afraid to turn down an offer and move onto another interview with added confidence.

Beware of fancy titles, expectations of unpaid overtime, open promises and so-called 'opportunities for growth'.