

# Interviews

## Telephone, Skype and video interviews

Organisations often use telephone, Skype or automated video interviews in the early stages of selection. Automated video interviews are becoming more popular as there is no dependence on time zones or both parties being available at a particular time. The process is used more as a screening tool than for formal interviewing and suitable candidates would usually be selected for a face-to-face interview if their recorded interview makes the right impression.

These types of interview can feel more daunting than face-to-face interviews but by following these tips you can ensure you make the most of the opportunity to impress potential employers:

- For Skype, use an account with a sensible username, ideally based on your name. Over the phone, answer with your name. It reassures the interviewer that they have got through to you directly and puts the onus on them to start the conversation.
- Most telephone interviews are prearranged but sometimes an employer might call in response to your CV or application. If this happens, try to take your phone to a quiet and private location, asking the caller politely to wait until you find somewhere quieter to speak. If the call happens at a completely inconvenient time then offer to give them a call back at a mutually convenient time. Ensure your voicemail greeting is appropriate in case they miss you altogether and want to leave you a message.
- If the time of the call has been planned in advance, decide where you want to be when they call - in your room, for example - and make sure there will be no interruptions or distractions from your housemates or family. Eliminate background noise like music and TV.
- Remember, first impressions always count whether face-to-face or over the internet, so for Skype and video interviews also think about your appearance. In fact, you may even come across more confidently over the phone if you are dressed professionally. Also think about the background, the employer will be able to see what is behind you, which will form part of the impression you make.
- For Skype and video interviews, practise speaking on camera in advance. You might feel a bit self-conscious but if you watch and record yourself talk, ideally practising answers to typical interview questions, you won't find it so alien when you are being recorded. You don't need to come across as polished as a TV presenter on screen, but it's a good idea to be aware in advance if you have a tendency to gesture a lot or be very expressive in your body language so that you can manage this.
- Otherwise, prepare in advance as you would for any other interview - research the company, be ready to say why you want to work for them and why you're interested in the role.
- It's OK to make notes and refer to them for a telephone interview, as the interviewer can't see you. For Skype, you could have some key points to glance at, using post-it notes around your screen for example, but maintaining eye contact with your interviewer remains important. You should also have a copy of the application or CV you used to apply, as they may ask questions based on these.
- Have a pen and paper handy so you can jot down the key words from the interview questions, meaning you can answer fully and refer back if needed. It's also useful to keep note of interview questions for future reference.
- It's a good idea to set up for the interview at a desk or table rather than on the sofa or your bed so that you are sitting up straight and the conversation feels more formal.
- On the phone, body language becomes less relevant, so what you say and how you say it is everything. Try to speak enthusiastically and positively so that you come across well – believe it or not smiling and good posture can help!
- On the phone, give slightly shorter answers than you might do in a face to face interview and then get clarification if the interviewer wants more information. Long answers can feel like you're rambling, and you can't see the interviewer's reaction to what you're saying for reassurance that you are on the right track.
- Have a glass of water beside you in case you start to lose your voice.
- If you don't fully understand a question or a question seems difficult, repeat it back to the interviewer for clarification. This will reassure you and buy you some time to think calmly about your response. If you don't know the answer to something, be honest, and show you're willing to learn if relevant.
- Reinforce your interest in the post and in working for the employer by asking a few well thought-out questions at the end, and thank the interviewer for their time.

## Face-to-face interviews

### Competency based

This type of interview examines what you can do. At the application stage, you will have focused on proving you have the skills and abilities that the employer is looking for. Use that to help you to prepare for competency interviews. The questions will dig deeper into the skills you demonstrated in your application, and you can often anticipate and prepare for questions based on the person specification for the role.



The STAR technique is useful at the interview stage as well as the application stage. Interviewers will ask questions with the expectation that when you answer, you really prove you have what they are looking for.

- **SITUATION:** set the scene or context for the example you're using.
- **TASK:** briefly outline what you had to do.
- **ACTION:** give details of what you did specifically, focusing on your responsibilities, including any problems or challenges that you overcame. For examples where you worked in a group or team, focus on what you did individually.
- **RESULT:** include the outcome and anything you learned from the experience.

Questions are likely to be worded in a way that suggests to you that the interviewer is looking for a detailed answer, for example:

- Tell me about a time when...
- Give me an example of an occasion when you have...
- Talk me through a situation where you...
- Outline an example of...

You can see some examples of competency based questions in the interview transcript included in this pack.

### Strengths based

Strengths based interviews are becoming increasingly popular with graduate employers. Unlike a competency based interview, an employer will expect you to talk about what you love doing, what really motivates you, your interests and what you think you are good at. The passion that comes from talking about these things helps to bring out the real you. Be enthusiastic and genuine when you are answering these questions. It's important to an employer to select not only someone who has what they are looking for, but someone they feel will fit in well and make a difference.

Strengths-based interviews can be more difficult to prepare for, as it's harder to anticipate the questions, but it would help to spend some time considering questions such as the following:

- What are your greatest strengths?
- What does success mean to you?
- What are you most proud of and why?
- How do you know when you've had a good day?
- What energises or motivates you?
- What things come naturally to you?
- What gets done first on your 'to do' list?  
What never gets done?
- When are you happiest?

#### Weaknesses

"What is your greatest weakness?" is a common and much feared interview question but it's something you could of course be asked about in addition to strengths. Try not to be put off by the seeming negativity of the question. The interviewer is not trying to catch you out, they are likely just trying to see if you are aware of any weaknesses you have (nobody's perfect!) and that you can manage them so they don't affect your work. Try to avoid saying "I'm a perfectionist", it's overused. Instead, think about your answer in advance, be honest and put a positive spin on your answer. See the interview transcript in this pack for an example.



"The job interview is a uniquely powerful opportunity for you to present yourself and interact face to face with the employer. By using the Essex Interview pack, you will be able to approach the interview with confidence, know how to tell your story and be able to make the right impression so that you stand out from the crowd."

Dave Stanbury, Director of Employability

# Interviews

## Technical

Technical interviews are used to assess technical ability or sector specific knowledge required for a role and are typically used in the IT, Engineering and Science sectors.

Employers may look at how you can practically apply technical knowledge to real working situations and how you set about solving a problem, assessing you on how you think, and how you communicate your thinking during an interview. The interviewer will not only be looking for a correct answer, but for how you reach that answer, testing your reasoning and analytical skills, as well as whether you can think laterally and creatively under pressure. While there would be a focus on technical knowledge, employers could also be considering how you think by testing your problem solving or your numerical abilities by using a few brainteasers or a numerical reasoning test for example.

It's not so straightforward to prepare for this type of interview as it's tougher to predict specific questions, but by familiarising yourself with the exact details of the role from the job description and looking at staff profiles if available on their website, YouTube or LinkedIn, you should be able to anticipate any technologies, coding, techniques or methods they might ask you about. Remember, if you don't know the answer to something, it's better to be honest and say so. In some cases with technical interviews, even if you get the answer wrong, your thought process and how you reach the answer may be just as important.

## Other types of interview question

### Scenario based

A scenario based question will usually be based on something that could typically happen in the role you are being interviewed for so that the interviewer can assess how you would react to and deal with a particular situation.

They could be considering things like how well you work under pressure, how you analyse situations, whether you can prioritise and delegate if appropriate and that overall you can think creatively and suggest a sensible approach to dealing with the situation.

### Career motivation

The way you answer questions based on this are very important. Employers are likely to use it to differentiate you from other candidates. They will want to know more about your career goals and ambitions and what motivates you to want to work for them. Preparing answers to these kinds of questions in advance will show the employer that you have done research into the role and the company and know what you are letting yourself in for. Questions could be based on why you want to work for them; what you think the role would involve; where you see yourself in the future e.g. 5 year's time.

It's a good idea to address professional future plans rather than personal ones and to come across as ambitious but realistic. Do some research in advance into more senior staff if possible (e.g. staff profiles, LinkedIn) to see how long it took them to progress within the organisation and how so that your

response is comparative. Talk in terms of achievement and responsibility rather than any financial reward or perks that would come with progression. Demonstrate that you are keen to make a difference and willing to be flexible.

### The unexpected

Sometimes employers will throw in a curve ball question, which may or may not be related to the job you're being interviewed for. The reason for the question is likely to be to get an insight into how you tick by seeing how you react to the unexpected and deal with that under pressure. They may also be looking for creative thinking.

You may have heard of some questions used by employers in the past such as 'what biscuit best represents you and why?' or 'if you had a superpower, what would it be and why?'. These are less common now, but you may get questions more like

- How many golfballs could you fit in a Mini?
- How much does a Boeing 747 weigh?
- If the time is 11:50, what is the angle between the hands?
- What do you think about when you're alone?

Your interviewer won't necessarily be looking for a right answer to these questions, they will be interested in the thought process you use to reach your conclusion, or to find out more about you and your potential fit to the role and the organisation. While it's not possible to prepare, and not all employers will ask something like this, be on alert and try not to panic and blurt out the first thing that comes into your head. Instead, be calm, take a moment to think and give the most reasonable response that you can, making sure it reflects positively on you, and if possible, frames you as a suitable candidate for the role.

## Questions to ask at interviews

At the end of any interview, the interviewer is likely to ask you if you have any questions for them, so you need to be prepared. The best questions are ones that reinforce your interest in the employer and the role.

Things you might want to find out more about could include training and development opportunities; what a typical day or week is like; future plans or challenges/opportunities for the organisation; anything topical for the employer (learned from their website, social media pages and the media in general). You could ask your interviewer why they think it's a good place to work. This is a bold question and the tone with which you ask it is very important but it could make for interesting conversation and impress your interviewer. Only ask it if you are confident you can ask well though!

If you have prepared questions but they end up being answered by the interviewer through the course of your conversation with them, just say that you don't have any questions at the moment. It's better not to have any questions than for it to seem you weren't listening or to ask something trivial. It can be disappointing to an interviewer if you don't have any questions though, so it can be a good idea to have them written down or saved as a note on your mobile so you can refer to what you wanted to ask, reassuring the interviewer that they have covered everything for you. That way they will see that you cared enough to think in advance about what you wanted to know about the role and the organisation. It also means you won't forget to ask anything you intended to.

Don't ask about anything you can easily find out about from their website and definitely don't ask about pay and holidays at this stage! You will find out this kind of information in the contract if you are offered the job, or in some cases, be given an opportunity to negotiate if you are made a job offer.

## What to wear?

It may seem a basic question, but first impressions count and this includes your appearance. While some workplaces are less formal than others, an interview is a formal meeting so it's safest to dress on the conservative side.

For larger corporations and organisations like financial institutions and law firms, formal business dress will be expected. For men, a smart, well-fitting suit is guaranteed to make a good impression. Don't be tempted to borrow a suit from someone who is a completely different build to you, or to team up old trousers with a mismatched jacket. If you don't have a suit and your budget is stretched, you could have a look in local charity shops to see if you can get a good second hand one. With your suit, choose a neutral shirt, a plain tie, plain socks and smart, polished shoes. Make sure your hair is neat and it's generally advisable to shave before your interview. For women, it's often a tough decision between

a trouser suit or one with a skirt, or a tailored work dress. It's best to wear what you feel the most comfortable in, provided it is smart, and like the boys, match your choice with a plain, neutral shirt. Heels are ok but make sure you choose something that's not too high and that you can walk comfortably in. Keep make-up and accessories minimal and neutral so as not to be distracting.

For smaller companies and organisations with more creative roles like publishing houses and design or marketing consultancies, men could possibly get away with a fine-knit jumper or cardigan and smart trousers with a shirt and tie instead of a suit. If you usually sport facial hair, it's advisable to ensure you look very well-groomed. For women, slightly less formal attire would also be acceptable, a more fashionable blouse or top with a smart skirt or trousers, for example, or a dress. Don't wear anything too short or revealing though. Colour and pattern would be more acceptable for either gender, but nothing too loud or distracting and nobody should ever wear jeans to an interview! If you are in any doubt, go with formal.



“My top tip for interviews is to tie your answers to the requirements for the role as much as you can. Don't assume that the interviewer will be able to connect all the dots. It's your job as the interviewee to make sure the interviewer understands how your skills and experience are transferable to the role they are recruiting for.”

Dee Hardcastle, Careers Adviser