



A guide to excelling in your interview

We are often asked for advice on the best way to approach an interview. Using actual feedback from our most trusted clients, we have compiled these recommendations to help you. At the risk of pointing out the obvious to the more seasoned candidate, we have made this list as comprehensive as possible, to ensure that it benefits even the most inexperienced of interviewees.

Dress code/ Personal appearance

The majority of businesses that we represent adopt a corporate dress code. Should you be invited to interview, it is essential that you dress appropriately, and we would therefore recommend the following attire:

- A conservative suit and shirt (with a collar), and a tie for men. All clothing items should be clean and well-pressed (ironed). Even if you are made aware that your potential employer has a 'dress down' day, or a casual dress code at the time of your interview, we still strongly recommend that you wear corporate attire.
- Do not wear excessive jewellery or have visible tattoos (if at all possible).
- Facial Hair - Unless you're already sporting a full beard, this is not the right time to start.
- Smokers - be mindful of the fact that your interviewer may well be a non-smoker and therefore sensitive, maybe even offended, by the odour of smoke/tobacco. Smoking can often divide opinion, and in this highly competitive market, you do not want to give the advantage to the non-smoking applicant. We would strongly recommend that you refrain from smoking before the interview, or anywhere near to the interview location, thereafter.
- They say 'you can tell a lot about a person by their shoes.' Don't let yours say tardy! A good clean and polish will breathe life into even the oldest pair of shoes, and will say much about your attitude towards your interview, and your ability to prepare for an important meeting. We would recommend smart, black shoes (not heavily influenced by the latest fashions), and strictly, no trainers.
- You should have with you the ability to make notes, and we recommend that, at the very least, you have a notebook and (un-chewed, clean) pen. Better still, would be a presentation folder/wallet in which you would have a copy of your CV, together with any literature in relation to the job vacancy and/or information on the company.

First impressions do count!

You only get one opportunity to make a great first impression. Experts estimate that you have a window of approximately 2 minutes to do this, so it would make sense for you to adopt these best practices, some of which may strike you as obvious.

Body posture is perhaps the best place to start when meeting someone new. It can take the human brain a matter of seconds to pick up signals subconsciously and form an opinion of someone. You want to make sure you are giving off as many positive indicators to the interviewer as possible, as you hope to be representing their business in the future. When you stand up straight with your shoulders back, you are sending out the message that you are confident in yourself. You also need to speak clearly and purposefully.

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Your introduction will have no impact if you mumble, look at the person's shoes, or over their shoulder. Always look the speaker in the eyes and offer a good firm handshake.

Make sure you smile throughout your meeting. Happiness and enthusiasm are infectious and attractive.

If you believe in yourself and seem confident, enthusiastic and genuinely interested in the interviewer and the job opportunity, you cannot fail to make a great first impression. On your way to the interview, visualise having a positive outcome from the meeting; an effective technique employed by business giants and athletes when faced with a forthcoming challenge. You should also bear in mind the following:

- **Don't be late** – potentially, it shows that you're not able to organise yourself and suggests a lack of respect for the interview/interviewer. Occasionally it's unavoidable, and if this is the case, we recommend that you contact the interviewer as soon as possible and explain what has happened to delay you. Make sure you apologise both on the phone and in person. Try to keep calm and do your very best; you can recover from this. You will significantly benefit if you plan your journey well in advance of the meeting, and we would recommend doing a trial run beforehand, if possible. Always allow yourself more travelling time than you think you will need. If you are early, you could find a coffee shop and go over your notes, or practice your answers. However, make sure that you don't arrive for your official interview more than 10 minutes before, as this can put unnecessary pressure on the interviewer.
- **Be polite and courteous to everyone**, including the receptionist. Managers and interviewers will often ask front office staff for feedback on a candidate's behaviour upon arrival and whilst waiting.
- **Be respectful and try not to relax too much**. However well you think the meeting is going, the interviewer is not your 'mate', and you should never address them as such. Exercise caution, as they may well be using techniques designed to catch you out. If the interviewer throws a swear word into the conversation, DO NOT follow suit! We know of at least one young candidate who fell into this trap and did not get the job.
- **Listen intently** and try not to interrupt the speaker. Remain professional at all times.
- If offered a glass of water, we highly recommend that you accept. Should you find yourself struggling to answer a particular question, you can take a sip, whilst you think of a suitable response.

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Common interview questions

Competency based questions

Many employers now use Competency Based questions in their interviews. This is when they are looking for you to provide SPECIFIC examples of how you have dealt with SPECIFIC situations in the past.

An example of a Competency Based question might be:

"Tell me about a time when you have had to deal with a difficult customer."

The most effective way to answer Competency Based questions is based on the model, STAR.

S	Situation
T	Thoughts & Feelings
A	Action
R	Result

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Be concise.
Demonstrate empathy and understanding for those parties involved.
Always end with a positive result.

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Most importantly, be prepared. Read the job description carefully and think about how you match the selection criteria. Prepare some of your own examples in relation to the required duties and responsibilities. Whilst we cannot guarantee what questions you will be asked, most interviewers will cover the following common subjects:

- Your knowledge of the company, and the job in question.
- Your reasons for leaving previous employers.
- Your career aspirations.
- What you are looking for from your next role and employer.
- Your strengths and weaknesses.
- Your key achievements.
- Your development areas.
- What specifically interests you about this opportunity.
- What specifically interests you about working for this company.
- What skills and experience you have to bring.
- How you like to be managed.
- Your hobbies and interests.

We strongly recommend preparing answers to the above questions, well in advance of your interview.

Using this model, an example of how to answer the above question could be:

*"The **situation**; I was sitting at my desk one afternoon doing some administration. The telephone rang and it was a customer who was very angry because he had not received his renewal terms from us. His policy was due to be renewed tomorrow and it was clear that there had been an error on our part. My **thoughts and feelings** were that I felt a little uncomfortable because the client was extremely angry and swearing at me, however, I could understand why the client was so angry, as our error was unacceptable. The **action** that I took was that I empathised with him, told him that I would make his insurance renewal priority, and agreed to call him back in an hour. I then rang the insurers, explained the situation, and negotiated his renewal terms within 20 minutes. I called the client back straight away, and we agreed the renewal terms over the telephone. I then sent an email to the client to confirm the cover. The **result** was that the client was satisfied with this and he continues to hold his insurance with our company".*

Prepare 5 questions to ask during the Interview

Interviewers will expect you to ask questions during the meeting, as this will demonstrate that you are genuinely interested in the position you have applied for.

This is also a very good opportunity to show that you have fully researched the role and the company. Good practice is to make sure that at least 2 of your questions relate to the prospective company's website/brochure. An example of this might be:

"Having looked at your website, I noticed you have just made a new business acquisition in the South of England. Do you have any plans to make any further acquisitions and, if so, what implications will this have on the business?"

One of the most effective questions that you can ask an interviewer is:

"What attracted you to the company?"

Our clients are always very impressed when a candidate asks this, and the truth is that most people enjoy talking about themselves and their own experiences, which will create a 'bond' between you.

If the interviewer covers all the answers to the questions you have prepared, DO NOT just say that you have nothing to ask them. Instead, say something along the lines of:

"Well, I was going to ask you about (and then summarise the question), but you covered that earlier on in the meeting, so thank you for that."

If necessary, do this with all 5 questions, because if you don't, the interviewer will assume that you hadn't bothered to prepare anything.

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The interviewer will want to find out what you know about their business, so make sure that you research their company thoroughly. There are many resources that you can use, including the company's website, Twitter, LinkedIn or Facebook pages, as well as running internet searches, and visiting 'Companies House' website for financial information. Generally, the more research you have done, the more impressed the interviewer will be. Importantly, demonstrate to the interviewer that you have done your research by taking print-outs with you to the meeting.

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Don't be too negative about your current/previous employer

The interviewer will undoubtedly ask you about your reasons for leaving your current/previous role, and it is vitally important that you are clear on these. However, you should not use this as an opportunity to speak disrespectfully of your current employer, with the air of someone who has an 'axe to grind,' as it is likely to cause concern. This could

potentially make the interviewer cautious about offering you a position within their organisation, as you might well be saying the same things about them one day. You may have genuine cause for grievance or complaint with previous colleagues/employers, but we strongly recommend that you exercise a degree of diplomacy and discretion when explaining your

reasons for leaving. You will no doubt have heard of the theory: six degrees of separation, which estimates that everyone and everything is a maximum of six steps away (by way of introduction), from any other person in the world. **Be wary of naming names.**

Don't ask about the salary on offer, unless the interviewer brings the subject up first

We appreciate that the issue of salary is an important factor (although not necessarily the most important), but the interviewer wants to know that you are interested in their company because of the opportunity, and not just the money. This is also because your prospective employer does not want to think that you are so money-motivated that you will leave as soon as another job comes along

offering you more; wasting their time and investment in you. There are exceptions to the rule however; for example, a direct sales role, where negotiation in the interview is more accepted. But in the majority of cases, we recommend that you leave it to us to negotiate the best package for you; that's what we're here for!

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Although your prospective employer wants to know that you have ambition to do well within their organisation, they are recruiting for a specific role to fill a particular need in their business. In most cases, they will want their new recruit to perform the job, as advertised, for at least 18 months, before they potentially move on to a different area within the business. The prospective employer needs to know that you are not planning to be elsewhere '5 minutes after joining', as this would leave them needing to recruit again for your position; not something that would appeal.

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Tell them that you want the job

So many of our clients comment that the candidate failed to make it clear, whether or not they were interested in the position at any point during the interview. This goes back to the principle that the prospective employer needs to know that you actually want to work for them. We would recommend that you say something to the effect of:

"I appreciate you taking the time out to meet with me today. I'm particularly interested in this role and would very much like the opportunity to prove myself within your organisation."

This clearly shows that you are keen on the position and, more importantly, you would work hard when appointed - a trait that all hirers like to see.

You could also add:

"Are there any reservations you have about me?"

We've found this question to be very effective, as it can provide an opportunity for you to address any of the interviewer's concerns and possibly prevent the need for a 2nd interview, or worst case scenario, your application being dismissed. However, you should use your discretion to gauge the appropriate moment to ask this question and we recommend a degree of diplomacy when doing so.

If you are lucky enough to be invited to interview for more than one job vacancy, we strongly recommend that you do your best to secure every one of them, ignoring your personal preference at this stage. Every opportunity to attend an interview is, at the very least, good practice and at best, gives you the luxury of choice, should you be fortunate enough to receive more than one offer.

Telephone interviews

Some employers like to carry out initial interviews over the telephone, as a tool to measure whether or not to take applicants through to a formal selection process. Your aim should be to demonstrate your enthusiasm and commitment in, what is likely to be, a fairly short conversation. However, phone interviews can be challenging because neither party can see the other; making the usual visual clues absent. As with a face to face interview, you will be informed of the time and date the phone call will take place, so the key thing is to research and plan for your interview in advance.

Practice makes perfect. Any experience you have of using the phone in a professional capacity will help you, but if you feel you need more experience to build your confidence, ask a friend or a relative to help. They'll be able to give

you feedback on how you come across over the telephone. You could also record yourself so that you can listen back and identify any problems, such as speaking too quietly or quickly.

Control your environment. Turn off the TV. Let your family/ housemates know what's going on and ask them to leave the room to give you some peace and quiet. If using a mobile, make sure it is fully charged and you have adequate reception. Only use the speakerphone if you're sure there will be no interruptions.

We suggest you sit next to a table with your notes, a copy of your application and CV, the interview details, and a pen and paper to hand. If you are able, make brief notes as you talk, but be sure to make more comprehensive ones as soon as the call is over. These could prove essential at the next interview.

Before you dial or take the call, take a couple of deep breaths... and smile! It will 'show' in your voice. You'll forget about your nerves once you're focused on the interview. Speak clearly and at a reasonable pace. If you're asked a difficult question, take time to think - you can always say something like, 'Let me just reflect on that for a moment,' to buy some time. Pauses are OK, just as in any interview. If you couldn't hear or didn't understand a question, it's fine to ask for clarification.

Answer the phone professionally: 'Good morning, Sarah Smith speaking' should do the trick. Address your interviewer as Miss, Mrs or Mr, unless invited to use his or her first name.

Be animated and enthusiastic, but polite. But, as with a full interview, don't be over familiar and don't start chatting as if you were talking to a friend. Remember to listen carefully and try to be succinct.

Telephone interview turn offs:

- **Lots of background noise.** Cafés/ busy places are not good locations to take the call.
- **Munching and slurping:** By all means, have a glass of water nearby just in case your mouth goes dry mid call, but don't eat, drink or smoke, whilst taking part in a telephone interview.
- **Taking other calls or responding to texts.** Switch off all other phones, or move to another room.
- **Multi-tasking.** Resist the urge to reply to e-mails, check your Facebook page, make your lunch, wash up etc - focus only on the person at the other end of the line.

Social media

Today, you can be sure that employers and recruiters will be checking you out online - perhaps before they consider inviting you to interview, and even after you have been successfully appointed.

It's up to you to make sure that your virtual presence doesn't damage your career prospects. Not a week goes by when social media isn't in the news. And often it's a story about someone getting in trouble at work because of something they posted online, so be careful what you upload or 'like'. Whilst a picture of you on Facebook having a glass of wine on your birthday probably won't turn off employers, other more wild behaviour and constant ranting possibly will. Be sure that your presence is consistent across all media and true to who you are. Make sure your LinkedIn profile aligns with your CV. It doesn't need to be exactly the same, but the jobs, including titles, should

be, particularly the dates. Inconsistencies tend to make people suspicious.

Share the positive things that you do. If you are running a 10K for charity, you should post pictures of that. Mentoring younger staff? Tweet about that. Let employers know you're the type of person they want to have as part of their team. The best advice is to research what potential employers may find attractive in an applicant. Company websites, the internet and Google Alerts are all useful tools to do this.

Today, your online presence is your calling card, particularly when it comes to your career. So use it wisely. Make sure that recruiters and hiring managers will be talking about you in a good way. They may well need your personal email address, which should be given careful consideration: daffyduck@stuffandnonsense.co.uk will not instil much faith in this scenario.

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These recommendations are by no means exhaustive, but we have done our best to compile a useful guide to help you. If you would like to discuss any aspect of the above, or have a specific query about a forthcoming interview, then please do not hesitate to call us as we would be only too pleased to assist you. In the meantime, we wish you the very best of luck with your interview.



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