

Top tips for job interviews

• Making a positive impression

Interviewers cited the following among the key factors that impress them about a candidate:

- strong handshake
- being smartly and appropriately dressed.

Factors that impress least include:

- lateness
- sloppy appearance
- poor grooming
- too much perfume or aftershave.

• Opening greeting

- smile
- make eye contact with the interviewer
- offer a hand to shake as soon as they introduce themselves
- say "hello", "pleased to meet you" or whatever phrase you feel easy with
- shake hands firmly (you can practise your handshake with a friend) with all the interviewers if there is more than one
- wait to be invited before sitting down.

• Keeping in control

Five minutes before the interview, nip into the cloakroom and do a quick check in the mirror – teeth, hair, tie, earrings, buttons, zips – then you won't have to worry about them in the interview.

Nervous? The key lies in understanding what causes an attack of nerves and the root cause is fear. Fear of what could go wrong from drying up completely to soaking the interviewer by spilling your water. The more remote these failures and catastrophes seem, the more remote will be your fears. This is why you often notice a couple of minutes into the interview that you're not nearly as nervous as you were just before the interview began.

If something does go catastrophically wrong and you spill water down yourself or knock over a huge pile of papers, the answer is to laugh at yourself and admit to being nervous. Say something like "that's what nerves can do to you! It shows how important the job is to me". Unless you're being interviewed for a post where you have to give huge presentations there's no reason why your interviewer should count it against you so long as you can respond well and with humour.

TIP

Coffee and tea *If you're worried you'll spill them, simply decline them when offered. In fact caffeine's not a great idea anyway if you are nervous – avoid it for a couple of hours before the interview.*

Looking nervous *No-one cares if you look nervous so long as you still do the job well. But we often fear appearing to be nervous. If you are inclined to shake at the start of the interview, fold your hands together in your lap where they can keep each other under control.*

Mouth turning dry *When you turn down the coffee, ask for a glass of water instead. If you don't need it, it's ok to leave it (you don't have to drink it and have the worry of spilling it).*

Unable to think of anything to say *Here's another time the glass of water comes in handy. Taking a sip or two before you answer a question buys you a few moments to get your head straight.*

TIP

Your best bet is to rehearse as thoroughly as you can. Think through your replies to likely questions and tough ones and practise your answers in front of a mirror. Rehearse your opening greeting and try on your outfit in advance if you haven't worn it recently.

TIP

The panel may advise you how long the interview is expected to last and maybe how many questions they will ask you – this will give you an indication of how much time you should be spending answering questions. Generally, an interview for an admin type job would last about 30 minutes and for a managerial role between an hour to an hour and a half.

TIP

It is always useful, as part of your answer, to repeat the question that the panel has asked you to ensure you have heard the question correctly.

- **Common types of questions and suggested answers**

“What do you feel you can bring to this job?” or “Please briefly outline how your experience matches the requirements of the job” or “Please tell us why you applied for this job”

This type of question is usually asked as an “opener” to get you talking and ease you into the interview process. This is the type of question that most candidates will have prepared for and will have an answer ready for it.

You should briefly outline the relevant jobs you have done and how what you did in each job matches to what the requirements of the job are. Always try to include examples to substantiate what you are saying. Do not give one word answers; try

and be brief but without omitting anything relevant. State your answers in terms of what is relevant for the post you are applying for.

TIP

If you notice that the panel aren't taking notes it maybe that what you are saying isn't relevant – ask if you have answered the question fully, or for the panel to re-phrase the question.

TIP

Keep control by asking for a repeat or a re-phrase of the question.

TIP

If the panel asks you supplementary questions to the main one they have asked you, it means that they are looking for more information from you to ensure that you are answering the question fully.

“How do you work in a team” or “What are the most important elements of teamwork”

Give a brief answer such as “I enjoy working as part of a team and I like the flexibility it demands. I get a real kick out of collective success” or words to that effect. Follow up your statement with an example which demonstrates how you have worked well as part of team and what successes you have had. If the job for which you are applying requires you to be part of a team you should be prepared for this and have an anecdote ready prepared.

“If we asked one of your colleagues about you what would they say” or “How would your friends describe you”

This is an invitation to list your strong points, so grab it. Concentrate on your plus points as a colleague (supportive, a good team player, etc). Don't make any wide claims that could be checked out via references if you do get the job, but do put a good spin on things. For example, if you are a bit quiet you could say “they'd say I was one of the quieter members of the team, popular and can be relied on to pull with the team when it's facing any kind of challenge”. It's always worth mentioning loyalty and supportiveness.

“What are your greatest strengths?”

Go for it – this is a perfect question. Just focus your answers on the key responsibilities of the job to make sure your strengths are relevant to your interviewer. Pick one or two key strengths which are really important for this job.

“What were your most significant achievements in your current job” or “Tell us about any improvements you made to your service”

It is unlikely that the new job you are applying for will require exactly the same achievements as the one you are currently doing – although it is great if you can find a parallel. What the interviewer is looking for are the qualities you must have exhibited in order to achieve the results you have. You need to own the achievements (“I introduced", “I managed") – this is a chance to sell yourself. Your answer needs to cover a recent achievement (or the implication is that

you've achieved little of note since); something that was difficult to achieve; and be as relevant as possible to the job you are applying for.

**“How could you demonstrate a commitment to equalities in this role” or
“What’s your understanding of equal opportunities”**

Equal opportunities is not about treating everybody the same regardless of ethnicity, race etc etc. It is about addressing an individual’s needs so that they are afforded equality of opportunity to services - so that these services are equally accessible to all sectors of the community. You need to back up your statement with examples of how you can demonstrate your commitment. For example, if you are working in an administrative role you can ensure that documents, brochures and leaflets are available in large print and different languages. For someone working in HR they can arrange for additional assistance at interview, eg interpreters, access for people using wheelchairs. If you are working as a Housing Caretaker you could give examples of how you help your more vulnerable residents (eg helping to change light bulbs).

More senior posts will not be asked a specific question about equalities, it is expected that this will be addressed as part of the answers to other questions – so if you aren’t specifically asked about this, make sure you include reference to it in one of your answers.

- **Any questions for us**

At the end of the interview you will be invited to ask questions of the interview panel.

Questions to avoid:

- What will my salary be?
- What holiday entitlement will I get?
- How long will I get for lunch?
- Would I get my own office?
- I need to drop the kids off at school on my way to work – can I start at 9.30?

Suggestions for questions to ask:

Bear in mind when you start asking questions that most interviewers will resent it if they feel you are trying to take control – in effect that you start interviewing them. So remain deferential and make sure you don’t inadvertently take over. You can, for example, start questions which phrases such as “May I ask”.

“What opportunities are there to gain extra qualifications or experience?”

You want to be careful with questions about training if you’ve applied for the job setting yourself up as an expert in your field. But if this isn’t the case, or if you are a professional (working as in Legal, HR or similar fields) where you are expected to add to your qualifications, or keep a continuous professional development log, go ahead and ask. It shows you want to improve your career prospects and increase your value to the organisation.

“What will be the main priorities for this job over the next six months?”

This type of questions shows that your focus is on the overall objectives of the job so you're less likely to get bogged down in day to day routine and fail to meet your targets. It also has the psychological advantage of projecting into the future and inviting your interviewer to envisage you in the job.

“Where does the organisation want to be in five years' time?”

Interviewers are particularly impressed by questions about their organisation, showing you have a wider interest than simply the narrow focus of your own job.

“When can I expect to hear from you?”

If this has not been covered by the interviewer, you should make this your last question. Apart from the fact that you need to know this, it gives you another potential advantage. If they fail to get in touch with you by the date given, it gives you a legitimate reason to contact them and chase them up.