



How to prepare for a job interview

Firstly, well done on getting an interview!

Think about it. You are only being offered an interview because the interviewer thinks you can do the job on offer. Not every applicant who applies for a job is seen. How many interviewers do you know who waste their time on candidates they don't think can do the job?

Let's zoom out a little here and think about the interviewer who has offered you an interview. Is the interviewer trained to interview? Does the interviewer have a structured way of getting the information they need to make a decision? Interesting thought isn't it? Think about how you can *assist* the interviewer with information about yourself to help them make the right decision.

In the next few pages, I will be giving you tips and practical exercises to complete so that you will be in the driving seat in job interviews. You are in control of the information you give about yourself, and with a little thought and planning you can decide what questions you will be asked.

Part one: job interview preparation

"Before everything else, getting ready is the secret of success". ~ Henry Ford

I am constantly amazed at how so few people do enough preparation for an interview. Missing out on this vital step is like jumping in and driving the car without adjusting the wing mirrors and checking there is fuel in the tank. This lack of preparation will bring you to a grinding halt when you least want it to! The better the input into your job interview, the more successful the output will be.

RESEARCH is the key to success

I like to think of this part of your job search as the Sherlock Holmes phase. You may already have some clues about the company, who works there and what they do. In fact, to write a killer CV to land the job interview, you should already have found some of these things out!

Now is your opportunity to find the hidden clues about the company, its people, culture, products, services, suppliers and competitors. So that you know who you are going to be sitting opposite at the table...



SWOT up on the company

You may already be familiar with a SWOT analysis which is commonly used in a business scenario to understand the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats of a particular product or market.

It is a useful and objective method to get an overall view of the organization that you are going to interview with. What are their strengths and weaknesses? How could they capitalise on their strengths (with your help) and overcome any perceived weaknesses? What are the external opportunities and threats for the organisation?

In the table below are some clues that are worth following up in order to prepare your questions for the interviewer, and to understand what might be going through their minds when they are assessing you.

The more information you have about the company the less likely you are to imagine the worst if the interviewer seems distracted (they may have heard some unwelcome news just before the interview) or if they ask you seemingly unrelated questions about your experience.

	Strengths	Weaknesses
	<p>Internal positive aspects under a company's control that can be capitalised on:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">● Specialist expertise● A new, innovative product or service● Location of the business● Quality processes and procedures● Any other aspect of the business that adds value to their product or service.	<p>Internal perceived negative aspects that are under a company's control:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">● Lack of marketing expertise● Undifferentiated products or services (i.e. in relation to their competitors)● Location of their business● Poor quality goods or services● Damaged reputation.

	<p style="text-align: center;">Opportunities</p> <p>Positive external conditions that the organisation does not control but could plan to take advantage of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● A developing market such as the Internet ● Mergers, joint ventures or strategic alliances ● Moving into new market segments that offer improved profits ● A new international market ● A market vacated by an ineffective competitor. 	<p style="text-align: center;">Threats</p> <p>Negative external conditions that the organisation does not control but could lessen the impact of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● A new competitor in the home market ● Price wars with competitors ● A competitor has a new, innovative product or service ● Competitors have superior access to channels of distribution ● Taxation is introduced on their product or service.
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WHO do you need to know about?

Now you have a big picture view of the organisation, it is time to start getting to know who the influencers are within it.

The most obvious place to start is to find out who will be interviewing you. To avoid any surprises, think of *everyone* in the company who might have something to do with the interview and selection decision making process. These people could be:

- HR Administrator
- HR Manager / Director
- Receptionist / PA
- Line Manager
- Departmental Manager
- Managing Director
- Potential Peers
- External Consultants / Contractors

Thanks to the Internet, Google and social media, it is possible (without Sherlock Holmes' help!) to research people within the company. Knowing something about who you might meet and be interviewed by enables you to build rapport quickly and anticipate questions.

A case study: introducing John!

I recently worked with John to prepare him for an interview for a Projects Engineer in a manufacturing company in Cambridgeshire. We found a lot of information about the company and its products on their website and press releases, so the SWOT analysis phase of his research was straightforward.

However, there was *little* information about the people in their business on the company's website.

John and I did have **one name to go on** – the name of the HR contact and her email address appeared on the company website career's page. We decided to use *www.Linkedin.com's* advanced search tool to see if her name came up when we selected "People", "HR" "Cambridgeshire, UK".

We had an instant hit and soon discovered that the HR contact was an external HR Consultant, specialising in supporting small to medium sized businesses with their HR needs. The link to her website told us about her clients and the way she worked.

This gave John three new points to add to his interview strategy check list:

- She is more objective than all the other decision makers as she doesn't work there full time
- She is trained in interview techniques so will have a structured process
- Assume she might assess John for jobs with her other clients, not just this one.

Further searching on LinkedIn under the company name led John and I to the profiles of the Managing Director, the Technical Director and 3 other people who would be working in John's department. Gold dust!

John's interview strategy checklist now had the following additions:

- MD is a qualified accountant, focuses on costs (*salary negotiations ALERT!*)
- Technical Director served in the RAF for 8 years (*share my experiences of RAF*)
- Brian Daily in Projects previously worked at my sister Ann's company (*is Brian a friend on Ann's Facebook page, find out about Brian's personality and interests*)
- Sally on reception has been there 3 months (*assess how happy she seems at the company, what happened to the previous receptionist?*)

Check out the company culture. What is it like to work there?

The research John did on the people at the manufacturing company in Cambridgeshire, also gave him an idea of the company culture. So often people ignore this question as they get caught up in the excitement of the job interview and only have a hazy view of how the organisation really operates.

Unless you want to halt your career progression in its tracks, it is essential to investigate the culture and what it is like to work at the company BEFORE you attend the interview and accept a job offer.

John's interview strategy check list included the following questions:

- Will they reward success and encourage personal growth and development?
- Are there lots of deadlines (pressure) and support (or lack of support) to meet them?
- Check out Facebook, Glassdoor, LinkedIn and TwiDer feed to see
 - what excites Brian, Sally / others about working there
 - customer / supplier comments
- Language on websites, press releases, social media – is it formal or informal? Do they use jargon and acronyms (MBO, TQM, outsourcing) and what do they mean?

How will the interview be structured?

A request to attend an interview is an open invitation to ask questions of the company about how the interview will be structured. They will be able to tell you the length of the interview, whether it will be with 1 person or a panel interview, whether you will expect to take technical tests or undergo psychometric profiling (in some instances they may have assessment centres planned as the next step in the interview process).

If you know the structure then it will assist you in your preparation because you can anticipate the questions and tests. Don't be afraid of asking for this information – it sends a strong signal of your interest and professionalism to the company and puts you in a good light.

Now you have your interview strategy checklist complete under preparation, it is time to start putting the research into practice!

“In theory there is no difference between theory and practice. In practice, there is.” ~ Yogi Berra

Part two: on the interview day

Look the part.

First impressions count enormously. Prepare in advance what you will wear to ensure that your outfit is clean...and still fits you! Even the colours you choose to wear can make a difference. That crisp white shirt and black suit can drain you rather than give you a healthy glow.

Be on time.

Obvious, maybe. But it's amazing how many people fall foul to last minute 'hitches' (getting lost) to scupper their chances of landing the job before the interview's begun. If the interview is in an area you don't know very well, ensure that you are well prepared with maps and directions or, ideally, visit prior to the interview so you know exactly where you're going.

Make sure that you arrive about 10 minutes early, giving yourself time to check your appearance and get into a composed and confident frame of mind.

Enter the room confidently.

First impressions count – enter the room with your head held high, make good eye contact with everyone you meet, and shake their hands firmly. During the interview, sit with your head held high, do not fold your arms, and be conscious of hand gesticulations. Try not to fiddle or to look down - which can be a sign of insecurity, doubt or a lack of confidence.

Maintain eye contact.

Maintain eye contact with interviewers. When addressing them, focus on their eyes for a split second, and then let the focus soften so you do not 'stare them out'. Practice this with a friend to get it right. Primarily, address your responses to the person who asked the question, yet do also engage any other interviewers with eye contact whilst responding.

Do not rush into answering questions.

Take a moment to consider any question before answering, don't just launch in. Keep your answers concise and anchored into the questions - you can always ask "would you like some more examples?" rather than presuming that the interviewers do. If you do not understand a question, or exactly what the interviewer is looking for, ask them to repeat or explain. As well as showing that you are conscientious and diligent, this also demonstrates confidence.

Illustrate your answers.

Do feel free to use anecdotes/stories to illustrate your points yet try to keep these to no longer than a minute. Again, practice such anecdotes with reference to possible questions before the interview in order to ensure you include all of the key points.

The interviewer is interested in you, not your old team.

Focus on 'I did' rather than 'we did'. Even if you work in a team which shares tasks around, be prepared to specify your exact involvement in any task or project mentioned on your CV.

Avoid "I was responsible for..."

Dig deeper and be able to state what you actually did whilst you were responsible for a particular area - developed, increased, maintained, implemented, achieved are the sort of verbs you should be using.

Only use jargon when there is no other option. Speak in plain English!

"There were a few redundancies as a result of the recession so I had to look at ways of getting the job done with fewer members on the team" sounds so much better than "As a result of the global economic crisis, management decided to drop the headcount in my business unit so I had to assess how best to refocus and consolidate using the resources available to me".

Last but not least, RELAX!

Above all, remember that you've got this far. By being invited to interview, you know that the prospective employer wants to find out more about you. The interviewers are human. They are potentially your future colleagues. Of course you want to impress and get across just how suitable for the position you are, but you also want them to be able to see your human side. A friendly face and a smile go a long way to help with this, as well as settling your nerves.

So relax, breathe and focus on **them**. You really cannot focus on you and them at the same time.

Good luck in your interview. Let me know how you get on!