

Interview Guide



The Basics...

So, you've been invited to an interview. Nice work! Now it's time to decide how to convince the interviewer that you are the best person for the job! Try putting these hints and tips into action...

- **Do your research** – study the company fully using the internet, business press, or friends who may work there already, or have worked there in the past. Study the client's website. It always helps to look knowledgeable about topical issues affecting the company.
- **Interview format** – you need to feel prepared to be at your best, so find out whether you will need to sit any tests or make a presentation, etc., as part of the interview process. If so, clarify whether you need to take anything with you, or whether facilities will be provided (laptop, USB stick, software, etc.).
- **Be punctual** – arrive on time and allow plenty of time in case of heavy traffic, train delays, etc. Find out who you should ask for on arrival, and whether parking facilities are provided, etc.
- **Plan your route** – double-check where you're going, and how you're going to get there. Make sure that you arrive on time, plan the best route, and allow plenty of time for travel delays and traffic congestion. Arriving slightly early shows that you are keen, that you are prepared, and means that you will be relaxed.
- **Supporting documentation** – take copies of written references with you, any other supporting documentation you feel might be helpful –eg- certificates to support qualifications, training, accreditations, awards for good work, etc.
- **Revise** – brush up on your technical skills if any technical tests are involved. Re-read the job brief before the interview to remind yourself of the key skills and experience required, and how these areas relate to your CV.
- **Be honest** – answer questions honestly and straight-forwardly – don't waffle.
- **Be positive** – about your experience. Focus on your personal strengths and de-emphasize any weaknesses. Try to put a positive slant on your weaknesses. How could they be turned into positives?
- **Ask Questions** – have several of your own questions prepared for the interviewer(s) at the end of the interview to demonstrate that you are interested in their business and have thought about the role. Remember an interview is a '2-way street', and that you are 'interviewing' the company to see if they meet your expectations, as much as they are interviewing you! Don't be afraid to ask relevant questions.
- **Confidence not Arrogance** – be confident, cheerful and enthusiastic. Take care not to be perceived as overbearing, over-confident or arrogant. Find the right balance between confidence and arrogance.
- **Be authentic** – let your personality shine through. If the company doesn't like your personal approach, then the chances are that you wouldn't want the job anyway and wouldn't enjoy working there.



- **Dress code** – dress smartly in business attire. Don't worry if the working environment turns out to be casual dress or business casual. It's always better to make an effort and to create a good first impression than turn up under dressed. Prepare your clothes the night before, and make sure that you look presentable. You need to look smart and business-like – first impressions count!
- Don't smoke or eat spicy foods, garlic, onions etc. prior to the interview.
- **Examples** – think of specific examples as supporting evidence for your experience and think about how your experience relates to the specific role that you have applied for.
- **Get some sleep** – don't stay up late the night before the interview. Relax and get an early night so that you feel well rested for the big day.

What do Interviewers look for?

You've already spent time researching the company, and position as well as preparing answers to the typical questions you could be asked. It's worth knowing what interviewers are looking for, and how you should acquit yourself on the day of the interview:

- **Relevant Experience** – usually evaluated by asking you for examples of workplace related situations.
- **Personal attributes** –e.g. - team working, motivation, ability to work under pressure. Examples can be used as well as hypothetical questions.
- **Career progression** – the typical career progression that would be expected for your profession and industry.
- **Employment consistency** – looking for any gaps in your work history.

Getting into interview mode...

Be wary of 'being yourself'. This does not mean you have to undergo a complete personality transformation and pretend to be someone that you're not. To a certain degree we all 'role play' in what we do and wear different 'hats' to fit different situations.

The interview is an opportunity for you to sell yourself to a potential employer to fulfil your objective of getting that job, and therefore your behaviour will be clearly different to that of meeting a group of friends for an evening out.

Some of the most challenging interviews are the ones held in a social setting, say over lunch, where the relaxed atmosphere can turn this into a very informal occasion and shapes what you say and how you say it...

- **Talking** – interviewers generally spend just 20 – 30% of the time doing the talking – you will be expected to do the rest.
- **Humour** – gauge the tone of the interview and adopt it yourself. Be very careful of over-using jokes – gentle humour is about the most you should consider.
- **Confidence** – Employers are looking for confident, positive people to work for them and this should be obvious from the way you answer their questions. You are, after all, selling yourself and so your cup should always be ‘half full’ not half empty. A word of caution: there is a fine line between confidence and arrogance.
- If you have rehearsed your answers beforehand, it will be much easier to handle the interview in an enthusiastic, natural, and confident manner.
- **Be concise** – Make sure you speak as clearly, and as concisely as possible. Do not mumble or ramble. If your answer has been too concise, the interviewer will seek further information by prompting you. Conversely, do not give one-word answers. Be responsive and explanatory, and make sure you elaborate sufficiently.
- **Body language** – Much is said about body language and what you should and should not do. A sound piece of advice is to ensure you project energy and enthusiasm at the interview. By doing so, it says a lot about you: that you are positive, capable and enjoy what you do. It is difficult to portray this if you are slumped in the chair, unable to make eye contact.
- **Real life examples** – if you are asked a hypothetical question, always turn it into a ‘real life’ situation and give an actual example.
- **Asking questions** – by all means ask for clarification to a question if its meaning is unclear but at this stage do not ask any other questions. Leave your own questions until the end when you ‘turn the tables’ and the interviewer has to do all the talking.

Before the Interview...

- Find out everything you can about the company from their website, annual reports and company literature / brochures.
- Review your CV and think through specific questions you may be asked about it.
- Practice answers to common interview questions (examples listed later).
- Prepare your own questions about the company and job.
- Double check that you have the correct date / time / location.
- If you have time, consider making a ‘dummy run’ to the company so that you know how much journey time to allow.

On the day...

- Take the company name, address and contact details with you, together with a location map. You may have to call the company if you are delayed.
- Take a copy of your CV with you.
- Dress smartly, arrive early, and be polite to everyone you meet at company.
- Have a notebook, pen and your questions to hand.

On arrival...

- From the moment you come into view of the interview venue look professional, organised and composed.

When you are greeted...

- Greet the Interviewer with a smile and a firm handshake.

Remind yourself that you are there to...

- Sell yourself and convince the interviewer that you can do the job.
- Demonstrate that you are motivated to do the job well.
- Demonstrate that you will fit in with the company and team culture.

During the first 5 minutes...

- Make a good first impression – studies show that the first few minutes of an interview count for a lot.

Throughout the interview...

- Always answer questions in a positive way.
- Avoid criticising your previous job, employer or manager.
- Avoid highlighting motivations that could be construed 'negatively' –e.g. - a desire for more money, shorter working hours, etc.

Also...

- Look attentive by leaning forward slightly in your seat. Don't slouch.
- Listen keenly, nod and orally acknowledge what you are told
- Don't waffle
- Be prepared to support your answers with evidence, facts and figures
- Maintain some eye contact with everyone present
- Don't hide your personality, talk about yourself but don't dominate the interview

At the end of the interview...

The interviewer should ask if you have any further questions. Check your list of questions. If any are outstanding ask them now.

As you leave...

Tell the Interviewer that you are interested in the job and leave the interview with firm handshakes to everyone present.

Common Interview Questions...

Before your interview, think about your responses to the following questions. Go through your responses before every interview, as each application is unique. Practice until you feel confident with any of these questions.

Typical interview questions often include the following...

1. Why do you want this job?
2. Why do you want to work for us?
3. What attributes would you bring to the job?
4. What can you offer?
5. Give me an example of a problem you recently had to solve.
6. Are you prepared to relocate?
7. Are you willing to travel?
8. Why should we employ you?
9. How long will it be before you are making a real contribution to the company?
10. How ambitious are you?
11. Why did you choose a career in this industry?
12. How long have you been looking for a new job?
13. Do you prefer to work for a small or large organisation?
14. How would you describe yourself?
15. How would your work colleagues / friends describe you?
16. How could you improve yourself?
17. What are you looking for in a new job?
18. What would your ideal job be?
19. Are you considering any other positions at the moment?
20. Did you feel you progressed satisfactorily in your last job?
21. Are you a leader?
22. How do you handle criticism?
23. What sort of manager are you?
24. Do you work well with others, or are you a loner?
25. Are you self-motivated?
26. Are you accepted into a team quickly?
27. Can you act on your own initiative?
28. What motivates you?
29. Do you know how to motivate other people?
30. What do you dislike doing?
31. What problems did you encounter in your last job?

32. Do you feel you are ready to take on greater responsibilities?
33. Can you work under pressure?
34. How many hours are you prepared to work?
35. What are your career goals?
36. What interests do you have outside work?
37. How long do you plan to stay in the new job?
38. What do you know about this company?
39. What interests you about our particular products or services?
40. What can our company / job offer you that your previous company can't?
41. What did you think of your manager / supervisor, co-workers and sub-ordinates?
42. How did you get on with your Manager?
43. What did you do on a day-to-day basis?
44. What was your greatest success? How did you achieve it?
45. What has been your biggest failure?
46. What did you earn in your last job? What level of salary are you looking for now?
47. What do you think of your previous employer?
48. Why did you join your previous employer? Why are you leaving?
49. Explain the structure of your last company and where you fitted in.
50. What is your greatest weakness?

'Killer' interview questions...

Often, potential employers will look to test whether you can 'think on your feet', and they may ask questions designed to see how you cope with the unexpected. Examples include:

- Would you ever lie in the interests of your job?
- What do you want to be doing in 5 years?
- Why should I give you this job?
- How do you handle pressure?
- Describe a situation where your work, or an idea, was criticised.
- What kinds of discussions are most difficult for you?
- Are you willing to take risks when necessary?

Questions you could ask...

- What will my key responsibilities be?
- Where will I fit into the overall company structure?
- Who will I report to? Where do they fit in the structure?
- Who will report to me?
- What do you expect of me during the first 3 – 6 months?
- What level of performance do you expect from me?
- Who are your customers?
- Where is the company going? Expansion plans? Future business strategy?
- What are the chances of advancement / promotion in this position?
- Will travelling be required in this position?

- Will relocation be required now or in the future?
- What training do you provide?
- When will you be making a decision? What is the next step?

Factors that could cost you the job...

- Being unprepared.
- Being late.
- Poor manners.
- Complaining about previous employers.
- Poor communication.
- Being arrogant, aggressive, or superior.
- Making excuses.
- Looking scruffy, poor personal hygiene.
- Lacking enthusiasm.
- Being evasive or vague.
- Appearing greedy or mercenary – i.e. - excessive focus on money or promotion.

Interview Types...

Interviews are conducted in different ways depending on the level of the job for which you are applying, and the recruitment style of the organisation. The 2 main styles of interview are:

Unstructured Interviews...

This is the more traditional interview format, whereby candidates are asked questions of a general nature, and are expected to respond in a way that they feel appropriate. The final call in terms of suitability of the candidate is often left to the judgement of the interviewers.

Structured / Competency based Interviews...

Structured interviews are those where the interviewers have clearly identified core skills (competencies), required to carry out the job, and are asking specific questions about these core skills. The questions typically require examples of situations in which the candidate has used the relevant skill:

- **A typical type 1 question** – How do you rate your communication skills and how do you feel they could be improved?
- **A typical type 2 question** – Describe a situation where you used your communication skills to achieve a particular outcome against all odds.

Generally speaking, recruiters tend to favour Type 1 interviews with a few Type 2 questions thrown in. This is because pure competency-based interviews are very difficult to set up since a thorough analysis of the job is required in order to ascertain which questions would best help select the right candidate. They also often involve complex 'scoring' systems to evaluate candidate's individual competency level in a given skill area.

Type 1 – Unstructured Interview Questions...

- Tell us about yourself
- What made you choose this career?
- What is your career ambition?
- Why should you be given the job over another candidate?
- Where do you see yourself in 3, 5, 10 years' time?
- Take me through your CV.
- If you were to start your career again what would you change?
- Tell us about your best/worst manager.
- Tell us about your best/worst colleague.
- What are your main strengths / weakness?
- Give us 3 adjectives that describe you best – e.g. - friendly, organised & hard-working!
- Why do you want to join our company?
- Why did you leave your current job?
- What concerns you about the job?
- What do you think will be your biggest challenge in this job?
- What makes a good team player / leader / team?
- What is the difference between a manager and a leader?
- How would you describe your management style?
- How would you handle a non-performing colleague?
- What would you do if you noticed one of your colleagues getting stressed?
- How would you react if one of your colleagues was about to do something that might be detrimental to the company?
- How do you measure success?
- How would your manager motivate you?
- What skills do you need to develop most?
- Do you work better as part of a team or alone?
- What is the riskiest thing you've ever done?
- Why should we employ you rather than any of the other applicants?
- What is your approach to resolving conflict?
- How would you rate your communication skills and what would you do to improve them?
- What type of things makes you angry? Do you ever lose your temper?
- Tell me about your hobbies.
- What do you know about our company?
- How would you react if your boss insisted that you carry out a course of action that you knew to be wrong?
- Have you ever been in a conflict situation with a colleague? How did you handle it.
- What could you do to improve the organisation and running of your current workplace environment?
- What IT skills do you possess?
- How would you cope with criticism and a complaint against you? Describe an instance where your work was criticised.
- What was the most important event in your life?

Type 2 – Structured Interview Questions...

Organisation & Planning...

- Tell me about a time when you set and achieved a goal.
- Tell me about a time when you improved the way things were typically done in your job.
- Describe something you have done to improve the performance of your team / company.
- Tell me about a time when you changed your priorities to meet others' expectations.
- Describe a time when you altered your own behaviour to fit the situation.
- Tell me about a time when you had to change your point of view or your plans to take into account new information or changing priorities.

Decision Making...

- Describe a challenge or opportunity you identified based on your industry knowledge, and how you developed a strategy to respond to it.
- Describe a time you created a strategy to achieve a longer term objective.
- Describe a time when you used your business knowledge to understand a specific business situation.

Dealing with Customers...

- Give an example of how you provided service to customer beyond their expectations. How did you identify the need? How did you respond?
- Describe a situation in which you acted as an advocate within your company for your manager's needs where there was some organisational resistance to be overcome.

Team Focus...

- Tell us about a situation where you had to talk a difficult person around. How did you approach it?
- Tell me about a situation where your communication skills did not succeed in getting something done.
- Tell me about a time when you worked successfully as a member of a team.
- Describe a situation where you were successful in getting people to work together effectively.
- Describe a situation in which you were a member of a team, and a conflict arose within the team. What did you do?
- Tell me about a time when you coached someone to help them improve their skills or job performance. What did you do?
- Describe a time when you provided feedback to someone about their performance.
- Give me an example of a time when you recognized that a member of your team had a performance deficiency. What did you do?
- Describe a recent situation in which you convinced an individual or a group to do something.
- Describe a time when you went through a series of steps to influence an individual or a group on an important issue.

- Give an example of where you've had to work as a member of a multi-disciplinary team?
- Describe a situation in which you needed to influence different stakeholders with differing perspectives.
- Tell me about a time when you had to lead a group to achieve an objective.
- Describe a situation where you had to ensure that your 'actions spoke louder than your words' to a team.
- Describe a situation where you inspired others to meet a common goal.

Competency based interviews...

What are Competencies...?

Competency-based interview frameworks are made up of 'key competencies' with associated behavioural indicators. The headings are a description of the things we need to do well for the business to succeed and the associated behavioural indicators provide us with the how. Most jobs will have around 5 key competencies which are critical to the role.

Application Forms...

The application form is the first step in applying for a post. They are intended to give you the opportunity to describe how you have demonstrated your competence for the post. Focus your evidence on the key competencies from the job description. When answering the questions on each competency:

- Get to the point, answer with relevant information and keep to the space provided;
- Complete the sections in your own words. Do not lift phrases directly from the competence framework;
- Give specific examples that relate to the things you actually did. Be precise about your personal contribution
- Think about what needed to be done, what part you played and what the outcome/result was.

During the interview questions will be structured around the information that you give in the application form. It will also be helpful to think of some additional examples of when you have demonstrated the competence that you can refer to during the interview.

What is a Competency-based interview...?

The aims of a competency-based interview are...

- Obtain information about how you have previously demonstrated the key competencies for the post through specific questions; and
- Explore the examples further to obtain a clear understanding of the situation, what you did / your personal contribution and the outcome.

Preparing for competency interviews...

Preparation is the key to performing well at any interview. Below are some tips on interview preparation:

- Ensure you have a copy of the job description clearly defining the key competencies for the role
- Take some time to reflect on your experience, and the evidence that you have included in the application and its relevance to the role.
- Think about some additional examples that demonstrate the key competencies. Think about how you would describe your contribution to your most important achievements.
- Think positively about why this role appeals to you, and why you think you should be considered for this role and be prepared to express this during the interview.
- Prepare some questions you might want to ask during the interview. Remember that an interview is a two-way street.

Questions you could ask at the close of the interview...

- What would a typical working day look like?
- What support for my development is on offer?
- What sort of people have done well in this team?
- What is your vision for the future? What are the plans, if any, for growth or expansion?
- How well do you think I match the requirements of the role?
- What is the next step in the process?

Interview Structures...

Competency-based interviews are now one of the most common interview styles. They are also known as 'behavioural interviewing' which means you should draw on past experience and describe specific examples of incidents that demonstrate your competence in a particular area. The most effective way of answering these questions is to use the '**STAR**' technique:

- **Situation** – briefly describe the background to the situation
- **Task** – specifically describe your responsibility
- **Action** – describe what you did
- **Result** – describe the outcome of your actions.

Here is how you might respond to a competency-based question that is testing the competence working together:

Question:

"Working together is very important in our organisation. Can you describe a time when you have demonstrated being a good team player?"

Answer:

“I have a number of examples I could share with you. In one instance, when I was working as a financial analyst at ABC Company, the sales team were putting together a bid for a large piece of work and the analyst that normally helps them was on leave. I offered to help them and worked hard to ensure they had all the information they needed. They took on my suggestions regarding pricing and also some creative ideas I had on formatting the proposal. As it turned out we won the bid and I was promoted as a result.”

You may be required to provide between one and three real-life examples to validate one particular competence.

A few examples of how competency-based questions are phrased...

- Describe a situation in which you were able to use persuasion to successfully convince someone to see things your way?
- Describe a time when you were faced with a stressful situation that demonstrated your coping skills?
- Give me a specific example of a time when you used good judgment and logic in solving a problem?
- Give me a specific example of a time when you had to conform to a policy with which you did not agree?
- Tell me about a time you were able to successfully deal with another person even when that individual may not have personally liked you (or vice versa).
- Tell me about a recent situation in which you had to deal with a very upset customer or co-worker?
- Tell me about a time when you missed an obvious solution to a problem?
- Tell me about a time when you were forced to make an unpopular decision?

Key Competency Areas...

- Team Working & Interpersonal Skills (Soft Skills)
- Organisation & Planning
- Problem Solving – overcoming obstacles, suggesting solutions
- Coping with Stressful Situations
- Initiative
- Persuasion / Influencing
- Handling Customer Complaints
- Learning from mistakes
- Creativity
- Leadership



Summary...

- Think of the core skills and ‘competencies’ related to the job –e.g.- man management, technical skills, team working, organisation, time management, customer-facing, etc.
- Think of examples of situations where you have successfully demonstrated these skills and competencies, or situations where these skills have been ‘tested’ in real life.
- For example, think of an example of a situation where you demonstrated team-working skills or examples of situations where you overcame problems.
- Think of 3 examples for each core competency or behaviour. Doing so will help you to tackle the open-ended and non-specific questions that can often throw candidates during interviews.
- Permanent interviews, in particular, tend to be more about ‘soft skills’. Think of example situations in relation to topics such as:
 - Turning around difficult situations (disaster recovery)
 - Gaining ‘buy-in’ from people resistant to change.
 - Team leading / team working.
 - Making unpopular decisions.
 - Coping with adversity.

And finally...

We hope you now have the tools to at your disposal in order to confidently tackle most interview situations and to get the most from your interview. If in doubt, always feel free to speak to your contact at *Syntax* and we will do their very best to answer any further questions.

We would also be grateful if you could contact us following your interview so that we can discuss your feedback and next steps. To learn more, visit our website at www.syntaxconsultancy.com.