

The OCG logo is positioned in the top left corner. It consists of the letters 'OCG' in a bold, black, sans-serif font. To the right of the 'G', there are two small red dots stacked vertically.

OCG

Planning your next career move...

MODULE 2: The Interview – Advice & Interview questions

MODULE 2.1:

THE INTERVIEW - TIPS & ADVICE

Next to public speaking, enduring a job interview can be one of the most stressful human experiences...

It is an opportunity for exchanging information and for mutual marketing, assessment and fact-finding. An employer or recruiter assesses your suitability for a position and you market yourself, gain information and try to decide whether you wish to work for the employer.

While it is natural to be nervous do try to use the interview to your advantage. Remind yourself about the joint purpose of the interview and this will help shape the way you prepare for and conduct the interview. Often candidates do not prepare sufficiently; many are unable to focus on how what they have to offer matches or relates to what the employer requires. In this current climate you need to do more than simply 'turn up and answer questions' to make it past the initial interview. You must participate in the discussion and 'sell' yourself at the interview. Self-promotion (without arrogance) is an important part of the interaction - being able to talk fluently about your relevant skills and achievements and capably outline past and potential areas of contribution will maximise your opportunity to progress to the next stage.

Interviews vary enormously from the informal quick 'coffee' to an elaborate selection process lasting a whole day. The style and emphasis depend on many factors including the organisation's recruitment practices, the level of the role, the experience of the interviewer, whether they have used a recruitment consultancy to source potential talent and more. However, there are many features common to all interviews, and the following tips should provide a core around which you can construct your own interview preparation.

EMPLOYER'S VIEWPOINT:

Faced with a vacancy employers utilise many different avenues to find the ideal candidate. Many successful businesses have an internal recruitment programme where internal employees (also friends and family of the employees) can apply for the position first. If the role can't be filled internally or by connections/networking of internal staff the company will then approach the market directly by either advertising themselves and/or engaging the services of a recruitment consultancy. Often if the position is sensitive, senior or they do not have the resources to manage the recruitment process themselves the employer will only engage Recruiters to find the candidate on their behalf. Ultimately the Hiring Manager is looking to find the right person for the job who can bring their knowledge and experience to the role but also grow and develop in the position.

Selection requires:

- **Definition of the job and its requirements and demands**
- **Measurement of the candidate's capacity against those requirements**

To achieve a complete and balanced assessment of candidates, skilled interviewers will work to a plan or format. We know from research that the best predictor of future performance is past behaviour so this plan will include finding patterns of behaviour repeating themselves whenever and wherever changes occur in the candidate's life. If such behaviour reveals itself during the course of the interview, the interviewer will begin to feel confident that the same pattern will appear if the candidate joins the organisation.

As part of the plan, an interviewer will endeavour to establish, measure and possibly weigh the following:
Specific competencies required for the role

- General impressions of a candidate: appearance, communication skills etc.
- Attainments, education, training, work achievements.
- General intelligence and abilities.
- Disposition: relationship skills, self-reliance, dependability etc.
- Circumstances: willingness to relocate, flexi hours etc.

YOUR VIEWPOINT:

You will want to achieve certain things from the interview:

- Effective self-presentation
- Increased knowledge about the job
- Increased knowledge about the employer

While your ultimate goal for the interview is to secure a job, the immediate aim is to move forward a step in your job search. If the job appeals to you, you will want the interview to lead to a second interview or directly to a job offer. If the position or organisation is not for you, you will want the interview to help clarify this.

PREPARATION IS PARAMOUNT:

It is essential that you plan carefully for every interview. You cannot rely on your personality to see you through because the trained interviewer will detect poor preparation and is likely to view it as a lack of motivation or interest.

Your carefully prepared CV will give you confidence but your own interview plan will enhance it. The following check-list may help you to prepare for the interview and act appropriately during and after:

- If you have an opportunity to choose the time of your interview, aim for the first or failing that, the last interview. That way you maximize the chances of "standing out".
- Confirm the interview place, time, day and date - in case of a mistake, as a courtesy and as another opportunity to make a good impression.
- Make sure you know how to get there (do a trial run if possible) and take into account travel times at rush hour.
- Arrive with time to spare but don't arrive in Reception too early - about five minutes before your scheduled interview is an appropriate time. If you are earlier than this wait elsewhere.
- If you are running late for unforeseen reasons always call and make your apologies before the interview start time. If you have to cancel/postpone give as much notice as possible otherwise you will create an unfavorable impression.

- Dress according to the job you are interviewing for. The employer wants to look at you and see an immediate fit into their team/company. A good rule of thumb is to dress one level above current employees.
- Always be respectful and friendly to the Receptionists/PAs - they know a lot about the company and can be a good source of information. If candidates are rude to them this is very likely to be communicated to the interviewer.
- Visit the bathroom - and not just for natural reasons! Walking to and from the bathroom will often take you past working areas of the office from which you can indirectly glean a great deal about a company (cleanliness, atmosphere, efficiency etc).
- Always research the employer – the products, processes, services. All the relevant information will be online including market performance, competitors, successes, initiatives, new developments in the industry etc.
- Obtain a copy of the job description/advert before the interview and determine the most important skills/experience they're looking for. Usually their requirements are listed in order of importance so focus on the top 3-5 and plan an example from your own experience to address the required skills/competencies.
- Have a thumbnail sketch of yourself on the tip of your tongue when the question is asked "Tell me something about yourself... This sketch should cover what sort of person you are, your education, work experience, career goals, interests, etc. Learn this by heart.
- Identify questions which will pose difficulties for you and consider how to answer them. Practise your answers.
- Discuss the interview with your family, especially issues like relocation.
- Interviewers are not allowed to discriminate based on medical conditions. If you have a condition that you feel may affect your day to day performance of the role then you should bring it up with them at some stage before acceptance. All employers are expected to accommodate medical conditions or disabilities within reason.
- Know what your last employer will say about your reason for you leaving - this will always come out during reference checking. If you left on bad terms it's better to be open and honest about it straight away because this will give you a chance to tell your version of events. It will also prevent a shock for an employer who is about to offer you the role.
- Find out the names and positions of the interviewers and as much as you can about them. LinkedIn is the go-to place at present but also check the company website and search engines.
- Try to find out the offered salary range beforehand and decide where you would sit in this range with your skills/experience if you are asked. Be realistic and prepared to negotiate if you are offered the role.
- Eat beforehand but don't eat smelly food prior to an interview.
- Prepare some questions to ask during the interview. You might like to ask questions about:
 - Exactly what the position involves?
 - The reason the position is available?
 - Training?
 - Organisation/sector growth plans?
 - The interviewer's experience of the company?

Naturally the interviewer(s) is/are going to have many questions to ask you. Be prepared for:

- Why did you choose this particular career/sector?
- Where do you see yourself in 5 year's time?
- What management style do you find the best?
- What interests you about our company/products/services?
- Why do you want to work for this particular organisation?
- What is the thing you are most proud of in your career?
- What is your major weakness?
- Are you willing to travel?
- What does teamwork mean to you?

Above all else - smile and enjoy the experience. Smiling will help you to look engaged in the process and will help you to relax.

PREPARATION CHECKLIST - HAVE YOU...

- Obtained a job specification, person/selection criteria, job description?
- A clear understanding of the job objective and person specifications?
- Prepared questions to ask the supervisor/manager of the position?
- Talked to/visited the supervisor/manager of the position?
- Completed and submitted an application, covering letter and resume?
- Collected and organised any supporting material to take to an interview?
- Contacted your referees and discussed how they will speak on your behalf?
- Possible answers?
- Assessed your own strengths and weaknesses?
- Prepared and rehearsed any presentation you may have been asked to prepare?

PRE INTERVIEW CHECKLIST:

- Spare copies of resume
- Clean and ironed interview outfit
- Originals of transcripts, relevant work and other supporting documentation (with copies that you can leave with the interviewer).
- Details of interviewers' names and titles

THE INTERVIEW ITSELF:

The first point to remember is that you are being interviewed because somebody wants to hire staff not because they want to embarrass you. The whole interview process is designed to assess your suitability for a position. In order to find this out, the interviewer will be evaluating qualifications, skills and intellectual qualities. They will also try to get an understanding of your aptitudes, stability, motivation and maturity.

The following list will assist you to make the interview as smooth and successful as possible for both you and the interviewer:

- Plan ahead and arrive on time. Late arrival for an interview is never excusable.

- Turn your phone off/silent before you arrive and put it away.
- Shake hands firmly looking the interviewers in the eye.
- Once seated sit upright, be alert, friendly and interested. Do not fidget. Be a good listener as well as a good talker - the interviewer may give important leads as to how you can promote yourself.
- Always try to relate your skills and experience to the position.
- Do not answer questions with a simple yes or no, expand on your answers telling those things about yourself that relate to the question and position. Having said that, keep to the point and do not over answer questions.
- Remember that you alone can sell yourself to the interviewer. Make sure that your good points are relayed in a factual, sincere manner and do not be vague.
- Never lie. Bear in mind that if you get the job, discrepancies in your information may become embarrassingly apparent because almost all applicants are reference-checked.
- Do not make derogatory remarks about former or present employers or companies.
- In the first interview it is not wise to discuss salary, (holidays/bonuses/retirement etc) unless this is raised by the employer. Try to obtain this information beforehand.
- Always conduct yourself as if you are determined to get the job under discussion, even if you are unsure whether you want it or not. It is always better to be in a position where you can choose between several jobs.

POSSIBLE QUESTIONS TO ASK WHEN BEING INTERVIEWED:

- Why did the person who held this position leave?
- What would you like done differently by the next person who fills this job?
- What are some of the objectives that you would like accomplished in this job?
- What is most pressing? What would you like to have done within the next two or three months?
- What are some of the longer-term objectives that you would like completed?
- What freedom would I have in determining my work objectives, deadlines, and methods of measurement?
- What kind of support does this position receive in terms of people, finances, etc?
- What are some of the issues the successful candidate would have to face in this position?
- What are some of the career advancement possibilities within the company?
- In what ways has this organisation been most successful in terms of products and services over the years?
- What significant changes do you foresee in the near future?
- How would my performance be measured/managed? What accounts for success in your organisation?

PANEL INTERVIEWS:

In the public service and increasingly in the private sector interviews take place before a panel. The panel usually comprises of three people though this may vary in number. Usually at least one panel member will be a supervisor or manager from the immediate work area and another will be an independent member from another business unit.

To ensure all applicants are assessed fairly against the same criteria the panel will have prepared a list of questions and these questions may be weighted to reflect the importance of the requirements being assessed. Your answers are usually point scored against the expected and those of the other applications. At the end of the interviews the applicant with the highest score is usually offered the position provided they meet all the required criteria.

Panel interviews are not as difficult as they may seem. A few points to help you perform at your best:

- If the room set up allows it greet each member of the panel with a handshake.
- The panel members usually have a set procedure they wish to follow so allow them to control the direction of the interview.
- When answering a question, make the majority of your eye contact with the person who asked the question but still give occasional eye contact to the other panel members.
- Take your time to think of your answers. What feels like an unusually long pause to you will seem like a short time to the panel. The pause will simply make you look thoughtful and considered.
- Try not to be intimidated by the panel. Although they may seem serious to you, they want you to perform as well as possible and are unlikely to ask difficult questions just for the sake of tripping you up.
- If you are not sure what was meant by the question, ask for clarification - don't guess.
- Keep your answers focused and to the point. If you are not sure whether you have provided sufficient information ask the questioner for clarification.
- Remember that others on the shortlist will be feeling exactly the same way you do.
- Most panels do not ask yes/no questions. They want you to do the talking. In fact, the panel are not really doing their job unless you are doing at least 75% of the talking.
- Generally, you will be asked to summarise your claims to the position. Use this opportunity to make a final statement about why you are well suited for the position. Remember it is only a summary so keep it brief and to the point.
- Mentally tick off, as they arise in the interview, those five or six key reasons why you should be considered for the position. Find opportunities to raise those that have not been touched on.

If you are confident you have answered the following, then you have done all you can:

- Why are you interested in the job and the business unit?
- What can you offer and can you do the job?

THINGS TO AVOID:

The interviewer will be evaluating your negative factors as well as your positive attributes. Listed below are negative factors frequently evaluated during the course of the interview and those, which most often lead to rejection:

- Poor personal appearance
- Overbearing, over aggressive, superior or defensive behaviour
- Inability to express ideas clearly, poor verbal communication.
- Lack of purpose or goals
- Lack of interest and enthusiasm
- Lack of confidence, excessive nervousness

- Evasiveness and making excuses for past behaviour
- Lack of tact, maturity and courtesy
- Condemnation of past employers
- Failure to look interviewer in the eye
- Limp, fishy handshake
- Persistent attitude of "What can you do for me?"
- Lack of preparation for the interview resulting in an inability to ask intelligent questions.

INTERVIEW PRESENTATION:

Research proves we form our first impression of another person within the first few seconds of meeting them. This generally only allows for an assessment of personal presentation, so below are some tips to consider when thinking about how you will present yourself for your interview:

Appearance is made up of three elements:

- Physical Features
- Self Image
- Clothing

Clothing is the single most important factor in what constitutes appearance. Additionally, clothing affects your physical features and your self image.

INAPPROPRIATE INTERVIEW DRESS:

- Ill fitting clothes (too tight/short/low cut)
- Jeans/sportswear/casual clothes and clothes that are ripped, torn or faded
- Scuffed, dirty or unprofessional shoes (such as trainers)
- Messy /unwashed/unkempt hair
- Unwashed or too much perfume/aftershave
- Be careful with accessories, you want the interviewer to look at you not your necklace!

You never get a second chance to make a first impression, so use that first meeting to your advantage.

BODY LANGUAGE:

With communication, it is important to have words and action work together. You can shut off verbal output, but not non-verbal output. For example, in a situation where we do not agree with what is being said but prefer to be polite so it is quite common for us to verbalise agreement while we shake (rather than nod) our head. This gives an unconscious cue to the person we are speaking to that we are not being entirely honest.

Crucial misunderstandings can arise from ignoring the situation, the context and culture of the people involved. Non-verbal communication has to be looked at in total to determine a general attitude and expression. Your body message will provoke a positive or negative reaction depending on the situation and person you are communicating with.

Positive body language actions include:

- Maintaining eye contact
- Occasionally nodding the head in agreement
- Smiling
- Leaning towards the speaker

Negative body language actions include:

- Looking away or turning away from the speaker when they are talking to you
- Closing your eyes
- Yawning
- Slouching
- Frowning

IF SOMETHING GOES WRONG...

If something goes wrong it is easy to get flustered and sometimes not recover your composure in time to remedy the situation. Try to remember that most people mishandle interview questions or make mistakes at one time or another (including the interviewer). If you handle the situation calmly and sensibly the person you are talking to is likely to be impressed with you.

Helpful hints:

- Don't panic. You will think more clearly if you can avoid feeling panicked.
- Don't dwell on it. Acknowledge the mistake or problem to the other person, and then endeavour to move on.
- Keep breathing. Pause and take a deep breath. This will help settle your thoughts and nerves.
- Clarify. If there is a misunderstanding, it is important to clarify by repeating what you understand and checking if it is what the other person understands.
- Expect to be nervous. What you may see as a disaster may only be viewed as a hiccup if anything at all by others.

Frequently you may find the interview questions are structured in the form of hypothetical questions. That is, they would be phrased "What would you do if...". Wherever possible reflect on a past situation where you successfully dealt with a similar issue (as we said earlier, it has been scientifically proven that past behaviour is the strongest predictor of future performance). If you have never been in a similar situation let the panel know and draw on your common sense and life experience to formulate your answer. Sometimes it is most appropriate to simply state "I've never been in that situation, but I would consider all of the data, possible solutions and the consequences of my decision before taking action."

TECHNICAL TESTING:

Testing is becoming the norm in recruitment and tests can vary from personality testing right through to measuring complicated IT skills. Testing is tool used by recruiters/employers to give them another measure of how you would fit into their organisation. Most people get nervous over

testing however there are some actions you can do to feel more prepared. There are hundreds of trial tests and coaching online to research and attempt so do a few of these to become familiar with them and understand common questions.

FOLLOW UP:

After a job interview, most applicants have to wait for the good or bad news. A follow-up email, expressing your appreciation for the opportunity of an interview can achieve the following things for you:

- It reiterates your interest in the job and gives you an edge over other applicants.
- It gives you a second chance to communicate your best feature that is relevant to the job.
- It shows that you are still confident about handling the job.
- It keeps your name prominent in the recipient's mind.
- It can help to speed up action on the part of the recipient.

Most applicants neglect this opportunity. A polite expression of gratitude could decide the case in your favour, particularly if you show that you remember a significant fact from the interview. Chances are you will be one of the very few who were interviewed who are thoughtful enough to send a follow-up communication. If, as sometimes happens, the interviewer is left with only vague impressions of dozens of applicants, the person may remember you better through this action.

Tone:

Be conscious of the tone you use in your follow up communication. Every time we speak or write, we are dealing with 'tone of voice', as well as meaning and quite often our tone has the greater effect. Keep some formality in your communication but make it human as well. Ensure it reflects your own style.

FEEDBACK AFTER THE INTERVIEW:

Once the interviewer has reached a decision, they will contact you and inform you (either directly or via the Recruitment Consultant) of the outcome. Use this contact to ask for specific feedback on your strengths and weaknesses as the interviewer saw them. Also take the opportunity to ask for feedback on your application and how the interviewer reacted to it. Gaining this feedback is important (even if you are successful) because there will be future interviews in your career and gaining feedback now can help you identify areas in which you may need to develop.

Being unsuccessful at interview generally means the interviewer considered another applicant to be more suitable so it is vital for you to gain feedback from them if you can. With this feedback you can then improve your approach to the next interview. They may also help you to identify specific areas in which you need to develop and may be able to recommend a training/development agenda.

Feedback after the interview can help you:

- Understand how you present at an interview
- Know what interviewers are looking for
- Develop a clearer picture of your strengths and weaknesses
- Know the impact of your covering letter and resume

- **Construct an appropriate training and development plan to assist in your career management**
- **Be better prepared for your next interview!**

It is often difficult to receive personal feedback - praise often causes us embarrassment while criticism can make us defensive or even argumentative. And remember, feedback is generally as difficult to give as it is to receive. Negative feedback is rarely delivered with the intention of personal attack (although sometimes it can feel this way). Sift, sort and filter for what is useful to you in your development. If you are unclear about a particular point of feedback ask the person to explain it.

Good luck!