



S U N D A Y

## The interview process

You opened the post this morning to find you have been invited to an interview – great news! You feel good. You are high, elated and you congratulate yourself. You imagine yourself in the role; it’s exciting, an ideal job for you. You read the letter again and, as the reality of the interview becomes your focus, you are bombarded with less positive feelings and thoughts, such as:

- I hate interviews
- I can’t remember the last time I was interviewed
- I really want this job – I hope I don’t let myself down

It is not uncommon to feel a degree of trepidation in anticipation of an interview. The trick is not to let this weigh you down.

After all, you have experienced being interviewed, not just once but many times in your career. Most career transitions such as selection, promotion or other forms of career development will have been punctuated by interviews. You are therefore experienced and familiar with the process. As interviews follow a relatively common format, you will already have some of the skills and knowledge required to make you successful.

This experience is not always reflected in your performance. The following comments from interviewers reflect common problems:

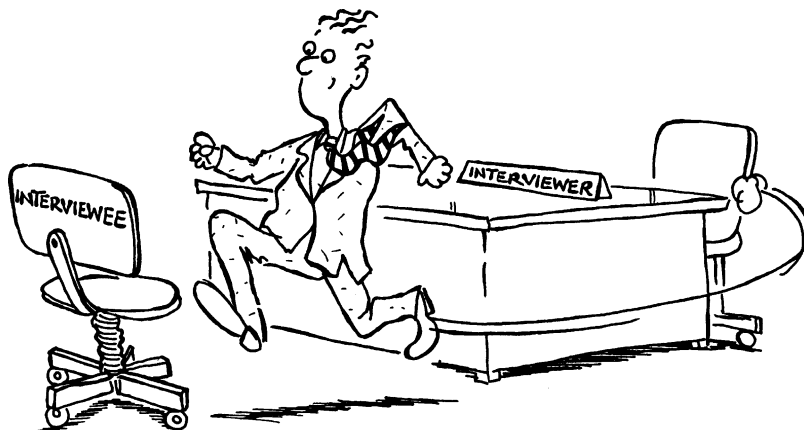


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- She looked great on paper
- I know a lot about his employer, but very little about him
- She seemed very nervous and aggressive
- He stumbled over all the questions related to his personality
- I'm not sure how long he would stay
- She seemed too good to be true
- There was no substance in what he said
- It was difficult to get a word in edgeways

Think back over past interviews and answer the following question honestly: *Did I present myself in the best possible light?*

Whilst we would hope that your answer is 'yes', it is more likely to be 'no' or 'not quite'. Managers are often experienced interviewers, having undergone training on skills, techniques and questioning. They are not so skilled at being interviewed.





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Having had experiences of being interviewed and being the interviewer, you will be aware that interviews often follow a tried and tested pattern. Today, we will help you focus on the known rather than the unpredictable factors, exploring questions such as why, in what way and by whom:

### *The interview process*

- Interview objectives
- Types of questions
- Interviewers

### **Interview objectives**

If you have been invited to an interview – well done! Your invitation is based on the limited knowledge the interviewer has of you from an application, recommendation or your past achievements. They already believe that you could be the person they are looking for. The interview is therefore an opportunity for interviewers to extend their knowledge and complete their picture of you.

You will have your own agenda. The interview is an opportunity for you to discover further information about the job and the organisation. Based on that information you can reach decisions about match and suitability.

The interview is a two-way process: treat it as such.



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### *Interviewee's objectives are to:*

- Gain the initiative – an offer or commitment
- Present yourself in the best possible light
- Make known your talents and expertise
- Fill gaps in knowledge about the job and organisation
- Meet future colleagues/managers
- Be clear about whether or not to accept the post

### *Interviewer's objectives are to:*

- Find the most suitable person
- Encourage you to express yourself fully
- Look for specific skills and achievements
- Sell the job and organisation
- Assess your initial impact and social fit
- Appoint the right person

You will both have independent objectives with a degree of overlap. Spend time before the interview clarifying your objectives. You may even want to rank them; having gone through this process, you can be much clearer about whether the interview matches your objectives and, if not, for what reason.

### *Interview structure*

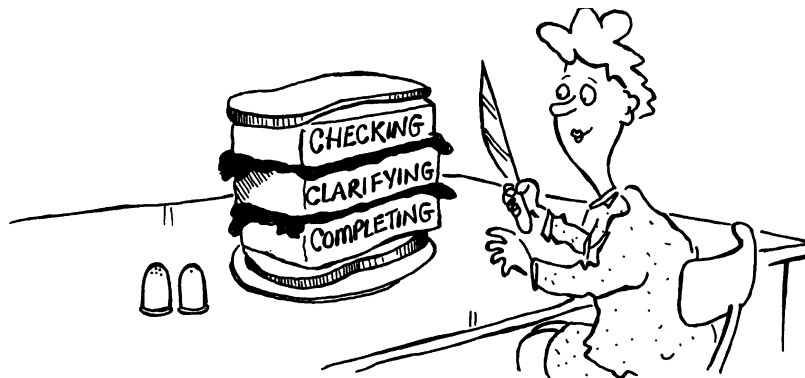
The whole of the recruitment process requires careful planning. From drawing up a job description and person specification, designing the advertisement, compiling the information pack, to short-listing. The interview is no exception.

Be aware that interviewers will have clarified their objectives in general and decided on a format and a set of questions for each interviewee. No two interviews are the same. Your personality, application, cv, and experience will be different



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from others, as will the areas that require further exploration because they are of particular interest or concern. Whilst interviews are not the same, there are similarities, and there is a process which is common and accepted.



The process can be likened to a sandwich. It is built on some 'warm up' questions to help you both settle down and feel as comfortable as you can. The middle and main section of the interview will constitute the filling in the sandwich, where you will be asked a variety of questions, checking and clarifying match and suitability.

In the final stage there will be time for your questions, closing with a summary of the interview and an indication of what will happen next: a second interview, a meeting with other staff members, or a letter telling you the result of the interview.

Some organisations provide their interviewers with a standard form to assess certain aspects of the interviewee and their performance. They will have a points allocation for each category and make direct comparisons between candidates. Depending on the post available, they may cover the following:

*Assessment categories*

- Skills
- Knowledge
- Behaviour
- Motivation
- Fit with team
- Fit with culture
- Career aspirations

**Types of questions**

During your interview you will encounter a number of different types of questions. If you can recognise these and the reasons they are being asked, you can concentrate on your replies. We will give you further guidance on responding to questions on Thursday.

The better the questions, the better the interview. Questions can be categorised in the following ways:

- Open
- Probing
- Closed
- Hypothetical
- Leading
- Difficult
- Negative
- Discriminatory



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### *Open questions*

This is where interviewers give you the chance to talk. They want to hear your ideas and see how you develop an answer. Open questions usually start with:

- Who, What, Where, When, Which, Why and How

#### *For example:*

- What levels of budget responsibility have you had throughout your career?
- How did you implement Investors in People?

Questions such as these allow you the opportunity to sell yourself. They require a level of preparation on your part. Think about the key themes that are likely to be covered in the interview focusing on those which you consider will be of interest to the interviewer.

### *Probing*

When interviewers are particularly interested in your reply and want further information, they will use probing questions to focus in on the subject:

#### *For example:*

- Tell me about your research to date
- How did you manage the change?
- What made you respond in that way?

It's rather like a funnelling process where the interviewer moves from general questions to specific examples.



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### *Closed questions*

Direct questions that tend to pin you down to a factual reply or to a 'yes' or 'no' answer.

#### *For example:*

- Were you responsible for managing a budget in your last job?
- Are you familiar with Investors in People?

Questions such as these can inhibit you and restrict your freedom in presenting information. For example, you may not have been responsible for the budget in your last post, but have had budget responsibilities in the past. If you are not able to communicate this information it may reduce your chances of being successful. Always try to highlight relevant previous experience.

### *Hypothetical questions*

Hypothetical questions are just that, encouraging you to imagine how you might handle the unknown. They also



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provide an opportunity for you to demonstrate how well you think and the quality of your judgement. The interviewer will suggest a hypothetical situation and ask how you would deal with it.

*For example:*

- What would you do if □. . . ?
- How would you deal with □. . . ?
- What would you expect from a perfect manager?

These can tend to be difficult questions to answer, especially if complex scenarios are being presented. If you are not careful you can end up tying yourself in knots, especially if you concentrate too much on trying to work out what kind of answer you think they might want. Try to relate these questions to your own experience and, if you are not clear about the complete details of the situation, ask for more information.

*Leading questions*

These are the opposite to hypothetical questions as here, the interviewer steers you to the kind of answer they expect. Leading questions do not give interviewers much of an idea about you, though you will have an insight into their thinking. Generally it is best not to rock the boat; go where the questions are leading and check if you are unclear.

*For example:*

- As you have had experience of budgeting, I'm sure you wouldn't □.□.□.
- With regard to Investors in People, you are obviously aware of the problems with □.□.□.



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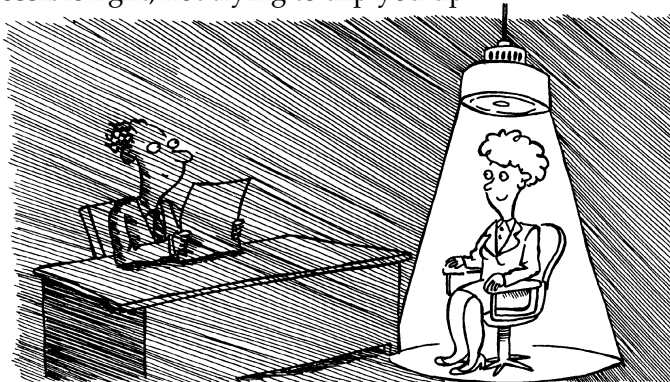
### *Difficult questions*

These take many shapes and forms. Give yourself a moment to think, rather than trying to start answering immediately. Don't be evasive; you may have some ideas about which areas of questioning are likely to cause you difficulty. Anticipate what areas interviewers might cover and be ready for them. It is important to have some kind of answer ready rather than clamming up and leaving interviewers to jump to their own, possibly incorrect, conclusions.

#### *For example:*

- I see you have a gap of 3 years in your employment; what did you do during that time?
- This job requires a professional diploma. How are you going to make up the shortfall in your qualifications?

You don't know which questions will take you by surprise. Whatever they are, take your time over them. And remember that in most cases, the interviewer is trying to give you the opportunity to put yourself forward in the best possible light, not trying to trip you up.





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### *Negative questions*

These can often reflect an interviewer's tendency to look on the more negative side of life. It may be their way of making comparisons between the best candidates.

#### *For example:*

- What are your weaknesses?
- Why is it that you have changed jobs so often?
- You stayed in your last job for 10 years. Why so long?

Don't fall into the trap of defending yourself, as though this were a direct attack by the interviewer. Be constructive and turn the question around to show yourself in a positive light.

### *Discriminatory questions*

These sorts of questions are still asked at interview, particularly of women and minority groups.

Women applying for senior jobs may be confronted with a whole battery of questions about their private lives, which male colleagues might not be asked.

#### *For example:*

- How does your husband feel about you applying for this post?
- What effect might the increased responsibility have on your family life?
- Are you planning to have a family?

People from minority groups may be asked:



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*For example:*

- How would you respond to criticism from a white colleague?

These all need to be handled very carefully. You need to clarify the interviewer's intention and the relevance of the question. Ask yourself and maybe even the interviewer:

- Is this question ever put to other candidates?
- Would it affect my performance in the role?

It could be that the interviewer is just clumsy rather than malicious.

If you feel that you have been discriminated against in your interview, you can contact the Equal Opportunities Commission who will advise you about what action to take.

Equal Opportunities Commission  
Overseas House  
Quay Street  
Manchester M3 3HN  
Tel: 0161 833 9244  
Fax: 0161 835 1657  
[www.eoc.org.uk](http://www.eoc.org.uk)

As well as recognising the different types of questions, it is worth considering the order in which the questions are asked. The use of supplementary and probing questions will often suggest what is in the interviewer's mind; you should notice this and react accordingly.



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Good interviewers will be watching your reactions and body language: posture, gestures and facial expressions. You should do the same; some interviewers deliberately present an unresponsive, wooden mask. This can be because they are inexperienced or are not comfortable with the role. With practice you should be able to read and assess intentions and reactions reasonably well. You will undoubtedly also meet some ineffective interviewers.

### Interviewers

Interviewers are trained, not born! Be prepared for an interviewer who:

- Has not read your cv
- Gets aggressive to see how you react under stress
- Is constantly disturbed
- Makes remarks about your previous employer or boss
- Asks questions but doesn't listen to your answers

Even the best training can fall on deaf ears and even the best interviewers can have a bad day. If you happen to be on the receiving end of poor interviewing, you can sometimes turn it to your advantage. You may meet interviewers who fall into the following categories.

#### *The disorganised interviewer*

Allow them time to settle down and find the papers or notes that they need. Establish your preparedness early on and, if necessary, subtly suggest an interview structure.



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### *The unprepared interviewer*

Sometimes very experienced interviewers think they can sail in on the day and don't need to prepare. You have to keep calm and be patient. It won't do your cause any good if you try to catch them out or show them up. If interviewers have a position of authority over the post, you may want to consider how you would feel working with them.

### *The nervous interviewer*

You sense that the interviewer would rather be anywhere else than in an interview room and may even be more nervous than you are. This sometimes happens when specialist functional managers are taken out of their familiar work setting and are expected to be at ease in a more social setting. They will be grateful if you offer relevant information and loosely control the interview. Be careful not to patronise.

### *The aggressive interviewer*

Don't allow aggressive interviewers to provoke you. Rather than apologising for the weaknesses, failings or gaps in your cv that they point out to you, give positive explanations and put over what you have prepared.

Being familiar with the process of the interview will enable you to understand the direction it is taking. If you are unclear about a question, try to assess what the reasons are for asking it and answer it accordingly.

## Summary

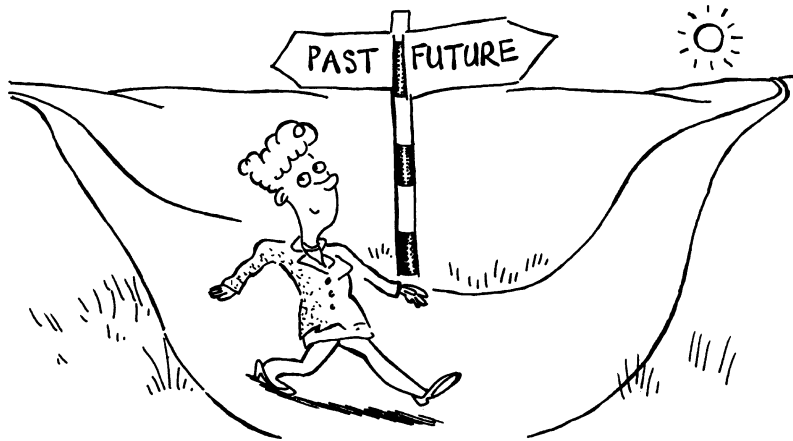
We have begun the week with a general overview on the process of interviews, preparing you generally for what you should expect.



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### *The interview process*

- Objectives of an interview
  - interviewers' objectives
  - your objectives
- Types of question to expect
  - open
  - closed
  - hypothetical
  - difficult
  - negative
- Types and styles of interviewer
  - disorganised
  - unprepared
  - nervous
  - aggressive



Remember that interviews are not a new experience for you.  
Learn from the past to prepare you for the future.