

S U N D A Y

What's involved?

Today we will begin by summarising what's involved – what you are likely to encounter on your journey to the interview. We want to set the scene so that you are ready to concentrate on the questions that follow during the rest of the week.

What's involved?

- Objectives
- First steps
- Telephone screening
- Assessment centres
- What makes a question tough?

Objectives

Throughout the week you will have the opportunity to reflect on the reasoning behind the different kinds of questions you are asked. You will be able to consider your own aims. It is amazing how many interviewees expect the interviewer to be so in charge of the interview that they disempower themselves by not having their own clear plan and set of objectives. If you don't know specifically what you want from a job, how will you know when you achieve it?

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Today's objectives relate to overall considerations of what's involved for both parties in the lead-in to the interview itself.

Interviewer's objectives

To get the right person for the job with:

- key interpersonal skills
- relevant qualifications
- high energy
- a record of quality results
- initiative

Interviewee's objectives

To find the job I want by:

- creating a positive impression from the start
- being prepared mentally and physically
- getting to know the organisation
- anticipating questions
- having something to say
- feeling confident

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It is vitally important that the interviewer selects the right person the first time, otherwise they might upset the balance of the team, have to look over their shoulder at a rival, or, at worst, have to suffer the expense in terms of time and cost of re-advertising and recruiting anew. Interviewers are also aware that the interview process itself is flawed so the process is often made up of different steps.

First steps

Good interviewers will have invested a significant amount of time in the planning process – scoping the role, allocating a budget, talking to the stakeholders, defining the competencies and the person specification, planning the advertisement and briefing headhunters or recruitment consultants. After receiving applications, the tasks are far from over. The interviewer, or someone else in the organisation, has to arrange the first steps:

- long listing
- short listing
- first interviews – sometimes telephone
- second interviews
- assessments
- meeting the stakeholders

Be aware that the more responsible the role, the more involved the key stakeholders will be. This may mean greater demands on your time because it may involve a series of meetings.

S U N D A Y**Telephone screening**

The route to receiving an invitation to an interview can differ from organisation to organisation. Letters of application accompanied by CVs are the preferred way to present yourself and give information on your qualifications, experience and career to date. Increasingly this information is acceptable on-line. Your aim is to sell yourself in no more than two pages, giving the reader what they need to make their decision. There is help at hand from a book in this series, *CVs in a Week*. Some organisations use application forms, and the same applies to an application form as applies to a CV. Don't forget to sell yourself, even though your style may be cramped by the space available or questions asked – be creative.

Many organisations screen their long list of applicants by using a telephone interview. The purpose of the conversation is to create a realistic short list for the next stage. Only a small number of the candidates will progress beyond this stage so don't underestimate the importance of this conversation.

Often a screening interview will be unannounced: don't be put off by this. The interviewer normally asks whether it is convenient to talk so you can always buy some time and ring the person back. Your preparation is essential – you will need to think through what you say, how you say it and what you want the interviewer to remember. Also consider the limits of time; whilst we know of screening interviews that have lasted over an hour, it is more likely that you have under 20 minutes. Check whom exactly you are speaking to and don't make any assumptions.

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Case history: One senior manager screening applicants for a key post in her team, rang an applicant to discuss certain aspects of his CV. He was unable to talk immediately. When she answered the phone, he assumed he was speaking to an administrative assistant and was both sharp and dismissive. Once he realised he was talking to his potential boss, his manner changed. But it was too late and there was no way he was going through to the next stage.

Pre-screening is one of the most challenging stages as making an impact with only your voice is extremely difficult. When you listen to an interview on the radio or have a telephone conversation, you probably only listen to a small amount of the conversation. Who do you listen to and why? What is it about their conversation that holds your attention? It's then up to you to build these techniques into your conversation with the interviewer! Use pace and tone to punctuate what you are saying. Think about what makes a voice attractive to you. Relax your jaw and mouth by repeating the sounds 'me – you' a number of times to help. If nothing else it will make you laugh which in turn will relieve any tension.

Be prepared – what you say

- Which parts of your CV to highlight
- Make it interesting
- Relate what you say to the role

Be prepared – how you say it

- Speak up and out
- Use tone and pace
- Be relaxed
- Smile

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Some organisations are now using video conferencing for this screening and you are asked to attend an anonymous office with what looks like a computer screen. Don't be put off by the technology. Arrive early and become familiar with the surroundings. In global organisations this is as commonplace as a telephone link.



If you are one of those lucky people who receive headhunters calls on a regular basis, treat all these seriously. They may lead to the opportunity you are looking for.

Assessment Centres

Every organisation wants to make the best decision. The amount of investment in terms of time and money (advertising, head hunters/agency costs, etc.) can be immense. This, balanced by the fact that interviews are proven to be one of the least reliable methods of selection, means that you will probably experience more than just a traditional question and answer session. The word 'interview' can be used to include a multitude of experiences, including:

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- Presentations
- Group exercises
- Tests – psychometric and ability tests
- In trays
- On-the-job assessments

All of these exercises are devised to give you an opportunity to shine rather than to trip you up. Find out which are going to be on the agenda for your interview and develop a strategy for managing them. It is likely you have had to make a presentation, contribute to a group discussion, manage your in-tray or be assessed via performance reviews. As these are nothing new, merely a different environment, you can be prepared for the unexpected. Remember that you have plenty of knowledge and experience to manage it well.

What often happens when individuals are asked to prepare for a presentation is that it becomes the only thing they focus on and they produce a wonderfully slick presentation, but everything else suffers. Whatever you are informed of in advance, it is worth preparing yourself for more and even contacting the named person to find out more about the process.

Tests fall into a number of categories:

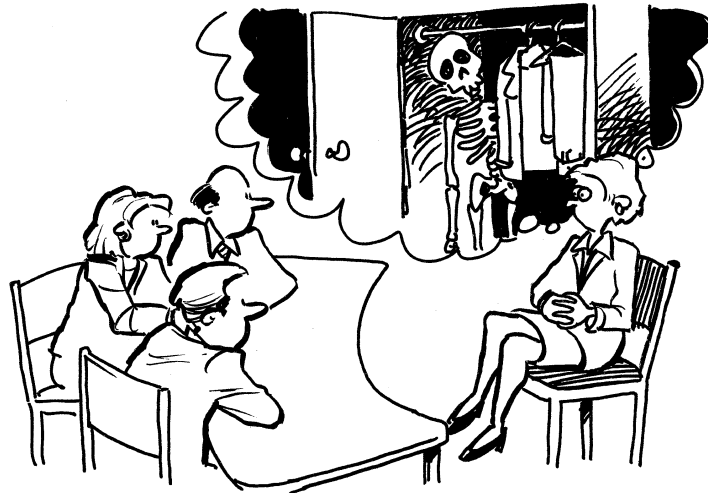
- verbal
- numerical
- skill
- spatial
- personality/psychometric.

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Skilled assessors should only choose tests which have a relevance to the role. You may be asked to complete some tests at home, others will take place in a classroom environment and be timed. If you haven't sat any tests before, there are books and people who can help you including *Psychometric Testing in a week*. Most parts of the process have an equal weighting, so overlooking any part in your preparation will affect your overall performance. For more information on Assessment Centres, see *Assessment Centres in a week*.

What makes a question tough?

The concept of a tough question is usually a matter of personal interpretation. Sometimes an interviewer will deliberately ask what they consider to be a tough question; on other occasions they may hit your Achilles' heel without intent.



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You may already have a clear idea of your 'tricky' areas. If so, it is a good idea to think about them now instead of hoping they might be missed. Compile a table like the one below to help you.

What constitutes a tough question?	Why?	How will I combat this?
Gaps in employment
Industry/technical knowledge
Health problems
Why I am leaving

If the question is tough because it is a surprise either in content or timing, take a deep breath, and think about what you have been asked. You can't prepare for the content of a surprise question, but you can prepare a general response. Practise the skill of checking with the interviewer that you have understood what has just been asked without simply echoing their question. *'Let me be clear – you are asking me . . . So you want to know how precisely I would . . .'* This is a useful technique if the question requires you to go to a level of explanation that feels uncomfortable to you. This buys you some thinking time, too. Watch politicians, they are expert at this technique.

Why do interviewers ask 'tough' questions? In many cases they want to gain a deeper understanding in a particular area – either a greater insight of you or to check the extent of your knowledge and expertise. They may need to test your response to the types of pressure demanded by the job.

The way to answer tough questions is to be confident that if

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you have done your preparation you will have a reasonable answer somewhere in your repertoire. Go for that rather than struggling to find a 'perfect' answer; just like the 'perfect' question they don't exist! While every question the interviewer asks has a purpose, it is unwise to answer until you know:

- the reason for the question
- the most appropriate answer
- how to reply positively

Over the next few days, notice whether your automatic responses to any questions tend to be framed in positive or negative language. When you use negative words like 'trouble', 'problem' and 'disaster', you base your thinking in a negative framework.

The interviewer will join you there and be in a negative set too. If you use language in a positive vein, then you will feel more confident and can expect the interviewer to respond in a more friendly and co-operative manner. Use words like 'opportunity', 'challenge' and 'learning'. Consider the different impacts and choose to be more positive.

Summary

Today we have considered interviews and their part in the recruitment process. Whilst the other tools that organisations use are either organisation or role specific, the preparation you do for interview is essential to your success. Here are some simple rules to help you.

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- Stay calm
- Listen to the question
- Speak clearly and steadily
- Tell the truth
- Avoid talking too much
- Make it relevant

You need to understand the interviewer, and by simply listening and reflecting back the language and pace of the interviewer you can demonstrate this understanding. Before you jump in with your response you need to think about the question, considering why it has been asked and what the interviewer wants to find out. If you understand this, then you are able to answer the question comprehensively, presenting yourself well and leaving the interviewer with no need to ask you any supplementary questions.

By doing your research well, you should also have picked up some of the language from company reports, or any information you are given about the job, department and organisation. If you would like further information on how to conduct this research, we devote a day (Monday) to research in the companion to this book, *Succeeding at Interviews in a Week*.

Tomorrow we will ensure that you are ready to make a positive first impression.