



Information Guide No.10

Interviews

Prepared by: David Beck

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1. INTRODUCTION

To be invited to an interview – any type of interview – is to achieve a major objective of your job-hunting campaign. Although, in this information guide, the emphasis is upon the job interview with the decision maker/prospective employer, and the screening interview that may precede it, much of the material is relevant to other types of interview.

Planning and preparation for every interview is essential and should encompass:

- Defining your objective and planning a strategy, dependent upon the type of interview to be attended
- Researching the company or organisation concerned
- Preparing and rehearsing a 3 minute presentation covering the essential points in your career history and emphasising your experience, aptitudes and strengths, particularly in relation to the job opportunity under consideration
- Preparing the answers to questions you may be asked, especially those you may find difficult
- Listing the information you will need to obtain

A vital part of your preparation is to research and predict a potential employer's likely requirements, and therefore to be able to demonstrate you can satisfy them.

At the time of the interview, remember the first impressions are all important and sound preparation airs a calm self confidence. Negative impressions, often generated in the first few seconds of the interview, can scupper your chances at the outset, a positive beginning can set the scene for success.

2. TYPES OF INTERVIEW

In the course of your job hunt you may experience different types of interview, in which the objectives of both interviewer and interviewee will also be different. The well prepared candidate will have defined objectives for each interview attended and should be able to anticipate what the interviewer is looking for.

Types of interview:

- Telephone Interview
- Face to Face Interview (one on one or possibly two on one)
 - Traditional / Directed Interview
 - Competency Interview
 - Behavioural Interview
- Panel Interview
- Other types of interview

Within these types of interview format listed above you will almost certainly undergo during the job hunt process the following:

- i. The personal contact development interview of meeting
- ii. The meeting with a key executive in a target organisation
- iii. The screening interview, conducted by a Company's HR Department
- iv. The screening interview conducted by Recruitment / Executive Search Consultants
- v. The interview with the decision maker, arranged by the employer company

Although all these types of interview have many elements in common, there are differences of emphasis and your preparation should be adjusted accordingly.

2.1 Telephone Interviews

This type of remote job interview can be a first point of employment screening. The interview may be with a Recruitment / Executive Search Consultant but some employers are now using the telephone interview as the first stage of the selection process, using it as a means of determining who they will invite for face to face interview. For international roles where the client is based overseas frequently the first interview will be a telephone interview.

Although this may seem daunting, it's actually positive. It suggests your CV or resume impressed the Recruiter / Employer enough to want to find out more.

Ultimately if you're called to a face-to-face interview, it means they're serious about you and not wasting your time.

Although you may be nervous, they are actually a chance for you to make a great first impression.

In some ways telephone interviews are normally quite basic, without too many trick questions.

Typically, the interviewer will want to get to know you a little – get a feel for the personality behind the CV. They will ask you some questions about your CV, work experience, skills, background and why you want the job.

To prepare for a telephone interview, it's critical to:

- Set the call up for a time when you are able to relax and not be disturbed. You should typically allow for between 30 – 40 minutes for this type of call and when invited try at that stage to ascertain from the Employer / Recruiter how much time should you allow
- Don't do it at work! You will be too nervous to do yourself justice and what if a colleague walks in while you are on the telephone
- Dress yourself as you would for a Face to Face interview. Sit upright in the chair and hold the phone as you would at work. All of this helps you physiologically to create a professional image. In your jeans and lounging on the sofa, you may feel laid back
- Have a copy of your CV ready by the telephone
- Really Listen. You can't see the interviewer so will need to concentrate on the tone of
- their voice and what they are saying. You might be surprised how much a "pregnant pause" can give you
- Think about your body language. Try to imagine the other person sat at the end of the phone and move your body as though you were looking at them in a normal conversation. If you would normally smile, then smile. This will also help you avoid sounding "wooden" on the telephone
- Don't answer your Call Waiting when you are being interviewed
- Don't eat, chew gum, or drink anything whilst on the telephone

2.2 Face to Face Interviews

Face to Face interviews are the most common type of interview used in the selection process although they can vary in structure.

In terms of process the first interview with an employer is normally with a member of the HR / Personnel Department. This may simply be a one on one – and is typically a screening interview. Typical time allowed for this type of interview is one hour between appointments so your interview will probably last around 50 – 55 minutes if things go well.

Sometimes the recruiting Line Manager will accompany the member of HR. It is important at this stage to engage with that person as if you are ultimately successful they will be your "Boss".

If successful, you will be invited back for a second or final interview that will almost certainly be with the recruiting Line Manager's Manager / Director, accompanied by the Line Recruiting Manager or the same or possibly more senior member of the HR Department. It's known as interviewing by the "One Up rule".

Depending upon the management style of the Line Manager's Manager / Director their view of you may not be the determining factor in you receiving a job offer. In well managed companies they will normally allow the Recruiting Manager to make the decision, clearly if they form an unfavourable view of you it is unlikely you would receive an offer of employment.

Traditional / Directed Interviews

In terms of the structure of an interview it will vary in companies. Some companies may have a generalist / traditionalist approach and some may have a directed approach.

The interviewer will have a definite plan and you must follow it. They are likely to ask the same questions of every applicant so follow their lead, listen carefully and answer all questions fully.

After the personal introductions the process will typically begin with the HR person conducting a trawl of your CV and background.

If the recruiting Manager is present they will probably interject at various times and ask for clarification or ask questions of direct interest to them.

Following the review of your career a set of generalist questions will be asked followed by the HR member giving a brief background to the company.

At that point you will be asked if you have any questions then the interview will be concluded. If you sense the interview is coming to an end, supply the information you think is important but they did not ask.

Competency Based Interviews

Many more companies however are adopting a more structured approach to interviews and the most commonest used today is called the Competency Interview.

In this type of interview the employer will have prepared a detailed job description which identifies very clearly the competencies required for the role e.g. Team Working, Decision Making etc etc. The Interviewer will therefore have prepared a set of questions to test whether you have the required competencies. Typical questions are often phrased as "Tell us about a time when"

To be successful in this type of interview you will need to think of examples in your career where you have demonstrated the particular competence relative to the question being asked.

Behavioural Interviews

Behavioural interviews also known as Situational Interviews are trying to “suss” out how you would act in certain situations.

The interviewer wants to be able to predict how you would behave in the role, if they recruited you. So they ask hypothetical questions. These might be about a time in your past, or asking you to imagine yourself in a future situation.

It's difficult to second-guess which questions might come up, so the best advice is to prepare as for Structured Competency Interviews.

2.3 Panel Interviews

Panel interviews are often used by employers in the public sector and in companies where a very high priority is placed upon teamwork.

The number of panel members can vary enormously from around 4 and sometimes as many as 10. Clearly the more people in front of you the more daunting the experience.

If well managed by the Chairman of the panel it will be a directed approach with certain panel members being allocated specific questions.

The key to success is not to let the numbers of people over awe you and treat all panel members with the same respect and sense of importance.

2.4 Other Types of Interview

Breakfast, Lunch or Dinner Interviews

Don't let food lull you into a false sense of security. This is still a business interview. Use good table manners as well as all your other etiquette. The presence of food and drink sometimes makes an applicant relax and reveal some of their negative points.

In cases where a senior appointment is being considered your partner may well be invited along for the meal and they should attend if you have one.

Some useful tips:-

- Don't sit down until the Interviewer does
- Order a meal slightly less expensive than the interviewer
- Don't start eating until they do
- Don't order anything “messy”
- If they order a dessert, do also order a desert-it can be as simple as fruit
- Do not consume too much alcohol!!

Stress Interviews

Used in the USA more than in the UK but used by companies where the role you are being considered for is one where there is lots of pressure. So be on the lookout for this and enter every job interview fully rested, alert and calm.

If you encounter a seemingly rude or abusive type of interview, think about it before accepting a job with this company. Was the interview a real snapshot of what it is like to work for that company, or was it a deliberate interview technique to ascertain how you react under pressure.

In a stress interview, perhaps you'll wait an hour for the interviewer to show up. They may sit silently staring at you during the interview and act cool towards you for no reason you can determine. They will challenge you strongly and try to insult you. Your reaction to all this shows how you will stand up to the management and staff and others associated with this organization.

Tip: Memorize your major discussion points so they come to mind immediately, even if you are caught off guard. Be polite and smiling, no matter what they say or do. If they cross one of your personal boundaries thank them for the interview and make your exit.

2.5 The Screening Interview with a Recruitment / Executive Search Consultant

Vacancies and applications handled by Recruitment or Executive Search Consultants will almost certainly involve you in a screening interview, prior to your meeting with representatives of the employer company.

The interview cannot gain you a job, but it can prevent you from getting one. In preparing for a screening interview, remember the objective of the recruitment company is to present to their client (the employer company) one or more candidates who fit their 'job and person' specification.

Your objective in such an interview is to ensure you are not screened out of consideration before having the opportunity to present yourself to the employer company.

Since this preliminary interview is most likely to focus on the match between you, the candidate, and the employer company, it is essential you provide positive answers to the questions asked; in this situation negatives or reservations are particularly likely to remove you from contention. In addition, it is important to remember your interviewer is unlikely to have more than a very general knowledge of the post, and may be embarrassed by any attempt on your part to embark upon a technical discussion; this properly takes place in the interview with the company.

However, the standard and nature of preliminary screening interviews is very variable and their course may be difficult to predict; they are dependent upon the experience and expertise of the staff of the recruitment company.

Approach such an interview well prepared and anticipating the need to be flexible in your response – to ‘think on your feet’. This is most effectively accomplished if you have already ‘thought through’ your whole approach to the interview and rehearsed the different types of question that may be asked – especially any that present difficulties.

Finally, if all goes well, you may find that you are being provided with some very useful information about the employer company and its requirements, and even about the ‘personalities’ you are likely to meet at subsequent stages of the selection process! This should not be surprising, if you recall the objective of the recruitment company, a candidate who shows insight into the company and its requirements is likely to make a favourable impression.

NB –It is important to remember that an Executive Search or Recruitment Consultant can be a useful guide to help you gain information and to assess your progress as you advance through further interviews with the company.

2.6 The Job Interview

In all probability, potential employers or their representatives will have drawn up a Person Specification or ‘Profile’ of their preferred candidate; this is likely to include the following:

- A list of specific areas of knowledge, skills and experience (including education and qualifications, career progression and responsibilities)
- Aptitudes and special abilities, (e.g. intelligence, interpersonal and management skills, and their application)
- Personal attributes (e.g. drive, enthusiasm, maturity, leadership qualities, compatibility with other team members, stability under pressure)

This ‘Profile’ may take the form of a list of desirable qualities, against which a score is entered for each candidate. Whether or not such a list exists, you should be aware of the necessity to demonstrate that your skills and strengths match their requirements or needs.

Objectives of the Interviewer

The interviewer’s task is to find (i.e. predict) the right person for a particular job. By the end of the interview the interviewer will need to be convinced that the answer to the following two fundamental questions is in the affirmative:

- **Can** this candidate do the job?
- **Will** this candidate do the job?

Can is about career history: Qualifications, experience, knowledge, expertise, skills.

Will is about personality: attitudes, motivation, maturity, qualities of leadership, stability.

The only way the interviewer can find answers to these questions is to investigate and assess you, in the context of your work history.

By this means, the interviewer will hope to gain the assurance that you have both the ability and the qualities required to do the job, the motivation to do it well, and your personality and operating style will be compatible with the rest of the staff.

Objectives of the Interviewee

Your task is to convince the interviewer that you can and will do the job.

Your purpose, in preparing for an interview, is to anticipate what the interviewer is looking for; during the interview you have to show how well you match the qualities (you predict) they will have selected when drawing up a 'profile' of their preferred candidate.

Convincing the employer of your suitability is achieved by means of an ordered, functional presentation of your skills, experience, expertise, achievements, performance levels, positive attributes and motivation.

It is likely that, at an early stage in the interview, the interviewer will invite you to talk about yourself or your career. In answer to this type of open-ended invitation, you must be prepared to respond with a rehearsed response of about 3 minutes' duration.

The emphasis in your rehearsed presentation should be on your achievements and strengths, both in terms of experience gained and the skills and personal qualities offered.

Management of an Interview

A 'model' interview can be expected to progress through five phases, each phase requiring a particular technique on the part of the candidate. It is helpful to use this basic plan as a framework for your preparation.

At the same time, it is important to realise that few people have been trained in the art of interviewing, and you should be prepared for the possibility of an interview being apparently unstructured and without organisation. In these circumstances, you will need – subtly- to participate in the management of the interview.

In a well-structured interview, the initial questions are likely to be quite general in nature, becoming more specific as the interviewer probes to obtain more detail; this is known as the funnelling technique.

For example, the interviewer will probably begin with a broad, open-ended question designed to get you to talk fairly freely ('Tell me something about...'). Information that is of interest will be followed up as the interviewer focuses on areas he or she wants to explore more fully. ('You say you re-organised and simplified the....; how did you accomplish that?'). A good interview will include a series of 'funnels', designed to examine various topics in depth.

Apart from questions designed to check factual information, e.g. 'Your name is....?' 'You started work at....?', closed questions (i.e. ones that can be answered either 'yes' or 'no') will be avoided by the experienced interviewer. If you get this sort of questioning, it is likely to be for one of two reasons:

- You are talking too much and the interviewer wants to shut you up, perhaps to introduce a new topic;
- The interviewer is untrained

At regular intervals the good interviewer will summarise, e.g. 'From what you have said so far, it seems that you have.... Is that correct?' This will allow you to correct a wrong impression. It also gives you the opportunity to substantiate and expand upon what you have already said.

Although it is to be expected that the interviewer will generally lead the conversation, there is no reason why the interviewee should not take a turn, when appropriate. If the interviewer is untrained, you can assist by asking questions yourself, so taking some responsibility for directing the course of the interview. For example, you can provide a way out of closed questions by offering to expand upon some 'Yes' or 'No' answers by adding 'Perhaps I should explain that...'

Irrespective of the skills of the interviewer, the responsibility for making an interview successful rests, at least in half measure, with you and your ability to treat it, not as an interrogation, but – to some extent – as a conversational exchange.

Dialogue is created by referring questions back to the interviewer; e.g. you may ask if you should elaborate or provide additional detail on a particular topic.

This approach is a means of directing the interviewer's attention to subjects that are of significance to you. It also enables you to elicit the interviewer's real line of interest, and not waste time or sacrifice empathy by leading them up a blind alley!

Success at interview is more likely to be achieved if you treat the interview as you would like to be treated yourself, if the roles were reversed, i.e. listen attentively, be receptive to what is said, and respond appropriately. An attitude that is too passive is likely to result in a self-presentation lacking in confidence.

An interview is a unique and unrepeatable opportunity for you to project your strengths; it is up to you to use that opportunity to maximum advantage.

3. PREPARING FOR INTERVIEWS

3.1 Background Information

It pays to do the preparatory work for an interview as early as possible and not leave it to the last minute.

Research as much information as you can find regarding:

- (a) The Organisation/Company
 - Its business, markets, networks
 - Earnings, growth, turnover
 - Products, services etc

Obtain the maximum amount of information from and 'contact' who might have introduced you, and try to get hold of some company literature, brochures, annual reports etc (phone the secretary or the receptionist and ask for copies)

Find out as much as possible on the business grapevine; what reputation the company has among its competitors, clients, customers; talk to people conduct some research interviews, makes some company searches, scan the press and journals for information.

(b) The particular job:

- Its scope, responsibilities, duties
- Chain of authority, reporting channels
- Salary range – look at adverts for comparable or similar jobs elsewhere
- Previous incumbent – reasons for leaving

Try to discover why the opening exists: is the vacancy due to promotion, retirement, termination, or expansion? If you learn for example, that there have been ten different people in the job within the last year, you might wish to ask yourself whether you want to be the eleventh!

(c) The Interviewer:

- Position, function, responsibility
- Personality, enthusiasm, dislikes etc

3.2 Questions and Answers

Prepare and rehearse your answers to the three key questions (described in section 5 of this information guide).

You may find it useful to draw up an agenda of matters you wish to have covered in an interview, i.e. points you want to 'get across' and information you require.

From the time an appointment is fixed to the time you appear on the scene for the interview, keep talking to people to discover as much advance information as you can.

Finally, and obviously, do ensure that you get sufficient rest the night before an interview.

3.3 Your Appearance

The occasion involves high stakes; the business community is mainly conservative and, while individuality of style may help promote your image, no credit will be gained from extremes or eccentricities of dress.

Male or female, conformity is denoted by a sober suit (darker for men than for women) but preferably one that has been worn a few times, so it is familiar and comfortable. Attention to detail is vital; dark clothing will show up hairs or dandruff on the collar! Fingernails must be clean and shoes polished. Check beforehand for any fraying of cuffs or collars, for hemlines that may require stitching and for holes or ladders in stockings / tights.

Also avoid taking too much baggage to an interview, e.g. briefcase, overcoat, umbrella, newspaper, handbag, shopping. Think ahead and minimise what you carry. A cluttered presentation does not help a professional image.

Remember to wear a watch. It will prove very useful if you have to undertake any psychometric tests or make a presentation.

Remember also to have a handkerchief or tissues and females remember to have spare pair of stockings / tights with you.

3.4 The Preliminaries

Be sure:

- 1) You know the exact location of your destination
- 2) You arrive in good time (15-30 minutes before the interview is due):
 - Not only to avoid being late or giving the appearance of being rushed, but more importantly so that you can achieve composure and sense the atmosphere before you meet the interviewer
- 3) You know the interviewer's title and name and how to pronounce it!
 - If unsure ask the receptionist or secretary beforehand
- 4) You take with you a slim document case containing
 - A good pen or pencil and notepad
 - Your CV and a spare copy and if appropriate
 - Your 'portfolio' of work examples
 - Certificates and/or open references

Arrival 15-30 minutes before the appointed time often provides a research opportunity. While sitting in the foyer or reception area of a company, you can:

- Talk to the Receptionist / Telephonist
 - Examine the company notice boards
 - Look at the display/boards of the company's products and activities
 - Read the company house magazine and/or its public relations literature
 - Observe the nature of the interpersonal relationships in the establishment
 - If appropriate, spend the first 15 minutes before going to reception taking a brief walk around the premises in order to pick up information on the nature of the workshops, the quality of the offices, housekeeping etc; these can be important clues to the character of an operation
 - Use the facilities if there are some visible in the reception area
- 5) In addition, remember to:
- Turn off your mobile phone
 - Have your list of questions ready to hand

If you are asked to fill in an application form prior to being interviewed, make sure you have access to all of the required information. If you do not, offer to complete it at home and post it to the interviewer. You should try to avoid filling out application forms in waiting rooms. If you have been invited to attend an interview without being asked to submit an application form, you are entitled to expect to be interviewed without further ado; completing an application form may serve to screen you out of consideration before you even get your foot inside the door of the interview room.

Finally, as you will have done all your preparations in advance, compose yourself by remembering positive aspects of your background.

Make sure that you feel confident and good about yourself before entering an interview room; your interviewers will respond to how you feel.

4. THE COURSE OF THE INTERVIEW

In preparing for an interview, it is helpful to plan according to the following 'phase' sequence. As already indicated, this pattern is not invariably followed, but it provides a useful model.

- Phase 1 After some introductory 'small talk', the interviewer usually leads by giving an overview of the organisation and the job under discussion.
- Phase 2 It is then the candidate's turn to respond – usually to an invitation to tell the interviewer something about him or herself.
- Phase 3 Discussion and Questions usually follow related to the presentation given in Phase 2, often involving a discussion of personal factors, motivation, operating styles etc
- Phase 4 Terms and conditions are then tabled, some being for discussion, others being of the 'take it or leave it' variety
- Phase 5 The candidate is offered the opportunity to put any questions before the meeting is concluded

Phase 1

The Overview

Handling 'the jitters' may not constitute so much of a problem if it is realised that nervousness and tension may be experienced as much by the interviewer as by yourself.

Be on the alert therefore for any chance to ease the tension by your attitude and behaviour:

- A handshake of equal pressure
- Let the interviewer make the running with the small talk, respond appropriately, but don't protract the exchange or be tempted into being facetious
- Sit when and where indicated (not before), get comfortable and at ease

- Remember to place your bottom firmly on the back of the seat, this will prevent you from fidgeting during the interview and present a confident image
- Deal with distractions, don't ignore them. If for example, you find yourself seated in direct sunlight, move your position; if there is more than one interviewer, position yourself so that you can establish eye contact with everyone

Have your CV at hand; ensure that the interviewer has a copy (that is why you should bring a spare)

On the other hand, don't:

- Lean on your interviewer's desk
- Touch, move or read things on the desk
- Sprawl in your chair
- Fidget or gesticulate

If, as expected, the interviewer leads off with information about the company and the vacancy, listen attentively and try to retain what is said. It may be helpful to jot down a note about anything that may require clarification, or to mark relevant points on your CV that you will wish to emphasise in your presentation. Be perceptive of the problems, requirements, likes, dislikes and enthusiasms etc that are revealed so that you will be in a position to respond appropriately. The interviewer will expect you to remember what has been said, and whatever you say subsequently will be cross-referenced in the interviewer's mind with what he or she has already told you.

Once the interviewer has come to the end of the introduction, you will probably be invited to say something about yourself; this is the 'green light' for entering Phase 2 of the interview.

It sometimes happens that, instead of providing the introduction, the interviewer asks whether you would like to start by saying something about yourself. It is safest to suggest that it 'may help you to focus your thinking' if, first, you could be given some information about the job opportunity. This may not always work, however, and you find that you have to immediately launch into your prepared presentation (i.e. Phase 2) Do not forget to ask for relevant information about the position later in the interview (the checklist that you have prepared can usefully be referred to at that stage).

Phase 2

Talking About Yourself

Your presentation should comprise an outline of your main attributes and functional capabilities. Historical facts can be used, but only as a means of leading into and highlighting the important areas of your achievements, expertise or skills.

This is your opportunity to impress with your competence and confidence. As said before, be interruptible and don't be afraid to throw in a question or two to elicit the line of interest.

Throughout the interview, but particularly whilst you are making your presentation, watch the 'body language' reactions to what you are saying, facial expressions, gestures etc; a sequence of rapid head nods are a signal that the interviewer wishes to speak, whilst obvious glances at a watch indicate that you are 'going on' for far too long. Check before proceeding further, whether 'this is the sort of information required', in case you are off on the wrong track.

Deal with distractions – don't compete with them. If, for example, interviewers answer the phone, sign letters or cheques whilst you are talking, say politely and pleasantly, 'I see that you are very busy. Is it convenient to carry on or would it be better to meet at another time?' This will hopefully bring their attention back to the interview.

By responding to the invitation to talk about yourself with a comprehensive account of your achievements and skills, you should enable your interviewer to begin the 'funnelling' process. If you ask the occasional question, you should be able to continue your presentation, with the focus on those topics likely to be of particular interest to the interviewer.

If, in response to your check questions, the interviewer indicates which areas you should enlarge upon, follow the lead and stick to that topic; be on your guard against going off at a tangent. Use eye contact and body language clues to check that you are on the right lines.

If, on the other hand, you are given a free reign, it is advisable to seize the opportunity to concentrate on your strongest functional competencies, as they relate to the requirements or needs of the company, as disclosed in Phase 1 of the interview, or researched by you beforehand.

The following questions can help to reveal where the interviewer's interest lies:

'Does that answer your questions satisfactorily?'

'Shall I give you more details concerning...?'

'Is there any other aspect you would like me to cover?'

'Would you like me to tell you about another aspect of my experience?'

As a general rule, if questions are put in a rather generalised form, you can afford to be expansive in the way you answer. If, on the other hand, the questions are detailed and specific, your answers should be brief and to the point.

Realise that Phase 2 of the interview should provide the opportunity for a self-promotional marketing exercise: this is not the time for undue modesty any more than for extravagant claims to fame. Sell yourself but do not brag; you should aim to present yourself in the best light possible, seeking constantly to focus and re-focus the interviewer's attention on your strongest functional areas.

Throughout your presentation, therefore, be natural, be yourself. In appropriate circumstances, don't be afraid to turn the question, e.g. 'This is the way I solved the stock holding problem, I don't know whether you have similar problems?'

Be aware of a possible time restraint upon your presentation. An interview for a middle management vacancy can usually be expected to last for the best part of an hour, but a high level executive job could take several hours. Pre-planning your presentation and timing your rehearsal of it, could be critical if you are to put across all your material in a balanced manner (remember how often the answer to the last question on the examination paper had to be rushed?) .

Plan for each interview and if you know in advance that the interview involves taking lunch, order simple, easy to eat food (it's so easy to have accidents with peas, soups or spaghetti type dishes) and don't drink more than you can take without blunting sharpness of mind.

Phase 3

The Funnelling Process

It would be ideal, of course, if you could simply confine yourself to a presentation of your functional abilities, thereby imposing your own pre-planned pattern and sequence on the interview. But you are almost certain to be asked about other areas, not strictly related to your functional abilities or work accomplishments. You have to be just as prepared therefore, in Phase 3 of the interview, to deal with personal and sensitive questions, and matters concerning feelings rather than facts, conjecture rather than history.

In dealing with these, the following precepts may be found helpful

- Listen to the question and understand it before answering; if it is not clear, repeat it aloud to ensure you have heard it correctly; if you don't understand the question, ask for further clarification
- Think before answering: don't be afraid of silence for a short while; use it to select the relevant information.
- Answer briefly and positively:
 - never take more than a minute or so to answer
 - avoid all negative connotations or admissions
 - never volunteer unnecessary or irrelevant extras
- If in difficulty, say so and ask for time to think; it is better to ask to be allowed to come back to the question later on than to prevaricate.
- If you find yourself put under pressure from embarrassing, awkward or sensitive questions, try to re-focus the interviewer's attention on positive aspects – your success factors, areas of competence; do not allow 'negatives' to be dwelt upon.

An experienced interviewer will be asking personal questions for the purpose of establishing your motivational drives – to discover 'what makes you tick'. It is not so much the content of your answer that matters as what it reveals in breadth of thinking, enthusiasm, sense of fulfilment and so on.

In answering questions about your personal life, the opportunity to point the relationship to your work-centred skills or interests should not be neglected.

In talking about your hobbies, for example, it will be a plus point if you can show how carpentry provides you with 'the creative outlet you need'; or sailing with 'the feelings of independence'; or sport with 'the sense of competition'.

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In talking about your hobbies, for example, it will be a plus point if you can show how carpentry provides you with 'the creative outlet you need'; or sailing with 'the feelings of independence'; or sport with 'the sense of competition'.

These factors corroborate the claims you have made regarding your functional abilities in (respectively) introducing new ideas, concepts, and designs; problem-solving or trouble shooting; or breaking into new markets. Such answers are bound to score over the simple, perhaps uninteresting, recitation of pure facts, because particularly relevant dimensions and insights reinforce previously related attributes.

An interviewer may try to push you into a stress situation in order to observe how you cope with it. It is not unusual to be faced with fairly insistent questioning on some sensitive matter; the aim is to unnerve you so that you reveal something negative about yourself.

For example, you can be fairly certain if you are invited to expound upon your strengths, it is merely a prelude to being questioned about your weaknesses. It would be fatal to lose composure in such a situation. The key factor in answers to such challenges is the ability to turn negatives into positives, and disadvantages into advantages.

Thus, faced with the question 'What do you consider your main weakness to be?' – it would be pointless just to say 'Intolerance'; that simply highlights a negative. The opportunity should be seized to point out a positive factor such as what you do about the fault, because this will command much more interest than the admission of the weakness, for example:

'Some of my friends tell me that I am rather intolerant. I must admit I don't suffer fools gladly. So I try always to stay calm and to identify the reason for my irritation and this usually makes it possible to sort out the problem in some way or other, improving relationships and with any luck, gearing for better performance in the future.'

As there's no such thing as the perfect human, it's only realistic to admit to some imperfection. What you do about it, however, can convert the negative into a positive, in terms of interview assessment. It also serves to nullify the stress of the questioning; and if ever the questioning about some negative aspect becomes too insistent, or personally sensitive, a way should be found to re-focus attention on some functional area of competence, for example:

'if it hadn't been for a little intolerance, I would never have succeeded in...' (and then relate the gist of a success story – on an 'if it hadn't been for me' theme)

It is a worthwhile exercise to think through your answer to the above question, as well as similar examples, such as: your greatest success/biggest failure/your greatest satisfaction/disappointment /likes/dislikes; also:

'Tell me about the best person you have ever worked for';

and 'Describe the worst person you have ever worked for'

In tackling the last question bear in mind that you could unwittingly be describing your next boss. So, it will be important to indicate, on the positive side, how you coped with that person's shortcomings.

A further possibility is that a hypothetical question or a problem case is put to you. The 'How would you deal with...?' or the 'What would you do if...?' type of question should be treated with caution. The main rule to observe is never be too dogmatic or one-sided in the solution you propose. This is not to suggest that you should be evasive in answering: it would be prudent, however, to attach some qualification to your answer to take into account any variables or unknown factors that might influence the situation.

Thus, you might preface your answer as follows:

'Depending upon all the circumstances, including factors that are not presently apparent but which may become so when actually dealing with the case/situation/problem...

'I would probably do/suggest/recommend...'

You may be asked your opinion on a matter of religion, politics, economics, industrial relations, social or topical issues etc.

When faced with a 'What are your views on...?' or 'What do you think should be done about...?' type of question – to which the answer is a matter of opinion – it is important to recognise that whatever your views, and however strongly you hold them, it is unwise to ignore or discount 'the other side of the question'.

It is ok to indicate that you hold strong views on the subject, but don't 'Bible-thump', don't be dogmatic, and don't try to lay down the law. It is important that you should be considered fair and open-minded about matters that are debateable. It would be senseless to antagonise an interviewer who happened to hold a view contrary to your own.

Some further typical questions to be expected at interview are contained in Section 6 of this Information Guide. In advance of attending interviews, it will pay to work out answers to those questions that present any difficulty. There will undoubtedly come a time when some unexpected question will throw you off balance; panic sets in when you try to fill the ensuing silence too quickly. It bears repetition: do not be afraid of silence – use it to think before you answer and thus overcome your sense of panic.

Also remember the following tactic which can buy you some thinking time and acknowledge the difficult question by replying, 'That is a difficult question' or 'What an interesting question, I need a little time to consider that.'

Phase 4

Terms and Conditions

At the beginning of an interview the two parties can be assumed to be in an open frame of mind towards each other; each has the option to accept or reject the other.

It is at the point where an interviewer starts speaking in terms of 'we' or 'us', talks of your future plans, or raises the subject of salary, that the character of the interview undergoes, suddenly, a dramatic and significant change.

Up to this point, the candidate has been the 'seller', whilst the interviewer has been the 'buyer'; but at this juncture, the roles are reversed. In raising the topic of salary, in talking about another meeting with an associate, or including you in future plans, the interviewer is in effect putting aside the option of rejecting you, and is continuing the interview on the basis of considering you in the job. In other words, your interviewer is now in the position of selling a proposition to you.

By contrast, the interview candidate – now projected into the role of 'buyer' – still has both options wide open. You do not have to consider acceptance the only option; you can reject the interviewer's impending offer. A danger at this stage is that of failing to adjust to the changed circumstances and over-selling yourself. This is the time to stop directing the interviewer's attention to your functional skills and abilities, and to desist from the further questions aimed at discovering the interviewer's needs.

In the context of salary negotiation, the realisation of this changed situation can enhance your negotiating stance. Too often the first offer is accepted and salary negotiation is never so much as contemplated. There is no reason to over-price your potential contribution to a prospective employer but, by the same token, undervaluing yourself could be regarded as a sign of weakness. If the opportunity to negotiate is presented, it should be taken up gladly – and enjoyed.

Not all jobs on offer necessarily carry a salary that can be negotiated; (the techniques of negotiating salary are covered in a separate Information Guide) but some general principles are applicable, whether or not the salary is negotiable.

In the first place the topic of salary should be never be introduced by the job applicant – always let the interviewer introduce it – as, indeed they will have to if a job offer is contemplated.

Secondly, if the topic is raised early in the interview, ask for the matter to be deferred until the job has been discussed in detail.

One of the rules regarding salary negotiation is that it should always be considered in relation to the worth of the job which, early on in the interview, cannot be known.

Thirdly, even if an advertised salary (which is not, on the face of it, open to negotiation), never accept an offer on the spot without discussing what else might be built into it – frequency of reviews, rates of increments, other benefits.

There is no reason why 'other irons in the fire' should not be alluded to; 'the higher rates on offer elsewhere' can be pointed out; the statement made that 'non-negotiability' will be expressly taken into account before arriving at a final decision.

Phase 5

Ending the Interview

At the end of an interview:

- (i) You may be asked, 'When would you be available to start?'

There is a danger in showing willingness to start straightaway: it may convey the impression of having no other commitments to attend to, or that you are prepared to ditch any you have for the sake of the new job. You will not be popular (so the thinking could be) if, once you start in 'this' job, you then need time off to attend unfinished business elsewhere. Worse still is that since you are ready to behave in this way now, you could be equally ready to down tools at a moment's notice, whenever you decided to leave this employer for another.

By all means express to prospective employers willingness, for their convenience, to start as soon possible; but if this involves time to 'clear your desk', make sure that interviewers are made aware of your need to fulfil this, or other outstanding commitments.

- (ii) Ending the Interview

To keep the initiative in your own hands, try to reach some understanding with interviewers as to when you may be expected to be informed of the outcome of the interview.

You do yourself an injustice if you allow the 'We'll be in touch' or 'we'll let you know' type of farewell constitute the end of the matter. Point out that you are 'scheduling appointments' and you would not want to timetable appointments then either have to cancel or disappoint the interviewers when they may want to talk to you again.

Pin interviewers down – at least to gain yourself a valid excuse to contact them if you have not heard by the time, they say they 'will be in touch'.

5. The Three 'Key' Questions

5.1 'Tell me something about yourself'

You can expect to be asked this, or a similar question, during almost all interviews. It may herald Phase 2 of the interview, or it may come right at the beginning of the interview, with an invitation to start the ball rolling. Whenever it comes, you are unlikely to make much of an impression if you cannot give a good account of yourself. Having prepared and rehearsed your 3 minute presentation, there should be no fumbling for words or inexact phraseology.

You should assume that a question of this kind provides your best opportunity to market yourself and present your strengths. This is your chance to set the scene, table your functional competence and areas of expertise, and paint in a background that invites examination in more depth. Typically, your answer should comprise a chronological review of your career, culminating in your most recent job and achievements; the most recent years will always be the most significant and a large proportion of your time should be devoted to them. What you say should enable the interviewer to establish an impression and draw up a plan for the remainder of the interview.

Three minutes should be just long enough for you to table the key points of your career; it will enable you to give some dimension to your CV which is probably all the information your interviewer has about you; colour and reasoning can be superimposed upon the steps of your career, thus leaving achievement pointers that you want to be picked up,. Three minutes should be short enough to not bore the interviewer or cause worry as to when there may be a chance to ask the next question, but remember to watch for an interviewer's non-verbal responses and ask check questions if necessary.

Providing you have this short presentation well prepared, you will be able (because you have the key points about each stage of your career clearly in mind) to come in on cue with the appropriate part of your presentation if the interviewer turns out to be someone who jumps in with questions like 'why did you leave Bloggs & Co, and what happened then?'

If you have already had an introductory overview from the interviewer about the job opportunity and the company, you may need to adapt the order of the emphasis of your presentation to highlight relevant points but, provided your account is comprehensive, you should not need to depart from it to any great extent.

It will pay to rehearse your presentation using a recorder, listen to it, polish and refine it, to achieve the best possible review for any employer.

5.2 'Why are you looking for another job?'

This is, perhaps, the trickiest of the three key questions. To achieve credibility, you will need to provide a convincing explanation of why you are searching for another job.

The answer to this question needs to be water-tight; brief yet comprehensive.

The golden rule for answering this question is – keep your answer short! Stick to ‘essentials:

- An explanation of the circumstances
- The consequence of those circumstances
- The course of action you are taking as a result

Further points to be considered:

If a ‘personality clash’ with your present boss is the reason for looking for another job, it is best to admit if pressed, as long as you do not indulge in character assassination.

You may very well have to justify your operating style/management philosophy/outlook to the interviewer, you are likely to be respected if you make a reasonable case for your position and ensure that the interviewer understands that you and your past/present boss ‘agree to differ’.

5.3 ‘What sort of a job are you looking for’

Interviewers need to be able to match up the job requirements with what you have to offer. No one wants to hire a “mistake” or a square peg for a round hole. Not unnaturally, therefore, they need to make a thorough assessment of your qualities – professional and personal.

Your answer to this question will be interpreted in a company oriented context of your ability to satisfy the company needs. Your needs are of no interest at all to the interviewer, other than they coincide with the company’s requirements.

The best way to answer this key question is to invert the statement prepared in answer to Question 1 and translate that answer into the terms of the job under consideration and the contribution you wish to make to it.

In the initial stages of the interview, take care not to narrow the range of options that may be available to you. If, for example you have both a technical and general management experience, give an either / or reply – unless you already know precisely what the nature of the opportunity is going to be.

6. Other Questions You May Be Asked

6.1 General Questions

- Why did you leave your last job?
- What have you been doing since you left your last job?
- What do you know about us?
- What do you think you could do for us?
- What would be the first thing you would do if we gave you this job?
- What key things would you want to do within your first 100 days?
- What are your views about relocation?
- What are your strengths?
- What are your weaknesses?

6.2 Employment History

- Are you satisfied with the progress you have made in your career to date?
- What adverse factors have kept you from progressing as fast as you feel you should have done?
- Why have you changed jobs so often?
- Why did you stay with one company for so long?
- How did you like working for your last company?
- To whom were you responsible?
- How did you get along with them?
- Was there ever a personality clash between the two of you?
- In what way were you best able to contribute?
- What criticisms have been made about your work? By Whom? and were the criticisms justified?
- How do you motivate your subordinates?

- How do you develop your subordinates?
- Which of the positions you have held over the years have you enjoyed the most? and Why?
- What exactly did you do in your last job?
- What did you like best / least about it?
- Which responsibilities did you handle on your own? and as a member of a team?
- From which people you have worked for did you learn most?
- Will you give me instances of the most difficult problem(s) or frustration(s) you encountered in your last position? How did you resolve them?
- Have you ever failed at any job you tried to do?
- What are your ambitions for the future?
- Where do you see yourself in 5 years time?
- Why do you want to get into this company / field/ job?
- Why does this company interest you?
- Did you have to work long hours in your last job? or travel much? How did you feel about that?
- How did your partner / family feel about it?
- Will you be able to work with and influence other functions within the company?
- Most of the people who will be reporting to you will be far older / younger than you are. How will you handle this?
- Don't you think you are rather over qualified for the job?
- What experience have you in?
- There are doubtless many good things you could say about yourself, but what is the best thing of all you would say?
- What else do you think I should know about you?

6.3 Biographical

Education

- What have been:
 - Your best subjects
 - Your most difficult ones
 - Those you liked most / least
- What subjects did you take at advanced level? Why did you choose those subjects?
- Did you have any part – time vacation jobs when at college / university?
- Did you like school / college/ university?
- What do you think were the benefits of your university education?
- What outside studies have you been involved in since leaving university?
- Why didn't you go to university?

Family Background

- Tell me something about your family and background?
- Whom do you take after most – your father or your mother?
- From whom have you inherited your strongest characteristics?

Personal Philosophy – Outlook and Attitudes

- Do you regard yourself as an introvert or an extrovert?
- What are your main likes / dislikes?
- Tell me about the most difficult decision you have ever had to make?
- What international / national / local issues concern you most?
- What do you find to be the most frequently voiced criticism(s) about yourself? Do you think they are justified?
- What type of person irritates you the most?
- How do you cope with people you don't respect?
- What would you do in the event of :

- A disagreement with your bosses?
- A conflict between your employer and your staff?
- A conflict between your and an employer's interests?
- Which do you regard as the most important, job satisfaction or salary? and why?

Community, Social and Leisure Activities

- What social / civil / community activities are you involved with?
- Why are you interested in these activities?
- What responsibilities are involved?
- How much time do they take up?
- What do you think you have achieved by taking up this activity?
- How much / how often do you entertain at home friends / business associates?
- How would you describe your best friends?
- How would they describe you?
- What do you usually do together?
- How far do you think it justifiable to mix business and pleasure?
- What are your hobbies?
- What television programmes do you watch?
- What kind of reading interests you?
- What is your view of social networking sites e.g. Facebook etc

6.4 Some "Trap" Questions

- If you were choosing someone for this position, what kind of person would you select?
- What makes you think you are suitable for this position?
- Isn't this a career switch for you?
- Isn't this position below your ability level?
- If you could have your choice of any job, what one would you choose?

- What does success mean to you?
- You don't appear to have the technical knowledge / experience required for this job- so how could you handle it?
- Are you considering other positions at present? If so how does this one compare?
- Would you accept this position if it is offered to you?

6.5 Personal or Unlawful Questions

The fact that some questions could be deemed to contravene the Equality Act 2010 etc will not necessarily stop them being asked. Indeed some poorly trained interviewers, particular line managers may not be aware of the potential offence.

In any event whilst a company must not for example discriminate on the grounds of age, it is not against the law for them to ask the age of an applicant.

In the end, it is discrimination in selection that is unlawful, and as this will only be established in an industrial tribunal, which you may have little intention of initiating, you should prepared to deal positively with questions on domestic matters, as with any others.

An interviewer may wish to probe your attitudes and motivation, your value judgements, tolerance levels, sense of responsibility and adaptability to changing or difficult circumstances.

Typical questions that you could be asked are:

- How long have you been married?
- Have you been previously married?
- How did your divorce affect your career?
- How many children have you?, How old are they?
- How much time do you spend with your family / partner?
- What activities do you engage in together?
- Does your partner also go to work?
- If you have to relocate, what will your partner's view be?
- What does your partner think of your career goals?
- How would your partner / family react to your being away from home or long periods at a time?

- Do you take work home with you?
- How would your partner / family react to your working long hours / late at the office?
- How is your health?
- Are you currently taking any medication?

7. Questions Which You May Need To Ask

The following provides a checklist of those matters you should normally be aware of before accepting any offer of employment. Information on some will doubtless be discovered through prior research, and more will become evident during the interview process.

It is only in those areas, therefore, where information has not been forthcoming from either of those sources that you should pursue matters further by careful and tactful questioning of the interviewer at the appropriate time.

For the first interview you should have a list of questions ready albeit you may feel only asking a couple of them is appropriate at that stage.

The Job

- Is the job description / specification clearly defined
- Is there a clear statement of the extent of authority, responsibilities and duties?
- How long has the role been in existence?
- Why is the position now vacant?
- How long was the previous incumbent in the position?
- What are the criteria for measurement of success in the job?
- What training and development is available?

The Department

- Who are the people with whom I will be working?
- Are there any growth/ consolidation/ other plans for the department
- What is the relationship of the department to the rest of the company?
- Does the department have its own budget? Who controls it?
- Is there anyone presently on the staff who expected promotion to this position, and is now being bypassed?

The Company

- What's the sales turnover for the company?
- What has been the profit / loss pattern of the company over the last few years?

- What are the company's plans for growth over the next 5 years?
- How does the company view its competitors?

The Package

Are all the details clearly settled?

- Basic salary, Salary review dates?
- Bonus Scheme?
- Pension Scheme?
- Private Health Insurance, Individual, and Partner or Family?
- Car or Car Allowance, fully funded?
- Holiday entitlement
- Sick leave
- Travel. Relocation , Removal Allowances
- Restrictive Covenants?

8. After The Interview

It is helpful to keep records of interviews and interviewers. The desirability of doing so is apparent when a second or subsequent interview is arranged some time after the first, re-establishing rapport with an interviewer depends to an appreciable extent upon accurate memory of the factors that made for a successful first interview.

Once in a situation where several interviews are being attended, confusion and the mixing of memories of people or discussion becomes all too easy. A reliable source or reference for the future becomes imperative after every interview of any significance. This can easily be created by

- Completing and 'interview record'
- Recording additional personal data about your interviewer or an index card
- Attending to

FOLLOW UP ACTION

It can do nothing but good to consolidate the impression left with interviewers by writing to them immediately after interviews to:

- Express gratitude for time and consideration extended to you

- Confirm your continuing interest in the situation
- Elaborate on any aspect that was omitted, or only briefly covered, in the interview

To write back simply to express gratitude would look too much like a ruse to have yourself kept in mind, although this is exactly the desired objective. To write to confirm continuing interest, however, achieves this objective and has an additional advantage. Given such an indication, it is likely that other candidates – whose interest has not been confirmed – will probably take a back place in the interviewer’s rating, even though they may be equally well qualified.

Better still, however, is to provide a new angle, or new information, for the interviewer’s consideration. This is likely to reinforce the advantage over your competitors, providing, firstly, credibility as to your continuing interest, secondly, the opportunity for a further, uninterrupted, presentation of your qualifications for the job. This may well serve to consolidate your position, and may prepare the ground for the next interview.

Finally, if you have reached the stage where references are being asked for, do remember to alert your referees before they are approached.

PS : If you enjoyed reading this guide, why not head over to The rpc Group of Companies Blog Page www.therpcgroup.co.uk/blog where you can view an array of content on Recruitment, HR and Management.

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If you wish to follow me personally (David Beck), my Twitter account handle is [@rpcrecruiter](https://twitter.com/rpcrecruiter).

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Thank you for taking the time to read this guide

Best Regards

David Beck and Anita Searle

Co-Directors

The rpc Group of Companies

