

Postgraduate & Early Career Researcher Series:

Interviews

Congratulations on securing an interview! The employer likes what they've seen on your application and would like to find out more. The interview is your opportunity to convince the employer that you're able to do the job and that you want it. In this tip-sheet we focus on preparing for the interview, what format the interview might take, techniques to use on the day and how to tackle those difficult questions.

Key points to bear in mind as you prepare for your interview are:

- The employer wants to hear examples of previous activities and achievements that *best demonstrate your suitability for the role*
- You should be able to communicate *why you want to work in this organisation* and how your experience so far has led you to this role
- You need to be able to articulate *clearly, concisely and confidently* why you are the best candidate

When you have an interview coming up, book a practice interview with a careers adviser as rehearsing your answers can help you feel more confident about the real thing.

BEFORE THE INTERVIEW

Prepare for the specific role and organisation:
Continue to find out as much as you can:

- Look over the research you did before you submitted your application and do some more! *Don't fall into the trap of thinking your research for your application will be enough. Start afresh and leave enough time to spend a few hours doing further research*
- What are the key areas of expertise the role needs?
Look again at the advert / job description (JD) / person specification (PS) and highlight each competency
- Who are the organisations clients? Who are their competitors? What projects are they working on at the moment?
You'll need to do this for the organisation as a whole as well as the specific department / area you are interviewing for. Look at the organisation strategy and read any profiles of employees on their website
- What changes or issues are their industry / sector facing?

Search the internet for industry / sector news and look at relevant professional bodies / associations

- Can you find out about the individuals that will be interviewing you?
Explore LinkedIn etc / use your network of friends & colleagues. What key topics interest your panel members?

Prepare your specific examples and conversation topics:

Remind yourself of your strengths, abilities and potential – get into a positive mind-set then:

- List out some questions you might be asked
Look at the competencies in JD/PS. Use websites like [Glassdoor](#) and [WikiJob](#) to research questions others have been asked
- Create example responses and practice saying them out loud
Review and update your [STAR](#) stories thinking about the detail – how can you demonstrate the skills and expertise they are looking for?
- Identify topics you might want to talk about in the interview and prepare for them
Print off your application and re-read it,

highlighting areas you might want to talk. Think about your panel members areas of interest. Prepare some questions for your interviewers

Prepare the logistics:

The interview experience is more than just what happens in front of the interviewers:

- Where is the interview taking place? How will you get there?
You should receive directions in your interview pack or email invite. Look it up on a map and plan your route in advance (not on the morning of the interview!)
- Arrive early and build in extra time for delays
Leave extra time and plan alternative routes in case of cancellations, strikes or bad traffic
- Know the name of the person you need to ask for when you arrive
Have the contact details for the reception desk with you in case you need to ring them to let them know you will be late

Prepare to present yourself:

Regardless of the sector, an interview is a formal occasion. You should show respect:

- Dress smartly
For men this usually means wearing a suit and tie. For women it could mean wearing a suit or a smart top with trousers or a skirt, or a dress, with a jacket. If you get there and you feel overdressed – you can remove your tie/jacket. If you arrive and feel under-dressed, it is difficult to become smarter.
- Consider your appearance from head to foot
Make sure your hair (on your head and/or your face!) is neat. Take the time to polish your shoes in advance (not on the morning of the interview!).
- Accessorise professionally
Select a smart-looking bag/handbag to carry the items you need - bring the job advert, your CV and application for reference as well as a digital and hard copy of your presentation if you are giving one.
- Allow yourself time to cool and calm down
If you are running late, call ahead and let them know rather than arrive hot and flustered. Arriving early and using the time to re-read your notes is far better than arriving 5 minutes before and still catching your breath as you enter the room.

INTERVIEW FORMATS

Normally an employer will let you know in advance what the format of the interview will be, but if you don't know it is quite acceptable to request this information.

Face to face:

This is the format most people associate with the word interview:

- This format could be just a single one to one interview or it could be several such interviews following each other with different key people in the organisation
- More often there is a panel interview with three or four people, where each member of the panel asks questions in turn

Alternative formats:

Increasingly employers are using a suite of different interview formats to help filter down their long-lists:

Telephone interview:

- This is generally a first interview, which is followed by a face to face interview or an assessment centre day at a later date.
- It is usually at a pre-arranged time and is structured in the same way as a face to face interview.
 - *Make sure you take the call in a quiet room with your CV / application, plus a pen and paper to write notes.*
 - *It is useful to have notes / bullet points of examples and key points you could talk about. However, be aware of your tone of voice and try not to just read from your notes as it might sound too rehearsed.*
 - *Tips to help self-confidence are to smile whilst talking, stand up and use your hands as you speak, if this comes naturally to you.*

Skype/live video interview:

- Dress as you would for a face to face interview – smartly – and be aware of any items that may be visible in the background.
- Make sure that you have your equipment set up and tested in good time beforehand.
 - *Once you've set up your webcam, consider turning off the box which shows your image as it can become distracting and lead to you glancing off in a different direction. It is*

better to focus on the camera.

- Avoid speaking over anyone by making sure that the person has finished speaking before you answer their question.
- For more useful tips see:
www.jobs.ac.uk/careers-advice/interview-tips/1252/job-interviews-by-skype/

Recorded and Digital Video interview:

These are becoming increasingly popular with employers who receive a high volume of applications.

- You will be sent a link where you access automated questions and are given a time limit in which to answer them.
 - *You will have 15-30 seconds to consider your answer and 60-90 seconds to answer.*
 - *All candidates are asked the same set of questions.*
- Dress and act as smartly as you would for a face to face interview
 - *You will be assessed on your body language and tone of voice as well as the content of your answers*
 - *Remember to keep looking at the camera.*
- Consider your surroundings and lighting
 - *Choose a quiet space where you won't be interrupted*
 - *Ideally sit near a window during the day*

For a light-hearted look at how to tackle digital interviews see: <https://www.hirevue.com/blog/build-blog/how-to-prepare-for-your-hirevue-digital-interview/>

THE INTERVIEW ITSELF

The interviewers want to find out your *motivations, skills, qualities* and *experience* to see if you would be a good fit for the role. The tools at their disposal to do this are:

- Observing you while you are with them
People form their first impression of you within a few seconds – even before you speak.
- Asking a range of questions
They are not trying to “catch you out”, but find out about you. Be honest in your responses.
- Asking you to give a presentation
As well as being an insight into your thoughts on a particular topic, this gives the employer information about your ability to prepare and deliver a presentation (to time), communicating

with a potentially non-expert or mixed audience

- Giving you small assignments to perform
This is particularly used if there is a specific skill that is important for the role that they want you to demonstrate (e.g. read and précis 3 articles in a restricted timeframe)
- Asking for feedback from everyone you came into contact with
Use your initial meeting with the reception staff to practice a big smile and confident ‘hello’; this will set you up for a positive entrance. Remember that anyone might be asked for their opinion of you. If you are friendly and polite compared to a grumpy, rude candidate, this could tip the balance in your favour.

Non-verbal communications:

First impressions are important and will stick in the minds of the interviewers.

- Take time to “ground” yourself before going into the interview:
 - *Use the toilet while you are waiting – you may not think you need it, but nerves can unsettle the stomach!*
 - *Check your appearance – make sure you are still looking professional after your journey*
 - *Take deep, calming breaths before entering the room*
- Go in with your head held high, shoulders back, and a relaxed smile on your face
- The interviewer(s) may offer to shake your hand. Reply with a firm, but not bone-crushing handshake. It's not a grip contest but a limp handshake may give the impression that you are not interested or are unassertive.
- Take a seat when invited to do so. Sit up in a comfortable but alert position without folding your arms as this can be seen as defensive.
- Try not to fidget. If you know this is going to be difficult for you, try practicing beforehand.
One strategy to help you can be to bring out a pen and pad and make notes on this as constructive activity rather than fidgeting.
- Accept the offer of a glass of water if offered.
It is polite and, whilst you may not initially be thirsty, once you've answered a couple of questions you probably will be!
- Maintain good eye contact with everyone present, but focus on the person asking you the question. An occasional smile will make you

appear friendly and help with the nerves

- Employers are looking for enthusiasm and this is often conveyed by body language, posture, and tone of voice as well as positive answers. If you are enthusiastic about something – let it show!

Warm up questions:

These act as an introduction to the interview before the more in-depth questions are asked.

Don't be fooled into thinking they can be answered quickly, you need to give them thought.

Examples include:

- *Why have you applied for this role?*
- *Why do you want to work in this organisation?*
- *Talk me through your CV, highlighting skills and experience relevant to this position.*
- *Tell me about yourself.*
- *Why did you choose your PhD topic?*
- Prepare for these in advance so you can present a well-structured, meaningful walk through your CV and career history to date, pulling out the relevant pieces of information for the role.
- Do not ramble on, mentioning everything that comes to mind from your 'life story' – prepare a succinct story
- If you are making a transition into a different career or role which isn't directly related to your research, you can summarise why this is and what you have transferable skills you have that make you a good candidate (keep it brief; save the detail for the later questions).

Competency-based questions:

These help the employer understand how you react and deal with different situations, as well as your level of experience.

They are probing for an example of when you have used the competency. These questions often use the phrases below:

- *Can you give me an example of when you have (e.g. led a team). What was (e.g. the hardest) thing about that for you?*
- *Tell me about a time when you (e.g. had a difficult problem). How did you (e.g. solve) it.*
- *Describe a time when you (e.g. dealt with conflict). How did you (e.g. resolve it)?*
- Develop and practice structuring your answer

using the **STAR** technique for this type of question :

S = situation

T = task (your objective)

A = action (how you did it)

R = result (quantify it where possible)

Strength-based questions:

Strength based interviewing has its foundations in positive psychology and is growing in popularity.

Organisations (such as Aviva, Standard Life, BAE Systems, Ernst & Young, Unilever, Microsoft, Barclays International and Capgemini) use it to focus in on what you are good and enjoy doing. The theory is that people who recognise and use their strengths in their jobs, perform better and enjoy their roles more.

Strengths based interviews are more difficult to prepare for. Questions might include:

- *When are you at your best?*
- *What motivates you?*
- *What tasks are always bottom of your to-do list?*
- Take time to reflect on what your strengths are and what tasks you genuinely enjoy (and don't enjoy!) doing.
- Look at the employer's website for clues about their culture, their core values and think about the strengths the role would require from someone to be done well.
- For more information see:
www.assessmentday.co.uk/strengths-based.htm

Technical / Commercial Awareness questions:

These are questions which test your knowledge, interest and commitment to the job and the industry for which you are applying.

Sometimes you will be given a technical interview as well as a more general interview. Questions might be along the lines of:

- *What is the biggest challenge facing our industry at the moment*
- *Describe the physical processes on X-ray interaction with tissue*
- *Tell me your views on current legislative standard affecting the Pharmaceutical industry*

- It is always important to attempt to answer these questions, even if you don't know the answer. The interviewer wants to understand your thought process and how you might find out information you don't know.
- Increase your commercial awareness by keeping up to date with current industry trends and developments.

Read the business sections of papers, news websites and sector professional body websites.

Difficult Questions:

Often candidates dread questions that ask for a seemingly negative answer, or are about their personal attributes and ambitions.

Employers are looking for self-awareness and a commitment to personal development. Example questions might be:

- *What is your biggest weakness?*
- *What is your greatest strength / achievement?*
- *What sort of training do you think you would need to do this role?*
- *Where do you want to be in 5 years time? Where do you see yourself in 3 / 10 years?*
- Avoid trite answers to common questions – think your answer through and be genuine.

The weakness question:

- *Don't choose something that is crucial to the job as a weakness to talk about.*
- *If you have examples of where you have taken the initiative to improve a skill or quality, this is a good time to bring it up. Perhaps you aren't a confident public speaker so attended some training and have taken opportunities to practice to build your confidence.*
- *Many people answer a question about weakness with 'I'm a perfectionist'. Simply putting a positive spin on the question doesn't really answer the question. If you do decide to use this example:*
 - *give specific examples of what is negative (e.g. do you miss deadlines because you want everything to be perfect?)*
 - *how you are addressing it (e.g. learning to apply the 80:20 rule and issue things that are "fit for purpose" rather than perfect)*
 - *as well as what is positive about it (e.g. I still do a thorough proofread of things)*

Questions for the Employer:

You will probably be invited to ask questions at the end of the interview.

Employers can use this as an opportunity to gain an insight into what is important / a burning issue for you. It is also an opportunity for you to "interview" them – but be careful that you do not come across as arrogant.

- Try to have some pre-prepared questions that show you are interested, eager and wanting to add value to the team, not needy or demanding! Potential areas might include:
 - *Asking about development opportunities: "I'm keen to deliver well in this role, what opportunities for training/development are there?"*
 - *The challenges/scope of the role (if they haven't asked you about this): "What do you think will be the biggest challenge of the role?"*
 - *The culture of the organisation "I'm interested to see that there's a large coffee room. Do people tend to meet up and chat over coffee at specific times of the day? I've found this a really interesting way to improve informal communications and idea generation..."*
- If questions occur to you during the interview, now is the time to ask them
- **Do not ask questions about salary or annual leave** because it might appear that these are your main priorities. You can negotiate salary if you receive an offer.
- Be prepared to have a conversation with the panel at this point. This can be a more free-flowing section of the interview where you can talk about things that are on your agenda / things you would genuinely like to know the interviewers views on. This can be an opportunity to talk "as equals" and/or check you'd be happy in the role
- If you have no questions to ask because you have had them answered ahead of the interview (e.g. you have asked questions ahead of the interview either of the panel member(s) or know people already working in the group and have asked them), state that that is the case, and close with something along the lines of:
 - *Ask about their decision making process: "When will you be making your decision?"*

When might I know the outcome of this application?"

- You can finish up this section by creating a statement summarising your excitement / attributes / suitability for the role - especially if there's something that you think is really important but they haven't touched on. E.g.:
 - *"I don't have any questions, but would just like to thank you for the opportunity to come speak with you. I'm really excited about this role and I have enjoyed meeting you all today."*

Closing out the interview:

Be aware – your parting words and actions count!

Many panels will talk about you informally once you have left the room, perhaps while you are being escorted back to reception by one of the team. So remember:

- Your final words and non-verbal communications will be fore-most in their mind and can contribute a lot to the last impression you leave the panel with. Make sure it is positive!
- Always thank the interviewers for their time / consideration
- Make sure you let them know that you are still really interested in the job if you've not already done so!
- Take your cue from the interviewer in terms of shaking hands
- Remember to smile as you leave

Leaving after the Interview:

Once the interview is over, beware that you are still "on display"

It is normal to give a sigh of relief once the interview is over. However, remember that you are still communicating (verbally and non-verbally) with your future employer until you have left the building.

- Although it is unlikely that formal notes will be made about you during this time, people will chat about how you were outside of the interview environment
- Try to be natural and relaxed – this is a good time for you to talk informally with the people around you. Think about how you would feel working with them. You have to decide if you want the job if they offer it to you

- Try not to make any silly remarks / undo all the good work you have done in the "formal" part of the interview
- If there is an opportunity to meet the rest of the team and/or look around a bit – make sure you do. Can you see yourself working there? Can you see yourself working in that team? How much do you want it? Enthuse if you're excited!

After the Interview:

You could follow up with a 'thank you' email if you feel it is appropriate but this isn't necessary.

If you are successful:

- Congratulations!
- Remember it is often possible to negotiate on salary – especially if you have a rationale / evidence of why you want your employer to improve their offer to you
- Find out about terms and conditions and any benefits you may have prior to / shortly after starting
- Ask about things such as travel allowances, relocation allowances, parking costs etc

If you are unsuccessful:

- Sorry you didn't succeed this time, however...
- Remember that it was good practice for future interviews and your preparation can be used again for the next interview.
- If the employer offers feedback, always take it as it's useful to know the reasons you weren't successful and what you can work on next time.
- If the employer doesn't offer feedback, get in touch and ask. You may be pleasantly surprised with the positive feedback and it will help build your confidence for next time.
- If the decision was based on a candidate having more experience, this is out of your control and there will be a role where you are the one who is the best fit.

Potential Interview Questions:

The following list of questions can help you with your preparation.

Warm Up Questions

- Tell me about yourself.
- What are your key strengths?
- What are your weaknesses?
- Tell me something about yourself that I wouldn't know from reading your application.
- What have you gained from your previous experiences that would make you useful to us?
- What about yourself do you want to improve?

Team Work and Interpersonal Skills

- What would your team mates say you needed to improve about yourself?
- Give me a specific example of something you did that helped build enthusiasm in others.
- Give an example of when you had to work with someone who was difficult to get along with. Why was this person difficult? How did you handle them?
- What qualities do you have that make you an effective team member? Can you give me examples?
- Can you tell me about a situation where building strong relationships with people was important in achieving your goals.
- Can you describe a situation where you have had to resolve a conflict within a team?

Prioritising and Organising

- Recall a time when you had to complete a complex project. What steps did you take to prepare for and finish the project? How happy were you with the outcome? What would you have done differently if given the chance?
- Describe a situation in which a number of things to be done at the same time. How did you handle it? What was the result?
- Give me an example of when you set yourself a goal that took a lot of organisation on your part to achieve it.
- Can you tell me about a situation in which you anticipated a problem early on that saved a lot of work later?
- Tell me about a situation in which your plans for something went wrong. Why did it happen? What did you do? What could you have done to prevent it?
- Describe a decision you have made in which there were a number of variables to take into account.

Problem Solving, Analysis and Creativity

- Describe a difficult problem you had to deal with. How did you approach it?
- Can you give me an example of a situation in which you have had to analyse complex information in order to make a decision? How did you approach it?
- Tell me about a situation in which you had to perform background research before solving a problem. How did you use the research? How did you ensure you hadn't missed something important?
- Describe a situation in which you had to change the way you approached a problem in order to solve it.
- Describe a time when you came up with a creative solution to a problem.
- Describe a time when you have had to overcome several obstacles in order to achieve something.

Decision Making and Judgement

- Can you give me an example of a complex decision you have had to make and how you went about it?
- What is the worst decision you ever made? Why did you make it? What would you do differently now if you had to make the same decision again?
- Can you give me an example of a time when you found it hard to make a decision about something? Why was it difficult? What did you do?
- Describe a time when you had to make a very quick decision and it went wrong. What did you learn?
- If you could go back and change a decision you made in the past, what would it be and why?
- Can you tell me about a time when you have had to make a decision with incomplete information?

Drive and Determination

- Describe a task that you completed that you didn't enjoy. How did you motivate yourself?
- Give an example of a situation in which you had to demonstrate determination in order to succeed.
- Tell me about a situation in which you have had to cope with various setbacks.
- Tell me about something you gave up on. What else could you have done to succeed?
- What sort of tasks do you normally put off doing whenever you can?

- Give me an example of when you delivered more than was expected of you.

Adaptability and Initiative

- Describe a situation where you had to change your approach to a task in order to complete it.
- Can you give an example of a situation when you have had to adapt to an unexpected change?
- Can you give me an example of any tasks or projects you started on your own?
- Tell me about when you completed a task without all the resources that you would have ideally needed.
- Tell me about a time when you improved something using your own initiative.
- Tell me about a time when you have used your free time to gain new skills or knowledge in order to be better at something.

Commercial Awareness and Customer Focus

- Tell me about a recent business news story that you found interesting. Why?
- Can you give me an example of when you have done more than your duty in order to provide a good service to someone?
- What attributes do you have that would instil client confidence? Tell me how you have used them.
- What do you think will be the most important issues facing this sector in the next five years?
- Can you give me an example of when you have sought to understand someone else's job in order to do your job more effectively?
- Are there things that our competitors are doing that we should be worried about?

Leadership

- Describe a situation in which you took responsibility for achieving something.
- What skills have you developed that will make you a good leader?
- Describe a time when you had to change your leadership style.
- How would you describe your leadership style? Can you give me an example of it in practice?
- Tell me about a time when you have spotted and utilised other people's talents.
- Tell me about a time when you had to give feedback to someone on their performance in a task.

Professionalism and Diligence

- What does professionalism mean to you? Can

you give me an example of when you put it into practice?

- Can you think of an example that demonstrates your commitment to integrity and honesty?
- Tell me about something you have done in which it was important to pay attention to detail over a long period. How did you maintain your accuracy?
- Can you describe a task which required a great deal of concentration?
- Give me an example of when you have spoken out against something which you didn't think was right.
- Can you describe a task in which you have had to follow very stringent procedures?

Critical Thinking and Brain Teasers

- What is the best shape for a manhole cover? Why?
- Approximately, how many baby's nappies were used in the UK last year?
- How many hairs are there on a dog?
- How many table tennis balls will fit into a 747 aeroplane?
- How many gents' barbers are there in London?
- What is the angle between the hands on a watch when the time is 3:45?
- How many different ways can you think of to find a needle in a haystack?

Resources and Further Support:

The following resources can help you with your preparation.

- Read the 'Presenting Your Skills to Employers: Be Guided by the STARS' leaflet online or pick up a copy from Employability & Careers: <http://www.surrey.ac.uk/careers/current/leaflets/ets/>
- The AllAboutCareers website www.allaboutcareers.com/careers-advice/interview-tips has useful tips on various different types of interviews.
- Interview skills advice and sample questions: <https://www.how2become.com/resources/interview-skills/>
- Book a 1 to 1 appointment or a practice interview with a Careers Adviser by calling 01483 689001.