**WHAT IS AN INTERVIEWER SEEKING?**

Three main areas employers typically look at in the selection process:

**What can you do for us?**

If hired, how can you contribute to the department and/or organisationdifferently than other interview candidates? This can be demonstrated through your educationalbackground, prior experience, special skills andknowledge.

**Why do you want to work with us?**

An employer wants to make sure the candidate chosen has a solid understanding of the organisation, department and position. If not, chances are the individual will not be a good hire, which can lead to ineffectiveness, resignation or termination. All scenarios cost the employer resources, timeand money. As a candidate you needtostate why you want to work inaparticular industry, for a particular organization and/or department. Also, you need to convey to that employer that you have a realistic picture of the job and how this industry/position fits within your short and long term goals.

**What are you like once we've got to know you?**

Employers are looking at areas such as your motivation, initiative, creativity, problem-solving abilities and team-work skills, and how these skills will continue once you are hired and part of the organization and department. Also, an employer is looking for a good personality fit within the organisation and department.

**WHAT IS A CANDIDATE SEEKING?**

Many candidates have a false idea that interviews are only a one-way process. Of course an employer is interviewing you, but you also need to interview that employer and organisation. Use the same criteria as an employer.

**What can you do for me?**

How can the organisation, department and position grow my professionaldevelopment?

**Why do I want to work for you?**

How does this organisation, department and position fit into my short and longterm career goals? Do I have a good understanding of this industry and the position expectations for me to develop my career and enjoy my work?

What are you like once I have gotten to know you?

Is this an organisation and department I would like to work for? Is this a group of people I would like to spend a minimum of eight hours a day with?

**How do I answer interview questions?**

The interview may be based around just one type of question, a few or perhaps a combination of them all. If you have done your research you will have a fair idea about what is important in terms of technical knowledge, practical experience, attitude and skills required for the job, and be able to demonstrate your motivation for the role and commercial/sector awareness.

* Ask friends and family about their interview experiences.
* Look at the Employer Insights on the Target jobs website for inside information about interview and selection tips for the company you have applied to: http://targetjobs.co.uk/employer-insights
* Use blogs, forums and opinion websites, but remember that these sites may contain misleading information or people’s opinions rather than fact.

**Types of interview questions**

**Warm up questions**

These types of questions usually occur at the beginning of the interview and are usually about you or subjects that are familiar and easy for you to answer. The question may seem easy but remember the interviewer can tell a lot about your personality from the way you respond and how much you have prepared by the structure and length of your answer.

**Examples of warm up questions:**

* Tell me about yourself? Knowing what to say and how long to talk for can be challenging. Try and keep it brief and then check with the interviewer if they would like you to expand on particular areas. Prepare a brief and relevant snapshot about yourself. The question is about your ability to communicate clearly, confidently and concisely.
* Why did you choose to study at The University of ………? Consider your reasons, what was it about the course and or the city that attracted you.

The interviewer may then conduct the interview based on what you have originally said. The key to remember is start with a positive impact and make a good first impression.

**Motivation questions**

These questions will assess your enthusiasm and research into the job role, offer and company. Don’t slip into ‘speech mode’ – keep your response personal and specific to you, this role and this organisation. You can demonstrate your research about the role and company to show you have made informed decisions.

Examples of motivations questions:

* Why do you want to work for us?
* Why are you interested in this role?
* Why you have applied for the job?

**Competency based questions**

Competency based interviews give employers an indicator of how you could potentially perform in the workplace, by asking questions about how you have reacted to and dealt with previous academic, work or social situations. The competencies that employers focus on are related to the job, so you should be able to anticipate the types of questions you may face.

You will be asked to give an example of a situation or task which led you to take a certain course of action. Probing questions will then be used by the interviewer to determine the course of action you took, what changes were created by those actions, and the effects of those actions on you and/or others.

You need to **research what the key competencies are for the role you have applied for.** Use the job description, person description, company website, company values/mission statement, company literature, application form, or any company events you have attended.

If there isn’t a job description, the Prospects website includes job profiles that will help you find out typical skills and activities in many different types of jobs: www.prospects.ac.uk/types\_of\_jobs.htm

Examples of competency based questions include:

* Tell me about a time when you were faced with a difficult challenge?
* Can you describe a time when you had to persuade others around to your way of thinking?
* Give me an example of a time when you had to deal with conflict in a team?
* Can you give me an example of when you have effectively led others?
* How do you go about motivating team members?

Ensure that you have at least two situational examples of when you demonstrated a particular competence. Try to use examples from all aspects of your academic, work and social life.

Then practice structuring your answer using the **CAR**/**STAR** model (context, action, result). This may also be referred to as STAR (situation, task, action, result) You will provide most detail in the ‘Action’ part.

**Context** – Say who, when, what, where, how and why this situation was.

**Action** – Say specifically what you did and how you demonstrated that competence.

**Result** – Say something specific or quantifiable, a learning point or feedback from others.

Ensure you choose examples that are as relevant to the role as possible, that were challenging and really show off your skills. Avoid saying ‘we’ to describe actions taken in a team, as the employer is not recruiting the team but needs to be clear what ‘you’ specifically contributed. Be prepared to be questioned about what you learnt from the experience and how you might do it differently in future.

**Commercial awareness questions**

Many employers tell us that this is where candidates fall short. Developing commercial awareness requires time and research, and at interview you need to prove to the employer that you understand and are interested in the industry and their company. To help you prepare, think about the following:

* Know and understand the range of products / services the company provides.
* Who are their competitors? What are the risks associated with the work they do?
* Who are their clients and what are their needs?
* What legislation might be relevant or have an impact on the company / sector?
* What current events / trends might be important?

**Example questions**:

* What do you see are the main challenges facing the…….. profession in the next few years?
* What do you understand about the…… qualification? How does it differ from ………?
* Please tell me your views on current legislative standards affecting the Tax profession?

There are other ways employers can test your commercial awareness, such as a reasoning question or a case study. There is little you can do to prepare for those types of questions. However the key to success is structuring your answers and being prepared to support your point of view with evidence. Skills learnt on your course such as report writing, summarising, problem-solving and presenting will all help.

**Technical / Specialist**

Here the interviewer wants to find out if you meet the required standard of knowledge for the job or are able to adapt your current knowledge to new situations. The specialist areas and the possible questions that could be asked are endless.

**Strength based interviews**

A number of graduate recruiters have begun to introduce strength based, rather than competency based, interviews into their recruitment processes.

Employers who have recently used this approach include Aviva, Standard Chartered, Royal Mail, BAE systems, Ernst & Young and Unilever.

Strength based interviews concentrate on what you are good at and what you enjoy doing rather than, as with competency based interviews, focusing on what you can do and have done in the past. Strength interviewing has its foundations in positive psychology; everyone has innate strengths that engage and energise them. By recognising these strengths and matching them to a role, not only will you perform better in your role but enjoy it more too. Employers are opting to use this strength based approach as they feel candidates can be over rehearsed in competency interviews and often give pre-prepared ‘perfect’ answers. Strength based interviews are difficult to prepare for, other than by taking the time out to reflect on your own strengths beforehand. Questions are generally asked at a quick pace and, combined with your body language and tone of voice, are used to sense your energy and engagement and therefore your strengths.

**What are you good at?**

**What comes easily to you?**

**When are you at your best?**

**What subjects do you most enjoy studying?**

**What motivates you?**

**COMMON COMPETENCY INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

**1. Why have you applied for this job?**

You need to demonstrate that you have researched the employer and tie yourknowledge of them into the skills and interests that led you to apply for the position**.**

**2. Describe a situation where you worked in a team**

Most jobs will involve a degree of teamwork. The interviewer needs to assesshow well you relate other people, what role you take in a group and whether you are able to focus on goals and targets.

**3. What do you expect to be doing in 5 years time?**

This question allows you to demonstrate that you have thought carefully aboutyour future and show that working in this position will help develop your career aims. Think about what your career aims are and how this job will help you get there. Be ambitious and show an enthusiasm for your personal professional development.

The question is focusing on your commitment to your career and is a chance for you to demonstrate your knowledge about the career routes available with the employer you have applied to. Key things to discuss would be around the management opportunities available, opportunities to experience new areas within the organisation (e.g. secondments) or working abroad if the organisation is international.

**4. What are your weaknesses?**

The classic answer here is to state a strength which is disguised as a weakness, such as "I'm too much of a perfectionist" or "I push myself too hard". This approach has been used so often that, even if these answers really are true they sound cliched. Also, interviewers will know this trick. If you feel they really apply to you, give examples: you could say that your attention to detail and perfectionism make youvery single-minded when at work, oftenblotting out others in your need to get the task done.

A better strategy is to choose a weakness that you have worked on to improve and describe what action you are taking to remedy the weakness. For example, if you used to dislike public speaking, perhaps taking on a role such as student representative or joining a debating society has helped you deal with this fear. You are therefore showing the interviewer that you have areas for development but you can take steps to turn them into a strength.

The interviewer might ask you questions around negative experiences you have faced, e.g. you may have failed the first year of your degree or had poor A-levels. As with the weakness question, be positive and focus on what you have learned from that situation. Other examples: "I'm not a very self-confident person and used to find it verydifficult to talk to people I didn't know well, but my Saturday job in the local library meant that I had to help people with all kinds of queries and that helped me a lot Now I'm perfectly happy talking to anybody on a one-to-one basis and I've joined the debating society this year to give me experience of speaking in front of an audience."

Don't deny that you have any weaknesses - everyone has weaknesses and if you refuse to admit to them the interviewer will mark you down as arrogant, untruthful.

**5. What are your strengths?**

This allows you to put across your "Unique Selling Points" - three or four of your key strengths Try to back these points up with examples of where you have had to use them.

Consider the requirements of the job and compare these with all your own attributes - your personality, skills, abilities or experience. Where they match you should consider these to be your major strengths The employer certainly will

For example, team work, interpersonal skills, creative problem solving, dependability, reliability, originality, leadership etc., could all be cited as strengths. Work out which is most important for the particular job in question and make sure you illustrate your answer with examples from as many parts of your experience as you can.

This question may be phrased in other ways, such as "Tell me about yourself' or "How would a friend describe you?"

**6. What has been your greatest achievement?**

This doesn't have to be an Olympic medal or an act of heroism. Ideally, it should give evidence of skills relevant to the job such as communication, initiative, teamwork, organising or determination:

Examples:

* Gaining my degree award
* Voluntary work/Charity/Youth work
* Facing barriers in education but achieving your aims
* Overcoming and facing a fear.

**7. What do you know about the company/organization or sector?**

Sometimes this will be asked as a direct question, it is really important that you communicate your knowledge about the organisation you are interviewing for during the interview. You do not have to go into depth, relaying facts and figures, you just need to demonstrate a general understanding of the organisation e.q. what their aims are, how they work, where they are based, whether they are a large or small company.

**8. Give an example of when you have worked under pressure**

Many jobs involve needing to work to deadlines, in a busy environment or where you are given targets. This can sometimes mean working under pressure. Employees are looking for examples that show an ability to remain calm and positive in pressured situations. If you have an example from the workplace this is generally preferred but it is also possible to use an example from your educational experience. For example, balancing different deadlines for different subjects and ensuring you get everything in on time and to a high standard.

**9. Do you have a flexible approach to work?**

Again, this question might not be asked directly but it is important during the interview to convey your flexibility in terms of job role, working hours and/or shift patterns. The more flexible you are in terms of the hours you can work and your willingness to take on different tasks and roles the more attractive you are to an employer.

**10. Have you got any questions?**

At the end of the interview, it is likely that you will be given the chance to put your own questions to the interviewer.

* Keep them brief: there may be other interviewees waiting.
* Ask about the work itself, training and career development: not about holidays, pensions, working hours.
* Prepare some questions in advance: it is OK to write these down and to refer to your notes to remind yourself of what you wanted to ask.

It often happens that, during the interview, all the points that you had noted down to ask about will be covered before you get to this stage. In this situation, you can respond as follows:

**Interviewer:** Well, that seems to have covered everything: is there anything you would like to ask me?

**Interviewee:** Thank you: I'd made a note to ask about your appraisal system and the study arrangements for professional exams, but we went over those earlier and I really feel you've covered everything that I need to know at this moment.

You can also use this opportunity to tell the interviewer anything about yourself that they have not raised during the interview but which you felt is important to your application:

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COMPETENCY QUESTIONS

The STAR Approach

A good way of dealing competency based question is by using the STAR approach **STAR** stands for **Situation, Task, Action**, **Result**. It helps you to structure your answer as a mini essay.

* The **SITUATION** forms an introduction and describes - The situation, Where were you? What were you doing?
* The **TASK** explains -The problem or what you needed to do. Why did you need to do it? What were the difficulties you faced?
* The **ACTION** forms the main body and describes - What did you do about it? How did you go about analysing and solving the issues? Use active verbs e.g. (designed, saved, redirected)
* The **RESULT** is the conclusion and describes - What the results were. Use quantifiable, measurable or tangible terms

**EXAMPLE COMPETENCY QUESTION AND ANSWER**

Give an example of a time when you have worked successfully as a member of a team

**Situation:**

* During my degree I was given a coursework assignment where I needed to work in a group of five.

**Task:**

* We were given the task of researching, planning andpreparing a presentation to the rest of the class about local history. We had 3 weeks to complete the project

**Action:**

* The first thing I did was arrange a meeting with the rest of my group so we discuss how to move forward. I was nominated as project leader and we discussed our ideas regarding the project.
* During the meeting we decided to assign specific tasks, we split into two smaller groups to complete the research and then met again to communicate our findings. Together we wrote the presentation and I was nominated with another classmate to present our findings to the class.

**Result:**

* Because we had communicated really well throughout the process and were organised and well prepared, the Presentation went really welland all of us felt like we had contributed to the outcome.
* We received the highest mark in the class and all understood the benefits ofworking as a team.

**Telephone Interviews**

Phone interviews are often used by companies, usually as a method of initial screening. The majority of companies usually pre-arrange a time with you but you should also be prepared for those who just ring!

**Tips for Telephone Success**

1. make sure your phone is topped up and charged before the call
2. arrange to be in a quiet location with good reception where you are unlikely to be disturbed
3. allow enough time - interviews can take up to an hour
4. you need to make a good first impression on the telephone, so, answer the phone professionally, be positive and sound enthusiastic
5. make sure you know about the organisation, the job and the criteria they are looking for
6. be aware of how you sound as you can't see how the interviewer is responding. Practise on the phone with a friend or record yourself speaking.
7. have your laptop/tablet ready so that you can see your application form and information about the company
8. think of examples to help you get your key strengths across and prepare questions to ask the employer
9. have drink of water handy
10. check that you have a professional answerphone message just in case you miss the call

**What Will You Be Asked?**

Questions are most likely to focus on what you know about the job and organisation; and will check your skills, knowledge and experience against what is needed for the role.

Examples include:

Tell me 3 things about our organisation.

Why do you want this job?

Who else have you applied to?

How would you describe your communication skills?

Tell me about a challenge you have overcome.

**Skype or Video Interviews**

These are increasingly being used, especially for national and international recruitment. These interviews are real-life interviews and you should prepare and dress for them in exactly the same way.

**Tips**

* Use a private room and put a “Do Not Disturb – Interview in Progress” sign on the door.
* Sit at a desk or table to give you a professional image.
* Ask a friend to Skype you beforehand to check that you can be heard and that the lighting and background are suitable.
* Make sure that you have a phone number and/or email for your interviewer, so that you can contact them in the case of any technical problems.

**More Information**

[www.jobs.ac.uk/careers-advice/interview-tips](http://www.jobs.ac.uk/careers-advice/interview-tips)

[www.prospects.ac.uk](http://www.prospects.ac.uk)

[www.targetjobs.co.uk/careers-advice](http://www.targetjobs.co.uk/careers-advice)

[www.jobsite.co.uk/bemyinterviewer](http://www.jobsite.co.uk/bemyinterviewer) - practice questions and answers from a range of senior recruiters and employers.