

Preparing for Academic / Industrial Interviews: Suggestions and Best Practices



Objectives: by the end of this seminar you will be able to...

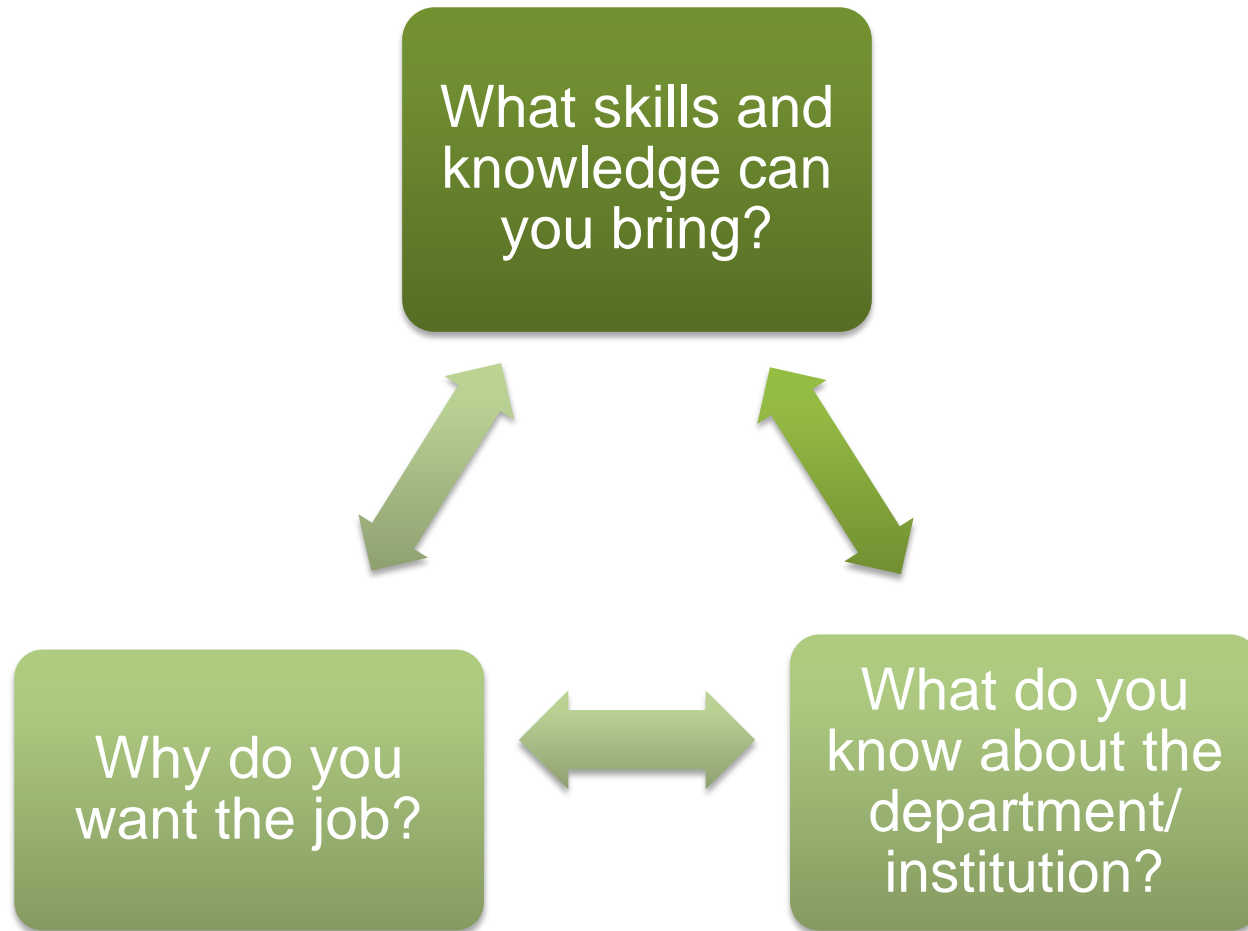
- Describe the likely key elements of the interview process
- Identify appropriate interview preparation activities
- Use STAR statements to present your past experience
- Assess what further action or support you will need prior to your next interview

What is the objective of an interview?

A two way Process

The Selectors want to:	You will want to :
Verify your claims	Verify their claims
Evaluate your skills and professionalism	Understand what the job entails
Establish the relevance of your skills	Convince them your skills match the job
Decide whether you would fit in to the organisation/ team	Decide whether you want to work with them
Promote the organisation	Persuade them your worth employing
Find out if they can afford you	Find out if they will pay you enough (don't discuss this before an offer is made unless they raise the subject)

Interview key themes



Interview Preparation

1. Know yourself
2. Sector Knowledge
3. Research the Institution / Organisation
4. Research the job
5. Prepare for obvious and difficult questions
6. Create the right visual image

You will (hopefully) have already covered, or at least started to cover, a number of these when you prepared your application.

1. Know Yourself

- Why this career/type of job?
- Re-read your application and be prepared to discuss it
- Ensure you can give examples for each skill and attribute that the employer is looking for
- Know your strengths, weaknesses, achievements, and disappointments
- Be prepared to talk about them in a positive and balanced way
- If applying for a non-academic role be prepared to talk about why you decided to leave academia / change direction

Generic attributes

“... Virtually all of the employers said that they assumed the subject specific skills would be associated with study at postgraduate level... therefore the main basis for deciding to recruit an individual was in terms of their complement of soft skills”

Institute of Employment Studies / EPSRC Study of Employers of PhD physicists

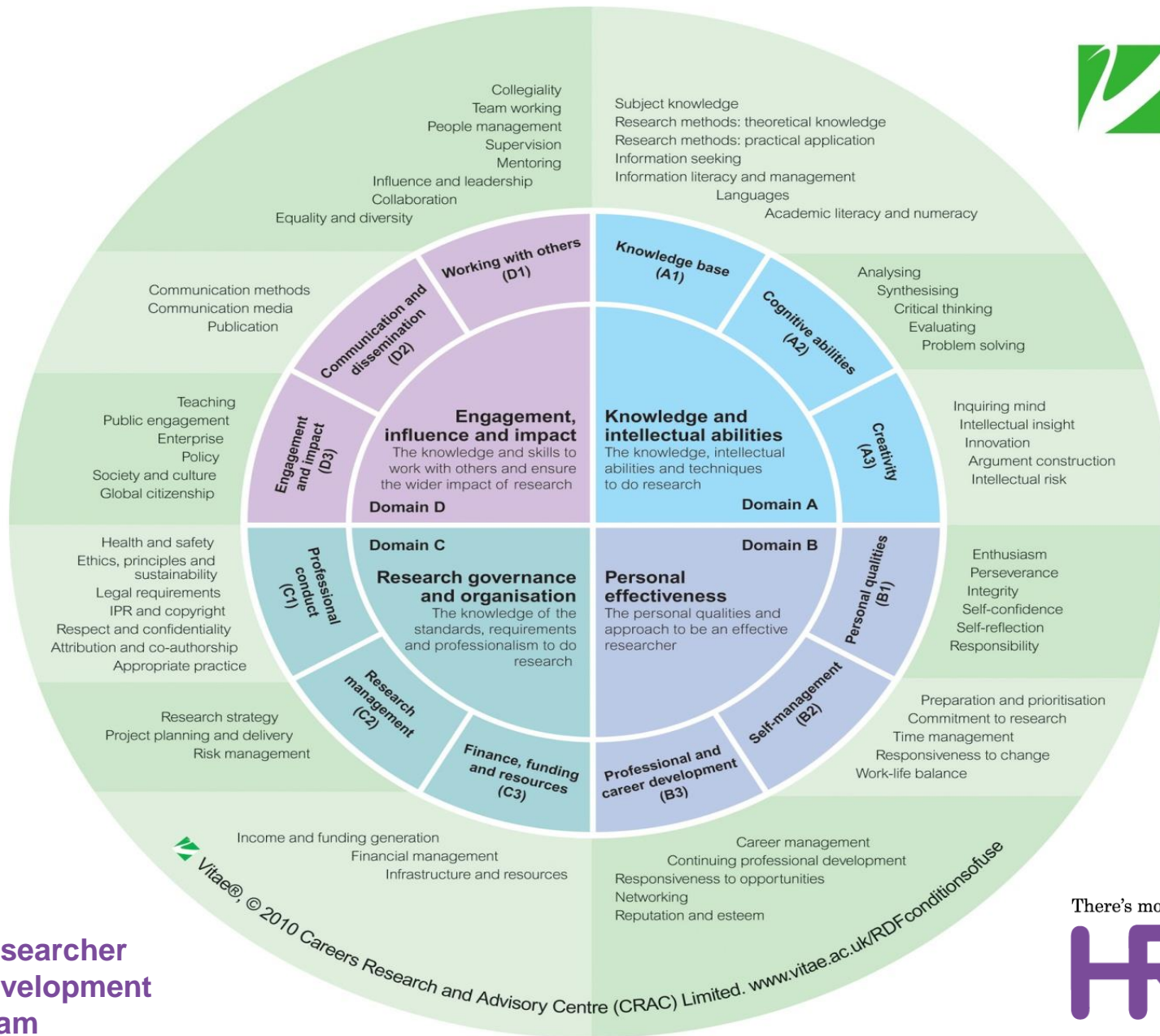
What you have gained while completing your PhD?

- lateral and creative thinking
- adaptable / flexible approach to work and research
- ability to absorb, analyse and interpret detailed data and information
- advanced computer literacy
- able to challenge premises, question procedures, interpret meaning, offer alternatives
- capacity to access information from a wide range of resources and sources

What you have gained while completing your PhD?

- self discipline and motivation when working in isolation
- perseverance – able to overcome difficulties
- priority setting – time management
- report writing
- oral communication when undertaking presentations, lectures and delivering papers at conferences
- team working / collaboration – undertaking research with academic colleagues on similar areas of interest
- others?

Researcher Development Framework (RDF)



2. Sector knowledge

- What's happening in the sector?
- Who are the key players?
- Trends or recent events of note?
- www.prospects.ac.uk/links/sectorbs - for briefings about different sectors
- Company literature/website
- Research Councils UK; National Science Foundation (USA)
- Newspapers; trade magazines; industry journals.
- Personal contacts
- Google

3. Research the organisation

- How does the organisation perceive itself?
- What's its “mission” and how is it developing / moving forward?
- What signals does it send out about its culture?
 - Hierarchical? Democratic? Centralised? Devolved? Formal? Informal?
- How is their “business” faring (REF in HE)?
- Who are their main competitors?
- Are they facing any political/market issues?

4. Research the job

- Re-read the job description and person specification
- Read relevant careers literature / websites
- How does this job fit into the wider organisation?
- What training, supervision, and progression routes are offered?
- What are the key competencies and how do you evidence your relevant abilities

5. Prepare for obvious and difficult questions

- Most of the hard work should be done before you enter the interview room
- Make a list of obvious tricky questions
- Identify any issues that may come up from your application
- Prepare answers for the questions you do not want to answer, i.e., spells of unemployment, moving across, or taking a “step down”

6. Creating the right visual image

Dress

- Background research of the organisation will help here
- Err on the side of formal
- Context appropriate i.e.. is this an informal chat, formal panel?
- Be comfortable – you don't want to be distracted

Body language

- Basic rule: natural and relaxed
- A genuine smile can help an interview along
- A good posture can relieve tension in the back and shoulders

Types of interview

- Criteria/competency based
- CV/application form based
- Technical
- Portfolio based
- Case study



Who are you going to face?

- **Single**
 - One to one meeting
- **Panel**
 - Who is going to sit on the panel?
 - Typical for academic & public sector interviews
- **Sequential**
 - Series of interviews carried out by different interviewers at different levels
 - Used by large organisations

Academic interviews

- Formats & processes vary
- One or several candidates
- Small panel of 2/3 or up to a dozen or more
- Staff from the department – or with other reps from the university (and more senior appointments may have a rep from another university)
- Likely to be supported by a rep from HR

Break Time



Types of Questions

Competency / behaviourally based questions

- Questions based around the competencies/criteria required to do the job
- Questions requiring you to provide examples of how you demonstrate these competencies
- Based on the premise that past performance is the best guide to future success

Example

Starter Question:

Tell us about a time when you have worked effectively as part of a team?

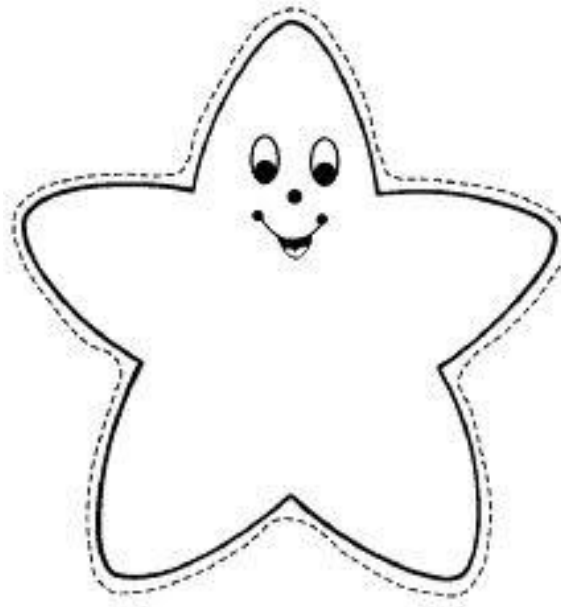
Follow-up Questions:

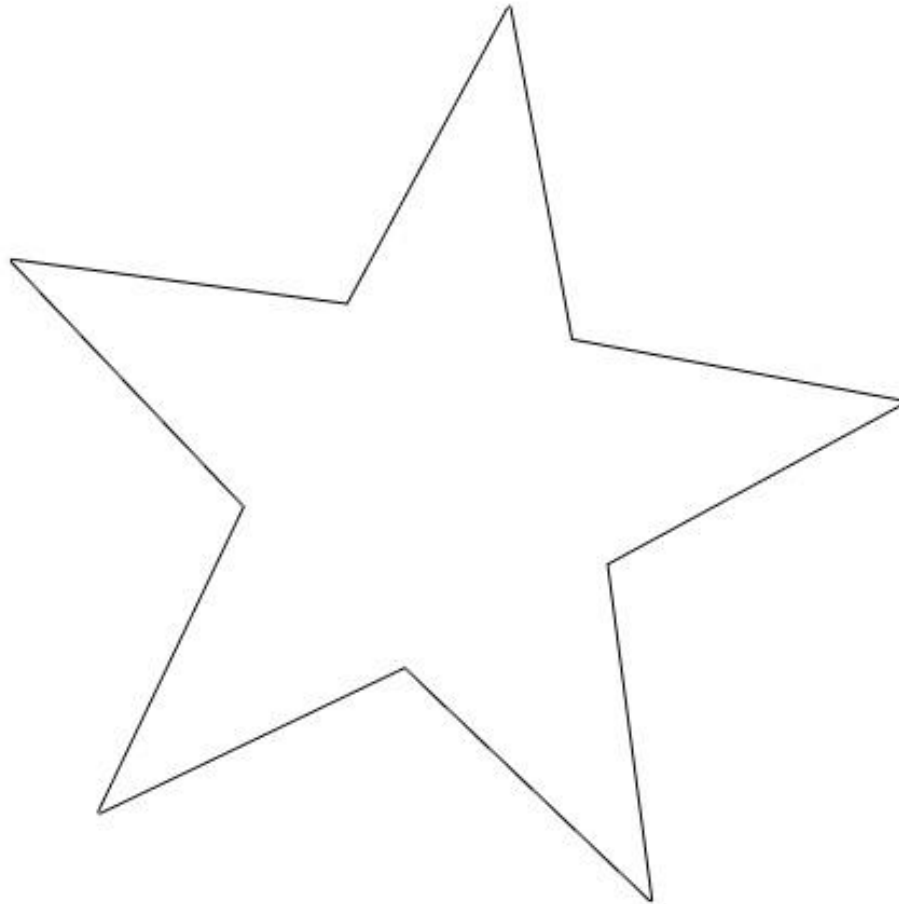
What was your role and what did you contribute to the team?
What did you learn for the future?



A technique for answering competency based questions...

STAR TECHNIQUE





- **Situation**
- **Task**
- **Action**
- **Result**

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STAR statements

- Help you to define your experiences and how they relate to the job description / person specification
- They are what follow the words (spoken or unspoken) “For example,…”
- **Situation:** Define the general context.
- **Task:** Identify the key objective.
- **Action:** Describe the action you took or initiated, emphasising the skills you used to complete the task.
- **Results:** Summarize the outcome in business terms.

Starter question:

Tell us about a time when you have worked effectively as part of a team?

Follow up questions:

What was your role and what did you contribute to the team?

What did you learn for the future?

- **Situation** – Between September 2008 and the present I have acted as procurement officer for my research group of 2 academics, 4 postdoctoral researchers and 3 PhD research students.
- **Task** – I am responsible for making sure that all researchers in the group have the chemicals they require for their experiments, when they need them whilst controlling the overall budget. Care must be taken regarding storage space, volatility and use by dates.

- **Action** – On a weekly basis I conduct an audit of the resources in storage within our lab. I then checked with each team member on the progress of their research and how their requirements for materials had changed. I then calculated what was required for the next week and contacted the appropriate supplier to order materials for delivery, negotiating bulk buying discounts where appropriate.

- **Result/Reflection** –Delays due to lack of materials have been eliminated since I took over this role. There has also been a cost saving of £14,000 on the previous 2 year period, as chemicals are no longer destroyed through storing for too long. I have learned the importance of regular communication with all members of the team, accurate note keeping (to avoid any subsequent disagreements), and forward planning as a group.

Essential & Desirable Criteria / STAR statement exercise

- Read through the table of essential & desirable criteria (Hand out)
- Identify 3 criteria which you think will be relevant for your next career move
- Think of an example to demonstrate how you fulfil 1 of the criteria
- Create a STAR statement that could form the basis of an interview answer (WB p 14 & Hand out)



Responding to competency / behaviourally-based questions

- Take your time and clarify the question if necessary
- Think of one good example – ideally a recent one
- Identify your personal contribution
- Be prepared to be probed: they may ask about your thought process and feelings as well as your actual contribution
- Don't waffle!

Tips for language to use

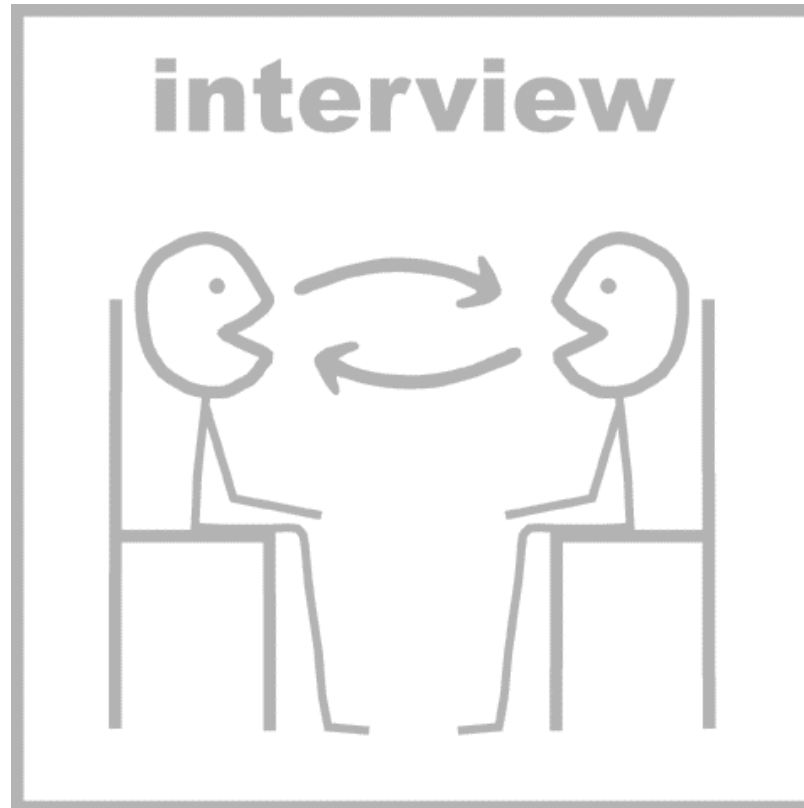
Avoid

- ... I think I can
- ... some people have said I'm
- ... I probably could
- ... my friends think I am
- ... negative statements

Use

- ... which resulted in
- ... so that
- ... the benefit was
- ... the advantage was

Interview practice exercise



WORKBOOK PAGES 16-20

Other possible Questions

- Hypothetical questions
- Values and outlook
- “Describe a weakness” question

Is there anything you want to ask?

Asking questions at the end of an interview can do two things:

- give you information which will help you decide whether this job is for you
- give the interviewers an indication of how interested you are in this job

Before the interview, generate a list of questions which you can ask. However, before launching into a long list, check how much time is left and prioritise your most important questions.

Areas you might cover

- Clarify, for example, the division of tasks in the department, i.e., hours assigned for research, teaching and other responsibilities.
- Ask for more detail about specific research projects and what gaps they are seeking to fill within the department or links they have with other disciplines, faculties and institutions.
- For an established project, you may want to ask about how the team works, e.g., how work distributed, what is the timetable.

Areas to avoid or treat with care

- Questions on basics which you should have found out about before the interview, e.g., current research or taught courses.
- Questions about car parking and catering - not very strategic.
- Salary - you will want to know this, but think of the potential mercenary impression it might create (at least in the UK). Also, the interview panel may not directly set the salary, so may not be able to discuss this.

After the Interview

- Possibly a second interview
- Hopefully a job offer!
- NOW is the time for negotiations.

Coping with unsuccessful interviews

- Try to get some feedback on your performance
- Use this to improve subsequent applications

And remember... sometimes an unsuccessful candidate may be offered a post, perhaps at a lower grade or at later date, so it pays to maintain good relations!

Reflections

- What went well in the practice exercise?
- What have you learnt about your interview style?
- What will you take away from today?
(positive & developmental)

Contact

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