

# Preparing for an Interview

## By Melanie Allan

First things first: if you have got to the interview stage, congratulate yourself. You have been chosen from a large number of applicants and you've done well. Keep reminding yourself that it is not easy to get this far. Secondly, when people say to you 'you'll be fine - just be yourself', you need to know that it is excellent advice, but not enough to get you a job in today's job market.

Interviewers are looking to fill the vacancy with the best candidate. They are interviewing to find out whether you are *the* candidate. Your task is to persuade them that you *are*. In order to do so, preparation is the key.

### Why to prepare?

There are three main reasons for preparation.

*One:* to be able to answer questions concisely and clearly. You can't if you're scrabbling about in your brain for suitable answer-materials. Although you can't second guess every question you might be asked, if you are prepared you can tailor them to fit.

*Two:* to be confident. Confidence has a lot to do with the way you present yourself. If you're prepared, you'll feel more confident. There's nothing more confidence-sapping than feeling that you're on the defence.

*Three:* to look keen. Prospective employers will choose a not-quite-perfect but willing candidate over a brilliant one that obviously isn't bothered. Attitude matters!

### What to prepare?

There are three main points:

#### *Find out about the organisation*

- Visit the website, read prospectuses, brochures and other materials that you may have been sent with the application. If nothing has been sent, phone the company to ask for any useful reading matters they may have.
- Visit the premises if you can.
- Talk to anyone you know who works there already.

#### *Find out about the job*

- Ask for a job description or specification. This will give you the duties and responsibilities that go with the job you're being interviewed for. Not all

- organisations will have one or will let you see it! However, it's always worth trying and showing your willingness.
- Ring the nominated person on the advertisement to ask anything you need to know about the job.
  - Talk to anyone you know who is familiar with the kind of work you may be doing (if you haven't done that specific job before).

*Find out what qualities or capabilities the prospective employer is looking for*

- Read the job advertisement and job specification (if you have one) carefully. Although you probably have matched your CV and covering letter to their requirements already, at the interview, you will need to be able to demonstrate what you have said you can on your CV with solid examples.

### **How to prepare?**

By giving concrete and detailed examples of what you have done to demonstrate your ability in that area - scenarios and achievements. This is the most important part of your preparation - even if you're asked to give a presentation as well. Your interview secures the job, so don't spend all your preparation time on the presentation at the expense of the interview.

*Preparing your examples*

Read your Personal Statement or profile and the responsibilities/current job specification/skills and capabilities on your CV. Make a list of the things you claim you can do.

For example, if your personal statement says:

*I am task-oriented, able to motivate myself and sustain focus from the start of a project through to completion. A naturally strategic thinker, I also have an eye for detail, quality and practicality. I enjoy collaborating with other people, working towards a shared goal and learning from shared experience.*

... you will need to give examples from your work experience that show:

- *how task-oriented you are*
- *how motivated you are*
- *how you followed a project through from start to finish*
- *your aptitude for strategic thinking*
- *your eye for detail, quality and practicality*
- *how you collaborate with other people and work towards a shared goal*
- *how or what you have learnt from sharing experience.*

Also add to your list any capabilities or skills from the advertisement or job description that are not on your CV.

This will give you a list of competencies, capabilities, skills and qualities that you need to back up with examples from your experience. You can then tailor those examples to answer most of the competence or capability questions that will come up, such as '*Tell me more about how you work in a team*', '*Describe a time when you worked under pressure*' or '*What would you do if ...*' questions. Some of your example scenarios will fit with two or even three points. A scenario about teamwork may also fit coaching skills, organisational skills and influencing skills, for example.

Keep the scenarios short and concise. The STAR model is a useful tool for compiling them:

**S**ituation - the context

**T**ask - what you had to do

**A**ction - what and how you did it

**R**esult - the outcome and what difference it made.

*Added value*

Add in a few 'lessons learnt' scenarios - what you did and how you might have done it better. You may be asked to describe a situation you have learnt from.

Prepare to talk about anything you have done and learnt from that would contribute more to the job, team or organisation.

You can also demonstrate your experience in any voluntary work, secondments, experience of other kinds of jobs or of working in another sector.

*Preparing for other kinds of questions*

Interviewers are also looking for someone who is likely to stay with the organisation or institution and progress within it. Prepare to answer questions about your future and your career aspirations. Make sure you can answer:

- Why do you want this job? (not for the money!)
- What are your ambitions for the future? (in the organisation)

You may also be asked to explain any gaps in your career or career breaks. Contrary to popular belief, employers don't necessarily see this as negative. Be positive about yourself and accentuate the learning or experience you gained. Most importantly, **never** speak disrespectfully about a former employer.

### *Preparing your own questions*

It's good to be interested enough to ask questions yourself.

- Think about what you want to know about the job and the company, who your boss is, how many colleagues you will work closely with, how often your team meets, for example.
- Technical questions about software, systems and structures and how things are done are good.
- **Do** ask about training opportunities and opportunities for career progression.
- **Don't** ask about salary or terms and conditions of work until you have been offered the job.

When you've prepared as much as this and you keep your head, you're in with a very good chance of success.

Good luck!