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Interview Tips For Researchers.

Being invited to attend an interview can be a cause both of anxiety and excitement, especially if you haven't had many interviews before or if the interview is for a post that you really see as your 'dream job'. However, if you are feeling anxious there are three important things to remember. First, the very fact that you have been invited for interview means that the employer thinks you have the potential to do the job (remember that most of those who applied will not have got this far). Secondly, interviewing is a two way process and the interviewer may be just as nervous on the day as you are. Finally, although there is always an element of luck involved, there are a lot of things that you can do to maximise your chances of being successful at interview and the aim of this publication is to describe some of these essential steps.

Types of interview

You will almost certainly be interviewed by a panel comprising several people. One-to-one interviews are now rare unless they constitute just one element in a larger assessment exercise. The panel may be made up entirely of people from the department or section in which the job is based but in larger organisations it might include people from the human resources department.

Often you will have to have more than one interview before being offered a particular job. Where this is the case, the first interview might focus on your general (or 'transferable') skills while subsequent ones focus on skills and experience that are directly relevant to the job. In other cases later interviews will be designed to explore in greater depth things that have been raised at earlier ones. In many cases, and especially if you are applying for a graduate entry scheme with a large company, the final stage of the selection process will be an 'assessment centre' lasting one or more days and including a range of additional selection methods, such as psychometric tests, group exercises and presentations. Even where an employer doesn't ask you to attend a full-blown assessment centre you may still find that you are asked to take tests, give a presentation or complete a written exercise on the day of your interview. There isn't sufficient space in this publication to discuss assessment centres in detail but you will find useful

information on the Careers Service's website at: www.sheffield.ac.uk/careers/students/gettingajob/assessment.html

It is becoming increasingly common for employers to use telephone interviews, especially as the first stage in a selection process, and some advice on preparing for this type of interview will be given later on in this publication.

Preparing for interviews – the basics

The key to success is to be well prepared so that you can demonstrate to the interviewers that you have a good understanding of the job and what it involves, have researched their organisation thoroughly, and are able to provide convincing evidence that you have the skills and personal qualities they are looking for.

Review your application

What you have said about yourself in your CV or on your application form is likely to form the basis for many of the interviewers' questions and so you will need to review the examples that you have given of your skills and be prepared to elaborate on these or to give further examples if necessary. For instance, if you have described a situation where the outcome was positive be prepared to say what you might have done if things had turned out differently.

The publications in this series are: Support for Postgraduate Researchers; Support for Research Staff; Your PhD - What Next?; Skills of Researchers; CVs and Covering Letters for Researchers; Interview Tips for Researchers

Practical considerations

Unless you are familiar with the location make sure that you allow plenty of time on the day (or before if possible) to check exactly where it is. If attending the interview involves travel by car or public transport allow more time than would normally be necessary for that journey in case there are any delays. If you are a disabled applicant it is important to let the employer know in advance of any special requirements that you may have. Unless the employer has stated otherwise it is best to assume that you will be expected to dress formally. If you have bought an outfit especially for the interview you should try it on a few days beforehand just to make sure that it looks right.

Arrival and the start of the interview

First impressions are very important and so you should be open, friendly and polite with everyone you meet on the day including those, such as reception staff, who may not be directly involved in the selection process.

It's easier said than done, but try to relax. Most interviewers will expect candidates to appear slightly nervous and this can even work to your advantage, as a candidate who displays no sign of nervousness whatsoever might be seen as over-confident. You will almost certainly find that feelings of anxiety diminish as the interview progresses and a skilled interviewer will know how to put you at your ease.

You will need to be aware of body language, gestures and the speed at which you talk. Avoid fidgeting, respond to the interviewer with appropriate non-verbal gestures, such as a nod or a smile, and try not to speak too quickly. Try not to slouch and instead adopt a posture that is relaxed but still shows that you are alert and interested. You can do this by sitting up straight with your back against the back of the chair.

Different types of interview question

There are several different types of interview question and an interviewer will use more than one of these in the course of an interview.

Behavioural or 'competency' questions

As employers strive to make interviews fairer and more objective this type of question is becoming increasingly common. Questions of this type are based either on the detailed 'person specification' drawn up when the job was advertised or on a more general statement of the 'key competencies' that the organisation expects its employees to have. They usually require you to give a concrete example of a time when you have demonstrated a particular skill or personal quality. Examples of this type of question would include:

- Give an example of a time when you had to work to a tight deadline
- Describe a time when you have found yourself in conflict with another team member and tell me how this was resolved
- Tell me about an occasion when you had to persuade others of your point of view.

The key to answering this kind of question is to look carefully at the skills the employer is asking for and to think of as many situations as possible, in your research and undergraduate career, at work or in your leisure time, where you have exercised each one of these. In thinking about how you will describe each of these scenarios it might be helpful to bear in mind the acronym 'STAR' which stands for:

SITUATION – describe the circumstances and background

TASK – say what the outcome was that you were hoping for

ACTION – tell the employer what you did **personally** towards meeting the desired goal

RESULT – say whether or not you succeeded and, if not, what did you learn?

You will find that the same principle of analysing the employer's stated requirements and thinking about how you match them will help also with the 'personality' and 'hypothetical' questions described below.

Personality questions

Employers use this type of question to gain an insight into your personality and attitudes. Examples would include:

- What are your strengths and weaknesses?
- How would your friends describe you?
- What has been your greatest achievement to date?

Career questions

These questions are designed to test your understanding of the job and your motivation for applying. For instance, you might be asked:

- Why do you want this job?
- Where do you see yourself in five years' time?
- What are the main things you look for in a job?

Hypothetical questions

These are 'What if...' questions, concerned not with how you *have* acted in the past but how you *would* act in a possible situation in the future. They may be designed to test your understanding of what the job involves or they may be used in order to gauge how good you are at thinking on your feet.

Knowledge-based questions

The purpose of these is to see how thoroughly you have researched the organisation. Employers won't expect you to have an encyclopaedic knowledge of their organisation but you might be asked basic questions such as:

- Can you name our best-selling product?
- Have you ever used us as a customer, and if so what did you think of us?
- Who are our major competitors and what do we have to offer that they don't?
- Who is our Chief Executive?

Often the questions will ask for information that is readily available on the organisation's website but for information on how to research companies more fully see the Careers Service's website at: <http://www.shef.ac.uk/careers/students/gettingajob/research/>

Interviews for academic posts

Whether you are applying for a lectureship, a post-doctoral research post or a 'teaching only' post the actual interview is likely to be conducted by a panel. If the interview is for a permanent lecturer's post the panel may be fairly large, with members drawn from across the institution, not just from the department which is recruiting. Sometimes, you will also be seen informally by a number of departmental staff before or after your interview. This is a chance for you to learn more about the department and it is possible also that those whom you meet will be asked for their impressions of you as a potential future colleague.

All of the general principles outlined above apply in the case of academic interviews, but the following are examples of some of the questions that are commonly asked of those being interviewed for academic jobs:

- What were the key achievements of your research project/PhD?
- Outline the project you would undertake if you were awarded research funding
- Who are the leading researchers in your field?
- What opportunities do you see for collaboration with other departments in this university?
- What relevance does your research have to the economy or to the wider community?
- What plans do you have for publication of your current research?
- What are the potential sources of funding for your research?
- What support will you need from the department in order to achieve your objectives? (e.g. training, research networks, help with funding applications)
- Can you describe a time when you have met a significant problem in your research? How did you resolve this and what did you learn from the experience?
- What experience do you have of teaching and what areas of teaching do you want to work in?
- Can you describe something particularly innovative that you have done as a teacher?
- Have you ever had to work with a group of students that was poorly motivated? What did you do to make the course more appealing to them?

Hints for handling telephone interviews

Again, all of the principles relating to face-to-face interviews apply in the case of telephone interviews but you might also find the following hints and tips helpful:

- As the interviewer cannot see you, more emphasis is placed on the sound of your voice. Try to get someone to listen to you answer some questions over the telephone and give you feedback on how you sound
- Make sure the location is quiet and free of interruptions
- Have your CV/application is close at hand
- Positive body language when you are talking, such as smiling and •hand gestures, can be communicated to good effect in your voice
- Have a pen, paper and your diary ready to make notes or arrange a date for a conventional interview

Sources of further help

Publications

The Careers Service, has a wide selection of materials on interviews, presentations, psychometric tests and assessment centres. Most of these are available for loan on payment of a small deposit.

Online talks and DVDS

Links to these can be found at: www.shef.ac.uk/careers/students/gettingajob/appstalks/

Interactive Interview software

The Interviewer CD Rom in the Careers Service allows you to film your responses to real interview questions and watch a playback. There are also interactive videos at www.bemyinterviewer.co.uk

Careers Service Events

We run workshops on Interviews as part of our series of skills sessions for postgraduate researchers (see www.shef.ac.uk/ris/pgr/ddportal for details).

KM/Sept11