

# Careers Success Toolkit

## Interview skills

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# Interview skills

## Introduction

Finding a job requires time and effort, particularly in a competitive job market. To be successful, you will need to develop a number of job hunting skills – such as researching careers information, job hunting creatively and presenting yourself effectively in writing and in person.

*Careers Success Toolkit* has been written to help you develop these skills. These guides follow the selection process, with sections on job search strategy, putting together a persuasive CV and application form, and interview techniques. Within each guide there are references to other sources of useful information. Many of these resources are available in the Student Service Centre in Gateway House. If you are a graduate and are no longer living near the University, investigate the resources of your local public reference library, and/or the nearest university careers service.

Careers and Employment Support offers a number of services to help you with your job hunt. These include:

- Information on occupations and employers
- **DMUworks** – an online vacancy database linked to our website **[dmu.ac.uk/careers](http://dmu.ac.uk/careers)**
- Job vacancy bulletins such as Prospects Today
- Employer events such as our annual Leicestershire Student and Graduate Fair and employer presentations on campus.

If you would like to discuss any aspect of your job hunting strategy, there are Careers Advisers available at the Student Services Centre, Ground Floor, Gateway House between 9.00am and 5.00pm, Monday to Friday.

If you are no longer living near the university you may want to use our **E-guidance** service. Logon to [dmu.ac.uk/careers](http://dmu.ac.uk/careers) and follow the email link to a simple form for you to complete with your query. A member of the Careers Team will get back to you with advice and information.

Following a successful application, an interview usually forms at least part of the next stage in the selection process. There may be one or a series of interviews, involving one person or a panel of interviewers but the techniques you need to use remain the same. In this section we examine what employers are looking for; preparing for interview; interviewing styles and possible questions and presenting your case effectively.

### **The purpose of the interview**

Interviews are designed to assess whether you are suitable for the job but also provide you with the opportunity to weigh up the organisation. The interview is very much a two way process:

#### **The employer's aim is to:**

- Assess whether you meet the requirements for the job
- Gain evidence that you have the necessary skills, personality, experience and motivation.

#### **You are aiming to:**

- Make a good first impression
- Persuade the employer that you have the skills and abilities to be successful
- Find out more about the job and the company.

Although the employer manages the interview you are not merely a passive recipient of this process. You should identify your own aims, and can influence the course of the interview through building a strong rapport with the interviewer, responding dynamically to questions and asking relevant questions when prompted. To do this effectively you need to be clear about the information you want to put across and prepare

thoroughly in advance. A good starting point is to think about the employer's requirements.

### **Preparation**

#### **What are they looking for?**

The interviewer is likely to have a list of criteria based on the job requirements against which your performance will be measured. These will include skills and qualities, your motivation and interest in the job, and your knowledge of the job, company and industry. They will also be assessing the way you communicate and the general impression you make.

Look carefully at any information you have about the organisation – the job advert, job description, company website, and try to put yourself in the mind of the employer.

To illustrate the kind of criteria employers use, the following examples have been taken from the recruitment literature of graduate recruiters:

- Trainee management positions with an international retailing firm:
  - Leadership potential
  - Planning and organisational skills
  - Analytical skills
  - Assertiveness
  - Motivation.
- Research and development positions with a major pharmaceutical firm:
  - Technical knowledge and skills
  - Communication skills
  - Teamwork
  - Problem solving skills
  - Ability to take on responsibility
  - Initiative
  - Willingness to learn.

- Graduate training positions with a health care manufacturing company:
  - Commercial awareness
  - Influencing skills
  - Personal drive and motivation
  - Flexibility and creativity
  - Resilience and the ability to work under pressure.
- Management trainees in a medium-sized packaging company:
  - Written and oral communication skills
  - Decision making skills
  - Numeracy
  - Time management skills
  - IT skills.

You can see that employers are interested in similar, core transferable skills, such as communication, teamwork and organisation. Questions linked to these skills will often form the framework of an interview. In addition you are likely to be assessed on the following:

**General impression** – Based on your appearance, body language and manner. Do you come across as lively, positive, keen, polite and confident?

**Communication** – Do you express yourself clearly and fluently?

**Reasons for the application** – Can you show that your decision to apply is based on sound, well-informed reasoning. Do you demonstrate a good knowledge of the job, organisation and employment sector?

**Motivation** – Do you show enthusiasm and personal drive? Are your career aims realistic?

**General intelligence** – are you able to analyse questions and think on your feet; do you ask intelligent questions? Depending on the nature and level of the job, the employer may also be looking for specific knowledge or directly-related work experience.

### **What have you got to offer?**

Review your application/CV and consider what you want to say about every part of your life to date. What will you say if asked about your degree course, your last job or your leisure interests? Clarify in your mind the major points that you want to put across about yourself, and how your abilities and experience relate to the job requirements. You need to be able to confidently state what your strengths are in relation to the post. Always think of examples from your experience to illustrate your arguments.

If there are parts of your life history that you feel uncomfortable about, such as poor A Level grades; changing degree course; periods of unemployment, decide how to best present this information. Think about the reasons behind the events and what you learned from the experience – always present the outcomes in a positive light.

### **Research the company and the job**

Find out all you can about the company. Large companies often have their own website, brochures and annual reports. Smaller companies are more difficult to find information about – try regional employer directories, trade directories or the employers themselves. For more ideas on researching organisations, see the guide in this section on Job Hunting. If possible try to find out something original

about the company, above and beyond what they say in their brochure. Take a close look at their services or products, eg if they are a retail organisation visit a local branch and make a note of your impressions; if they are a food manufacturer, track down their products in the supermarket; if they are a publisher, look at their publications.

Research the industry as well as the company through reading the broadsheets, trade magazines and local business press. You should be prepared to talk about current issues and have a broad understanding of what you would be doing on a day-to-day basis.

### **Predict the questions**

Your research of the job and company can help you to predict the sort of questions which will arise at interview. In any interview you are likely to be asked:

Why you want the job, or why you are interested in this career area?

Why you want to work for this company?

What you feel you have to offer the organisation — what are your strengths?

Prepare your response to such questions, but don't try to memorise the answers as you may need to adapt the information on the day. Further examples of typical questions are given later in this section.

### **Prepare your questions**

Think about the questions that you want to ask, for example, about training, career prospects or recent developments in the company. Refrain from asking questions about issues such as salary and leave entitlement until the latter stages of the

selection process. Make sure that the answers to your questions are not contained in the information the organisation has already provided. Intelligent questions can add to the positive impression you are trying to make, so think them through carefully.

### **Practice interview technique**

Try running through some questions with a friend, family member or Careers Adviser. Advisers can arrange a mock interview once you have a job interview confirmed, providing an excellent opportunity to rehearse your technique before the main event. Alternatively, practice answering questions out loud in front of a mirror to hear and see how you come across. You might feel silly doing this, but it could identify areas to improve on and give you greater confidence.

### **The logistics**

Finally, prepare the logistics of the interview. Make your travel arrangements and ensure you have plenty of time to get to your destination. Choose your interview outfit to suit the occasion and collect together all the information you want to take with you, eg letter inviting you to interview, map, your application and CV. On the day arrive early, but not too early, and if you do not already know, find out the name and job titles of your interviewer(s).

If you are organised and well prepared it can help relieve anxiety and allow you to concentrate on the job in-hand.

### Styles of interviewing

Every interviewer will have their own personal style of interviewing, whether this is friendly, detached or challenging, but there are also different general approaches to interviewing which you should be aware of:

#### Chronological interviews

- The agenda is set by your CV or application form
- Questions relate to the information you have given, eg Why did you choose this course? What did your placement involve?
- Be prepared to talk in detail about past and present experience and future plans
- Chronological interviews are becoming less common in favour of criteria-based interviews

#### Criteria/competency-based interviews

- Every candidate is asked similar, structured questions, related to the employer's recruitment criteria/competencies
- Tend to focus on specific skills and requires clear evidence that you have these skills
- In-depth questioning approach

#### Technical interviews

Most likely for scientific, engineering, IT or other technical positions

- Interviewer is often your prospective Line Manager or technical expert rather than a personnel specialist
- Questions relate to technical knowledge and skills, eg relevant subjects studied; your project; related work experience; hypothetical work-based questions

### Telephone interviews

- Becoming more common
- Used as an initial stage of selection, or following submission of a CV or application form
- See advice under the section on Presenting Your Case

### Interviews incorporating other selection methods

- You may be asked to participate in other selection activities in addition to the interview
- These could include psychometric tests, presentations, group exercises, role play etc
- Refer to the *Careers Success Guide 6: Apply for Jobs*

The approaches outlined above are not mutually exclusive, eg a chronological interview may well include skills-based questions, and a technical interview could include general competencies. Don't be confused by the terminology – the point of describing different interviewing styles is to make you aware of the range of approaches you may encounter, and to help you to prepare for them. An employer will often inform you in advance of the form the interview day will take, particularly if there is to be a competency-based or technical interview, or if you are to complete additional selection exercises.

## **The questions**

We have seen how the questions asked in an interview will depend upon the employer's selection criteria and the approach they take to the interview. In general, questions are likely to revolve around some or all of the following: your educational and work history; your skills and personality; your present career interests and future plans, and your knowledge of the job and company.

The following are typical areas for interview questions. Examples can also be found on the Prospects Website at [prospects.ac.uk](http://prospects.ac.uk)

## **Education and course experience**

- Q. Tell me about your education before coming to university.
- Q. Why did you choose to do these A Levels, GNVQ or Access course?
- Q. Why did you choose De Montfort University?
- Q. Why did you choose this course?
- Q. Outline for me the main elements of your course.
- Q. Tell me about your optional subjects, and why you chose them.
- Q. Describe your final year project.
- Q. What are the strengths and weaknesses of your course?
- Q. What have you gained from your course/from Higher Education?
- Q. What relevance does your course have to the world of work/to your chosen career?

## **Work experience**

Including vacation work, industrial placements, part-time jobs and permanent posts.

- Q. Tell me about your duties in your last job.
- Q. What skills and abilities did you develop?
- Q. What would you identify as your main achievement during your time with company X?
- Q. What have you learned from your work experience?
- Q. What relevance does your work experience have to this job?

## **Interests and activities**

Including involvement in clubs, societies and social activities within and outside the university; hobbies; sports, etc.

- Q. How do you spend your spare time?
- Q. Outside of the work place, what positions of responsibility have you held?
- Q. Tell me about your interests.
- Q. I see you like badminton/poetry/the theatre – what attracts you to it?

## **Job/career**

- Q. Why have you chosen this career from all those open to you?
- Q. Why have you applied for this job?
- Q. What do you know about what a Marketing Manager/Personnel Officer/Research Biologist does?
- Q. Why do you think you could do this job?
- Q. What relevant experience do you have?
- Q. What would be your main training needs if you were offered this job?
- Q. How do you see your career developing over the next five years?



- Q. Here is a problem we have faced recently. How would you have dealt with this?

### **Employer**

- Q. Why have you chosen to apply to our company?
- Q. What do you know about us/our services/our products?
- Q. Who would you identify as being our main competitors?
- Q. What do you see as the important issues within the industry/profession at the moment?
- Q. Which other companies have you applied to?
- Q. What do you see as our strengths and weaknesses?

### **Your skills/personality**

- Q. Tell me about yourself.
- Q. What have been the major influences on your life so far?
- Q. How would your best friend describe you?
- Q. What personal qualities do you feel you could bring to the job?
- Q. How do you handle pressure?
- Q. Which of your achievements are you most proud of?
- Q. What skills and abilities could you bring to this job?
- Q. Give me an example demonstrating your ability to solve problems.

It is useful to think through potential questions, but don't try to memorise your answers. It is better to get clear in your mind the major points you want to put across and the achievements you want to talk about. Some questions, such as the hypothetical "What would you do if...?" are impossible to prepare for.

Here they are looking to see if you can think on your feet and come up with a sensible, logical approach to a problem.

### **Competency-based questions**

You are likely to be asked about your abilities in any interview, but in an interview based on a competency model; these may be investigated in more depth. The interviewer is looking for evidence of key competencies (abilities) from your past experiences and will be searching for both positive and negative indicators. If the interviewer is exploring the competency teamwork, the following question could be asked:

- Q. Give me an example of when you have participated in a successful group project.

This will then be followed up by various questions which probe your experience more deeply, some of which may challenge your answers:

- Q. What was your individual contribution to the team?
- Q. How did you help to motivate the other team members?
- Q. How did you persuade others of the merits of your ideas?
- Q. In retrospect, how would you do things differently?
- Q. It doesn't sound as though your contribution was that vital to the team's success – can you convince me otherwise?



There may also be more general questions, such as:

- Q. What role do you tend to take in a team situation?
- Q. Why do you think teamwork is important in this job?
- Q. What are the components of a successful team?

For this style of questioning, you need to be ready to talk about examples that give direct evidence of your abilities in some detail. It is a good idea to have several examples for each possible criteria/competency from different parts of your life.

### **Stress questions**

Occasionally you may come across a style of questioning which seems confrontational.

For example:

- Q. Your work experience is really quite limited, isn't it?
- Q. Is there anything at all in your degree which is relevant to the world of work?

This approach could be taken because the interviewer wants to see how you handle pressure – whether you can think on your feet and put forward a persuasive argument. Try not to get ruffled, and don't take it personally – it is all part of the interview game. Be assertive, and calmly put forward evidence from your experience to demonstrate why you feel the interviewer's assumptions are incorrect. Don't allow yourself to become angry or intimidated, and stand up for yourself.

### **Equal opportunities**

It is illegal for employers to discriminate on issues such as sex, race or age, and you should not be asked questions which would not be put to every candidate. For example, women should not be asked whether they intend to get married, or to have children if this is not also asked of male candidates. If you come across such questions, one approach is to tackle the issues that lie behind the question rather than the question itself. For example, in this case "In asking me that, I assume you are wondering about my future commitment to the job. I can assure you that I am committed to my career and determined to reach the top with your company". You could also just (politely) refuse to answer such a question, though this might jeopardise your chances of success.

If after an interview you feel that you have been dealt with unfairly, list the questions you considered discriminatory and discuss the matter with a Careers Adviser.

### **Presenting your case**

How well you present your case will depend on the visual impression that you make and your verbal presentation, as well as what you actually say. Studies have shown that how you come across can have as big an impact on the listener as what you say.

### **Making an impression**

Your appearance and body language will have an effect on the interviewer.

**Appearance** – First impressions are very important so, as a general rule, dress smartly. If you are not sure what to wear, it is best to stick to something relatively conservative. For men a suit, or at least a smart jacket and trousers with a shirt and tie will be expected. Women can wear a suit or a smart dress, skirt or trousers. You need to be comfortable in what you wear and to look business-like. Remember that your hair, and if you wear it, jewellery and make up will also contribute to the impression you make – either positively or negatively!

**Body language** – How you come across has a great deal to do with your body language which includes your stance, sitting position, eye contact, handshake, hand movements and facial expressions. Don't fiddle with things, fold your arms, or lounge in your chair. Try to maintain good eye contact throughout, even if this is not your usual style – you need to connect with the interviewer. Smiling occasionally, especially when you first meet the interviewer, will make you appear more natural and less nervous. The impression you are trying to make is one of quiet confidence – friendly but business-like.

**Your verbal presentation** – The sound of your voice – its tone, variation and clarity is important. You will also be assessed on your verbal communication skills. Are you fluent and concise? Can you argue a point successfully? Can you think on your feet? Do you strike up a rapport with the interviewer? Be friendly, polite and enthusiastic.

**Nerves** – Nerves can be a problem. Almost everyone is nervous before an interview, and the interviewers will take

this into account, but don't let nerves overwhelm you. In preparation for the interview, try and spend some time imagining yourself entering the interview room, greeting the interviewer, and answering the questions calmly and positively. By practising in your mind you may find the real thing less nerve-racking. Remember that the interviewer is human too and that they are hoping you will be a good candidate – they are not out to trick you or humiliate you. All you can do is try your best.

**During the interview** – Ask for clarification if a question is confusing. Take a moment to pause for thought if you find a question difficult. Use every question as an opportunity to sell yourself. For instance, in answer to the question "Tell me about your course", you could describe every module in detail, or you could take the opportunity to focus on the skills and abilities you have developed. Do not just passively respond to questions, try and bring in what you want to tell the interviewer about yourself.

At the end of the interview check what will happen next and when you will hear about the outcome. Thank the interviewer for their time.

### **Telephone interviews**

Much of the above holds true for telephone interviews, with the major exception that the interviewer cannot form an impression of you from your appearance or body language. This could be considered a plus point, but it does mean that extra emphasis will be placed on your voice and the way that you communicate. Consider the following:

- Make sure you have a quiet place to take the call – you don't want the interviewer to hear a lot of background noise, or for you to be distracted by other people
- Have your notes in front of you, eg the main points you would like to make, examples giving evidence of your skills and your questions for them. You will still need to prepare thoroughly – your notes should act as an aide-memoir not a crib sheet. Be organised – you don't want the interviewer to hear nothing but silence and the frantic rustling of papers!
- If you think your mouth may go dry, have a glass of water handy, but don't slurp cups of coffee, and of course, don't smoke during the interview
- Don't let your voice become a monotone – you will need to try harder than in a face-to-face interview to communicate your enthusiasm and personality through the sound of your voice
- Communication can be more tricky on the phone as you cannot see the interviewer's face. If you are unsure of what the interviewer has said, or means by a question, check it out with them before answering.

As in any interview, try and be positive, friendly, business-like and as true to yourself as you can.

### **After the interview**

Think through what you have learned from the interview experience and assess your performance. Had you done sufficient preparation? Did any questions catch you

out? Did you talk too much – or too little? Which questions did you answer well and why? If you are unsuccessful, you might like to contact the company to see if they will give you feedback on your performance. Remember that lack of success can be due to the greater experience of other candidates, or personality differences between you and the interviewer rather than the result of a poor interview technique.

Having thought things through, try not to dwell on the interview but put it down to experience. It is likely that your performance will improve with practice. However, if you find that you are unsuccessful at several interviews, you might like to talk this through with a Careers Adviser and arrange to have a mock interview.

If you would like to read more on interview skills there is a wealth of material available. In the Student Services Resource Area there is a take-away booklet *Going for Interviews*, and reference materials on interview technique. These include:

*Great Answers to Tough Interview Questions* (Kogan Page)  
*201 Best Questions to Ask on Your Interview* (McGraw Hill).

**We wish you success with any interviews you face, and in your job hunting.**