

Succeed at your Interview

The interview process is still the most vital part of the recruitment process and making the right impression with an interviewer will mean the difference between a job offer and rejection. It is vital to do your homework well before you meet with a potential employer and our team at Cornwall Staff Agency are here to help and give you as much information as possible, anything you are unsure of please ask....

Some interviews will be relaxed, some more structured and sophisticated, but the same basic ground rules will always apply:

- Always arrive a little early, so that you are not thrown into a panic by any unforeseen delays. Make sure of your travel arrangements in advance, know exactly where you are travelling to and how you are going to get there
- Research the organisation and the business sector. Company web sites are a good source of information
- Dress smartly at all times, unless you have been advised that the company culture is extremely relaxed.
- Be friendly and positive and never criticise your current employer, unless you have an extremely good reason for so doing.
- Be honest - it is the best strategy in the long term.

Preparation is the key to a successful interview and you will need to be able to talk confidently about yourself, the business you are attending interview for and the industry you are looking to work in.

Interview questions

Below is a selection common questions that you may be asked in the course of a job interview. Prepare answers to the standard ones about why you want the job, what your career plans are, and what you perceive as your strengths and weaknesses. Be positive throughout and have around 3 – 5 questions you can ask the company at the end of the interview to give you more information about the job and which will delve more into their vision and future plans. It cannot be emphasised more strongly - be prepared. Good luck!

Top Interview Questions:

Tell me about yourself...

A common opening question, partly because your interviewers want to know more about you, but mostly because they want to put you on the spot and see how you react. They've given you complete control here, and you should take full advantage of it. They have not, however, asked for your life story.

It's important to keep your answer pertinent, and try not to go off topic too much. You're here to interview for a particular position, and you shouldn't lose sight of this. Remember: the interviewer is *not* just making small talk.

Right answer: Should be about a two or three minutes long and briefly cover your education, your interest in the field, work history and experience.

Wrong answer: 'Well, where do I start? I was born in 1974. A precocious child...'

What are your weaknesses...?

The first part of this question is realising that you actually have some. *Everyone* has weaknesses or things that they can improve about themselves. And that is essentially what the interviewer is asking you to consider. Be honest with yourself here. It'll save you a lot of time in the long run.

The best answers to this question take one of your weaknesses, and then gives practical examples of how you're trying to address it. A good example of this type of answer would be:

'I used to find it difficult to work on simultaneous projects, preferring to finish on one task before starting another. However, since taking a time management course recently, I've learnt how to manage my schedule more effectively, making it easier to multi-task when necessary'.

Right answer: Weakness + how you've tried/are trying to address it = (eventually) strength

Wrong answer: 'I don't have any weaknesses'; 'I'm a perfectionist; 'Kryptonite'.

Why should you get this job?

This is unashamedly aimed at provoking a personal sales pitch. As there will probably be a number of other candidates having interviews, this is your chance to demonstrate why you want the job, and why you would be a perfect fit for the company.

Essentially, the company is hiring for a reason (a brief summary of which can usually be found in the job description). You need to position yourself as the person to do this.

Right answer: 'From what we've discussed so far, you're looking to X (or, 'having a problem with X'). In the past I have demonstrated X, Y and Z (experience and your main strengths), which have really helped my previous employer'.

Wrong answer: 'Because I am better than anyone else you have interviewed', 'Because if you don't it would be the biggest mistake of your life', 'I really need the money'

What are your salary expectations?

When completing your preparations for the interview, always have this question in the back of your mind. Have a look at the average salary for someone in this industry, area, and who possesses similar skills to yourself, and you should get a basic idea.

Remember, this is only the first interview. You haven't been offered the job. There's no need at this stage to be too specific or to try and begin negotiations. Giving a broad salary range will usually be enough to move on, but be prepared to back it up if you need to..

Right answer: A broad (but realistic) answer e.g. 'I'm looking for a starting salary somewhere between £15,000 and £20,000'.

Wrong answer: 'How much do you think I'm worth?', 'Anything, I just want a job', or any unrealistic salaries which are not in line with industry standards and best practice.

Where do you see yourself in five years' time?

The job interview favourite. The interviewer wants you to display that you've thought about your future, your ambition to progress in the industry. They also want to verify that this isn't just a stop gap position.

Although all of your answers should be tailored to the organisation and position you've applied for, this is especially the case with this question. If you're going for an entry level position, for example, explain how you'd like your career to progress (e.g. 'I'd like to progress to a Senior Software Engineer' or 'I see myself being a team leader...').

If you're going for a more senior position, explain how you'd be looking to move the company forward. Have a look at their business strategy or corporate objectives before the interview, and explain how you can help in achieving them.

Right answer: Be passionate about the industry. Fit your career goals around the organisation's objectives, demonstrate ambition and exploit your strengths.

Wrong answer: 'On the other side of this desk', 'Doing your job', 'Rich', 'On a beach somewhere far, far away'.

Do you have any questions?

Right answer: 'Yes'. No exceptions.

Wrong answer: 'No'.

Why are you leaving your current position/Why did you leave your previous position?

Right answer: Avoid the temptation to criticise your employer. Stay positive, but try not to lie. Always avoid saying that you're simply looking for a new challenge if you can't back it up, because the recruiter *will* dig deeper. If all else fails, explaining that there were no opportunities for career progression sounds a lot better.

Why is there a gap in your work history?

Right answer: Wherever possible, be honest. If it was for personal reasons, then say that. Otherwise, something along the lines of 'taking a break whilst looking for a new career direction' should be enough to move the interview along.

Why did you apply for this position?

Right answer: Very similar answer to why you want the job, but focus more heavily on why the position and company excite you, rather than why you should excite them. Demonstrate what you know about the company (and use what you've learnt from the job description to back it why you're the right person to do the job).

Whatever your answers are, make sure that you've practiced them beforehand. Don't be tempted to improvise or answer on the spur of the moment. It'll never come out as well as you'd hoped. It doesn't need to be scripted, but knowing why you want the job and what your strengths and weaknesses are should be a standard part of your preparation process and just as important as your pre-interview research.

It is also essential to consider that you'll not just be judged on your CV. Getting across your personality is of equal importance. In other words, don't just think about your answers, but think about what they say about you.

Ultimately, you need to be likeable and display the parts of your personality that will make you attractive to prospective employers (engaging, dedicated, hard working etc). Entering a competitive interview, with the right mindset can really set you apart.

Finally, to avoid any awkward silences, never assume that the hiring manager has a sense of humour... Just in case.

Other common interview questions

- What are your strengths?
- What are your weaknesses?
- What do you know about our organisation?
- How would you approach this job?
- How do you manage your staff?
- What do you look for in a manager?
- What do you look for in a subordinate?
- How do you decide on your objectives?
- How do you manage your day?
- What interests you most in your work?
- What have you read recently that has taken your interest?
- What sort of things do you like to delegate?
- What do you do in your spare time?
- In what environment do you work best?
- What motivates you?
- If you could change your current job in any way, how would you do it?
- How have you changed over the last five years?
- Where do you see yourself going in the next five years?
- Describe a time when you felt you were doing well.
- Describe a time when you felt that things were not going too well.
- How do you work in a team?
- What would your colleagues say about you?
- How would your boss describe your work?
- Tell me about a time when you successfully managed a difficult situation at work.
- When were you most happy at work?
- Who are you finding it difficult to work with right now? Why?
- Given a choice in your work what, what do you like to do first?
- Given a choice, what would you leave till last in your work?
- On holiday, what do you miss most about your work?
- What do you think you can bring to this position and company?
- How do you see this job developing?
- Why did you leave xyz?
- Why have you stayed so long/for such a short time with your present company?
- Why were you out of work so long?
- Why were you made redundant/let go/fired?
- If we asked for a reference, what would it say about you?
- What do you think is your market value?
- Why were you transferred/promoted?
- What do you like best about your present job?

- What did you learn in that job and how did it influence your career?
- If you did not have to work what would you do? Why?
- What will you do if you don't get this job?
- What other job have you applied for recently?
- What decisions do you find easy to make?
- What decisions do you find difficult to make?
- What training courses have you been on?
- How do you get the best out of people?
- Which of your jobs has given you the greatest satisfaction?
- How do you respond under stress? Can you provide a recent example?
- This job has a large component of travel/sales/negotiation/stress. How will you cope with that?
- What support/training will you need to do this job?
- What will you look forward to most in this job?
- What sort of person are you socially?
- In your view, what are the major problems/opportunities facing this company/industry/sector?
- How did you get into this line of work?
- What other irons do you have in the fire for your next job?
- What aspects of this job would you delegate?
- What are the major influences that encourage you to take a job?
- How does the job sound to you?
- What questions have you for us?