



Essential Preparation Required Before Every Interview

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Understanding Your Strengths and How to Answer Every Common Interview Question

Remember, interviews are not 'rocket science'; they are simply a sales meeting – an opportunity for you to sell yourself.

The employer has a need, their vacancy, and you are the solution! An interview is simply a way for the interviewer to obtain information about yourself so that they can make a balanced business judgement as to whether you are right for the role.

Remember, most interviewers are not experienced interviewers. Very few managers go on interview training courses, and many interviewers will have read the 'How to conduct an Interview' just the night before. They are probably as nervous as you about the meeting and undertaking the subsequent exercises will allow you to feel confident and prepared for any interview, allowing your personality and skills to come through. In essence, the following exercises will help you 'WOW' at interview'



Preparation you must do on yourself prior to an interview:

By undertaking the following exercise you will be able to answer half to two-thirds of all common interview questions. You will be asked the SEVEN questions in every interview in a roundabout way – prepare for them!

1. Why do you want the job – think of, write down at least three solid reasons?

2. Why are you looking to leave your existing employer? Have the story planned and pre-prepared? If you were made redundant, what was going on in the company to force them to make that decision, how many others were made redundant, i.e. “my position was made redundant together with three of my colleagues last Wednesday as our major client went bust owing us £500K”. This is better, than “I was made redundant.” Don’t go into laborious detail and always portray your current/last employer in a favourable light. Good points to make are needing a new challenge/taken the company as far as I can/want to develop my career, and I’ve sat down with my boss, and they’re allowing me to attend interviews/I need a new mentor to help me develop my business skills further, etc.

3. Why do you want to work for the company – think of, write down and remember at least three solid reasons.

You will be asked these questions more than once each in a typical interview; therefore prepare further answers.

4. What are your strengths?

Ultimately, this is what the company are hiring! You would be amazed at how many senior personnel struggle to detail more than about four or five strengths – they’ve never analysed themselves in this way.

Basic sales: Sales is about features, examples and benefits. What is good about the product, how does it work, what’s in it for me and how will it improve my life?! Imagine a beauty product demonstration sale in a department store – full of features, examples and benefits. When you sell your strengths at interview, you must do so in the same way.

Everyone, yes everyone, without fail at interview is hard working, committed and a great timekeeper. All salespeople are continuously over their targets and the highest performers in their sector. All accountants have saved more money and improved processes. These are all words – features without examples or benefits - so how do you differentiate yourself? Quite simply sell yourself as a product.

EXERCISE: (THIS REALLY, REALLY, REALLY, DOES WORK!)

1) On a sheet of paper write down in column one all of your strengths – both work related, and non-work related. Involve your partner, good friend (a parent is also great!) as they will detail strengths that you didn’t even realise you possessed!

2) In column two give examples of when you’ve used this strength and in column three the benefits that this strength enabled. For example:

Feature

Example

Benefit

Example 1: Hard Working *“After a hard day’s work I helped Fred load up the lorry to deliver the kit which ensured that my client’s production line continued to schedule I won a further contract worth £5,000 from the company and I will be as hard working when I join your company”*



Example 2: Committed *“Even though the company relocated I stayed a further three months to ensure a smooth handover. My northern replacement was fully trained and is now becoming a tremendous asset to my previous employer. I will bring my 100% commitment when I join your business”*

Example 3: Persistent *“Even though we were three nil down at half time, I gave the team a strict talking to as I knew we were the better site. We won 4-3 and as a team, we learned a valuable lesson – never give up.”*

Get the drift? Look at your strengths, think of examples of when you've used those strengths and then sell the benefits. This exercise is invaluable if you have a formal job specification that details all the required attributes as you can simply tailor your examples to these.

This exercise is invaluable in competency-based interviews, particularly if you are provided with the list of required competencies prior to the interview (which is not the norm). A competency-based interview in its most basic form is 'give an example of when.....' rather than 'what would you do if.....' type questions. The interviewer then grades your answers against their scoring criteria and 'scores' you accordingly.

By undertaking this very basic exercise you will be able to answer 65% of all common interview questions. This exercise will make you feel more confident, as a consequence you'll relax and your personality will shine. And, ultimately whether you are an accountant, a lawyer or a sales person if your skills are equal to a competing candidate and your personality comes across better at interview you WILL succeed.

5. What is your business plan?

This is related to 'what are your strengths' but is asking how will you utilise these strengths when you join our business. At a first interview, all that is required is for you to spend 5-15 minutes thinking about the role, the specification and yourself in the role. How will you develop the business, what training do you need, what skills will you regularly use, what industry are the company in – how does this differ or compare to your existing sector? What contacts do you have that could be useful to you in the role. How will you structure a day/week/month. It will help you to spend a quiet 15 minutes visualising yourself in the role and you'll be amazed at how many questions you'll have at the end of the exercise.

A good time to visualise is just before you sleep or just as you wake up. Close your eyes and imagine the back of your hand. Now imagine that hand is on a keyboard in your new role, now look up at the office around you. What are you doing, what are people around you doing? Take a phone call from a client, have a meeting with your team. Have an appraisal meeting with your boss where they're telling you what a great job you've been doing and talking through project x that you've just completed. This exercise sounds far out, I'm not asking for incense and whale music, try it – IT WORKS and will help you to 'think on your feet when you are thrown that tough question.

At a second interview 'What is Your Business Plan' this is now a crucial question. The employer decided at the first interview that you had the right personality and basic skills and attributes – now they have to make a logical business decision. Often companies ask second interview candidates to prepare a presentation on what they'd do in their first year, or how they'd change the working processes, etc.

6. What are your weaknesses?

The dreaded weakness question – everyone knows it's coming, but few prepare for it!

There are many ways that the question can be answered so I'll start with the DON'T'S!

- 1) Making a joke of it - Chocolate, men, beer, Friday nights, whatever
- 2) 'I don't have any weaknesses' – YOU DO – you're full of them if only you'd look at yourself. I knew someone who once replied in this way and the interviewer shrieked 'Hallelujah! I've always wanted to meet you Jesus Christ. Here, shake my hand!'



- 3) 'The perfectionist answer' - e.g. "I am very target focused and work towards a team target – I quite often put undue pressure on my team to ensure that targets are reached" or "I am meticulous about everything that I do – I sometimes get annoyed with myself because I take longer than I would like to get tasks done." It can work but nowadays is a bit tired.
- 4) 'I need training answer' - I don't know your marketplace/products, I will need training to succeed, etc.

A very soul searching way to look at this is to prepare beforehand. Actually sit down and list your weaknesses. Ask a close friend and colleague to help (and take their answers as constructive – do not hold it against them – this could be the most valuable lesson you're learned in years). Many management trainers say that all of the best managers can list more weaknesses than strengths because this demonstrates self awareness, they know their limitations, they are looking to improve, they know how to and when to delegate, etc.

Therefore recognise that you have a weakness. Talk through what you've done about it but how it is still a weakness, e.g. "Friends and colleagues used to comment about how disorganised I was. I therefore searched the Internet and found an article on time management planning on www.aaronwallis.co.uk that prioritises daily tasks and structures my day accordingly. It works like this I list my tasks and grade them A –must do, B – do it I get the time, C – If I run out of B's, D – Delegate and E – Eradicate (cross off the list). Since I introduced this to my working day, friends and colleagues are always saying how more organised I am. However, I'm still not perfect and quite often get distracted and forget to focus on the tasks in hand, but I 'm really pleased with my improvements and I'm far more focused than I used to be.

By answering in this way it shows you are self aware, analytical and committed to self improvement. You will address the question and turn the weakness into a strength.

7 - Close the interview

Closing means to ask for the order or to ask what the next stage is and whether they will be involved in the next stage. As many as three quarters of sales people in sales interviews don't close the interview but all would say that they would never leave a sales meeting without closing the meeting down. Every interview, regardless of whether you are a lawyer, accountant or CEO is a sales meeting. You have to sell yourself, the benefits your strengths will bring, your skills, values and character in order to land your perfect job. As part of this process you also have to close. Most people are daunted by closing, but don't be. It is good professional business practise and will demonstrate that you are taking the interview seriously.

Before the interview prepare your close and particularly how to close in a straightforward and non confrontational way.

You will feel the meeting coming to a somewhat natural ending, the questions are less furious, there's a shuffling of papers, a glance at a watch, you'll know – it's instinctive.

At this point probe and fact find around their thoughts on you. Ask Open Questions (questions you can't answer 'Yes' or 'No' to) – How, What, Where, Why, When, Who to get the interviewer talking. A great question is "How do you feel our business meeting has gone today" – it is no longer an 'interview', it is a business meeting, you are now on a level. Others could be "How do you feel my personality will fit in with the existing team", "What skills and experience do you feel I have that will make me succeed in the role", etc.

If you are getting any negative points here you are in the perfect situation to overcome them. If all that you are getting are positives then you are in a position to SEMI-CLOSE.

Semi-closing is the precursor to closing – like all closing questions they should be closed questions (questions you can only answer 'Yes' or 'No') – Do, Don't, Didn't, etc. Questions could be: "Is there any further information on my career to date that you would like me to expand on that will help you in your decision process" – "Do you see any reasons why you feel my experience would not be relevant to the position" "Do you have any concerns about my



lack of exact product knowledge”, “Do you see any reasons why I would not be recommended for a second interview”

If you are getting negatives overcome them. Acknowledge that you've overcome them, i.e. “So have I managed to convince you that I do have the organisational skills required to succeed?” – etc. If all that you are getting are positives then you are in a position to CLOSE.

- Direct Close – “Have I got a second interview?” – use only if you feel that it is appropriate
- Alternative Close – “Would you like to see me again on Tuesday or Wednesday?”
- Deferred Close “I shall look forward to hearing from you tomorrow to hear your decision”

By far the easiest way to close is the Assumptive Close – “I have really enjoyed our meeting today and would like to reiterate my interest in the role. I really look forward to having the opportunity to meet with you again to discuss matters in more depth. I shall hope to see you then”

Planning & Researching a Potential Employer

Pre-Planning – Minimum Preparation

It is essential that you do research on the business, industry and market before every interview. This exercise will ensure that you complete the minimum preparation and not to do so is totally unacceptable in this ‘Google’ age. As a minimum you will need to know five facts on the following:

The Company – 5 solid facts – structure, history, turnover, amount of employees, Directors, etc.

The Role – 5 solid facts – territory, core responsibilities, key requirements, etc.

The Products/Services – 5 solid facts – application, purpose, etc.

The Marketplace – 5 solid facts – clients, competitors, how competitive, etc.

You will be asked questions such as ‘So, what do you know about us?’ and ‘nothing, just what the Recruitment Consultant told me’ will not win you any points!

Pre-Planning – Minimum Preparation

To go beyond minimum expectation you could research the following:

- Look at the job specification and tailor your CV to the requirements of the job – or do a ‘thematic appendix’ to your CV that details the job requirements, matching examples that you have of that experience/skill. This will help you enormously in a competency based interview – i.e. questions that are ‘give me an example of when you have.....’ rather than ‘what would you do if.....’
- Go onto the Companies House website, for less than £5 you can download the company’s financials or go onto www.companycheck.co.uk where you’ll be able to view the basics for free
- Google search what the company do – who are their competitors, what are their USP’s, who are the key personnel in the competitors, what is their market share, what do people say about them.



- Type '<company name> are sh*t' or '<company name> are cr*p' into Google – what are people saying about them on social networking/consumer sites and how are they handling it – NB this really works and forms a great chunk for discussion at interview!
- See if there are any reports/white papers that the company has been involved in.
- Google them and click on the news tab to see where they've featured in the news
- Google the name of the interviewer and the company name – you'll be amazed how much information you can glean on them – what PR initiatives have they been involved with, recent wins, product launches, etc.
- Search LinkedIn or other networking sites for the name of your interviewer – these often detail their career history, education, professional memberships/affiliations and even interests (have a picture in your 'mind's eye' of the interviewer before you meet them) NB Words of WARNING – I once had a candidate who came across as a stalker with the amount of information (including their home address and kid's names) that they were able to glean – don't come across as too intense or psychotic!!!
- Look for the company's products – USP's, what do they feel like, get a feel for them. If it is a product you can buy or find in a wholesalers get hold of the product, feel it in the shop, experience it for yourself!
- Type into the Google bar 'Links:www <and then the company URL>' this will show you who is linking to their website – could be clients, distributors, suppliers that are worth investigating.

Five additional things to do if the role is not confidential:

1. Call the company for company literature/promotional literature. Explain that you are attending an interview (it will get back to the interviewer!)
2. Call customer services/ the sales office to ask questions to obtain information on market trends, competition, etc. (it will get back to the interviewer!!)
3. Contact someone already in the post. What is 'x' like to work for? Any hints and tips? What would you research if you were going for an interview? What should I know about the business? Why do you remain with the business? (it will get back to the interviewer!!!)
4. Contact the equivalent person in your role with a competitor – what does the company do well/not so well? Would you consider working for company 'x'? If not, why not? (understand the weaknesses of the business and potential pitfalls to probe at interview)
5. Contact clients/distributors to obtain a full rounded opinion of the company prior to interview.

We hope that you've found this useful and good luck in preparing for your sales interviews!