

Interviews

Employers only interview people if they think they're a realistic candidate, so use the opportunity to demonstrate that you have the skills and experience required for the role.

What will I be asked?

It's unlikely you'll know exactly what questions will be asked, but by understanding the organisation and the role you're going for, you can get a good idea.

Your motivations and understanding of the job

Questions relating to these are likely to come up regardless of the job you're going for. "Why do you want this job?" or "Why do you want to work for us?" help employers understand what motivates you, but also test how much you know about the role and the organisation. They might ask "What do you foresee as the biggest challenge in this role?" or questions about competitors and clients, so make sure you've found out about the organisation and the sector beforehand. The organisation's website is a good starting point.

Your skills

Employers tend to ask about your skills, as if you've successfully used a skill in the past, it is likely you'll do so again in the future. The job description and person specification will highlight exactly what the employer is looking for, so use this to prepare; if team work and communication are listed, prepare examples to demonstrate these.

Examples can come from work experience, but also from your course, and extra-curricular activities. If there's no job description, then think about what skills are likely to be required, and apply the same principle.

How to structure your answers

STARR (Situation, Task, Action, Result/Reflection) is a handy acronym to use to structure examples of how you have demonstrated a particular skill.

Situation	Briefly outline the circumstances that led to your action.
Task	Explain exactly what the task, problem or goal was.
Actions	Give a step-by-step explanation of what you did (to show the skills you're giving evidence of)
Result & Reflection	Outline what happened as a result. Be specific, this will show your effectiveness in using that skill.

As a rough guideline, 10% of your answer should be background information (Situation and Task), 80% explaining what you did (Actions), and 10% for the final Result. Sometimes, for example a question about where something went wrong, you could add Reflection to your answer, e.g. what you learned from the situation and what you would do differently.

Strengths-based interviews

Some large employers have switched from competency-based interviews to a strengths-based approach, believing this leads to responses that are less rehearsed, allowing them to get to know the candidate better.

What to expect

The aim of strengths-based interviews is to find out what comes naturally to you, and what you do with ease and enthusiasm, rather than exploring merely what you are able to do. As such, you're more likely to be asked about motivations and values, rather than skills.

How to prepare

As you'll be asked about your strengths, ensure you understand them yourself. Ask yourself the following in a professional context:

- What energises me?
- When do I feel most like myself?
- What comes easily to me?

Improving your self-awareness will aid your performance, so try also thinking about why you enjoy these activities or why you're good at them.

You may be asked follow-up questions. This isn't a sign that your answer is lacking, the interviewer wants to get to know you better by seeing you think on your feet.

There will probably still be questions where you're asked to display evidence of skills, and the STARR approach can still be a useful model for these.

What they are looking for

Employers want to choose candidates who will enjoy the job and feel comfortable with the key skills required, so will pick people whose strengths align with the role. However, don't try to predict what these will be and model your answers accordingly, as the employer will be able to tell you're doing this.

They will however be looking for someone whose values match with those of the company, so research what these are and how they might be applied in practice, both by the company and by you.

Practical advice

- Make sure you look smart and professional. If you're not sure what to wear, it's safer to look a bit too formal.
- First impressions are vital, so be polite and professional from the start to everyone you meet. Pay attention to the questions! Answer the ones they ask, not the ones you wish they had.
- Speak slowly and clearly, and don't rush your answer. Don't be afraid to ask for clarification if you don't understand a question, or to ask for a moment if you need time to think.
- Avoid giving unnecessary detail in your answers – use the body language of the interviewer to decide whether you need to expand further.
- If you have to present negative information be truthful, but also positive. Say how you learned from it or would do something differently in the future.

Telephone, Skype and video interviews

Purpose and format may be similar to standard interviews but there are extra considerations:

- Prevent any potential disturbances – find a quiet space and take steps to ensure you're not interrupted, either by others or by a phone.
- Check the technology in advance. Try a practice conversation with a friend on Skype first, and consider using a microphone to improve the sound quality if needed. If you do experience problems during the interview, be honest and let the employer know, so you can sort it.
- For video or Skype interviews make sure there is enough lighting, and that the background behind you is appropriate. The angle of the camera should put you in the middle of the screen so your eye contact is central.
- Even if the interviewer can't see you, good posture and positive body language will help your nerves and make you sound clearer and more confident. Some people even find standing up can help.
- Be prepared! First impressions count, so warm your voice before the interview, to allow you to start the call in a professional manner.

- Memory aids such as written notes can make your answers sound seamless and informed if used well. Used poorly, your answers will sound unnatural and result in long pauses or rustling sounds.
- You may not have visual clues to help decide whether you've said enough or too little; pause periodically and allow the interviewer to interject if they want to.

Good answers to common questions

Why do you want this job?

Your opportunity to talk about your motivation and enthusiasm for the role, industry and company...basically things other than the salary! It's also testing that you have a realistic understanding of the job and organisation – the best answers will show how your skills and goals line up with these. Be as enthusiastic as you can, without going over the top.

Tell me about a situation where you had to manage multiple demanding deadlines. What was your approach?

This is one example of a competency based question. Preparation is key to answering these questions well, so plan ahead and identify examples you can use for the skills you may be asked about. Use the **STARR** (Situation, Task, Action, Result & Reflection) model outlined earlier to answer.

What is your biggest weakness?

You need to demonstrate self-awareness, although don't confess something that would majorly impact your performance in the role. Equally, avoid clichéd answers like "I'm a perfectionist." A minor weakness like being impatient or not being assertive enough is the right level, but it's also important to turn this into a positive by talking about what you do or could do overcome or manage this.

Tell me about yourself

Remembering that you are presenting yourself in the context of convincing the employer that you are a strong candidate for this role, give a brief summary including recent experiences, major achievements and a bit about your passions. Making sure what you say is all relevant to the role; the recruiter is looking for what you can bring to the company and if you are suitable for the job.

What do you think are the biggest challenges facing our organisation at the moment?

Here, you can demonstrate your knowledge of the organisation and the sector they operate within. You might for example talk about how recent developments will affect the company. Prepare for these commercial awareness questions by reading industry news and networking with people already working in this area.

Can you tell me about a time you've worked effectively as part of a team?

Another competency-based question. Make sure your answer is about what you did, rather than what the team as a whole did, although some information about this may provide relevant context. The recruiter will want to know what you contributed to the team.

How many pizzas are delivered in London each week?

Don't panic, you're not expected to get the answer right. Instead, this is testing how you approach and solve problems. You might start by estimating the population and how often the average person would order pizza and go from there. Show that you can keep your cool and talk them through a logical thought process.

When where you most engaged at university?

This is another strengths-based question. Pick something you enjoyed because it allowed you to use your strengths, and then let your enthusiasm show. Use the **STARR** method to structure your answer, but make sure you explain why you found the task so engaging. For example, if it was during your dissertation, explain how you enjoyed researching and drawing conclusions from this.

Sample interview questions

General

- Tell me about yourself.
- What are your key strengths?
- What are your weaknesses?
- Tell me something about yourself that I wouldn't know from reading your application.

Motivation and values

- Why do you want this job?
- How does this job fit in with your longer-term career plans?
- What would be the main challenge you'd face if you got this job?
- What does success mean to you?
- Teamwork and interpersonal skills
- Describe a situation where you had to deal with someone who didn't like you. How did you handle it?
- What qualities do you have that make you an effective team member? Can you give me examples?
- Please describe a situation in which you had to demonstrate sensitivity and tact.

Prioritising and organising

- Describe a situation in which several things had to be done at the same time. How did you handle it? What was the result?
- Tell me about a situation in which you have had to make compromises in order to get something done by the deadline.
- Tell me about a situation in which your plans for something went wrong. Why did it happen? What did you do? What could you have done to prevent it?

Problem solving, analysis and creativity

- Can you tell me about a time when you have had to make a decision with incomplete information?
- Can you give me an example of a time when you found it hard to make a decision about something?
Why was it difficult? What did you do?
- Describe a time when you thought outside the box.

Decision making and judgement

- Give me an example of a time you had to make an important decision on your own. How did you make it? How does it affect you today?
- Can you think of a situation where something you were convinced about was shown to be wrong? What did you do? What had convinced you?

Drive and determination

- Describe a task that you completed that you didn't enjoy. How did you motivate yourself?
- Tell me about a situation in which you have had to cope with various setbacks.
- Tell me about something you gave up on. What else could you have done to succeed?

Adaptability and initiative

- Describe a situation when you have taught yourself a new skill in order to complete a task.
- Can you tell me about a time when you had to adapt to an unexpected change?
- Can you give me an example of any tasks or projects you started on your own?

Communication and negotiation

- What is the most difficult thing you have had to explain to someone? How did you do it?
- Tell me about when you have persuaded someone to change their mind about something.
- Describe a time when you achieved a win-win result with someone who had competing needs.

Commercial awareness and customer focus

- Can you give me an example of when you have gone above and beyond in order to provide a good service to someone?
- Are there things that our competitors are doing that we should be worried about?
- What are the most important issues facing this sector in the next five years?

Leadership

- Describe a situation in which you took responsibility for achieving something.
- How do you get the best out of people?
- How would you describe your leadership style? Can you give me an example of it in practice?

This resource is available in alternative formats.

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