

After using a variety of job searching methods, such as networking, approaching employers direct, scanning the newspaper and internet, you have finally landed an interview. The initial excitement begins to subside as nerves get the better of you. Thoughts of messing up begin to plague you. You have this vision of making a complete fool of yourself -spilling a cup of coffee on your pants, dropping your documents on the floor as you enter the interview room, not being able to answer a question - the list goes on!

Well, it's only natural to feel nervous and anxious, especially if it's your first interview and a job you are really keen to obtain. You can do things to help avoid the typical 'nightmare scenario' every applicant goes through. Important tips follow to help you meet the challenge of an interview. With some vital preparation, you should find the interview experience less daunting and may even enjoy it!

What is an interview?

The interview is basically all about selling one thing – YOU. It's all about convincing the employer you are the right person for the job. Through the interaction you have with the employer he/she will be assessing you on your skills, strengths and weaknesses and qualifications, not to mention your attitude, aptitudes, motivation and maturity. No wonder people find interviews somewhat daunting!

The Right Approach

A positive way of approaching the interview is to see it as less of a contest and more of marketing exercise – a 'performance'. Focusing on the performance rather than the contest (or outcome) will keep you concentrated on those factors that you can influence, for example, the way you introduce yourself or answer a particular question. Perform well and the contest / outcome will take care of itself. Consider it as a 'conversation with a purpose'. Not only is it an opportunity for the employer to gain more specific information about your ability to perform the job, but it is also a chance for you to obtain information about the position, employer and organisation.

Preparing to Perform

Step One: Thorough preparation – is the most important step you can take to performing well. Employers are continually amazed at the number of applicants, who don't bother to find out basic facts about the industry, profession or organisation, the job or themselves. It's unlikely you'll be selected for a job without being able to articulate what the job involves, what you are good at, what you want in a career and so on. It's in your best interests to avoid being this type of applicant.

Step Two: Find out the details of the position, especially the selection criteria.

It is important to find out about the job and what the employer is looking for and most of all how your skills, experience, ability and personal qualities meet the position requirements. Ask for a position description, or speak to someone doing similar work about his or her job.

Step Three: Research the organisation

Find out specific facts about the company, e.g. what its products and services are: recent events which have had an impact on the organization, how many stores or offices it has and their location. What are the organisation's strategic directions? Future plans?

Employers look for applicants who show real eagerness to work for the organisation, i.e. an applicant who shows initiative in researching the company. There is a wealth of information you can refer to including:

- Annual reports
- Company websites
- Business directories (e.g. Business Who's Who of Australia)
- RMIT CD&E Website (www.rmit.edu.au/careers)
- Business magazines, professional journals
- Professional Associations
- Libraries
- Talk to someone who either works for or has knowledge of the organisation.

Step Four: Be clear about your skills and abilities, personal qualities and experience

By preparing practical examples, this should help you to demonstrate to the employer that you have the qualities he/she is seeking. For example, you may have been promoted to Store Manager in your part time retail job. What does this translate to? It's a good way of demonstrating your leadership and interpersonal skills, as well as an ability to accept responsibility. Remember, you must be prepared to talk about yourself (without overdoing it), so be forthcoming with information about yourself.

Step Five: Think about questions you may be asked

When preparing answers to questions likely to be asked, it is important to keep in mind what it is that employers are really seeking in an employee. Learning answers to lists of sample questions is not the right way. However, anticipating what you will be asked is the more sensible approach to take.

Try to think of a range of examples you could use to illustrate your answers to questions. Think back over your studies, extra curricular activities, employment and other interests. Employers will often look for past behaviour, to predict future performance. Interview questions are designed to elicit this information. For example: "Can you tell me about a time..." "Can you describe a situation where you..." These questions reinforce the need to think of concrete examples.

One way of preparing practical examples to use in an interview is to write skills/qualities the employer is looking for on a blank piece of paper and list relevant examples (drawn from all aspects of your life, not just study).

Describe each example in detail (who, what, where, when etc) – the aim being to jog your memory in the interview, so that if you are asked a question about teamwork, for example, you will have a range of fully fleshed-out examples to draw on.

Example questions

Questions you can expect to encounter and the rationale for asking those questions are described below. A full preparation means having an answer for each of the following:

- **Why should we employ you? Why do you want this job?**
An invitation to 'sell yourself' on the basis of your interest in the position, skills and personal qualities and how they match with the employer's requirements. Tries to identify how well you understand the organisation's needs and how confident you are of your qualifications for the job.
- **Why would you like to work for our organisation? What do you know about us?** Another effort to establish what you have to offer and how your needs and those of the organisation, complement each other.
- **What does teamwork mean to you?**
Employer is looking for evidence that you understand the needs and attributes of others and ways of ensuring that everyone contributes to a common goal. Think about team projects you have participated in as well as extra curricular activities, e.g. sport and other team activities.
- **Where do you see yourself in five years time?** This question is looking at your ambition, motivation and ability to look ahead. You need to be realistic in your expectations and demonstrate you have given some thought to your future.
- **What are your strengths and weaknesses?** The employer is interested in your assessment of your own abilities. Provide examples to back up your claim. When speaking of weaknesses it is best to answer in a positive way, i.e. turn the negative into a positive, expressing your desire to learn more about a certain area, or describing the action you have taken to improve something you were not confident about. For example: "I would like my computer proficiency to improve, so I have enrolled in a short course, to further develop my computer skills."
- **What have you learnt from some of the jobs you have had? Which did you enjoy most? How do you think the work you have done will prepare you for this job?** This is asking you to describe aspects of your work such as working under pressure, dealing with different kinds of people, teamwork, working with or without supervision. Provide examples of activities or behaviour exhibited in these jobs, which demonstrate such skills or qualities.

INTERVIEWS

- **What do you consider to be your greatest achievement?**

Employer is interested to know why this was important to you, how you set about achieving it and what obstacles you had to overcome.

- **Why did you choose to study your course? Why did you drop or transfer to another stream? Which subjects have you enjoyed/disliked? What led you to choose this career?**

Such questions are exploring your motivation and commitment to the work, logical thought and decision-making processes.

Other possible questions:

- What entrepreneurial activities have you been involved in?
- What do you do in your spare time?
- What do you think it takes to be successful in this field?
- How would previous employers/friends describe you?

You will also be asked behavioural questions such as:

- Summarise a situation where you displayed leadership and initiative to motivate others. Did you achieve an outcome? What did you learn?
- Describe a time when you dealt with conflict. How did you behave? What did you do?

Other Pre-Performance Factors

Having knowledge about the job and yourself is most but not all of the battle. A number of other factors can still affect your performance. Make sure you:

Know the interview logistics

Be clear about the exact time and place of the interview and the interviewer's full name (and correct pronunciation). Consider transport and parking arrangements. These may seem obvious, but you will be amazed at the number of applicants who turn up on the wrong day, or wrong place...or even ask halfway through the interview if they can go and put money in the meter. Sound impressive??

Understand the interview context

Know the process and structure of your interview. Is it a first round interview? How many rounds are there? How long will it go for? Does it just involve an interview or are there other considerations such as a test or tour of the organisation? What is the work role of the person(s) doing the interviewing?

Understand the type of interview

There is a range of different selection procedures to assist employers in the screening process. Interviews may take several forms:

- One to One
- Panel interviews
- Group interviews
- Assessment Centre - series of exercises (usually over a period of 1-2 days) designed to demonstrate a candidate's skills in relation to the position for which they have applied.
- Role Plays - to assess a specific skill, e.g. customer service, dealing with conflict, negotiation
- Psychometric testing - I.Q., aptitude, personality
- Lunch with managers – to assess your cultural fit, see how you manage yourself.

Prepare questions to ask the employer

Remember an interview is a 'two way street'. By asking questions it not only reinforces your interest in the position and your preparation, but also provides the opportunity for you to see whether the organisation will give you the growth and development you seek.

Avoid asking questions that already have been answered, that indicate a lack of preparation/ignorance or that focus on benefits to you e.g. salary.

Questions you could ask:

- Induction and Training Programs
- Culture of company
- Reporting relationships, to whom you will be responsible
- Changes happening at industry level
- The next step, i.e. when can you expect to hear if you have been successful.

Appearance

If you're the type of person who wakes up in the morning only to discover the clothes you want to wear either haven't been washed or are missing a button...then it is advisable to prepare what you are going to wear to the interview the day before!

Careful planning of your appearance is essential, as this could be what sets you apart from all other applicants. If you are well presented, it shows you care about the job and are willing to make the effort. Be comfortable with what you wear, otherwise you may find yourself focusing too much on your clothing rather than the interview questions.

It is generally advisable to dress conservatively (unless you are going for a position where you will be expected to very creative and artistic). Choose darker colours (said to present a more confident, authoritative image) and wear a light colour near your face (said to project vitality). Avoid anything too "loud" or "busy" and keep accessories simple - nothing that jangles or dangles, shine your shoes, wear stockings or socks, clean and trim your nails and make sure your hair is neat and styled away from the face. Finally, don't overdo perfume, aftershave or makeup.

The Performance

Now that you are adequately prepared (and hopefully feeling more confident), it's time to actually perform. Here are some do's and don'ts to guide you through the interview process.

Things to do:

- Arrive 10-15 minutes early to give yourself time to settle down
- Greet the interviewer with a smile and a firm handshake
- Wait until offered a chair before sitting
- Maintain good posture
- Smile
- Be attentive, listen and communicate
- Maintain eye contact
- Ask for a question to be repeated or clarified if you don't understand it
- Take your time to think the question through (not too long!), then give a relevant answer
- Use examples to make points credible

- Look and sound enthusiastic and interested without overdoing it
- Ensure good points get across in a sincere manner and express your thoughts clearly
- Maximise strong points, minimise weak points. Sell yourself!
- Find out what happens after the interview
- Thank the interviewer/s for their time
- Take note of the questions asked and review your performance
- If you have not heard anything by the time specified, phone and ask. If you have not been successful, also ask for feedback.

Things to avoid:

- One syllable answers, e.g. 'yes' 'no'
- Fidgeting
- Smoking (even if offered one) or chewing gum
- Interrupting a question
- Lying
- Criticising previous employers and/or teaching staff
- Coming across as a 'know it all'
- Lack of career planning/vision

Post Performance

Your goal after each interview is to improve your performance next time. Treat every interview as a learning experience – remember what went well and what needs to change. Seek feedback from the interviewer and, if appropriate, incorporate their suggestions in your next performance.

GOOD LUCK!

Further resources are available on the CD&E Website www.rmit.edu.au/careers or the Careers Library (e.g. books, videos).