



# How To Sell Yourself At Interview

Many of our candidates ask us for advice on how to best present themselves at interview. If one is entering the job market for the first time, or after a long period in a position, this can often be a daunting task. Remember that regardless of your 'on paper' experience, the impression that you convey at interview is usually the make or break.

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### Preparation

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Good preparation is paramount to perform well at interview. It will also give you confidence, and help allay any nerves. Preparation can be both practical and knowledge based. The following are key points that you must follow:

- Ensure you have all relevant details such as time, date and interview location, as well as the interviewer name(s) where appropriate. It is important that you take personal responsibility for these details and chase your consultant if they have not been provided - remember that your interview is one of many they are involved in every day.
- Plan your journey and factor in the chance of delays. DON'T be late. You may work long hours and be under time pressure, but if you are interviewing at another firm the chances are your interviewer is in a similar situation. Thus a negative impression is immediately created if you affect the smooth running of their day.
- Research the firm you are interviewing with, the role you are interviewing for, and your interviewer's background if relevant. Information sources include the internet, libraries, friends and your recruitment consultant. Think about the institution's background, current projects, culture, mission statements etc.
- It is essential that you are able to talk about the company, how many offices they have, how long they have been in operation, where their head office is based. Also look at the news section, see if anything of note has happened recently & be able to mention it in the interview. This creates the impression that you have taken an interest in the company, that you have actively decided you are interested in them & what they do, rather than just going for everything your agency puts you forward to.

- Read the job description carefully and think of ways in which your experience would benefit the company and where the challenges would lie for you.
- Make sure you know your CV - check dates of employment as these may have to be confirmed. Ensure that you are able to relate your discussion back to points you have raised on your CV.
- Wear a dark suit, white shirt / top and plain tie (men). Clean your shoes, shave (if appropriate!) and ensure your hair is tidy. Makeup, if worn, should be conservative.

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## Body Language

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This is an extremely important, and often ignored, part of an interview. It is said that a person will form an opinion of you in the first five minutes of a meeting. This is often based on sub-conscious reading of your body language. Remember the following:

- A good handshake gets you off to a great start. It should be firm without crushing their hand!
- Smile.
- Don't fidget. Practice a comfortable way of sitting before you go to the interview. Don't play with your hair, clothes, pen or business card; it will seem as though you are bored, and not paying attention. It will also imply nerves.
- Maintain natural eye contact, and, in the case of multiple interviewers, look at who is talking to you. When giving your answer shift your gaze between the two, to involve both in the discussion.
- Use affirmative actions such as nodding and saying 'yes' and 'mmm' as they speak. This will show that you can listen and understand.

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## The Interview

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Interviews can vary hugely, from very formal, to completely relaxed.

To increase your chances of receiving a job offer, you will need to learn how to confidently and successfully respond to questions.

Below are 11 common questions with some comments as to the reasons they are asked and the responses expected. Remember, these responses are only suggestions – do not use them if you feel uncomfortable about them, and try to personalise them, as many candidates will receive the same suggestions!

**Q: Tell me about yourself.** The interviewer is really saying “I want to hear you talk.”

**A:** This is a loosener, but is a common question so your response can stay the same. Write a script and rehearse it so it sounds impromptu. Spend a maximum of four minutes to describe your qualifications, career history and range of skills, emphasising those relevant to the job on offer.

**Q: What have your achievements been to date?** The interviewer is saying “Are you an achiever?”

A: Select an achievement that is work related and fairly recent. Identify the skills you used, the achievement and quantify the benefit.

**Q: Are you happy with your career to date?** The interviewer is really asking about your self-esteem and self-confidence, your career aspirations and whether you are a happy, positive person.

A: The answer must be ‘yes’ but if you have hit a career plateau or you feel you are moving too slowly, then you must qualify the answer.

**Q: What is the most difficult situation you have had to face and how did you tackle it?** The interviewer is really trying to find out what your definition of difficult is and whether you can show a logical approach to problem solving using your initiative.

A: This can be a trap! To avoid it, select a difficult work situation which was not caused by you and which can be quickly explained in a few sentences. Explain how you defined the problem, what the options were, why you selected the one you did and what the outcome was. Always end on a positive note.

**Q: What do you like about your present job?** The interviewer is really trying to find out whether you will enjoy the things you will experience in the job on offer.

A: This is a straightforward question. All you have to make sure is that your ‘likes’ correspond to the skills and duties required in the job on offer. Be positive, describe your job as interesting and diverse but do not overdo it – after all, you are leaving!

**Q: What do you dislike about your present job?** The interviewer is trying to find out whether the job on offer has responsibilities you will dislike or which will make you unsuitable.

A: Be careful with this one! Do not be too specific as you may draw attention to weaknesses, which will leave you open to further problems. One approach is to choose a characteristic of your present company such as its size or its slow decision-making etc. Give your answer with the air of someone who takes problems and frustrations in your stride as part of the job!

**Q: What are your strengths?** The interviewer wants a straightforward answer as to what you are good at and how it is going to add value.

A: This is one question that you know you are going to get so there is no excuse for being unprepared. Concentrate on discussing your main strengths. List three or four explanations of how they could benefit the employer. Strengths to consider include technical proficiency, ability to learn quickly, determination to succeed, positive attitude, ability to relate to people and achieve a common goal. You may be asked to give examples of the above so be prepared.

**Q: What is your greatest weakness?** The interviewer is really asking about your self-perception and level of self-awareness.

A: This is another standard question for which you can be well prepared. You have two options. Use a professed weakness such as a lack of experience (not ability) in an area that is not vital for the job, or, describe a personal or professional weakness that could also be considered a strength and the steps you have taken to combat it. An example would be "I know my team think I am too demanding at times. I tend to drive them pretty hard but I'm getting much better at using the carrot and not the stick." Do not select a personal weakness such as "I'm not a morning person".

**Q: What kind of decision do you find most difficult?** The interviewer is really saying "I need someone who is strong and decisive but who has a human side."

A: Your answer must not display weakness. Try to focus on decisions that have to be made without sufficient information. This will show your positive side. For example "I like to make decisions based on sufficient information and having alternatives. When you have to make quick decisions you have to rely on 'gut feeling' and experience.

**Q: Why do you want to leave your current employer?** The interviewer is trying to understand and evaluate your motives for moving.

A: This should be straightforward. State how you are looking for more challenge, responsibility, experience and a change of environment. Never be negative in your reasons for leaving, and rarely will it be appropriate to cite salary as the primary motivator.

**Q: Why do you want to work for the company you are going for an interview with?** They are asking you why you want to work for them as opposed to any other company.

A: The reasons need to be specific to this company, for example the culture, people development etc., so general points like the fact they have a good name aren't what they are after. Again, you need to demonstrate that you have done some research.

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### Other questions to consider

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- What can you offer our organisation?
- What are your best attributes?
- Why are you better than other candidates?
- Why are you interested in us?
- Tell me about your most recent position?
- How does your job fit into your department and company?
- Have you worked under pressure? (meaning can you?). Give examples.

- What kinds of people do you like working with?
- Can you give me an example of when your work was criticised? (be prepared for the next one of how you coped and the outcome).
- What is the worst situation you have faced outside work?
- Give me an example of when you felt anger at work? (and how did you cope and still perform a good job?)
- What kind of people do you find it difficult to work with? (take care! You won't know all about the staff at the company at which you are interviewing).
- Give me an example of when you have had to face conflict of interest at work? (testing interpersonal skills, team and leadership opportunities).
- Tell me about the last time you disagreed with your boss.
- Give me an example of when you haven't got on with others.
- Do you prefer to work alone or in a group and why?
- This organisation is very different to your current employer; how do you think you are going to fit in? (You may not be able to answer until you have established what he/she perceives as the differences).
- What are you looking for in a company?
- How do you measure your own performance?
- What kind of pressures have you encountered at work?
- Are you a self-starter? Give me examples to demonstrate this.
- How do you feel about working long hours?
- Give me an example of when you have been out of your depth?
- What have you failed to achieve to date?
- What area of your skills do you want to improve? (Try to relate your answer to the role on offer).
- Which part of this role is least attractive to you?
- Why do you think you will like this role?
- Where would you like to be in five years?
- How would your work mates describe you?
- What would your references say about you?
- Why should I give this job to you instead of the other people on the shortlist? (strengths).

- What reservations should I have about you as an employee? (weaknesses)
- What do you do in your spare time?
- What five adjectives would you use that best describe you (both in and out of the workplace)? eg goal oriented, attentive to detail, team player, competitive, hard working.
- Give an example where you had a difficult objective to meet, and where you achieved it through setting yourself clear goals and showing perseverance in doing so.
- When have you successfully challenged an existing way of doing things, without upsetting those currently doing it, and persuaded them that your way is a better way?
- How do you rate your ability to explain things clearly and concisely, either orally or written, on a scale of 1-10? What is it that stops you giving yourself a 10?
- Most people say they are "people focused". When are you not? Why?
- How would you sort out a complex situation or problem?
- When have you worked outside your immediate field of expertise, with non-Finance professionals? What problems occurred?
- What new lessons/skills have you learnt and put into practice in the last 3 months?

Don't worry if you have any problems with these questions, your consultant will go through them with you before you go to your interview.

**Practice your answers to questions, both mentally and actually. Generally:**

- Ensure your answers are succinct but not abrupt. Avoid waffling or going off at tangents. Although you may feel you have not had the chance to discuss all your skills, the interviewer will have ensured they have gleaned all relevant information for that stage.
- Think before you speak! If you are faced with a technical question, problem solving exercise or unexpected topic take a deep breath and give yourself time to collect your thoughts. This will demonstrate that you are not repeating information parrot fashion, but have the reasoning skills essential to succeed in this market.
- If you don't know - admit it! Ideally this should only happen once or twice though! Be honest and open - never lie.

Even if, half way through, you feel the role is not for you, continue as you would for a position you love. You may wish to interview with the same company in the future for another role, or may deal with them in another capacity. The job market is a small place and if you appear indifferent, arrogant or rude it will be noted and remembered. Your interviewer has given their time, and wants to feel it has been well spent, even if it is only to establish you are not right for the job.

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## The Close

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Thank the interviewers for their time. A good firm handshake and show eagerness.

Make sure you are prepared with a couple of questions to ask at the end of the interview. These questions should encompass a demonstration of your knowledge and enthusiasm for the company, and show you have a real interest in its running. Don't use this time to discuss salary or benefits - it implies money is your only motivator!

Possible closing questions:

- Can you give me a detailed description of the position?
- Why has this position become available?
- Why do people join the business?
- Why do people leave the business?
- What has made the company so successful?
- How do you feel the company is perceived in the market?
- What future growth plans are there?
- What is the culture of the company?
- What induction/training programmes are there?
- What kinds of people have previously been successful in the company?
- What goals do the team want to accomplish in the next year?
- Why do you like working at the company?
- What do you see in my background or experience that might prevent me from moving onto the next stage?
- This is exactly the sort of opportunity I have been looking for, what is the next step?

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## Conclusion

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You are half way there. The company you are interviewing with liked what they saw in your CV. An interview is your opportunity to reinforce your 'on paper' experience with 'in-person' excellence.

Remember - be yourself, and use the pointers above to enhance your overall performance. Always call your consultant as soon as you leave an interview - if it went badly, rather you acknowledge this, and the company may feel that your honesty and ability to admit your mistakes warrants another interview - if it went well, you want to let the company know that you are keen as soon as possible.

Good luck!