

# The difference is you

How to ace  
your interview



A guide to interview skills,  
produced by Network Rail

## We'd like to invite you to interview...



Congratulations! You've applied for your dream role and been invited for an interview. All that time spent researching, compiling your CV, covering letter and completing the application form has been worth it. So what happens next?

An invitation to interview is a clear indication that you're being taken seriously as a potential candidate for the job. This is your chance to convince the employer that you're the right match for the company and the role. A chance to let your knowledge, skills and personality really shine.

### — Preparation is key

You've no doubt done a substantial amount of research on your potential employer during the application process. Well now is the time to go even deeper with your research into the organisation, the job, and the skills and qualities you need to fulfil the role.

We've designed this guide to support you throughout the interview process. It covers every stage starting with thorough preparation, the types of interview you may encounter, example questions, what to expect on the day and what to do once it's all over.

**Good luck!**

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## Do your research

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### — Look into the organisation

Research their main competitors, customers, products and services to fully understand what they do and the sector they operate in. Make sure you're clear on why you would like to work for them.

### — Understand the role

Review the job description and prepare some notes on what you understand the role to be and why you'd like the job.

### — Interview format

Contact the company and find out what format the interview will take. Ask the names of the people you will be facing. Confirm where you need to go and what time you should arrive.

### — Questions

Think about the skills, experience and knowledge you can bring to the role and how you might articulate this. Start thinking about examples you might offer to back up and support your answers.

### — Get comfortable talking about yourself

You're already standing out from the crowd by getting shortlisted for interview, now think about any volunteering, work experience or achievements that make you different to the other candidates. Familiarise yourself with your CV content again.

### — Practise

Ask friends, family or your careers department to help you by carrying out a mock interview and ask them for their honest feedback on your performance. Rehearse how you will sit as well as how you will answer the questions.

### — Prepare some questions

Think of a few questions to ask the interviewer. These shouldn't just be salary and benefits related. Consider questions that demonstrate your enthusiasm for learning, your eagerness to know more about the company or your willingness to take on additional responsibility.

### — Read all the information

If the recruiter has sent you an information pack, make sure you read it thoroughly. It will contain instructions on where to go, when to arrive and who to ask for when you get there, as well as anything you need to take with you. Check the pack to see if you need to arrive early for an assessment, or if you need to prepare a presentation or research a topic to discuss during the interview.

**If you're unfamiliar with the interview location, perhaps do a trial run to see how long it takes you to get there.**

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### — Research works both ways

Remember, the company will also be carrying out their own research on you. If they haven't already done so, employers will look at your social media profiles before you come to interview and may even ask you questions about what they've seen on there. Take some time to ensure your pages look professional and think about what your posts say about you, your career and ambitions.

## On the day

### — Wear something that makes you feel good

Your outfit should reflect the role and company you are interviewing for, but most importantly it should make you feel confident and look professional. Don't smoke or wear a strong scent as this can be off putting to others. Prepare your outfit for SKYPE interviews in the same way; your interviewer will expect you to look as smart as you would in a face-to-face interview.

### — Don't panic!

It's natural to be nervous. Leaving yourself plenty of time to travel to your interview will help you to remain calm and give you time to take a few deep breaths and do some final preparation once you arrive.

### — Take a notepad and pen

A good idea if you want to jot down any notes and questions during the interview.

### — First impressions count

Consider the moment you set foot through the door as the start of your interview. Be polite and professional with everyone you meet. Even in the waiting area, sit upright and be aware of your surroundings. Ensure your phone is switched off.

### — A firm handshake

When you meet your interviewer, smile, introduce yourself and offer them a firm handshake. Always wait to be offered a seat before sitting down. Be conscious of your body language and what this says about you e.g. folded arms look defensive.

### — Be clear and concise

When answering questions, look your interviewer in the eye and be clear, concise and positive. Don't presume that the interviewer will make the connection between your answer and the role you've applied for. Demonstrate that you understand how the example you've given is relevant to the position and how your skills, abilities, knowledge and experience will benefit the organisation.

### — Don't be afraid of silences

Pause whilst you consider your answer or think of a relevant example, if you need to. Your interviewer would rather you take your time and give a well-thought out response than struggle or say the first thing that comes into your head.

### — Ask for clarification

If you don't fully understand the question that's being asked, don't struggle to answer it. Ask the interviewer to explain any technical terms or to re-word the question.



## Types of interview

There are many different formats of interview used by employers. The most common type is a one-to-one or panel interview. Here's some more detail on interview types and what to expect from each one.

**1 Competency based interviews**  
These are structured to reflect the competencies or capabilities that an employer is seeking for a particular job or role, and are often part of the job description so you should already be familiar with them. Competencies are specific skills, knowledge and abilities that are essential to perform certain tasks.

**2 Chronological interviews**  
Sometimes the interviewer may ask you to talk about your life, experiences and career in date order, often using your CV as supporting evidence. In this instance, familiarity with the content of your CV can work in your favour.

**3 Technical interviews**  
If you've applied for a job or placement that requires technical knowledge, it's likely you'll be asked questions based around technical issues or hypothetical scenarios to test your knowledge. Alternatively you might be asked to demonstrate how you've applied your technical knowledge already through your studies or work experience. Your interviewer won't expect you to know everything, so don't be afraid to admit if you can't answer the question. Just show a willingness to learn.

**4 Strength-based interviews**  
Strength-based interviews are used to find out what your interests are and what you're really passionate about. You could be asked 'what are you good at?' or 'what subject do you enjoy most?' The best thing about them is you can't really prepare, just be yourself and your energy and interests will shine through.

**5 Unstructured / Informal interviews**  
These are often known as an informal chat. The employer may invite you along to meet them on a one-to-one basis so you can both get to know each other better and find out if you're a good fit for the role. They're a good way of finding out whether you like each other. Unstructured interviews may be followed by a more formal interview if you progress to the next stage.

Don't make the mistake of thinking you don't need to do as much preparation or put in as much effort for an informal interview. These may be more relaxed situations but what you say, do and how you act still has significance.

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## Types of interview

**6 Portfolio based interviews**  
If you're applying for a role in communications, media or the arts, you might be asked to bring a portfolio of your work to the interview. It's likely the interviewer will ask you to talk through pieces of your work in detail to explain your creative thinking process and test how you respond to a brief.

**7 Case study interviews**  
Often taking the form of a group exercise, case study interviews could be based on a business problem that needs resolving or a straightforward brainteaser. You'll be evaluated on your analysis of the problem, how you identify the key issues and how you seek to resolve them.

**8 Panel interviews**  
You'll encounter the panel interview most frequently at large organisations in both the public and private sector. The prospect of being 'grilled' by several people at once can be daunting. But remember, you're there for a reason; they rate you and your application and want to get to know you better.

You'll often find interview panels contain the direct line manager of the role in question, a representative from HR and/or one other representative. They are designed to ensure the interview process is balanced and fair. There may be one person in the room whose role is to scribe and document all your answers.

**9 Group interviews**  
Often based around a task, a group of applicants will be placed in a room and their interactions observed. The interviewer/s may ask the group questions and ask you to discuss the topic between you. This scenario will allow the employer to assess teamwork, communication and leadership skills.

**10 Sequential interviews**  
These are several interviews in turn, with a different interviewer each time. Usually each interviewer is tasked with testing a different set of competencies.

**11 Telephone/SKYPE interviews**  
Distance interviews are often used if the employer is based overseas or as an early stage of the interview process to help with shortlisting. Always have a paper, pen and a copy of your CV or application to hand.



## Using the STAR technique

Using the STAR technique to respond to interview questions will give structure to your answers and prevent you from waffling or going off on a tangent. Interviewers will generally mark you on demonstrating the four elements of STAR in your answer, so if you can keep to the structure, you'll put yourself in a great position.

You won't be able to use this format for every question e.g. Tell me about yourself, but for questions that begin with 'Tell me about a time when...' or 'Can you give me an example of a situation when...' it's definitely a winner.

### — S = Situation

Give some general background to the situation you found yourself in. Don't go into too much detail but be clear enough so the interviewer has a good understanding of why it's relevant to the question.

### — T = Task

What was the brief or project? What was the problem you had to solve or the task you faced?

### — A = Action

Describe the decisions you made and why you took them. Talk about the key skills and qualities you demonstrated and how they were applied to the situation.

### — R = Result

Describe the outcome of the project or situation. What did you achieve? Were there any tangible or statistical results you can share? Reflect on what you learned, how you felt at the end and if you would do anything differently if you were presented with the situation again.

Focus on what you did, how you did it, the skills you used and what the outcomes were.

## Examples of competency based questions

1. Describe a time when you demonstrated excellent team working skills.
2. Tell us about a time when you faced a major challenge and how you overcame it.
3. Tell me about a time when you didn't agree with the way things were being done. What did you change and how did you go about it?

## Example interview questions

### All about you

- Tell me about yourself
- What made you apply for this position?
- What are your main strengths and weaknesses?
- How would other people describe you?
- Can you give me two examples that illustrate your communication skills?
- When working on a complex project, how do you prioritise tasks?
- How do you deal with difficult people?
- Why do you think you would make a good [insert job title]?
- Where do you see yourself in 5 years time?
- How do you like to spend your free time?
- Tell me something interesting about yourself.

### Your education and qualifications

- What key skills have you developed during your university course and how would they be of benefit to our business?
- How could your degree subject be of use to our organisation?
- Why did you choose to study this particular subject?
- What aspect of university life have you enjoyed the most?
- If you could redo a piece of university work or a project again, what would it be, and why?

### The role

- What do you know about the role and why do you think you'd be good at it?
- What makes a good manager?
- Do you think you can cope with working towards professional qualifications and exams in addition to your day job?

### The organisation

- What do you know about our organisation?
- Who do you think our customers are?
- Who are our major competitors?
- Why did you decide to apply to us? Who else have you applied to?
- What are the main challenges facing our organisation over the next few years?



## Preparing for the unexpected

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You should be prepared for your interviewer to ask you some potentially awkward or difficult questions, often unexpectedly. They may also ask you to undertake a short activity, for example, coming up with ideas on the spot or describing how you would prepare a plan for a specific project.

These questions and tasks are thrown in to see how you react under pressure and how well you think on your feet. They are becoming increasingly common amongst graduate recruiters.

If you do find yourself in such a situation, remain calm and take your time to consider the question before responding. Take the opportunity to show off your qualities and personality in your answer.

- If you were a Microsoft Office application, which one would you be and why?
- Room, desk and car – which one do you clean first?
- If you were a box of cereal, which one would you be and why?
- Imagine you're the chief executive of our company, what would be the first three things you check about the business when you wake up?
- If you were a brand, what would be your strapline?



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## Closing with confidence

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**You're approaching the end of the interview. But it's not time to switch off just yet; you've still got plenty of opportunity to create a lasting impression.**

— **Ask questions**

Don't worry if any of your pre-prepared questions have been answered during the interview. If this happens, just be honest and tell the interviewer that any questions you had have already been covered.

— **Make a closing statement**

Leave your interviewer with the right picture of you. Think of at least three skills or qualities you want them to remember after the interview and tell them how you demonstrate these with your final few words.

— **Offer to fill in any gaps**

Ask if there is anything else you can provide to help convince the interviewer that you're the right person for the job, such as references or samples of your work.

— **Show your enthusiasm**

State your interest in the position and tell them how enthusiastic you are to work for the organisation. Tell them what added value you could bring to the role.

— **Find out whether you got the job**

Ask the question "Based on my background and the skills and experience we discussed, how well do I fit the profile of the candidate you're looking for?" It's an open-ended question and it gives you the chance to have a conversation about any reservations they may have about hiring you.

— **Next steps**

The interviewer will make it clear when the interview is over and will usually tell you when you can expect to hear the outcome. If this doesn't happen, it's acceptable to ask what the next steps are and when they expect to make a decision.

— **Find out how to contact them**

If you don't hear back, ask how to get in touch and whether they will accept calls to ask for an update. This shows you are proactive and demonstrates your eagerness and desire for the position.

— **Create a lasting impression**

Remember, your interview doesn't end until you leave the building, thank your interviewer/s for their time and continue to remain professional and polite at all times as you are being shown out.



## Post interview advice

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**You did it! You got through the interview and now it's time to relax and reflect on your performance.**

— **Make a note of the questions**

As soon as you can after the interview, write down any questions you can remember. These will help you in your preparation for any future interviews.

— **Reflect on the positive**

If you got tongue-tied or couldn't answer a question, don't dwell on it. It happens to us all. Stay positive and think about how differently you might have answered the tricky questions, so you're more confident if faced with them in the future.

— **Say thank you**

If you obtained the direct contact details of your interviewer/s, it's polite to send them an email to thank them for their time. This shows appreciation for the employer's interest in you and serves as a reminder that you are committed and interested in the role. It could also be your opportunity to share supporting information to back up an example you gave during the interview.

— **Contact your referees**

If you think you performed well at interview, it's wise to contact your referees to let them know that their services might be required in the near future.

— **Ask for feedback**

Whether you were successful or not, it is always acceptable to ask the employer for feedback on how you performed during the interview. The feedback you receive will help you to improve during future interviews.

— **Remain professional**

Always remain professional when you're speaking with the company. Even if you're not successful this time, there may be other opportunities for you in the business in the future. And you never know when your path may cross with your interviewer/s again.

— **Reflect and refocus**

If you've applied for a number of roles, taking some time to reflect on your recent experience is the first step in preparing for your next interview performance.

**Stay positive and think about how differently you might have answered the tricky questions, so you're more confident if faced with them in the future.**

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