Starting Points: Interviews

The purpose of an interview is to find out, through effective questioning, if you are the ideal candidate for a job. If you have been offered an interview, well done, you have already demonstrated that you have the skills and abilities to do the job and the organisation are keen to find out more about you.

Preparing for an interview

• Research the role and reflect on yourself. Look back at the job description, person specification and your application. Familiarity with the role and your related skills will lead to less surprise questions at the interview.
• Research the company. Make sure you know about the organisation; its structure, mission and core values. A good starting point is the company website but extend your research beyond this wherever possible.
• Develop commercial awareness. Do you understand how the business operates, what’s happening in their industry and who their customers and competitors are?
• Think about logistics and practical preparation. Check that you know where you are going; how long is the journey time and which building should you report to? Do you need to take equipment or documentation?

Types of interview

• One-off or sequential? Recruitment processes differ; some include one interview, others a series of interviews.
• One-to-one interviews tend to be informal and are common for part-time roles and jobs in small businesses.
• Panel interviews are standard within large organisations and graduate employers. The panel will probably consist of your prospective line manager, someone from Human Resources and a senior manager.
• Competency-based interviews will focus on specific skills outlined in the person specification. Identify examples that best demonstrate these skills.
• Strength-based interviews concentrate on identifying your innate and authentic traits. They are difficult to prepare for, but do reflect on how and when you are at your best.
• Telephone/video/Skype interviews are often used to screen candidates at an early stage. Prepare as you would for any interview but also ensure you have a quiet space and the correct technology in place.

The questions

You will probably get asked a wide variety of questions at interview; listen closely to the question and ask for clarification if you are unsure of what the panel are looking for. Common question types include

• Open questions such as ‘what can you bring to the role?’ These offer you a real opportunity to sell your knowledge, experience and skills.
• Technical questions. For any role that requires technical knowledge be prepared for very specific and knowledge-based questions.
• Difficult questions. Interviewers usually ask difficult or challenging questions to see how you respond and to measure your self-awareness.
• Competency questions. These questions allow you to demonstrate your skills and abilities by talking in detail about how you have utilised those skills in the past.
• Strengths-based questions. Designed to look at what you enjoy doing and have an aptitude for, rather than what you can do.
• Questions for the panel. Ask questions that demonstrate your enthusiasm and interest in the job and the company.

Using the STAR technique
The STAR approach is useful for giving structured, focused and effective answers to interview questions based on past experience. Having a clear structure allows you to be concise and avoid rambling.

• situation (What was the context? Where were you and what were you doing?)
• task (What goal did you set yourself? What was the problem or challenge?)
• action (What action did you take?)
• result (What was the outcome?)

On the day
• Be punctual.
• Think about first impressions - dress appropriately, maintain eye contact and be aware of your body language.
• Be an active listener.
• Remember it’s a two-way process - this is your opportunity to check that the role is right for you.

After the interview
• Reflect on your performance. What went well and where could you improve?
• Ask for feedback.
• Seek extra support if you need it.

Support available from Careers and Employability Service
• Realistic practice interviews.
• Workshops on perfecting interview technique and answering tricky questions.
• Individual advice on interview techniques from an employability adviser, centrally and in faculty.
• Interview simulator. An auto-generated mock interview simulator is available to current Sheffield Hallam students through Careers Central (careerscentral.shu.ac.uk)

Want to talk it through? Contact Careers and Employability for further advice and support via the below contact details. This information is available in alternative formats on request.