

Selection Interviews

The following notes apply to selection interviews that may follow a campus interview, written application, previous informal telephone call or face to face conversation. This handout will cover:

- Purposes of the Interview
- Panels
- Structure of the Interview
- Preparation
- Presentation
- Handling Questions
- Concluding the Interview
- After the Interview
- Accepting a Position



Purposes of the Interview

What is an interview? Why is it used?

An interview is a conversation with a purpose – and not just for employers. The interview enables the employer to learn about you, your personality, social skills, general abilities, potential and whether you will “fit in” the organisation. A written application and / or CV is generally submitted prior to the interview, and will contain relevant facts and information about your academic and other achievements. The interviewer(s) may seek to verify these during the interview. Remember it is not so much a matter of right or wrong skills but certain skills will be more desirable and appropriate for particular positions.

For **you**, the interview enables you to learn more about the organisation, the position, and the people within the organisation.

Panels

Often an interview will be conducted by more than one person. There are several good reasons for this:

1. Responsibility for short-listing and interviewing is shared.
2. Responsibility for decision-making is shared.
3. The recruitment process is more equitable. The interview tends to be more objective, personal bias can be checked.

An alternative to the panel interview is a number of separate interviews with different people in the organisation. They will compare notes thereafter in the same way as a panel. So in reality they function as a panel although they do not all talk with you at the same time.

Structure of the Interview

The ideal interview will have three stages, but remember, just as all applicants are not well prepared and skilled in the interview situation, likewise some interviewers are not. Interviewers do not necessarily have any formal/informal training for this task.

First Stage – Opening:

Usually the interviewer’s aim at the opening of the interview is to set you at ease with open ended questions to help you relax. The questions may or may not be relevant to the position. The interviewers are making initial assessments based on – appearance, attitude, manner, tone of voice, etc. The first five minutes can set the stage for the rest of the interview.

Second Stage – Information Exchange:

Interviewers try to find out more about your skills, qualities, your interests/ motivation for the position, how you fit in with others in the organisation etc. Remember they are seeking the most suitable applicant for the position. The most suitable applicant is not necessarily the best qualified academically. Academic achievement is only one criteria, others include work experience, social skills, potential and enthusiasm.

Third Stage – Conclusion:

At this stage the interview is drawn to a close. It is important for you to leave a final positive impression – this is just as important as the initial impression and once again includes non-verbal as well as verbal messages that you give.

Preparation

- Re-read the job description, list of duties, conditions of appointment and your application.
- Find as much other material about the organisation as you can so that you can build up a picture of its goals, functions, structure or products. Try corporate plans, annual reports, brochures for customers. (See Handout – “Looking for Work” for more information on researching organisations).
- Collect originals of any references or other photocopied material sent in with the written application.
- Think about the sort of person the interviewers will be seeking, based on your research of the organisation. If you can, talk to contacts in the organisation, pick up brochures to help you form an impression, or drop off your application in person to help you get a “feel” for the company.
- Reflect upon your strong points and particular messages you want to get across in the interview – you can draw up a check-list either within your head or write it down on paper to ensure that you do not forget any of these points during the interview.



LET'S SEE NOW..... WHAT WERE THE THREE P's?
OF COURSE, I REMEMBER... PREPARATION,
PRACTICE, PRESENTATION!

- Find out the structure and expected length of the interview from the person scheduling the appointments. It is also useful to enquire as to who will be on the interview panel.

What to Take to the Interview

- A copy of your application, any reports/projects of relevance, pen and paper plus anything you have been asked specifically to take by the organisation, e.g. original academic transcript, samples of your written work, design work, etc. It is not generally advisable to take notes during an interview – this will distract your attention from the interviewers but pen and paper can be handy in case you feel you need to note anything immediately after the interview. It is a good idea to take a list of any questions you would like answered – there will usually be an opportunity to raise these at the end of the interview.

Presentation

Dress

- Wear clothes appropriate to the position, it is probably safer to lean on the conservative side. Where possible find out how people in the organisation dress prior to the interview. Generally, women should wear pantyhose. Avoid flashy items of clothing and accessories. A tasteful, distinctive item of clothing or jewellery, however, can be an advantage.
- Make sure your clothes are neat and pressed, and your shoes are not scuffed. Take care with your colour co-ordination. If in doubt, get an opinion from a friend.
- Go easy on perfume and after shave, some interviewers may be allergic to particular scents.
- Look out for dandruff. Make sure your hair is washed and neat.
- Be sure that your fingernails are cut and clean.
- If you have trouble with bad breath, take a mint before the interview.
- Personal appearance and habits are very important. Bad breath and body odour imply a certain sloppiness.

Arrival

- Get there early – allow yourself at least 5 to 10 minutes waiting time before the commencement of the interview – you can use this time to reflect and relax.
- If you realise you are going to be late, wherever possible ring to advise the employer of this fact. Once you arrive apologise briefly – avoid long-winded explanations.

- Greet the receptionist cordially. Remember receptionists are often asked for their initial impressions. They will not decide whether or not you get the position, but the initial impression you give them is just as important as the initial impression given to the interviewers.
- Use the waiting time to get the feel of an organisation ie. the pace of the organisation, how people relate to each other, information available to the public.
- If you have come straight from a lecture or are carrying a pack, large bag or other items, if possible leave all such material with the receptionist. Do not take them into the interview. The look you want is organised, professional, uncluttered.

Body Language

- First impressions are very important. Greet the interviewer(s) in a friendly manner, preferably by name, using a firm handshake and smile.
- Because each interviewer will be individually assessing you, it is important to make eye contact with all panel members. Nobody likes to be ignored!
- Be alert and enthusiastic. Look pleased to be there!
- Sit comfortably! Watch your arms, hands, shoulders and feet. If you are feeling nervous you may tense up and your hands or feet may shake. Try to relax by breathing evenly and be aware of any distracting mannerisms you have such as gritting teeth, rubbing eyes or nail biting. It is probably better to have your hands on your lap, and feet on the floor.
- Lean forward in the chair rather than back, avoid slouching or sitting bolt upright.
- Occasionally the chair offered to you will be facing a strong light or a window. Don't be afraid to ask the interviewer(s) if you can move the chair to a more comfortable position. This shows right from the start that you have initiative and such an action will generally be seen as a point in your favour.

Knocking Other People

- Be very careful not to knock previous employers or to run down university courses, even if probed. If you do this it shows you may run down people in this organisation in due course.
- Remember you cannot know the biases/attitudes of interviewers. You can never be sure who knows who.
- It is perfectly in order to say that you did not like a particular job or particular course but be objective in your reasons for making that statement.

Handling Questions

Be aware of the different types of questions in an interview. A good interviewer will mostly use open questions during the interview.

Open questions are phrased by the interviewer(s) in such a way that you are encouraged to elaborate in your answer at some length, e.g. "tell us about your university study", "what appeals to you about this position". The purpose of these questions is to get you to talk, so use the opportunity well.

- Don't be afraid to ask for clarification if you are confused by a question. If you did not hear a question ask for it to be repeated. It is far better to seek clarification than to start the question and realise part way through your answer that you can't recall what the question was or you have gone off on a tangent.
- Don't be afraid to disagree or add relevant information if you feel comments you have made have been picked up inappropriately. This once again shows you have initiative. Do however be tactful if you are disagreeing with the interpretation interviewer(s) have made of your comments, or if you are disagreeing with statements they are making. Remember an interviewer may be seeking to test whether you are a "yes" person or whether you have opinions of your own that you are prepared to defend.
- Speak clearly – avoid mumbling/ gabbling, and speak positively – avoid a flat, monotonous recital!
- Remember it is alright to pause when faced with a curly question.
- Avoid trailing off at the end of answers, e.g. "you know", "sort of", and a shrug of the shoulders.
- Don't be afraid to give yourself credit. Make positive "I" statements eg. rather than saying "I only organised/I just organised", say "I organised".
- Learn to read the interviewer's body language – it can give vital clues about how your answers to questions are being received.
- Sometimes you will meet an interviewer determined to be provocative and who uses stress techniques. Try not to become flustered or angry. Respond to questions positively but do not meet their aggressiveness with aggressiveness on your part!

Remember you may well be working with a firm that does not have many graduates. People within the organisation may have certain feelings and attitudes towards graduates and could vent these on you. It is important to show in the interview situation that you can handle this and other stress. Stress is a factor in any position!

- Try not to be phased by notes taken during the interview. These are normally used to help the interviewer remember key points that you have made. Sometimes something you say may trigger off another matter they may wish to raise with you later in the interview.
- Avoid trying to read what has been written about you upside down. It is unprofessional and can show a lack of confidence on your part.

Panels

- In a panel interview it is important to identify the chairperson. Usually this person takes an early lead into the interview. They may introduce you to other panel members, and / or outline the format for the interview. Regard this person as your chairperson, and when in doubt about what will happen next or whom you should address an answer to a question, refer to the chairperson for guidance. At other times when asked a question by a particular panel member start by addressing that person then let your eyes/gestures take in the whole of the panel.
- Remember that panels are not always well organised – try not to be disconcerted by strange glances passed between panel members. They may still be clarifying their own roles. Generally, before beginning a number of selection interviews, panel members will have determined who will take the lead at various stages of the interview and the areas they will cover – for example, one may ask you about your university background, and another outline the duties of the position etc. Sometimes as the number of interviews proceed a panel member may be bored with their assigned role and therefore adopt another one. This will disconcert the other members of the panel involved – who will react in some way.
- Sometimes one member of the panel is appointed to act as devil's advocate, firing all the difficult questions at you. It is easy to assume this person is a devil's advocate at all times. This won't necessarily be the case. They may have been assigned this role because it enables others to sit back and observe your reactions.



Concluding the Interview

If the interviewer(s) are skilled they will signal the end of the interview by outlining the procedure for follow-up afterwards. If you sense an interview is finishing and this aspect has not been covered – ask! Ensure that you know before you leave the interview what will happen next. This includes details of when the interviewer(s) will be finishing the interviews, the time that will pass before a decision is made, and

how all applicants will be notified the result of the interviews. Also establish who you should contact after the interview if there has been no news after a reasonable time period, also who to contact if after the interview you want to provide any additional information about yourself, or ask any further questions.

- If you consider there are additional points about yourself which you haven't had the opportunity to express yet, now is the time to request the opportunity to make these.
- Express your interest in learning the result of the application.
- Smile regardless of how the interview has gone and take your leave positively.
- Remember that you will leave a final impression for good or bad. You will certainly be discussed once the door has been closed behind you.
- Sometimes at the end of the interview you will be asked if you are still interested in the position. It is wise at the point to say you are interested. If the interview has not gone too well it is unwise at this stage to say that you do not wish to take the job. It is better to ring or write a note to that effect the following day, after you have had more time to think about it.
- Occasionally you may be asked at the end of the interview whether or not you would accept the position. Once again this is not the time to make a decision. State your interest in the position and the fact that you look forward to an offer in writing.
- Once out of the room check with the secretary about travel expenses if the employer has offered to reimburse you when setting up the interview.
- Sometimes you will be asked on what date you could take up the position if appointed. It is important to have some ideas about this. Remember in most instances you will not be eligible for annual leave until you have been with the employer for 12 months. Therefore a short break between exams and taking up the position could be in your and the employer's interests. Remember employers are seeking the most suitable applicant for a position. Their choice will rarely be made according to which applicant is able to start first.

After the Interview

Give yourself a break, then try to assess the interview for future reference. There are two aspects to this assessment:

- Think back objectively over the questions that were asked and your answers. Note any commitments you gave about the priorities you would establish if appointed to the position etc. Note any promises made by the interviewers to the successful applicant in case you are offered the job so that you remember these facts.
- Review your interview performance. Think about how you can improve next time. You may wish to discuss this aspect with family, friends, career advisers or others. This can help improve your interview performance in the future.
- Write to the interviewer thanking them.

Accepting a Position

- Do not confirm acceptance until an offer is made in writing. Check that the letter includes starting date, salary, any other allowances or award under which you will be employed and other conditions of employment including hours of work, sick / annual leave and period of notice required by you and the employer in the event of termination.
- If the offer received is not your preferred one and you have had an interview with another organisation which interests you more, (a) do not accept the offer right away, but ask for time to consider the offer carefully, and (b) contact the preferred organisation to explain that you have been offered a job elsewhere and would therefore greatly appreciate their advice as to where you stand in terms of a job offer. Generally in this situation the second employer will give you a pretty fair idea of your chances. *Note: You should not give the name of the firm which has made the offer.*
- If two offers are made at the same time and you are unsure as to which one to accept, assess your priorities carefully in terms of future development, the environment in which you prefer to work, and how work fits into your life. You may need to go back to the organisation before making your final decision.

Remember it is preferable to take the time to consider carefully before accepting offers, and it is quite permissible at this stage to turn a position down. What happens then is that the employer will most likely go to the next person on the list and offer them the position. What should be avoided is to accept a position in writing and later on turn it down. This is unprofessional, and may have repercussions. Once somebody has accepted the position, then those who have missed out are all notified. If you change your mind, it then becomes difficult for an employer to appoint somebody else from the schedule of applicants. However, until somebody has accepted the position it is rare for anyone to be told that they have missed out. So at this stage, while you are waiting to make your decision, other people are still being kept under consideration and no harm has been done.

Finally

- Keep applying for positions while you wait to hear the outcome of those you have applied for already.
- If you happen to miss out on a job offer, it does not necessarily mean you were unsuited for the position or interviewed badly. The employer may have simply decided that someone else was even more suitable. Where possible contact the interviewer or a panel member to thank them for their time. Ask for feedback on how you interviewed, what went well and what you need to work on for next time. You can also take this opportunity to confirm your continuing interest in the organisation in case other positions come up that match your skills and background more closely.
- Remember the employer usually sees how you handle the interview as an indicator of how you will handle the job. A passive, dull, unimaginative applicant who appears to equate interviews with a session at the dentist will most likely be perceived as an unmotivated and disinterested employee.
- Everyone gets nervous before interviews. There is nothing wrong with that. Indeed you probably need the extra adrenalin. Use your breathing to help you relax.
- There is no such person as the perfect candidate. On the other hand there is no such person as the perfect interviewer. All candidates can build skills to improve performance. Even if you are not initially successful, the interview should be a positive and useful learning experience.

Prepared by:
Victoria University of Wellington
Career Development and Employment,
PO Box 600, 14 Kelburn Parade, Wellington
Tel: 0-4-463 5393, Fax: 0-4-463 5252
www.vuw.ac.nz/st_services/careers/
RP0703

Assistance with career planning and
job searching techniques is available
from Vic Careers staff.

