



# Preparing for an Interview

A self-help Guide

**Talking Therapies  
Employment Support Service**

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## Where do I start?

Once you have been short listed and have been invited to an interview, this is when you need to start your **preparation**.

Preparation is the key to a good interview. It could be the difference between you being offered the job and someone else being offered the job.

A good place to start is to **research** the organisation/company well. This will put you in good stead for any questions they might ask you about the organisation. Even if they do not ask any questions about the organisation, it's always good to show off your knowledge of their organisation. Employers like this.

You can research the company in a few different ways, Newspapers articles, company websites, and their annual report.

Try to anticipate the kind of **questions** they might ask you. Think about the industry and the job role you are applying for. You might get an idea of the ethics or values of the organisation by looking at their website. Try to relate to these when talking about your own values and reasons why you want to work for them.

Once you have anticipated the kind of questions you might get, you will need to create answers for these questions. You will need to remember these answers as much as you can so that they don't seem rehearsed. Practicing over and over will help decrease any anxiety over remembering your answers. It might be helpful to take these notes with you on the day so you can rehearse right up until you enter the interview room.

You will also need to think of some questions to ask the Interviewer/s at the end of the interview. It is expected that interviewees will have some questions

to ask. Try to have 3 - 6 questions ready to ask. Asking questions can help you to gain an insight of the organisation and find out things that are important to you at work. For example, you might like to know if any ongoing training is available. Asking questions also shows your enthusiasm in the role.

By the time you are offered an interview, you should be informed of the location of the interview. Unless you know where this is and how long it will take you to get there, then it is recommended that you find out where the location is and how long it takes you to get there. It is important to **be on time** for your interview and make a good impression.

It's very important to **dress appropriately** and look professional at an interview. Your clothes should be professional but comfortable. Wear smart, clean clothes even if the organisation's dress code is casual.

Below are some **do's** and **don'ts** of dressing appropriately.

### **Do's**

- ❖ Dress conservatively
- ❖ Keep colours simple
- ❖ Wash and iron your clothes
- ❖ If you are unsure, check if there is a dress code by phoning ahead
- ❖ Aim to dress one level up from what you would expect to be wearing if you got the job. It hints at your desire to progress and succeed within their company
- ❖ Wear a business suit (Men)
- ❖ Dress comfortably
- ❖ Wear subtle make up
- ❖ Trim your facial hair
- ❖ Cover up any piercings and body art or wear smaller studs
- ❖ Polish your shoes

### **Don'ts**

- ❖ Wear clothes too tight
- ❖ Wear head wear
- ❖ Wear eccentric ties or patterns
- ❖ Over do the perfume/cologne
- ❖ Wear short skirts or low cut tops
- ❖ Wear too much jewellery

## What is Competency Based Interviewing?

We will cover Competency based interview questions in this booklet.

**Competency-based interviews** (also called structured interviews) are interviews where each question is designed to test one or more specific skills. The answer is then matched against pre-decided criteria and marked accordingly. For example, the interviewers may want to test the candidate's ability to deal with stress by asking first how the candidate generally handles stress and then asking the candidate to provide an example of a situation where he/she worked under pressure.

### **Which skills and competencies do competency-based interviews test?**

The list of skills and competencies that can be tested varies depending on the post that you are applying for. For example, for a Personal Assistant post, skills and competencies would include communication skills; ability to organise and prioritise; and ability to work under pressure. For a senior manager, skills and competencies may include an ability to influence and negotiate; an ability to cope with stress and pressure; ability to lead; and the capacity to take calculated risks.

Here is a non-exhaustive list of the more common skills and competencies that you may be asked to demonstrate:

- ❖ Adaptability
- ❖ Compliance
- ❖ Communication
- ❖ Conflict management
- ❖ Creativity and Innovation
- ❖ Decisiveness
- ❖ Delegation
- ❖ External awareness
- ❖ Flexibility
- ❖ Leadership
- ❖ Leveraging diversity
- ❖ Independence
- ❖ Influencing
- ❖ Integrity
- ❖ Organisational awareness
- ❖ Resilience and tenacity
- ❖ Risk taking
- ❖ Sensitivity to others
- ❖ Teamwork

## How competency-based interview questions are marked

Before the interview, the interviewers will have determined which type of answers would score positive points and which types of answers would count against the candidates. For example, for questions such as "Describe a time when you had to deal with pressure", the positive and negative indicators may be as follows:

Positive indicators	Negative indicators
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ Demonstrates a positive approach towards the problem.</li> <li>❖ Considers the wider need of the situation</li> <li>❖ Recognises his own limitations</li> <li>❖ Is able to compromise</li> <li>❖ Is willing to seek help when necessary</li> <li>❖ Uses effective strategies to deal with pressure/stress</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>❖ Perceives challenges as problems</li> <li>❖ Attempts unsuccessfully to deal with the situation alone</li> <li>❖ Used inappropriate strategies to deal with pressure/stress</li> </ul>

In some cases, negative indicators are divided into two further sections: *minor negative indicators*, i.e. those which are negative but which don't matter so much; and *decisive negative indicators* i.e. those for which they won't forgive you e.g. not asking for help when needed.

Marks are then allocated depending on the extent to which the candidate's answer matches those negative and positive indicators. Here is an example of a marking schedule for the table on the previous page.

0	No evidence	No evidence reported
1	Poor	Little evidence of positive indicators. Mostly negative indicators, many decisive.
2	Areas for concern	Limited number of positive indicators. Many negative indicators, one or more decisive.
3	Satisfactory	Satisfactory display of positive indicators. Some negative indicators but none decisive.

4	Good to excellent	Strong display of positive indicators
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If the interviewers feel that there are areas you have failed to address, they may help you along by probing appropriately. For example, in answering the question above “*Describe an example of a time when you had to deal with pressure*”, if you focussed on how you dealt with the practical angle of the problem but you forgot to discuss how you managed your stress during and after the event, the interviewers may prompt you with a further question such as “*How did you handle the stress at the time?*”. This would give you an opportunity to present a full picture of your behaviour. This is where the marking can become subjective. Indeed, if an interviewer likes you, he may be more tempted to prompt you and push you along than if he has bad vibes about you.

Competency-based interview questions vary widely between sectors and depending on the level of responsibility to which you are applying. The type of competencies against which you will be assessed also depends on the actual post and the company who is interviewing you. For example, some companies view leadership as a competency on its own, whilst others prefer to split leadership between a wide range of components (creativity, flexibility, strategic thinking, vision, etc).



## Possible Interview Questions

You will find below a spectrum of competency-based interview questions, ordered by competency. The list is by no means complete but will give you an idea of what you can expect to be asked.

### **Interview Competency - Adaptability**

Adjusts to changing environments whilst maintaining effectiveness

- ❖ Which change of job did you find the most difficult to make?
  
- ❖ Tell us about the biggest change that you have had to deal with. How did you cope with it?

### **Interview Competency – Communication**

Communicates effectively, listens sensitively, adapts communication to audience and fosters effective communication with others.

#### Verbal

- ❖ Tell us about a situation where your communication skills made a difference to a situation?
  
- ❖ Describe a time when you had to win someone over, who was reluctant or unresponsive.
  
- ❖ Describe a situation where you had to explain something complex to a colleague or a client. Which problems did you encounter and how did you deal with them?
  
- ❖ How do you prepare for an important meeting?

- ❖ Tell us about a situation when you failed to communicate appropriately?
- ❖ Demonstrate how you vary your communication approach according to the audience that you are addressing.
- ❖ Describe a situation when you had to communicate a message to someone, knowing that you were right and that they were wrong, and reluctant to accept your point of view.

### Listening

Give us an example where your listening skills proved crucial to an outcome.

- ❖ Tell us about a time when you were asked to summarise complex points.
- ❖ Tell us about a time when you had trouble remaining focussed on your audience. How did you handle this?
- ❖ What place does empathy play in your work? Give an example where you needed to show empathy?
- ❖ Describe a situation where you had to deal with an angry customer.

### Written

- ❖ What type of writing have you done? Give examples? What makes you think that you are good at it?
- ❖ How do you feel writing a report differs from preparing an oral presentation?

- ❖ What positive and negative feedback have you received about your writing skills? Give an example where one of your reports was criticised.
- ❖ How do you plan the writing of a report?

### **Interview Competency - Conflict management**

Encourages creative tension and differences of opinions. Anticipates and takes steps to prevent counter-productive confrontations. Manages and resolves conflicts and disagreements in a constructive manner.

- ❖ Tell us about a time when you felt that conflict or differences were a positive driving force in your organisation. How did you handle the conflict to optimise its benefit?
- ❖ Tell us about a time when you had to deal with a conflict within your team.
- ❖ Tell us about a situation where conflict led to a negative outcome. How did you handle the situation and what did you learn from it?
- ❖ Give us an example where you were unable to deal with a difficult member of your team.

### **Interview Competency - Creativity and Innovation**

Develops new insights into situations; questions conventional approaches; encourages new ideas and innovations; designs and implements new or cutting edge programmes/processes.

- ❖ Tell us about a project or situation where you felt that the conventional approach would not be suitable. How did you derive and manage a new approach? Which challenges did you face and how did you address them?

- ❖ Tell us about a situation where you trusted your team to derive a new approach to an old problem. How did you manage the process?
- ❖ Tell us about a time when you had to convince a senior colleague that change was necessary. What made you think that your new approach would be better suited?

### **Interview Competency - Decisiveness**

Makes well-informed, effective, and timely decisions, even when data are limited or solutions produce unpleasant consequences; perceives the impact and implications of decisions.

- ❖ What big decision did you make recently? How did you go about it?
- ❖ How did you reach the decision that you wanted to change job?
- ❖ Give an example of a time when you had to delay a decision to reflect on the situation. What did you need to do this?
- ❖ What is the decision that you have put off the longest? Why?
- ❖ When is the last time that you have refused to make a decision?
- ❖ Give us an example of a situation where you had to make a decision without the input of key players, but knowing that these key players would judge you on that decision (e.g. superior unavailable at the time).
- ❖ Tell us about a time when you had to make a decision without knowledge of the full facts.
- ❖ Tell us about a situation where you made a decision that involuntarily impacted negatively on others. How did you make that decision and how did you handle its consequences?

- ❖ Tell us about a decision that you made, which you knew would be unpopular with a group of people. How did you handle the decision-making process and how did you manage expectations?
- ❖ Tell us about a situation where you made a decision too quickly and got it wrong. What made you take that decision?

### **Interview Competency - Delegation**

Able to make full and best use of subordinate, providing appropriate support

What type of responsibilities do you delegate?

- ❖ Give examples of projects where you made best use of delegation.
- ❖ Give an example of a project or task that you felt compelled to complete on your own. What stopped you from delegating?
- ❖ Give an example of a situation where you reluctantly delegated to a colleague. How did you feel about it?
- ❖ Give an example where you delegated a task to the wrong person? How did you make that decision at the time, what happened and what did you learn from it?
- ❖ How do you cope with having to go away from the office for long periods of time (e.g. holidays)? Explain how you would delegate responsibilities based on your current situation.

### **Interview Competency - Flexibility**

Modifies his or her approach to achieve a goal. Is open to change and new information; rapidly adapts to new information, changing conditions, or unexpected obstacles.

- ❖ Describe a situation where you had to change your approach half-way through a project or task, following new input into the project.
- ❖ Describe a situation where you started off thinking that your approach was the best, but needed to alter your course during the implementation.
- ❖ Describe a situation where one of your projects suffered a setback due to an unexpected change in circumstances.
- ❖ Describe a situation where you were asked to do something that you had never attempted previously.
- ❖ Give us an example of a situation where your initial approach failed and you had to change tactics.
- ❖ Describe your strongest and your weakest colleagues. How do you cope with such diversity of personalities?
- ❖ If we gave you a new project to manage, how would you decide how to approach it?

### **Interview Competency - Independence**

Acts based on his/her convictions and not systematically the accepted wisdom

- ❖ Which decisions do you feel able to make on your own and which do you require senior support to make?
- ❖ Describe a situation where you had a disagreement or an argument with a superior. How did you handle it?
- ❖ When do you feel that it is justified for you to go against accepted principles or policy?

- ❖ Which constraints are imposed on you in your current job and how do you deal with these?
- ❖ When did you make a decision that was not yours to make?
- ❖ Describe a project or situation where you took a project to completion, despite important opposition.
- ❖ When have you gone beyond the limits of your authority in making a decision?

### **Interview Competency - Influencing**

Ability to convince others to own expressed point of view, gain agreement and acceptance of plans, activities or products.

- ❖ Describe a situation where you were able to influence others on an important issue. What approaches or strategies did you use?
- ❖ Tell us about an idea that you managed to sell to your superior, which represented a challenge.
- ❖ Describe a time where you failed to sell an idea that you knew was the right one.

### **Interview Competency - Integrity**

Ability to maintain job related, social, organisational and ethical norms.

- ❖ When have you had to lie to achieve your aims? Why did you do so? How do you feel you could have achieved the same aim in a different way?
- ❖ Tell me about a time when you showed integrity and professionalism.

- ❖ Tell us about a time when someone asked you something that you objected to. How did you handle the situation?
- ❖ Have you ever been asked to do something illegal, immoral or against your principles? What did you do?
- ❖ What would you do if your boss asked you to do something illegal?
- ❖ Tell us about a situation where you had to remind a colleague of the meaning of "integrity".

### **Interview Competency - Leadership**

Acts as a role model. Anticipates and plans for change. Communicates a vision to a team.

- ❖ Tell us about a situation where you had to get a team to improve its performance. What were the problems and how did you address them?
- ❖ Describe a change where you had to drive a team through change. How did you achieve this?
- ❖ Describe a situation where you needed to inspire a team. What challenges did you meet and how did you achieve your objectives?
- ❖ Tell us about a situation where you faced reluctance from your team to accept the direction that you were setting.
- ❖ Describe a project or situation where you had to use different leadership styles to reach your goal.
- ❖ Tell me about a time when you were less successful as a leader than you would have wanted to be.



## **Interview Competency - Teamwork**

Contributes fully to the team effort and plays an integral part in the smooth running of teams without necessarily taking the lead

- ❖ Describe a situation in which you were a member of team. What did you do to positively contribute to it?
  
- ❖ Tell us about a situation where you played an important role in a project as a member of the team (not as a leader)
  
- ❖ How do you ensure that every member of the team is allowed to participate?
  
- ❖ Give us an example where you worked in a dysfunctional team. Why was it dysfunctional and how did you attempt to change things?
  
- ❖ Give an example of a time when you had to deal with a conflict within your team? What did you do to help resolve the situation?
  
- ❖ How do you build relationships with other members of your team?
  
- ❖ How do you bring difficult colleagues on board? Give us an example where you had to do this.

## More interview questions to consider

- ❖ What is your understanding of Consumer Protection (Distance Selling) Regulations 2000 and how might this affect your work?
- ❖ How would you go about persuading a customer that our product was better than any other?
- ❖ Describe your sales technique and tell me about a time when this was successful.
- ❖ Tell me about a time when you had to communicate complex information. What was the situation, what approach did you take and what was the result?
- ❖ Describe a time when you used your skills to persuade a manager or colleague to accept your recommendations.
- ❖ What steps would you take to nurture commercial awareness and a sales focus in a customer service team?
- ❖ Why do you want to work for us?
- ❖ How would your friends describe you?
- ❖ What are your weaknesses?
- ❖ What are your strengths?
- ❖ How do you cope under pressure?
- ❖ How do you manage your time?
- ❖ Why did you choose market research as a career?

- ❖ What would you like to get out of working with us?
- ❖ What do you look for in choosing a company/job to apply to?

## Questions to ask the interviewer

At the end of an interview you will be given the chance to ask questions about the job and the organisation. Asking questions can help you to gain an insight of the organisation and find out things that are important to you at work. For example, ongoing training might be important to you. Asking questions also shows your enthusiasm in the role.

Some of the questions are similar but worded differently.

- ❖ How many other people work in the team? What are their job roles?
- ❖ If the job is in a new department, ask about the reason for establishing the department and what the plans for growth are.
- ❖ If the job is an old one, ask who you are replacing and why they have moved on.
- ❖ Ask about appraisals and performance reviews – how often, will they be tied to pay increases or bonuses?
- ❖ How will my performance be measured?
- ❖ Can you describe your ideal employee? This is a great one – use it early on to find out what they are expecting so you can tailor your later responses to suit them!
- ❖ A slightly more subtle approach, than the last point, would be to ask, “What skills and experience would you say are necessary for someone to succeed in this job?”

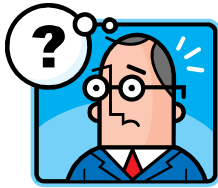
- ❖ Likewise, asking your interviewer when they started with the company and why they have stayed with the company? In a polite way – try not to ask this with a grimace on your face! You want to get them talking a little – it strengthens your relationship with them just that little bit more which can make a difference.
- ❖ (If you are being interviewed by the MD / Owner) Hypothetical question – if you had to leave how would you like to see the company be managed?
- ❖ What scope for progress and promotion is there within the company?
- ❖ What kind of work will I be responsible for over the next year?
- ❖ Will I be expected to work late nights or at the weekend?
- ❖ Can you describe a typical day or week in the job?
- ❖ What makes this company stand apart from the competition?
- ❖ In your opinion, what is the most important attribute / achievement / quality you would like to see from me within my trial period?
- ❖ Are you interviewing more people for this position?
- ❖ Do your employees socialise outside of the workplace? With this one you don't want to seem like you will be out of the door at 4 p.m. on a Friday and straight to the pub! But it is worth getting an idea of how the office life will be – perhaps ask if they have any company sports teams, etc. Basically ask them to quantify the atmosphere of the office.
- ❖ How would you describe the core responsibilities of the position?

- ❖ Will the job involve much travelling? If so, how much?
- ❖ When are you looking for someone to start?
- ❖ When can I expect to hear from you?
- ❖ Would you like a list of references or any additional information from me?
- ❖ Does the job involve any form of training? How will this be implemented and monitored?
- ❖ Could you explain the company structure to me? This lets them clarify the management and departmental structure within the company. It will also help you get a better idea of how your role will fit into the company.
- ❖ What software / systems does your company use? Know your industry so you know how to ask this question properly.
- ❖ What are the company's plans for the future?
- ❖ What challenges might I face in this position?
- ❖ How does the company reward or recognise outstanding work and excellence?
- ❖ Will my roles be limited to what has been outlined in my job description, or will I be expected to take on other tasks as needed? If so, to what extent do you foresee this being the case?
- ❖ What is the work environment like?

- ❖ Why do you [the interviewer] enjoy working for this company?
- ❖ Who in the company would review my performance? When?
- ❖ What are the opportunities for training and professional development?
- ❖ If I am as successful in this position as I should be, what might I be doing after a year? After two years?
- ❖ From what you already know about me and from what you have heard today, do you have any reservations about employing me?

This is a good question to ask at the very end. The interviewer will have to respond and it will give you an idea of what you could work on or how good you were. It will help reduce anxiety while you are waiting at home for the outcome.

## Tips for the Interview



**Clarify** anything you are unsure of. It is okay to ask the interviewer for clarification. You can also ask if there is anything they would like clarification on at the end.

Be prepared to be asked about **yourself** and your **experience**. Read over your CV and pick out key experience you have gained from each job.



Be **confident** and **assertive**. Shake the interviewer's hand/s and make eye contact.

Have good reasons why you think they should employ you over someone else. Know your top skills and answers to anticipated questions well.

What makes a good interview?

Be aware of your **body language**. Try to avoid closed postures. Sit up straight and maintain eye contact.



**Be on time** for your interview or even early if you can. This gives a good first impression and will also give you time to relax before the interview.



**Dress appropriately**. You're clothes should be professional but comfortable. Wear smart, clean clothes even if the organisation's dress code is casual.

**Don't waffle**; keep your answers short and to the point. If you feel you can't keep it short say "I could expand on this if you would like?"





## Things to remember.....

It is normal to feel anxious before and during an interview. They can be frightening, but try to focus on the questions you have prepared and how passionate you are about the job role. This will come across to the employer whether you are nervous or not.

The interviewer may be just as nervous as you are. Thinking this can help reduce the stress that you are the only one feeling this way.

Maybe get to the interview half an hour early and read through your notes, have a drink and relax yourself. You could try some relaxation breathing exercises to reduce the anxiety.

If you have time, exercise before the interview to release any tension and stress in your muscles.

Take a mobile phone with you with a contact number, so you can contact the interviewer if anything delays you.

Be yourself.

**Good Luck, Relax and Be Yourself!**

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