



Job interviews and assessment centres

This guide is a brief introduction to the different types of interviews used by graduate recruiters, and the activities you are likely to experience at an assessment centre.

Interviews

The purpose of an interview is to give the selectors an opportunity to assess your suitability for the job and for you to provide evidence of your skills and personality.

Just as the application form or CV is used as a way of eliminating a proportion of candidates, the initial interview acts as a screening process to identify potentially suitable people. Selectors have a checklist of requirements based on the job specification drawn up by the human resources department. The job analysis you did prior to the application should help to direct your preparation for the interview and should mean that your expectations match those of your interviewer.

An interview is a two-way process. Do not ignore your own needs in this. The selector wants to find out about you and you need to find out about the organisation. The selector wants to recruit the best person and you want to convince him or her that you are that person. You cannot do either of those things unless you prepare well and take an active role in the proceedings.

Interview preparation

Do your homework

Show that you have taken the time to research and learn about the company or organisation

- Find out if the company has been in the news recently and why
- What are the company's recent developments?
- Use social media networks for example, LinkedIn to network with contacts in your target company
- Be clear on the nature of the role you are applying for. If unsure, visit Prospects: prospects.ac.uk and then click on 'Jobs and work experience' and then 'Job profiles'

On the day

- Dressing smartly shows that you are taking the interview seriously (even in an office where business-casual attire is the norm)
- Greet the interviewer confidently (this may or may not include a handshake). Maintain eye contact during the interview
- If the interview includes being shown round the office, make sure you demonstrate your interest to the person showing you around

At the interview

It is natural you should feel nervous but show you can manage it

- Don't go to the other extreme and seem too laid back
- Be yourself – the employer has read your application and was impressed

Why ask me that?

Every time you are asked a question ask yourself "What are they trying to find out from this?" If you understand why an employer poses a particular question, you will answer it better. There are some interview questions later in this leaflet so you could prepare some responses.

Sell yourself

- Don't understate your achievements and strengths. Other candidates will be selling themselves and their achievements
- Speak confidently about your experiences and don't be afraid of talking about things you have already mentioned in your form or CV. Give specific examples of how you contributed or learned something exciting. Go over your application form or CV, identify the highlights and try and weave them into your answers
- If you need a moment to think, or don't understand a question, ask for clarification. It's also fine to take a second to think your answer through if you need it.

Two-way process

An interview is an opportunity for you to find out about the company, so don't be afraid of asking questions yourself. It shows you have done your homework and that you are interested. Think of two or three questions going into the interview. If you only have one, it might get answered during the course of the interview leaving you without anything to ask.

Different types of interview

Interviews can take many forms, but here are a few of the most common formats and types which you may encounter. Visit our website where you will find video resources on how to prepare yourself.

nottingham.ac.uk/careers/interviews

Telephone interviews

Telephone interviews are used extensively across the graduate recruitment process. They are often used as a method of initial screening, but some organisations may use them further down the line. In most cases, organisations will pre-arrange a time with you – ensure that you have a quiet environment in which to talk. One advantage is that you can have your details to hand. A disadvantage is the absence of non-verbal communication, so speak clearly, smile and sound positive.

Video interviews

These are becoming increasingly popular with employers as an alternative to telephone interviews as they can assess a larger number of candidates, and offer a more flexible alternative.

Interactive video interviews will involve e-conferencing software such as Skype or Facetime and will involve a live feed discussion. These are considered to be effective in assessing your demeanour.

Non-interactive interviews involve you providing video responses to a set of pre-recorded questions. These can be daunting as you cannot see your interviewer or receive feedback. However, you will normally be given the chance to practise your response, and undertake the interview at your convenience. Find a suitable place to take the interview – somewhere quiet and with a fitting backdrop – and dress and act professionally as you would if you were visiting the employer in person.

Competency-based interviews

These are structured to reflect the competencies that an employer is seeking for a particular job role. You will already have tackled some of these in your application. Your competencies are then assessed by the interviewer and checked against their selection criteria.

A competency-based interview may be conducted through a telephone or face-to-face interview. The meeting may include several interviewers, often representing a particular function. A chairperson will co-ordinate this panel. Try to address your answer to the person asking the question, while maintaining eye contact with the whole panel.

Examples of competency-based questions

- What role did you play in a team, assess your impact, and what was the outcome?

In answering this question you could select from: a team project at university, a position of responsibility, a sporting/cultural role or from your work experience. Remember to answer all parts of the question.

- Describe a time when you demonstrated a new approach to a task?

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Again you can choose from a range of experiences. The interviewer is seeking to discover how you approach tasks and if you can show evidence of innovation or logical thinking.

The STAR technique

STAR represents Situation, Task, Action and Result and is one way you can structure your answers. Using this technique in your preparation and during the interview will help you to provide a concise, well-structured, response and remain focused. This is a particularly useful framework when answering competency-based questions.

Situation = Outline what problem/issue you have faced. Set this in a time context.

Task = Explain what your task was within the situation.

Action = Explain in sequential steps what your response was to the situation? What did you do?

Result = Explain the outcome. The employer is looking for a positive response.

While this is a good way to prepare try not to over rehearse your answers so you can respond flexibly to each question.

Strengths-based interviews

An increasing number of employers are using this type of approach. A strengths-based interview consists of questions that require you to reflect on your past experiences and current interests. Interviewers may seek real life examples to demonstrate your strengths. They will try and identify your preferred working style. Research shows that past behaviour is the best predictor of future behaviour and performance.

The aims of this approach are:

- To find out more about the real you, what you are good at, and what really energises you
- To match your strengths to those identified in existing successful employees
- To allow you to use your natural strengths and abilities, in order that you are fully engaged in your work. This should allow you to be more productive
- Interviewers may ask a large number of questions at a reasonably fast pace
- Interviewers may also be paying close attention to tone and pitch of voice, as well as body language

Example of strengths-based interview questions:

- What energises you more, starting or finishing a task?
- How do you feel in situations where you are not fully prepared?

Although these types of questions may seem a little obscure, try and relax and respond as naturally as possible. Always give truthful answers and try and convey your natural preferences and enthusiasm for different topics. It may be useful to provide examples, but these do not have to be presented in a highly structured way.

With a greater understanding of your own unique strengths you will be better placed to consider how you can articulate what you can offer graduate employers.

Case study interviews

A case study exercise is often used by recruiters to assess your understanding of business scenarios as well as analysis, organisation and problem-solving skills. You will normally complete this task individually. Typically you will be provided with a booklet of information and will be asked to analyse it and make business decisions before presenting your findings either in a written report, a presentation or in a case study interview.

- You will have to work quickly. There will be a lot of information for you to read and digest, ensure you get everything finished in the allocated time
- If you are asked to write a report, use headings and bullet points rather than full sentences
- If there is financial or numerical information within the report, ensure you demonstrate that you can understand and analyse it
- If you are asked to present the information verbally, remember to introduce the topic area and outline a structure for the presentation before you start. This will make it easier for the assessor to follow your argument and you can cover everything

Technical interviews

These types of interview are used when applying for a role that requires technical knowledge for example, IT, science or engineering. The interviewer will ask you questions which should enable you to demonstrate your technical knowledge and ability developed through your studies and work experiences.

Typical questions

While you cannot predict what questions may be asked, certain types of questions are more likely to occur. These may be based on the evidence you provided in your application. When attempting to answer a specific question, be prepared to provide evidence from at least a couple of contexts not just from your university experience.

Why have you applied for this job?

This is a great chance to sell yourself. Describe the skills you can offer which are relevant to the role. Express the depth of your interest in the job. You might have developed an early interest in the field, had relevant work experience or you may have talked to people who are doing the job. Your answer should be enthusiastic and confident.

What are your weaknesses?

The best way of tackling this one is to pick one thing which you know has been a weakness but you have taken some steps to overcome. For example, you may not have been very confident about giving presentations, but have now practised and have overcome your apprehensions.

Can you work well under pressure?

Don't just reply "Yes!" Use the opportunity to give an answer focusing on several clear-cut examples showing your ability to cope under pressure.

The interviewer will want to discover what you know about their organisation or sector. Questions may include:

- What have you learnt through your degree that is relevant to this application?
- Why do you want to be a...?
- Why do you want to work for us?
- What are the main challenges facing this organisation over the next two to three years?
- What have you gained from your previous work experience?
- What is your biggest achievement to date and why?
- What are you looking for in a career?
- How would your friends describe you?
- What are your main strengths and weaknesses?
- What other careers have you considered and why?
- Describe how you analysed a complex issue or problem to reach a decision. What steps did you go through and why?
- Give me an example of a time when you achieved a task under a time constraint. How did you react? Were you successful?

Golden rules for answering questions

- Always be positive. Even when things have gone badly for you, try to think positively about what you have learnt from the experience
- Never offer derogatory information about yourself or others
- Don't try to answer a question you haven't understood, ask for clarification
- Do speak clearly, and not too fast
- Don't repeat the question you have been asked in order to give yourself time to think

Do you have any questions?

This question is almost always asked towards the end of an interview. Use this as an opportunity to demonstrate your interest and observation. You may have gleaned some new information over the course of the interview.

"You mentioned a possible business expansion into... Could you tell me a bit more about this?"

There may be gaps in your knowledge about the job role or organisation, so this is your chance to ask. You may also be trying to weigh up whether or not the job is for you, so try and consider what you might need to ask prior to the interview. Remember not to ask what has already been covered, and not to ask questions for the sake of asking. Some examples might be:

- What would be a typical career pattern for a young graduate entering...?
- Can you give me a fuller picture of your training programme? (Assuming this is not made clear in the literature.)
- What percentage of your graduates are in management positions? Is it increasing?

Assessment centres

If you are successful at the interview stage, you may then be invited to attend an assessment centre. These are normally day long events but can run over a few days with an overnight stay. At an assessment centre employers use a variety of tasks to assess candidates. Each task identifies and measures individual skills against a predefined list of desirable competencies.

An assessment centre is often the final stage of a graduate recruitment process, although some employers will invite you to a partner or senior manager interview if you are successful. You will be at the assessment centre with other applicants but you may not be in direct competition with them. Recruiters often make job offers to all candidates who meet their requirements whether this is everyone (or no one) from each assessment day.

There are a number of different selection exercises which employers may use to assess candidates. You are likely to experience four or five activities, during each one you will be assessed by representatives from the organisation.

Visit our website for more advice on case studies and presentations:

nottingham.ac.uk/careers/assessmentcentres

Group exercise

Typically you will be in groups of four to eight applicants and asked to complete a task within a given time frame. This might be a case study exercise or a negotiation task where you are assigned particular roles. Competencies such as leadership, teamwork, communication and organisation are normally being assessed. You should make sure you:

- Contribute positively to the task and ask questions. The assessor can only record evidence when you actually say something.
- If you have quiet members of the group, try to involve them in the conversation. Showing empathy for others in the group who might be struggling is a really positive step.
- Try to help organise the task; think of a strategy or ensure the group stays focused. The group should definitely reach a conclusion or complete the task in the time allowed.
- Be yourself; the employer is looking to see how you interact with colleagues. Think about what you would want from members of a team or examples of great team members you've worked with before. What did they have in common?

Psychometric testing

You may be required to retake any psychometric tests that you sat as part of the earlier recruitment process. These might include numerical, verbal and logical reasoning and also personality tests. These tests are likely to be paper-based and under exam conditions. Try our practice tests at:

nottingham.ac.uk/careers/psychometrictests

In tray or e-tray tasks

These types of assessment are used to examine skills such as organisation, decision-making, analysis and problem-solving. These tests are either paper-based or laptop-based and you will normally read, analyse and make decisions based on information presented to you.

Some firms (for example Civil Service and Linklaters) offer an e-tray test online. Even if you are not applying to these particular organisations, it is worth trying them.

- Pay attention to detail and ensure that emails are written in suitable language for the recipient
- Read the questions and information carefully and ensure that you do what is being asked

Lunch and networking opportunities

Many recruiters report that refreshment breaks during an assessment day are not formally assessed. However, it is important that you use the time to network with the assessors and other applicants. Often there will be graduates from the current scheme invited too and it may be an opportunity for you to find out helpful information about the scheme or even the recruitment process. Try not to disappear into a corner and check your email, you are likely to feel that some downtime would be useful but this may not create the best impression.

Feedback

Most employers will offer you feedback following an assessment centre. If you have been unsuccessful, it is vital for you to take the opportunity to get hold of this information as it is critical in terms of reflecting on this experience and preparing yourself for the next one.

Further information

- Visit our website for information, advice and videos on all aspects of the recruitment process
- Sign up for our skills workshops on interviews and assessment centres.
- Book an appointment with a member of our team
nottingham.ac.uk/careers/students

This publication is available in alternative formats.

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