

Interviewing



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Interviewing is a central part of finding the right person for the job. Done well, an interview is an effective way to find out about a candidate. But done badly, it provides poor information which results in poor decisions.

Proper planning, careful preparation and skilled interviewing can reduce the chances of this happening.

This briefing covers:

- How to plan and prepare for interviews.
- How to hold an effective interview.
- The most common pitfalls to avoid.

1 Planning

1.1 What are you **looking for**?

Prepare a job outline and a person specification. Use these to establish clear criteria against which candidates can be assessed (see **6**).

- Weight the criteria according to their importance.
For example, a customer adviser might need communication skills (weighted nine), then teamworking (six), followed by technical knowledge (five), and so on.

1.2 What selection **methods** will you use?

- Initial information can be obtained from candidates in writing and used to produce a shortlist. For example, a CV or application form will answer basic information about experience and qualifications.
- Interviews explore candidates' experience, attitudes and skills in more depth (see **3**).

Only interview those candidates who stand a reasonable chance of success.

- Important skills or characteristics can be assessed in other ways.
For example, psychometric tests can examine personality, ability and aptitude.

1.3 What **type of interview** will you hold?

Options include:

- Formal interviews, using planned questions to explore the selection criteria.
- Less structured, informal interviews to exchange information and to get to know candidates.

Take care to avoid personal matters which may infringe a candidate's right to privacy.

Informal interviews alone rarely form an adequate basis for fair comparisons

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between candidates and final decisions.

- Sequential interviews, involving different interviewers focusing on different aspects of the candidates (eg technical skills). The results of each interview are used to brief a final interview panel.
- Group interviews, involving several candidates, are an inexpensive way of providing information and assessing teamworking and interpersonal skills. Group interviews can be too competitive, and may not be suitable for senior roles.

2 Preparation

2.1 Select two or more **interviewers**.

- Using two or more people will help you check impressions of the candidates and reach a balanced view. It also protects you against accusations of unfair treatment.
- Involve the candidate's prospective line manager.
You may also want to involve other individuals the appointee will work with.
- Include someone with relevant specialist or technical knowledge if necessary.
For example, an IT expert to assess whether candidates have the skills needed

Legal issues

A You must not interview in a way that **discriminates** illegally.

- Decisions must be based on job-related criteria — not on grounds of race, age, sex, marital status (including civil partnerships), sexual orientation, religious belief, or nationality.
- It is illegal to treat people with disabilities differently.
- Under the Data Protection Act candidates are entitled to see any notes taken on them (**see 7.4**).

B Avoid **over-personal** questions.

For example, about a person's children or dependents and their care arrangements, or about family background, out-of-work activities, health or willingness to comply with dress codes — unless they are directly relevant to the job's requirements.

C An oral **offer of employment** made during an interview is legally binding.

- If you make an offer during an interview, or in a letter to a candidate, it will form the basis of the employment contract.

for a role as IT systems administrator.

2.2 Make sure interviewers are properly **briefed**.

Interviewers should:

- Know what the job requirements and selection criteria are.
- Be trained in questioning (see **4**) and other interview skills (see **5**).
- Be aware of the legal issues (see box).
- Know who will handle each part of the interview (see **3**).
- Understand their roles in the decision.

2.3 Decide **when** to hold the interviews.

- Make sure you will not be disturbed. Interrupted interviews create a poor impression and disturb concentration.
- Plan each interview to last 45 to 90 minutes. Longer interviews result in loss of concentration; too short an interview will lead to essential information being missed.
- Allow time between interviews to complete your notes (see **5.3**), to deal with any urgent business and to take a break.
- Do not try to see more than four or five candidates in one session.

You may need to be flexible for candidates who cannot attend interviews during working hours.

2.4 Prepare your **script**.

- Use the selection criteria to identify the question topics.
- Decide who is going to ask which questions and who will chair the interview.

2.5 Send written instructions to **candidates**.

- State when the interview is to be held, what time to arrive and who to report to.
- Make sure candidates know what the job requirements are.
- Tell candidates what to expect and what preparation they need to do.

3 The interview

3.1 Start by **welcoming** the candidate.

- Put the candidate at ease.
- Introduce the other interviewers. Explain their roles and their contributions to the interview.
- Outline the structure of the interview.

3.2 Verify information.

Ask questions to check information provided on the CV or application form.

- Probe any gaps in the candidate's career.
- Ask for details on levels of responsibility, and costs and sizes of projects. Find out who else worked with the candidate on these projects.
- Ask about the candidate's skills, and seek recent examples of how the candidate has used them at work.

3.3 Explore the candidate's potential.

Build on the information in the CV and the responses already given.

Ask candidates to:

- Identify their main strengths and most important experiences.
- Discuss the skills they need to develop.
- Outline how they will add value to the company if they get the job.

3.4 Provide **information** to the candidate.

- Give more detail on the scope of the job and your expectations.
- Invite questions on the nature of the job, terms and conditions, and the company.
- Ask candidates if they have any comments or if there is anything they wish to say.
- Be prepared to explain to the candidate why you asked a particular question.

3.5 Bring the interview to an **end**.

- Establish whether or not the candidate is still interested.
- Confirm that referees may be contacted.
- Tell the candidate how and when the decision will be made.
- Check you have accurate contact details.

4 Questioning

4.1 Different **types of question** can be used to reveal different kinds of information.

- Open questions which cannot be answered with a simple 'yes' or 'no' encourage candidates to talk. Good for exploring and gathering information.
- Probing questions (eg "Exactly what happened next?") aim to clarify what is meant by the answer to an open question. Good for checking details already known or given in response to an earlier question.
- Closed questions (eg "Would you be able to start next week?") are used to establish

facts and clarify specific points.

Good for finding out single facts or restricting a candidate who is rambling.

- Reflective questions (eg "Am I right in saying your work involves you in...?") repeat what the candidate said. Good for checking the accuracy of your understanding, summarising and leading to a close.
- Situational questions (eg "Suppose you were asked to do...?") pose alternative scenarios or viewpoints. Good for getting the candidate to consider different possibilities or ways of working.

4.2 **Destructive** interviewing techniques can mean that you lose good people you should have been able to recruit.

Destructive behaviour reflects badly on the interviewers and your company.

- Offensive remarks (eg "You weren't paid much in your last job").
- Personal remarks (eg "I like the colour of your jacket").
- Multiple questions (eg "When did you do that, why, what was the outcome...?"). Multiple questions can be used to test listening ability, concentration and intelligence, but often just lead to confusion.
- Unfocused behaviour is unproductive and rude. For example yawning, gazing out of the window, writing letters, taking telephone calls or interrupting the interview to deal with 'more urgent' matters.

5 Listening

5.1 **Listen actively** and concentrate on what is being said.

- Avoid thinking about how you are going to respond or phrase the next question.
- Resist the temptation to talk too much.

5.2 **Observe** behaviour.

- You may be able to tell if candidates are confident, or are unsure of their ground.
- Avoid jumping to conclusions. Check any impressions you form by asking a probing question (see 4.1).

5.3 Keep **notes** to help you remember the individual candidates.

- The candidates you see first and last tend to be remembered better than the others.
- Notes provide the information you need for the assessment. They will also act as evidence if decisions need to be justified.

“Many interviewers talk too much. You learn more when the candidate talks and you listen.”

Frank Thaxton,
Thames Valley
Partners business
advisers

See 7.4.

- Summarise your notes after each interview, while it is fresh in your mind.

6 Decision time

6.1 Assess the evidence for each candidate against the selection criteria.

- Use a scoring system to turn observations into numbers. This makes it easier to compare candidates.

6.2 Calculate a weighted score.

- Multiply the score for each of the criteria by the corresponding weighting (see 1.1). Add the results for each of the criteria. Any candidate not achieving the required standard can be discounted.

6.3 Make your decision based on:

- Candidates' weighted scores.
- Any other evidence you have collected.
- Your judgement.

You must make it clear if the decision (and offer) will be contingent on things which you have not yet been able to assess (eg references or a qualifications check).

6.4 Inform both successful and unsuccessful candidates of the outcome.

- Back up any phone calls with written confirmation.
- Try to provide brief, factual and helpful feedback to unsuccessful candidates.

7 Common mistakes

7.1 Keeping candidates waiting says all the wrong things about your business.

- Do not let the interview go beyond its allotted time or allow interruptions to delay another candidate.

7.2 Not focusing on selection criteria leads to subjective and arbitrary decisions.

- How the final decision will be made should be decided at the beginning. Once the criteria have been identified they can be used for recruitment advertising, shortlisting and designing the interview.

7.3 Failing to explore key skills and knowledge can lead to disastrous appointments.

- Do not assume that someone who appears to have many years' experience in a technical area (eg finance) can therefore do this job (see 2.1).

7.4 Making snap judgements usually means you are responding to your own prejudices rather than the reality of the situation.

- Use notes and evidence to identify which candidate best fits the criteria. Some interviewers favour candidates they like or candidates who are like themselves.
- Under the Data Protection Act, candidates have the right to access your notes. Only make notes of factual matters or your assessment of the individual in relation to the job requirements and selection criteria. You must be able to justify the selection of one candidate ahead of others.

7.5 Deciding too soon is an elementary mistake.

- Judgement should be suspended until all the interviews have been completed. Use evidence. Do not pick the first candidate who seems to be suitable or rely on initial impressions of candidates.

7.6 Expecting perfection opens the door to irrational decisions and self-delusion.

- Do not expect to find the ideal candidate who will hit the ground running.
- Most people will require an induction if they are appointed.

7.7 Avoid being taken in by candidates with good interview skills.

- Look for evidence of ability and potential.
- Do not rely on the interview alone. Gather information from a number of selection methods. Test skills as objectively as possible and obtain factual information from previous employers.

Expert contributors

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