Interviews

An interview can be defined as ‘a conversation with a purpose’ and conversations are a two-way interaction. The interviewer will be gathering evidence to see if you are the right person for the job. Could you do it? Are you motivated to do it? As the candidate, you too have an active role. Your ‘purpose’ is to try to select the most appropriate information and examples from your life which demonstrate your knowledge about the job requirements and the employer when responding to questions. These basic principles apply whatever the interview situation – one to one, panel or telephone.

PREPARATION

Re-read your application. You will already have given the employer some information on your application form or CV and covering letter. It is vital that you re-read this and are prepared to expand on any information or examples that you may have given. Don’t just rely on these examples though, be prepared to think of other occasions when you have demonstrated particular skills or competencies.

Are there any gaps or areas of potential weakness that an employer might wish to explore? Try to think about what you learned from any problems or challenges and present any outcomes in a positive light.

What do employers want? You need to be as clear as possible about the employer’s requirements in terms of skills, knowledge and personal qualities. Re-read the advert, any job description or other information about the job on the employer’s website. Make a list of requirements; this might range from a need to demonstrate commercial awareness to knowledge of a particular subject area. Think about examples that you could use in the interview to show that you have the right combination of knowledge, skills and experience to do the job.

Find out as much as you can about the company. Look at the organisation’s website – the latest news, press releases and annual reports sections may give you some useful insights. Check out the employer information on JobsLive, which you can access via the Careers website. Read the industry or professional press to get an idea of sector trends and issues. Pick up the handout ‘Researching Companies: a guide to sources of information’ (also available from www.imperial.ac.uk/careers).

Getting ready. Plan your journey to the venue and allow plenty of time. Take a copy of your application with you plus the invitation to interview and any directions. Check through what you are going to wear in advance to avoid a last minute panic if something needs to be dry cleaned etc. Do let someone know where you are going and when you are likely to return.

Mock interviews. These are simulated job interviews where you will be asked questions related to the type of work for which you are applying. You will get feedback on your performance and they are a useful way of preparing for the real thing. Mock interviews are available with Careers Consultants, and, during term time, with some recruiters. To make a booking, please telephone Careers on 020 7594 8024. Pick up the handout ‘Develop your Interview Skills’ (also available on the website).

ON THE DAY

Be positive but not over-confident. Plan to arrive 10-15 minutes early, so you have a chance to refresh up, sit quietly and prepare yourself. Take a few deep breaths if you find yourself getting tense and too nervous. You can convey a positive image to the interviewer from the beginning by giving a firm handshake and making good eye contact. During the interview don’t fidget with jewellery or the loose change in your pocket. Try to sit comfortably, not perched on the edge of the chair, nor lounging back either!

TYPES OF QUESTIONS

Whilst you can’t predict the format of the interview precisely, be prepared for questions which will explore your motivation (why this job or employer?), skills and experience and personal qualities. Typical interview questions are provided on the careers website along with ideas for answering them, and there are video clips with further examples. Competency-based questions probe into team working, leadership skills, problem solving, communication and so forth, where the STAR technique can help you provide an effectively structured answer. For a technical interview, be prepared to discuss practical applications of your subject knowledge, methods and processes used, and it is likely that there will be much emphasis on your independent and team projects.

More recently, some employers have begun to use strengths-based interviews. These probe into your self-awareness about your strengths and abilities and focus on what you enjoy doing rather than what you can do. Questions are likely to be about what motivates you, what gives you energy, how you learn best, or what makes a productive day for you, for example.
YOUR QUESTIONS
At the end of the interview you are likely to be asked if you have any questions. This is a good chance to make a final impression and you can prepare some in advance. Questions could cover training, career development or show that you have researched the organisation by asking about the impact of a new product or expansion plan. Don’t ask about topics that are fully covered on the organisation’s website or in the brochure. Don’t feel you have to ask questions just because you have been asked to – if everything has been covered then explain that this is the case.

INTERVIEW TECHNIQUE
• Listen carefully and don’t interrupt.
• Ask for clarification, if you don’t understand a question.
• Request a few moments to think about a question, if it is really a tough one. Don’t do this too often though!
• Use the STAR acronym for structuring your answers to competency questions (Situation – briefly set the scene and give an outline of the Task; Action – what was your contribution/involvement, what did you do? Result – what was the outcome?).
• Decline politely but firmly to answer questions on personal subjects where they have no relevance to the job. Employers must ensure that interviews are part of a fair selection process.
• Speak at a measured pace, make a conscious effort to slow down if you have a tendency to talk faster when you are nervous. You might find it useful to practise potential questions and answers aloud.
• Finally, each interview is also a learning opportunity to improve your interview skills. Just be yourself and take a few deep breaths before you walk through that door to steady your nerves.

TYPES OF INTERVIEW
Panel interviews: In a panel interview, there will be two or more interviewers who will tend to ask specific questions in a pre-arranged order. As it can be impossible to maintain eye contact with the entire panel throughout the interview, look at the person asking the question and glance at the others from time to time.
Telephone interviews: Often used to screen applicants at the beginning of the selection process. Prepare for the interview as you would for a face to face encounter by ensuring that you have thought of appropriate evidence of skills and researched the role and the sector. As the interviewer will not be able to pick up on any non-verbal clues, it is important that you show your enthusiasm and interest both by what you say but also by injecting some energy into your voice and avoiding speaking in a monotone. Smiling can help! Also, there are likely to be long pauses when the interviewer is making notes, therefore it is okay not to say anything rather than feeling that you have to fill the space with words.
Case study interviews: Typically used by consultancies and law firms. You may get asked to study a business case and make appropriate decisions based on the information provided. Although there are no right or wrong answers, you will be assessed on how you analyse the problem, identify key issues and develop your logical thinking and decision making process. The key is to put forward a strong argument for your decision about the case in question, including information about your reasons for rejecting other possibilities.

AFTER THE INTERVIEW
It might be useful to spend a few moments reflecting on your experience. What went well and what did not go so well? Which answers were you pleased about, which need developing? A short note to the employer, thanking them for the opportunity and stating that you are looking forward to hearing from them shortly can be polite, but is not essential. If you have not been successful, it might be useful to ask the employer for feedback about your perceived weaknesses and any tips about how you could improve for another time.

FURTHER INFORMATION
Available from the Careers Service:
• AGCAS Video - ‘Why ask me that?’ (Also on the ‘Selection Success in One’ DVD).
• Reference books - including ‘More Best Answers to the 201 Most Frequently Asked Interview Questions’, ‘Brilliant Interview’, ‘Vault Guide to Finance Interviews’
• Imperial College Careers Service website - www.imperial.ac.uk/careers (especially the ‘Quick guide to preparing for interviews’, also extensive job interview section with example questions/answers and video clips)
• Careers Consultants - can provide advice and information to help you prepare for interviews. Also look out for talks and group mock interview sessions, advertised on JobsLive via the Careers website.

For information on the disclosure of disability or specific learning difficulty such as dyslexia please see the information on the Careers Service website: www.imperial.ac.uk/careers/disclosure