



# Interview Preparation and Tips

The Spencer Group Candidate Toolkit



**the spencer group**

Specialist Recruitment Solutions

## Interview Preparation and Tips.

### 1. Do your research

If you want to prove you're the best, you've got to do your homework. Your first step should be to phone up for a copy of the company's annual report. Check out their website to find out what they do, where the company is headed and who's who.

Next, make sure you're up-to-date with the business you're in - especially if you've been out of the job market for a while. Check out the latest trends and buzz words, find out who's up, who's down, what's in and what's out. Look in recent issues of industry magazines and journals. Go along to networking groups or join relevant online newsgroups.

From the moment you get that confirmation letter or call, you need to start thinking also about what you want to say at interview. Interviewers want to know three things: Can this person do the job? Will this person do the job? Will they fit in? Put together a list of questions you might be asked, and include those that you might stumble over if asked on the spot. Jot down some appropriate answers and rehearse these until you sound convincing.

It might sound artificial if you reproduce these absolutely word for word on the day, but the process will build confidence. And if you're prone to interview stage fright, you'll have something solid to fall back on.

### 2. Think positively

Revisit your CV and take a long, hard look at your mission statement. If you've never written your own profile, however, begin by writing down what you do well and where you want to go in the future. Then in no more than 30 words sum up why you think you should get the job. Be proud of your achievements and ambitions - interviews are not the time for Bridget Jones-style self-deprecation.

Remembering this statement will help you walk into the interview thinking - and believing - 'I'm going to get this job'. You've got to this key stage because the recruiters believe that you've got the skills they want. Now you need to convince them that you're the best person for the job.

### 3. Look and play the part

Arrive early. Some experts suggest checking out the location of the building, before finding a cafe for a pre-interview drink. Use the time to have one last flick through your notes.

Get to the building early, too. Check the notice board and read company press releases and brochures - this is a good idea if you're looking to ask up-to-the-minute questions. Go to the loo and draw breath. Don't ever be late - if there are leaves or cattle on the line, call as soon as possible. Take a mobile just in case.

Take the minimum hand luggage so that you look professional - clear out your briefcase and your handbag before you go. Aim to look like a stereotypical employee for the job you want, so don't go for a youth TV job in a pinstripe suit. But if in doubt, dress up, not down. Dark colours tend to look more powerful, and remember to keep jewellery to a minimum.

Emanate energy: employers want fit, healthy workers who can work hard. Start with a firm handshake and look interviewers in the eye. Don't cross your legs, except at the ankles, and keep your hands away from your face. Don't maintain so much eye contact that you look like a dalek. It's not just what you say, it's the way that you say it... Your body language tells an interviewer all sorts of things you may not be aware of. Make sure you use it to sell yourself as the best person for the job.

First impressions count. Most employers decide within three minutes of meeting you whether or not you're right for the job. But amazingly, what you say comprises only seven per cent of the information you convey - your body language and behaviour speak volumes. Follow our guide and make sure that what you do backs up what you say.

## Speak the right language

A good interviewer will put you at your ease by starting with an open-ended question that's not about the job. If you're asked, 'Did you have a good journey?' don't feel shy about following up your answer with a sentence or two of light-hearted banter. 'Did you find it easy to get here too?' should help establish some rapport.

'Before you get onto the career questions try and establish some common ground'. 'It doesn't have to be a work-related question; it could be something you've watched on TV or a book you've read.'

At the end of the interview, don't forget that last impressions count too.

Make your interviewer warm to you

- Answer questions truthfully and to the point as much as possible.
- Sit bolt upright: this makes you look confident. Imagine you've got a piece of string running from the ceiling to the top of your head and vertically down through your spine. Don't lean to the side, or lean forward or backwards in your chair. Keep your head up.
- Always act as if you are determined to get the job you're discussing.
- Smile and nod a lot: this shows that you accept and approve of your interviewer. If two candidates are equally qualified, the one who shows the most approval is likely to land the job.

- Always look the interviewer in the eye: friendly eye contact shows that you're on roughly the same level - you're neither staring each other out aggressively nor grovelling at their feet. It also suggests that you've got nothing to hide.
- Listen attentively and take your time before you speak - this shows that you think carefully about things; it will also give you more time to prepare your answers.
- Answer questions with more than a simple 'yes' or 'no': this is not only good interview practice, but you'll come across as honest and open. Give succinct explanations whenever possible, and ensure that you communicate your strong points in a factual, sincere manner.
- If there's something you don't understand, put your head on one side, with a slight frown and a half smile. 'This is a non-threatening query expression'. 'It signals that you want to know more but also reassures the interviewer that your need to know is not a reflection of their failure to express themselves.'
- Mirror how the interviewer is sitting: this will make them feel more comfortable.
- If the interviewer is sitting hunched up and looks uptight, match what they're doing, then gradually unfold your body and relax. 'You'll find that miraculously they will follow your lead'.
- Adapt your body language to the type of job you're going for. If you're applying for a sales position, show your more extrovert side. Make sure that your voice sounds warm - particularly if you're applying for a telesales position or a job that involves a lot of communication. This way, the interviewer can tell exactly how you'd behave in the job. But if you're going for, say, a job in a library, the interviewer will probably be looking for someone who keeps their head down and gets on conscientiously with their work, so don't talk too much.

## Read your interviewer's body language

What it means if...

- They sit you in a chair that's lower than theirs: this is one of the tricks that interviewers use to keep you in your place. It can feel slightly intimidating, but don't be unnerved - it gives the interviewer confidence.
- Their hands are held in a steeple position: the interviewer is probably trying to dominate the conversation. Stand your ground by keeping your hands relaxed and in your lap. This will also stop you fidgeting.
- The interviewer is smiling, nodding a lot and looking at you: these are all good approval signs, which means that either you've got the job, or they're feeling sorry for you!

## How to tell if you've got the job

If there's a more relaxed atmosphere towards the end of the interview, and you feel that you're getting on well with the interviewer, then you either have the job or will be invited to come back again. Before you leave, the interviewer will give you a final extended handshake, and look you in the eye.

They're expecting to see you again so they'll make an effort to be warm and friendly. They will then probably walk you to the door.

## You've flunked it if...

- The interviewer seems to be searching for questions by frequently looking up or to the left with a slight frown, or leaning back from the desk. They are literally withdrawing from the interview.
- The interviewer's eyes are blank and they are sitting strangely still. This, again, suggests that they have already withdrawn from the interview and crossed you off the list.
- Their lips are pursed, almost as though they are about to spit something out. This is a bad sign - your interviewer seems to actively disapprove of you.
- The interviewer fails to shake your hand or offers a short, limp handshake while looking into the distance.

If your interview hasn't gone well this time, analyse what you said and did immediately after leaving, so that you're better prepared next time. But remember, if you found the interviewer difficult to get on with, you'd be better off working for someone you liked.

## 4. Control the interview

your interviewer won't know how good you are or why you should get the job unless you tell them. Don't boast or keep saying 'I'm brilliant', but stress your strengths by using anecdotes and examples of your achievements.

Use examples to illustrate how you can help make the company more productive and profitable. Talk in terms of 'results' and 'benefits'. Use positive language - 'I can', 'I will', 'I know' rather than tentative words like 'I think I might' or 'I probably would'.

Keep your responses short and to the point. If the interviewer is talking, listen carefully and respond when they've finished. If you don't understand a question, ask for an explanation rather than blunder out an inappropriate answer.

## 5. Turn your weaknesses into strengths

it's the interviewer's job to probe and ask difficult questions. They need to be able to trust you and be 100 per cent certain that you're the best candidate. If you've prepared properly, you won't be daunted by enquiries about gaps in your CV, problems you encountered in your last job or your reasons for wanting to move on.

Successful candidates are able to turn negatives into positives. If you were unemployed for a short period, tell your interviewer how you used that time productively and what you learned about yourself. Perhaps you used the time to re-evaluate what you wanted out of your career, and the break put you on the path you're on today.

If asked 'What are your main weaknesses?' saying something along the lines of, 'I can be over-committed and tend to push myself too hard', ought to win brownie points rather than do you a disservice. Make sure that all the personality traits you mention are accurate but you don't have to go into details. Rehearse your answers to tough interview questions

## 6. Be enthusiastic

Companies hire people who want to work for them. Tell your interviewers how much you enjoy your work and how wonderful you think their company is. Say you know that it's the right job for you and that you could do it really well. But always make sure that you explain and back up your assertions or your enthusiasm could sound false.

## 7. Ask intelligent questions

Show you care about your career and that you've taken the time to research the company and its recent successes. Memorise a few key questions before you go into the interview, but use your conversation to generate more.

Ask questions based on the assumption that the company wants you for the job. Say 'What would you expect me to achieve in the first six months after the appointment?' rather than 'What would you expect the appointed candidate to achieve?'

## 8. Send a short thank-you note

Send a letter to your interviewer/s within 24 hours of your meeting. Some interviewers prefer an email, so check out what form of communication they prefer at the end of the interview.

Keep your note brief and simple, and sound keen and interested. Thank them for taking the time to see you, say how much you enjoyed the meeting, how interested you are in the position and reiterate how your experience matches their requirements. Even if it's not your ideal job, you never know how your interviewer may help you in the future.

'If a candidate is clever, they'll add something that they've found out about the job or company that makes them keener,' advises one employer in the media. Make sure your tone isn't obsequious or schmaltzy. If the job relies on client communication, remember that you're demonstrating your communication skills every time you write, phone or email.

Because you secured the interview through a recruitment consultancy, then contact them immediately and give them some honest feedback.

## 9. Don't...

There are three key things to avoid during an interview - you might have done brilliantly, but commit one of these sins and you could jeopardise your chances.

### So don't:

- Badmouth your last employer. It's a small world and it reflects badly on you
- Pressurise your interviewer for a decision
- Discuss salary or terms of employment - wait until the jobs in the bag before the word 'perks' passes your lips

## 10. Write it down

How you feel as you walk away from your interview is often a good sign of how well you've performed. But we all have off-days, or make mistakes. 'I once kicked an interviewer, who was sitting about three inches away, in the shins,' recalls one embarrassed candidate, who decided to change her posture mid-interview.

Writing down your impressions of the company, the types of questions asked, and how you coped, could reap dividends. Write down what you did well and what you did badly. Did your experience match your expectations? If not, why not?

If you're then invited for a second interview, you'll be able to refresh your memory and use the information to devise more questions. If you're rejected, use it to prepare better next time - no interview experience is ever wasted.

## Example Questions:

### What's been the biggest disaster in your career so far?

**Don't say**

'Oh my God, I can't choose between them, I've had so many.'

Give the impression that your career path has been fairly smooth. If you once hired someone who later embezzled the company, or joined an organisation that immediately went bust, don't tell interviewers unless they already know.

Instead, choose a more innocuous mistake, put it in the distant past and suggest that you've learnt from it and moved on. This shows, among other things, that you're capable of handling a question that's designed to throw you off kilter.

**Do say**

'I've planned my career quite carefully so I haven't experienced any disasters. But like most people, I sometimes make mistakes. For instance, in my last job I was too enthusiastic about a particular project and put all my energy into it instead of stopping to reflect.

'I've since learned to take stock and think before I act, so if a similar situation occurred today, I know that I'd handle it much better.'

### Why have you got a one/two/five-year gap in your CV?

**Don't say**

'I went travelling around the world' or 'I took time out to have a family' and leave it at that.

Instead, capitalise on your additional experience. Explain what you learned from travelling the world or from looking after your children.

And don't lie about taking time off to bring up a family. Interviewers are quick to detect rubbish, so don't try and cover up a major part of your life. Sell yourself as optimistic, positive and sociable.

**Do say**

'I took a short career break to have my children and now have excellent childcare arrangements worked out.

'In fact, I've found that my experience as a full-time mother has dramatically improved my organisational skills, which will be invaluable in this job. For instance...'

## Why do you want to leave your present job?

### Don't say

'Because my boss is arrogant and nepotistic, and has replaced all the decent people with her mates.'

If you've had an unhappy experience in your previous job, don't let on or criticise your boss, as this will reflect badly on you. Point out all that you've achieved in the job and say that it is now time to move on to bigger challenges, such as this one.

### Do say

'Over the past two years, I've increase profits by 30 per cent within my department, brought on board three major new clients, and presented papers at conferences in London and Paris. I'm now ready to test those skills in a more international environment.'

### Don't say

'Because my company never rated me, they deemed me surplus to requirements.'

If you get asked this question it is important to make the point that your job was made redundant, not you, and to tell the truth about the circumstances. Don't be negative. The experience may have knocked your confidence for a time but you've used the opportunity to further your career.

### Do say

'My job was made redundant because the estate agency no longer needed the extra post after they closed all their offices in the Manchester area. That's why I'm looking for a similar position now.'

## You seem under-qualified for this job. What do you think?

### Don't say

'I know I haven't had much experience in this area but I'm very willing to learn.'

Questions about being under- or over-qualified are common, but remember that the recruiters are interested in you or they wouldn't have invited you to interview. If you're under-qualified for the job, focus on your achievements and then steer the conversation towards relevant training or work experience.

### Do say

'I haven't had the opportunity to do as much interviewing as I would have liked, but my Stage 1 certificate in personnel practice has given me the theoretical base on which to build. As you can see, I've got very good communication skills and have proved I'm a quick learner, so it won't take me long to get up to speed.'

Where the questioner asks if you're over-qualified, then they're probably worried that you'd get bored soon after starting the job. So focus on an area of the post you're applying for that you're really interested in and where you have relatively little experience.

**Do say**

'I've had a lot of involvement in employee legislation issues but the opportunity you're offering would mean preparing for tribunals. This is particularly interesting to me and would add to my overall skills.'

## What are your main weaknesses?

**Don't say**

'I'm not sure where to begin but, for instance, I'm not a very good timekeeper.'

This is a nasty question as the interviewer is giving you an open brief to tell all if you're naive enough to fall for the trick. Pick a strength you have that's critical to the job you're applying for, call its negative side a 'weakness', put it back in the past, and then show how you've overcome it.

Don't give more than one weakness unless you're prompted. This demonstrates another rule of interviewing - never volunteer negative information about yourself, unless you're asked to.

**Do say**

'I know I'm a bit pernickety about time management and this means that I can sometimes turn up early to meetings. So people might see me as too keen. I've learnt to become more relaxed and now get to meetings only five to ten minutes early.'

## Tell me about yourself?

**Don't say**

'Well, I've got four cats called Itchy, Scratchy, Homer and Bart, and I live with my boyfriend.'

This is the sort of question that could reduce you to silence or make you sound like a gossip queen as it gives you free reign to say whatever you like.

Don't fall into the trap and reveal intimate details about your personal life - you'll sound horribly unprofessional and will regret it later. Give them a brief sense of you, the person, but only include details that reflect well on you. So you might mention that you study Italian, or yoga, or let them know that you take part in the London marathon.

Most importantly, though, use the opportunity to reiterate how and why you're brilliantly qualified for the job. And add a bit more about why you want the job, or add a snippet of relevant information about your additional skills.

**Do say**

'As you know, I've had five years' experience as a manager, working for medium-sized companies in the UK and Brussels. One of my key ambitions at this stage in my career is to manage a bigger team of people within a larger organisation. I've enjoyed working abroad and would relish an opportunity to use my fluent German and French.'

## Why do you want this job?

**Don't say**

'The advert made it sound quite exciting.'

Tell the interviewer that your skills are perfectly matched, that you're looking for a new challenge and want to work for their company. This is your big chance to show that you've done some research on the organisation. Take advantage of it!

**Do say**

'Apart from the opportunities described in the advertisement, I saw on your website that the company is hoping to expand into Germany. As you will have seen on my CV, I speak fluent German. I'd like to use my language skills to help you explore new relationships and clients in Berlin.'

## What do you want to be doing five years from now?

**Don't say**

'I'd like to be working three days a week after having had a family' or 'I'd like to be doing your job.'

However ambitious you may be, try not to appear to be after the boss's job. Nor is it a good idea to share too many of your long-term ambitions. If you want to sail around the world in five years time, don't let on. Instead, say that you always excel in your work and would like to continue to progress.

**Do say**

'Obviously I'm extremely serious about my career and want to do the job I've applied for to the best of my ability. I work hard and get results so would hope to be doing a similar job at a higher level.'

## How do you show initiative?

### Don't say

'I'm always thinking up bright ideas that my boss likes.'

Answer general questions with very specific examples. Explain how your initiative has benefited your employer and give one or two examples.

### Do say

'I enjoy making things happen. I recently managed a big PR launch for a new British film, which led to my company getting more work.'