

Face to face

Elaine Ford explores how to make the most of yourself during an interview and at the assessment centre.

You may have great qualifications and a proven track record, but it's easy to lose out to a candidate who interviews better than you.

The mere mention of the word interview sends many into a blind panic. In reality, it's a discussion. A position is vacant and you and the interviewer(s) are coming together to see whether you're the best person to fill it; seeing the process from this perspective may help to relieve some of the tension.

But what is an interviewer looking for? Essentially, that you're capable of being one of their top performing employees! This will be gauged by the following:

- Past behaviours predicting future performance;
- An ability to plan and be in control;
- An ability to influence others at all levels;
- An ability to get the most from the team you work with;
- Challenging personal goals and the strength to keep going in tough situations; and
- An ability to prioritise, establish what's important and deliver solutions.

Show you possess such competencies by using past examples that demonstrate these behaviours, and expect to provide at least two illustrations of each. If you can support them with hard evidence, such as sales figures or a letter of endorsement from your manager, so much the better.



Getting a head-start

Look professional. If you can't be bothered with your own appearance, there's a good chance they won't be bothered with you.

Arrive 10 minutes early. Get an initial view of the venue and visualise yourself appearing calm, poised and making a positive impression. If you've had sales experience, know what you've achieved numerically, how you got there and the critical issues and solutions along the way.

When you meet the interviewer(s), look them in the eye and shake hands firmly. Maintain gentle eye contact during the interview but don't stare. Look alert and enthusiastic and remember it's OK to smile some of the time – just don't sit there grinning like a Cheshire cat!

Keep good posture and a clear, confident, but not strident, vocal delivery. If you must cross your legs, do so at the ankle – it looks less defensive. If you are addressing a panel, give equal attention to each interviewer, but be careful when using humour as it can fall flat or offend. Be clear about what you want, as well as what you don't want, from a job. You are not a supplicant begging to be employed, you are an entrepreneur seeing whether you can do business with these people!

Staying ahead of the pack

You know the kinds of questions you'll be asked. Let's not waste time revisiting them and, instead, look at how you answer

them, particularly, the 'big' question: "Will this person make the company a better place?" Show that the answer is a "yes" and you'll be the one who gets the nod.

The most important tip I can give is to listen. Don't give the impression you've gone AWOL by answering the wrong question. Listen to what you're saying and correct mistakes if necessary. When asked about your weaknesses show that, in overcoming them, you've learned something. And use this same approach to sell your skills. Lay out a problem you have faced, explain your solution and discuss the results. Paint a vivid picture. Show, don't tell, that you're the best person for the job.

If you don't understand a question, ask for clarification. If you really cannot answer it, say so. Ask questions about the job or the organisation, but don't make up things on the spot for the sake of it. If asked what salary package you're looking for, show you're open to negotiation. If pushed for a figure, reply with a level that reflects your worth, but doesn't price you out of the market.

Assessing your prospects

A mechanism often used by companies after initial interview is the assessment centre. Here, you will undergo role-play, team tasks or group discussions, presentations and psychometric tests. They involve a number of exercises designed to replicate the tasks and demands of the job advertised, and there's usually a common theme, with simulations to be undertaken singly or as part of a group. You'll be observed by assessors throughout, and the way you carry out the exercise is as important as the result achieved. Well-designed measures can relate to specific aspects of the job and serve as objective predictors of future performance.

Assessment usually covers dimensions such as teamworking, leadership and problem solving. A recruiter needs to assess how

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>> well a candidate is able to make decisions, interact with others and develop people's potential, so candidates will find their behavioural skills put to the test. The main attributes tested are:

- Action – leadership, motivation, flexibility, drive;
- Relationships – teamwork, interpersonal skills, oral communication, awareness of others;
- Judgement – reasoning, decision-making, commercial awareness, strategic planning; and
- Presence – self-confidence, calmness, political awareness, communication skills.

Play the game

Be yourself but, to improve your chance of success, think about what you already know about the company and what it might be looking for. How might you approach each task? Read and digest any information you're given before an exercise. Try to gauge the skills that assessors might be looking for and how you could demonstrate your competence in these areas. Don't make assumptions about the way in which you should respond and, above all, don't push yourself forward at the expense of others. Companies are looking to see how you work as part of a team.

Role-play: Remain calm. Often the exercise will put you in a confrontational situation to see how you handle it. Be flexible in your approach. Impress by listening and questioning – discovering the source of the problem and then dealing with it from a position of understanding.

Team tasks and group discussion: Find a happy medium between being a shrinking violet and an overbearing know-it-

all! Don't talk over others and dominate the group. Think about body language – people will be watching as well as listening. Show yourself to be a good leader, capable of directing a discussion, but don't come across as arrogant and insensitive to others' feelings. Praise other people's good ideas to show you are a team player and resolve any disputes in the group. Any criticisms you level at other candidates must be constructive – never use your greater knowledge of a particular subject to embarrass fellow candidates. Express your views calmly but assertively, and always try to help reach a consensus conclusion.

Presentations: Stick to the allocated time limit. Presenting is a subject for a later article but – in essence – tell people what you're going to tell them, tell them and then tell them what you've told them.

Psychometric tests: There are two types and opinions are divided about them but, like it or not, you're likely to face them some day. There are inbuilt checks, so don't give answers you think assessors want to hear. Ability tests involve verbal reasoning, numerical or diagrammatic tests that are timed and marked – and you either pass or fail. Personality questionnaires measure attitudes, habits and values – just be yourself and do your best – there is no pass mark but, when used with other methods, it's believed they can explore how well you are suited to a particular job.

The bottom line is that psychometrics can give employers information about you that you probably know already, but may not like to admit – providing the questions have been answered honestly, that is!