

How to survive and thrive at the interview

You've been asked to attend an interview. Congratulations – it's an achievement just to reach the short-list. Employers won't spend time interviewing an applicant unless they think that person might be right for the job. You must have made a good impression already. Don't leave it to chance – do everything you can to increase your prospects of success.

Before the interview

Let your referees know that you are going to the interview. Referees find it helpful to think about you in the context of the particular job, so they are ready for the employer's call.

Prepare for the interview. Don't practise on the real thing – ask a friend to role-play with you, or get some coaching. Or audiotape or videotape yourself.

Work out the main message you want to put across. How are you going to express what you have to offer? Practice what you are going to say *until it sounds natural*. You have to make sure you put this message across at some stage in the interview.

Review your resume. If it asserts any personal qualities, like leadership, teamwork or communication skills, prepare to justify those assertions with evidence. Think of a time when you used those skills to good effect, and be ready to tell that story. Explain the situation, the challenges, what you did and what happened. Come prepared with some achievements to talk about. What did you do, why, what resulted and who benefited? The message? If you produced benefits for your previous employer, you will probably do so for this employer if they hire you.

Try the testimonial technique. This means telling how other people have commended you. For example, "My boss told me that I have good attention to detail", or "Friends say that I am a good listener" or "I won the Employee of the Month award".

Anticipate what you might be asked, and work out how you are going to answer those questions. Interviewers sometimes start by saying "Tell me about yourself". This question often embarrasses candidates. Don't waste the opportunity to make a good impression. Prepare to say something factual about your achievements, goals and values.

Another common question is "What do you know about this firm?" Look at brochures, web sites, business publications and directories. Show that you have done some research and are on a fact-finding mission, not just begging for a job.

What are your weaknesses? Everyone has some. Use this as an opportunity to demonstrate your *Commitment to Continuous Improvement*. No one's perfect. Anyone who is serious about their career should be constantly evaluating their skills and working on improving them. Prepare to say how you are doing this.

Be prepared to talk about your interests, even if you have not included them in your resume. Be ready to elaborate. If you say you like reading, think of one or two books you recently read and enjoyed.

Write down a couple of questions you can ask. Prepare questions about the structure or culture of the organisation, requirements of the position or something you read in their publicity material.

What to wear? For solicitor or paralegal positions, suits are never out of place, and are easier to put together successfully than business casual outfits.

Give yourself plenty of time to get to the interview. If you can't find a car park, or discover that you are in the wrong street or building, you could end up in a panic. And arriving late is a cardinal sin that is difficult to overcome.

At the interview

Be pleasant to the reception staff; they may be asked to observe and give their impression of you. Switch off your mobile phone. If you forget to do this, and the phone rings during the interview, *do not answer it*.

Don't accept offers of coffee tea or water. You don't want to risk spillages or show that you are trembling.

Keep your right hand free so you don't have to off-load a bag or folder awkwardly. Shake hands firmly and confidently. If they do employ you, you'll be meeting their clients; they'll want someone who can inspire confidence. Females should take the initiative and extend a hand – some men are not sure whether they should shake hands with a woman or not.

Appear comfortable in your chair. If the chair is positioned back from the desk, pull it up closer; don't wait to be invited to do so. Sit up straight, but against the back of the chair – don't perch on the front of it. Don't rock or swing on the chair; some people do this without realising it. Keep your hands away from your face and hair. Maintain eye contact with the interviewer.

Be enthusiastic. Look and sound as if you want the job. Don't appear defensive, as if under cross-examination. Allow your personality to come through, so the interviewer can see what sort of person you are. Try to converse naturally.

Don't fall into the trap of just answering the questions put to you. You may leave feeling that you have not done yourself justice. Elaborate on your answer, by telling something more about yourself. Make an opportunity to put that main message across. But don't usurp the position of the interviewer – that can appear very “pushy”.

Any questions? Don't ask about the salary at this stage. For the first few years in practice, firms normally have a standard starting salary rate or band. But be prepared by knowing the Award rate – some smaller employers may not be sure what the rates are.

At the end, thank the interviewer and confirm that you are definitely interested in the position. If you have not had a chance to put across your main message, take this last opportunity to do so. Ask what will happen next – when will they contact you again? Will there be a second round of interviews or any psychological testing?

After the interview

Review your performance. Did any particular questions throw you? Prepare answers for another time. Consider getting some advice and coaching to improve your performance.

Send a letter thanking the interviewer and confirming your interest in the position.

If you are not hired, you may want to call the interviewer and ask for feedback. Ask "How could I improve my performance at interview?" Don't argue – you're not going to change their decision. Listen, say thank you, and take the feedback on board for next time.