

# HOW TO MASTER INTERVIEW SKILLS

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*As well as counselling patients, pharmacists may be involved in recruiting staff and in staff appraisals. The core skills of interviewing however, are the same and transferable to different situations. This article focuses on staff recruitment*

The interview is, perhaps, the most nerve-wracking aspect of the recruitment process, not just for the candidate but also for the interviewer. If an interview is conducted competently, it is a useful opportunity for a candidate to prove that he or she will be an asset to a prospective employer. It is, however, also an opportunity for employers to promote their organisation and therefore attract the best employees.

## THE INTERVIEWER

Given that people are the most important resource in any organisation, recruiting the wrong ones can be costly. In fact, replacing an employee can cost up to 50 per cent of that employee's annual salary. It is far better to invest your time in fine-tuning your interview skills than to spend time on damage limitation after discovering that you have employed the wrong person. The interview is your opportunity to get the right employee, and good preparation is essential.

**Structure of interviews** In recruitment the process starts from the moment you have a shortlist of applicants and a pile of application forms or curricula vitae in front of you. The interview is essentially a meeting to put the proverbial flesh on the bones of information provided by a candidate on their application form or CV. Your purpose is to satisfy yourself that the candidate meets the requirements for the job and fits in with the culture of your organisation.

You need to prepare questions in advance. Effective questions come from knowing what skills and attitudes a job requires. You should have already defined the job criteria before advertising a position and these criteria can be used as a basis for generating questions. Scan through application forms or CVs carefully and make a note of any key points that emerge. These could be achievements or successes in a particular area of work or you may require clarification on some aspect of the candidate's application. For example, is there an unexplained gap in their employment history?

Decide on or agree with colleagues the areas that you wish to discuss during an interview. Having done this, you need to draw up an agenda. If you are going to "panel interview" with colleagues, identify in advance who will raise specific questions and at what point during the interview. Remember that you want to present your pharmacy as organised and efficient. If you appear disorganised at interview, you will send out a negative message to prospective employees.

The whole process needs to be carefully managed so that you allow sufficient time for the interview itself and also time between interviews for immediate reflection and analysis. It is useful to make a summary while the interview is still fresh in your mind, especially if you have many interviewees.

Remember to give the interviewee an opportunity to ask you questions. This serves two purposes: it helps the applicant decide if

your organisation is right for them and it is a chance for you to evaluate his or her knowledge of your organisation and ability to ask questions effectively.

**Environment and atmosphere** Preparation for the interview also includes getting the environment right. Interviews are stressful enough without candidates being made to feel intimidated by the layout of the room. For example try using a round rather than rectangular table, or seat the candidate at an angle rather than directly in front of you. Layouts that allow candidates to feel equal rather than the "victim" are best. In order to manage time discreetly, make sure that your watch is either on the desk in an unobtrusive spot or, better still, use a clock which is positioned on a wall behind the candidate.

It is important for all your staff to be kept informed about when the interviews are taking place. It helps them to feel involved and makes them aware that their attitude and disposition, if they meet candidates, could influence a good candidate's decision to accept or reject a job offer.

**Welcoming** Use the first few minutes of the interview as a "meet and greet" opportunity. Make the candidates feel at ease by shaking hands and by making small talk. Next, outline the structure of the interview and perhaps restate the objectives, for example what you are looking for in a candidate and why. Make it clear that the interview is a two-way process and is equally about the candidate making a decision about whether they wish to work for you as it is about you making a decision about them.

**Competent questioning** The best questions to ask during interviews are open questions rather than closed or leading questions. However, because in everyday speech we get into the habit of poor questioning, it takes effort to get it right at interview. For fact checking, you may need to use closed questions but for probing and analysing use questions such as:

- 1 Tell me about . . . ?
- 1 What would you say if . . . ?
- 1 How would you react if . . . ?
- 1 What would you do if . . . ?
- 1 What are your opinions on . . . ?

Behavioural or competence-based interviewing is perhaps the most commonly used interview method. Interviewers use this method to try to determine how a candidate would behave or has behaved in given situation. Quite often candidates are asked to give an example of a situation where they demonstrated a particular skill. For example, they may be asked: "Can you give me an example of how you dealt with a difficult situation at work?"

The purpose of the interview is to find out whether the candidate really can do the job they claim that they can on their application form or CV, which is why asking questions that are directly

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related to the job being offered is useful. You also need to determine whether the candidate really wants the job. For example how enthusiastic and committed do they appear?

**Active listening** If an interview works well, the candidate should be doing about 70 per cent of the talking and you should be spending most of your time listening. And you should be actively rather than just passively listening to what candidates are saying. In 'The interviewer's pocketbook',<sup>1</sup> author John Townsend gives the following tips for people who want to become better listeners:

- 1 Maintain sensitive eye contact
- 1 Try to mirror the speaker's body posture and talking speed
- 1 Encourage the speaker to continue when you want more information
- 1 Paraphrase regularly
- 1 Clarify information
- 1 Give regular feedback on how you feel

Use positive body language as you listen, if only to help the candidate feel more at ease. For example, nodding occasionally, smiling or using open handed gestures should encourage a candidate to continue speaking. You may also need to give some attention to your paralinguistic skills, which is not so much about what you say but how you say it. Paralinguistic communication involves rate of speech, pitch variation, volume and vocal quality. It matters because the way you speak often affects the message that you send. Do you, for example, use any inflection in your voice as you speak, or do you speak rather loudly?

**Equal opportunities** One costly mistake that has occurred during interviews is when the wrong questions have been asked and have led to a lawsuit. As an interviewer you must avoid asking questions that contravene equal opportunities laws such as the Sex Discrimination Act. The Equal Opportunities Commission (EOC) advises that you avoid asking questions about any of the following:

- 1 Marital status
- 1 Number or age of children
- 1 Husband's employment
- 1 Living arrangements, eg, with parents, relatives, guardian, alone, boyfriend, etc
- 1 Parents' occupations
- 1 Boyfriend
- 1 Plans to get engaged or to marry

As an interviewer your task is to assess solely on the basis of a person's qualifications and suitability for the job. The same standards should apply when assessing women and men. The EOC says: "All candidates should be assessed on the basis of the same job-related criteria regardless of marital status and domestic responsibilities. Criteria adopted for the assessment of candidates should not discriminate indirectly against women, eg, length of experience in particular types of work which women may not have had because their working lives have been interrupted by periods of domestic responsibility."

You also need to make sure that you do not use subtle discrimination based on your own prejudices about what you perceive to be the relative characteristics, lifestyles or abilities of men and women. For example, do not assume that a woman may not be prepared to travel in her job because of domestic responsibilities.

**Evaluate your performance** Always evaluate your performance after an interview. This can be self-evaluation or, if you shared interviewing with a colleague, peer-evaluation might be more appropriate. Try to assess whether you achieved your objectives as an interviewer and try to use the information about your interviewing skills to improve your technique for the next interview you conduct.

## THE INTERVIEWEE

Because many pharmacists will change employers during their careers, good interviewee skills are also necessary. Having looked at what an interviewer should be doing during an interview, it is not

hard to assess what needs to be done if you are on the other side of the table. Your task is to self-promote and self-market to make your interviewer(s) believe that you are the best person for the job. In 'Kickstart your career',<sup>2</sup> the authors recommend the "4Ps method" for succeeding at interviews: preparation, presentation, personality and positive attitude.

**Preparation** Appearance and first impressions really do count. Dress smartly and present yourself at interview as someone who looks like they already work at the organisation or company in question.

Prepare for the interview by first of all convincing yourself that you really are the best person for the job. You will have been selected for interview because your prospective employer believes that you have at least satisfied, if not exceeded, the minimum requirements for the job. The challenge you face is that other people will also have met those minimum requirements. You therefore have to demonstrate that you offer added value.

Your preparation should also include finding out as much as you can about your potential employer and noting down anything relevant that you could raise during the interview. It could be something interesting about the company or organisation or you may need to raise a question of clarification.

Review your copies of your application form and CV and be prepared to talk about anything you have mentioned. For example, if you claim to be an excellent problem solver, go to the interview armed with examples of when you successfully solved a problem. In addition, pre-empt the type of questions that you will be asked at interview and rehearse the answers out loud. It really helps to practise with a friend. Try to understand what it is that the interviewer is really trying to find out. For example, the answer to the question "What are your goals for the next five years?" usually demonstrates how motivated you are. Although some questions will relate to your specific circumstances, most interview questions tend to be variations on a theme. Frequently asked questions include:

- 1 Tell me a little about your previous experience as a manager?
- 1 How do you think your work colleagues would describe you?
- 1 What is the most challenging issue you have faced at work?
- 1 What specific experience do you feel you can bring to the job?
- 1 Why do you think you are best person for the job?
- 1 What do you see as the key issues facing the industry in the future?
- 1 What would you describe as your main strengths?
- 1 How would you deal with a difficult member of staff?
- 1 What would you say motivates you at work?

**During the interview** In spite of your nerves, try to maintain a friendly, positive disposition throughout the interview. And remember that your task is to sell yourself. Enthusiasm pays dividends especially when you are up against another candidate who on paper is equally as qualified. As well as answering questions at interview, it is also important to ask questions, for example about training or opportunities for career progression.

**After the interview** Whether you are offered the job or not, always try to get feedback about your interview. It will boost your confidence if you are offered the job and, if you were not, you might learn something about yourself or your interview technique that will be helpful for your next interview.

## REFERENCES

1. Townsend J. The Interviewer's Pocketbook. 2nd edition. Hampshire: Management Pocketbooks; 2000.
2. Grout J, Perrin S. Kickstart your Career. Chichester: John Wiley; 2002.

## FURTHER READING

1. Edenborough R. Effective Interviewing. 2nd edition. London: Kogan Page; 2002.