



Prepare for interview success

Part Two: Answering interview questions

Working out the kind of questions you may be asked

You can't predict exactly what questions the interviewers are going to ask. However, you can have a careful look at the selection criteria and imagine what you would ask if you were in the interviewer's shoes. What questions or scenarios would test your ability to meet these criteria? Thinking in this way helps you to be mentally prepared for a whole range of different questions.

The types of questions you'll be asked depend on what kind of organisation is conducting the interview.

Government departments typically ask questions based on the selection criteria (you may even be given a list of interview questions to peruse before the interview)

Private sector organisations and recruitment agencies often ask behaviour-based questions

Identifying 'behaviour-based' questions and direct questions

Recent recruitment trends in both government and private-sector organisations are an increasing tendency to ask 'behaviour-based' questions, as opposed to 'direct questions'.

To understand the difference between direct questions and behaviour-based questions, compare these examples:

Direct question: 'Do you enjoy working as part of a team?'

Behaviour-based question: 'Tell us about the most successful team you've ever worked in and why it was so effective. What did you contribute to the team?'

Direct question: 'Do you have good organisational skills?'

Behaviour-based question: 'Give us an example of where you have used your

organisational skills to meet an organisation's objectives. What was the outcome and what would you change if you had the chance to do it again?

Direct question: 'Are you able to provide on-call support for clients on a roster basis?'

Behaviour-based scenario: 'It's Saturday night. You are not scheduled on the on-call roster this weekend and are getting ready to go out with your partner when the phone rings. You are told that the person on-call has had an accident and there is an urgent breakdown that needs a systems engineer immediately. What do you do?'

Technique: Use the 'SAO' method

Some applicants talk all around a question but never really answer it clearly. The interviewer may have difficulty understanding the context of a previous job and thus not really understand the significance of the response.

A structured answer using an S A O (situation/action/outcome) sequence ensures you cover the key points in a logical manner, from the interviewer's viewpoint:

Situation (*put the situation into context*)

In my role as operations manager.....'

Action (*state what you did*)

'I initiated new systems for managing orders and distribution. This involved ...'

Outcome (*state what you achieved, using facts and figures*)

The new systems have increased productivity by 23% and they're now being used in the company's overseas branches.'

Example

The question might be:

'Tell us about your project management experience and how you were able to contribute to the organisation?'

A possible response could be:

'For the past four years I've been involved in installation of telecommunication equipment and been involved in major projects such as ... (situation)

My responsibilities included ...(action)

The outcomes of these projects were ...' (outcome)

You could then expand on your response to mention previous roles, again using the same SAO structure:

Prior to this role, I was a senior technician at (situation)

where I was responsible for ...(action)

My achievements in this role included ... (outcome)

...and now I'm looking for a position where I can use that experience and knowledge in a leading edge organisation, which is why I'm here' (showing enthusiasm with a friendly smile!).

If the question has more than one part, answer as much as you can remember. If you think you may have missed part of it, simply ask if your answer has covered all that was required.

Develop your 'sales pitch'

Your interview is an opportunity to sell that invaluable product — 'YOU and your skills'. An ideal opening is that typical starting question, 'Tell us about yourself'. This is your BIG moment. Smile! Take a breath, think 'SAO' (situation/actions/outcome) and answer the question fully, selling your skills as much as you can.

Here's an example of what one winning applicant said in his 'pitch':

'I've been with XYZ for the past three years as a microelectronics engineer in their medical imaging section. In that time, I've been selected for major projects in hospitals in all states of Australia. Our team was responsible for upgrading the older radiographic equipment to a digital system. We completed all projects on time and then we trained operators in how to use the new systems. Before this, I worked for ABC company as an IT

specialist in their medical division.

Practise and then practise some more

Get a friend to ask you questions based on the selection criteria so that you have practice in formulating your answers using the SAO technique.

You can practise answering a range of behaviour-based questions out loud using virtual interviews on the internet.

Private sector interview questions

Interviews for private sector positions may have questions that are broader and a little trickier than those for public sector positions. Here are a few more of the most frequently asked questions.

What do you know about our company/products/services?

Why do you want to work for our organisation?

Why do you think you're suited to this position?

Why did you leave your last position?

What do you want to be doing in 12 months? 5 years?

What do you consider to be your main strengths?

What does teamwork mean to you? Tell us about some teams you've worked in.

Have you worked unsupervised? What were your responsibilities?

Every workplace has its problems. How do you handle conflict at work?

Do you consider yourself to be a leader? Why?

Have you ever had to manage other staff? Tell us about it.

What did you like most about your former job? Why?

What did you like least about your former job? Why?