

# Interview Preparation and Tips

*An overall guide to help you prepare  
for any interview.*

*Firstly, remember that recruiters and people interviewing you are not trying to catch you out! They are trying to find out as much about you as possible in a short time and structure questions to give you the very best opportunities to show your potential. They want to ensure you are right for the programme and for the job and that they are right for you too.*

*Sage Pathways is designed to give you as many opportunities to prepare and ask questions before the interview and assessment stages so make the most of them.*

## Pre-Interview

### Prepare – Research, Research, Research!

Do your homework, research information on the company, the site and the individual(s) you are being interviewed by, find out as much as you can around these subjects. You may not find everything, but by the time you are finished you will be knowledgeable about the business (this can take at least 2 to 3 hours, but if you want the opportunity, it's worth it), make notes:

- a. The Company
  - Where they are based/locations
  - Size of organisation/number of employees
  - What type of work do they do/what sort of contracts do they manage/what sort of services do they provide/what do they sell
  - How many divisions do they have
  - How long have they been established
  - Who owns the company
  - What's the latest news
- b. The project/division/site/local office
  - Size of project/division
  - Location
  - Work scope of the project/work looked after by the division

- Who is managing it and how many people/what size it in terms of budget or turnover
- Has anyone you've worked with in the past worked on the site or for the company
- c. The individual (who is interviewing you)/team (you will be working with)
  - Do they have a LinkedIn profile – read it, look at their interests/background and how they present themselves
  - Do you know anyone who knows them or knows the site
  - Google their name and company and see if there's anything on the internet about the individual, for example "James jolly" AND Company name. See if there's anything non-work – charity runs, awards, articles, that sort of thing
  - Look at the team, again search and have an idea of who does what in the team and what background that might come from

## The Job Description/Person Specification

You will not know the exact format of the questions that you will be asked, but by studying the job advert or Job Description/Person Specification you will be able to get an idea of the questions you are likely to encounter. For example, if the job advert says you need 'experience of developing a new process or procedure' you can be almost sure that a question will be based around that.

A thorough knowledge of the role is required, what you are expected to do and what experience and skills you can bring to the party –

- Read through and ensure that you can answer questions about each element of the job description and that you can relate experience you have to it
- Understand the competencies required in the role and use examples in your past to show what you are capable of, linked to the role in hand only, don't stray from that. Make sure your answers respond to the competencies of this role (use the STAR approach noted below)
- If you don't have the right experience, think about how you would gain this experience or what is similar to it that you could mention instead. Do your research, ask people who have done the role or who may be knowledgeable or relate your experience as near as possible to the role and you can even ask, does that answer the question? Making sure you are along the right lines
- As you have had a career break, there may be projects or activities you have been involved with which can add to your experience. Make sure you use these if they are relevant. Think about voluntary work, school organizing responsibilities, help with small businesses etc – anything you can use to demonstrate experience against the responsibilities of the role
- Write down your answers at this preparation stage. You will remember them better if you've read them a couple of times, but don't be tempted to read out answers in the interview.

## The Initial Telephone Interview

- The telephone interview is really a very informal part of the process to allow the interviewer the chance to understand more about you prior to the actual face to face interview
- Have your research to hand, consider what you already know about the Sage Pathways programme and the role
- Consider any previous experience and some of your greatest achievements (this can be from a previous role or you may have been involved in something that is not work related)
- If you have a CV, you may want to refer to this to open the conversation – do not worry about the length of time you may have been out of work, the programme is here to support you to get back into work
- Be honest, be upbeat and smile – even though the interviewer cannot see you, they will hear your positivity in your voice
- Listen, consider any questions you may have and make notes where possible in the conversation. You could use these in your face to face interview
- Most importantly, relax and enjoy the conversation.

## The Face to Face Interview

### The STAR Approach

Structure your answers, wherever possible, particularly those that are around competencies (this is called a Competency Based interview). To do this you should follow the “STAR” model as far as you can:

**Situation** - Describe the situation or the problem you had to deal with

**Task** - Describe the task that the situation required

**Action** - Describe the actions you took and the obstacles that you had to overcome

**Result** - Describe the end results emphasising the positive outcome, ‘which meant that ...’

#### **Situation / Task**

Describe the situation that you were confronted with or the task that needed to be accomplished. With the STAR approach you need to set the context. Make it concise and informative, concentrating solely on what is useful to the story. For example, if the question is asking you to describe a situation where you had to deal with a difficult person, explain how you came to meet that person and why they were being difficult. If the question is asking for an example of teamwork, explain the task that you had to undertake as a team.

#### **Action**

This is the most important section of the STAR approach as it is where you will need to demonstrate and highlight the skills and personal attributes that the question is testing. Now that you have set the context of your story, you need to explain what you did. In doing so, you will need to remember the following:

- Be personal, i.e. talk about you, not we. Always start with I did, where you can
- Go into some detail. Do not assume that interviewers will guess what you mean
- Steer clear of technical information, unless it is crucial to your story
- Explain what you did, how you did it, and why you did it

This is usually a step by step process, think of the steps you used to solve the situation. Also remember that competency-based interviews are often graded and that you need to be able to show the steps you took to be awarded points. If you have 10 questions each worth 5 points you can judge now that you will need to be concise at this stage, to the point and structured to score points.

### **Result**

Explain what happened eventually – how it all ended. Also, use the opportunity to describe what you accomplished and what you learnt in that situation. This helps you make the answer personal and enables you to highlight further skills.

This is probably the most crucial part of your answer. Interviewers want to know that you are using a variety of generic skills in order to achieve your objectives. Therefore, you must be able to demonstrate in your answer that you were taking specific actions because you are trying to achieve a specific objective. What did it mean to the company, the department or the individual, for example – where did you add value?

### **Example...**

Let's take the example of Customer Focus.

Definition: Individuals who display this competency understand and believe in the importance of customer focus. They listen to and understand the needs of customers and meet and exceed their needs to ensure satisfaction.

The interviewer might ask you,

*“Tell me about a time when you had to deal with a very angry customer. What was the situation? Why had it happened? What did you do? How was the situation resolved?”*

They are looking for a specific example of a situation you have actually dealt with in the past. You should not generalise. Don't say “Oh, it happens all the time.” Tell the interviewer about one occasion when you dealt with a customer complaint and brought it to a satisfactory conclusion using the STAR as closely as you can.

## **Common Interview Questions**

Interview questions may vary but in essence they are all trying to establish the following:

- Your skills and experience to do the job
- Your enthusiasm and interest for the job

If you can answer these questions, using real-life examples to illustrate your points, then you should be able to answer most of the questions that arise including the following frequently asked questions.

### **Tell me about yourself?**

This question or something similar usually starts every interview. Your answer should be well-rehearsed, confidently delivered and last between 3-5 minutes. Be succinct and relevant. The interviewers will know that you are returning to work, so you don't have to go into detail about why you have taken a break or how hard you are finding getting

back to work. You need to try and think about what you were doing and how you were performing before your break – this is often hard to do as we understand that people can lose their confidence quite quickly. Think about how great you were at your job before your break!

Your answer should also:

- Focus on the areas of most relevance to the job in question
- Include some impressive achievements e.g. improvements made
- Convey your enthusiasm for the job
- Avoid personal or irrelevant information e.g. your children, un-related jobs

### **What are your key skills/strengths?**

Focus on what you know they are looking for, even if it has been a smaller part of what you have been doing to date. The job advert or job description will give you the information you need about their requirements.

### **What are your weaknesses/areas for development?**

Choose a weakness that:

- Doesn't matter for the job e.g. languages for a UK firm
- Is a positive e.g. "I like to make things happen and get frustrated if too long is spent sitting around discussing it without action"
- Used to be a weakness but which you have improved upon e.g. presentations

### **Why did you leave your last job?**

Your answer should be positive and upbeat even if the circumstances were difficult. If you were made redundant, depersonalise it by talking about company restructuring rather than your individual circumstance. Never criticise a previous employer no matter how tempting. Again, the interviewer will know that you have taken a career break, so you don't have to explain in full detail.

### **Why do you want this job?**

Your answer should reinforce why you are such a good fit for the job and then convey your enthusiasm for the role e.g.

- Good match between your skills and their requirements
- Interested in the product/market/sector
- Company's excellent reputation, exciting challenge etc.
- Make sure you refer to all aspects of the Sage Pathways programme and what appeals to you about it
- Do not say (even if it's true) that you just need a job, or you want it because it's local

### **Tell me about a difficult scenario at work and how you dealt with it**

The interviewers are testing how you cope under pressure as well as your problem-solving and communication skills. Good examples are where you:

- Helped resolve or improve a difficult situation
- Were resilient in adverse conditions
- Showed emotional intelligence and cool-headedness
- Avoid any examples which still feel sensitive, because in a high-pressure interview situation, old emotions can easily resurface and throw you off balance.

**Tell me about an achievement of which you are proud?**

Choose work-related examples that show a tangible benefit to the business/site or project. Personal achievements should only be included if they are very impressive or prestigious.

**What are your career goals?**

They are checking if you are likely to stay and if so, for how long. Reassure the employer that the role you are applying for fits your career plan and your longer-term commitment to the company.

**What do you know about our organisation?**

As above – prep, prep, prep! Company structure, finances, products and services, key staff

Tip: Google 'Common Interview Questions' and 'Difficult Interview Questions' and do some general reading on the types of responses out there, get good ideas and add them to your prep notes.

## Questions To Ask At Interview

Again, there are lots of questions you can ask at interview and it's always worth preparing some before you turn up, it shows you've thought about the role and are interested. Some suggestions might be:

***What types of training opportunities do you offer?***

We show clearly what training is part of the Sage Pathways Programme but perhaps think about further training in the organization. This is a classic question – it highlights that you're keen to advance your skills and add further value to the organisation.

***Is there scope for promotion in the future?***

This is another classic question. In a similar vein, it emphasises a determination to make progress and over the long term. For the Sage Pathways programme you could ask about potential career paths.

***Can you tell me how the role relates to the overall structure of the organisation?***

With this question you're drawing attention to a preference for teamwork. It looks as though you want to know where you would fit in and how your contribution would affect the rest of the company.

***How would you describe the work culture here?***

This signals that you want to operate at your optimum and understand that for this you require a positive environment. This indicates you're a good self-manager who is aware of how to get the best out of yourself.

***In what way is performance measured and reviewed?***

This question flags up that you appreciate the importance of delivering real results. You will be seen as someone who understands the value of commitment, reliability and returns.

***What are the most important issues that you think the project/the site/the business faces?***

Show that you are interested in the job and the issues that might arise. It will be

apparent you have done some research, done some thinking, and are now eager to hear their analysis. You may also present solutions if the situation arises.

***Do you have any doubts about whether I am suited to this position?***

This is a rather more brazen way of emphasising some of your strengths. It suggests you are open to constructive criticism and willing to learn from the experience of others. It also gives you a real chance to address any weaknesses the interviewee may think you have. Finally, it allows you to finish on a high, re-stating why you think you are the right person. Not a question for everyone, but a great closing question if you are comfortable with it.

## Overall Tips

Check directions and parking before you go, make sure you set off in plenty of time to arrive without feeling flustered. You'd be surprised how many people don't have enough change or go to the wrong location.

First impressions are vitally important, especially your appearance - even if the employer has a relaxed dress code. Make sure you're smartly dressed - it'll show how much importance you place on the company and the position on offer.

Arrive 15 minutes early so you can relax, watch or read any safety information and read any notes you may have. Check through corporate literature on display, and chat to the receptionist (create a good impression from the start) - both can be vital sources of up to date company information.

Make sure you know the name or names of the interviewer(s) and their position in the company. On meeting your interviewer(s), greet them by name, make good eye contact and deliver a firm handshake (not vicelike!) - it all helps to make you feel confident and gives them a good impression.

Smile!! People buy people and if they like you they will want to employ you. After all they've invited you for interview so you must have a relevant application, this is just to make sure you fit what they are looking for and that the role is right for you.

Listen carefully - and if you don't understand a question, ask the interviewer to repeat or clarify it. If you don't know an answer, say so - and don't be afraid to make it a point of discussion, giving you the chance to turn matters to your advantage.

Don't be afraid during the interview to confirm your answers – does that sound right to you or did that give you a full answer to the question? Would that work in this organization or in this case? If they nod you are on the right track, if not you can address it with them.

Always be positive, and wherever possible, give detailed responses to questions asked, beyond a simple "yes" or "no". NEVER be negative about a previous employer!

Before the interview ends, make sure that you have mentioned all of your relevant experience - your interviewer may not have covered everything in their questioning. If appropriate, summarise your understanding of what's needed - and get their agreement or clarification where necessary.

If you are still keen on the position at the end of the interview, reinforce this before you leave. Ask the interviewer about what happens next, when a decision will be made - and ALWAYS thank them for seeing you.

Don't worry if you are a little nervous, interviewers are used to this and see it as a good sign and that you care about the role/company. The more prep you do the less nervous you will be.

Always ask for feedback whatever the outcome, update your prep notes with anything you noticed and felt was a difficult question and you can prep and practice more next time and anything that you are told about your performance.

Interviewing is a life skill and not knowledge you are born with. We all need to prep and practice to get better at it.