

Job interview

Applying for a job is a skill. You can learn it by practice and by making mistakes.

Congratulations, you are invited to a job interview! Based on your CV and application letter, you are invited to a first interview. What comes into play and how do these interviews work?

The goal of a job interview

The goal of a job interview is to find out whether there is a match between the applicant and the organisation.

- **Rationally:** the interviewer wants to confirm that you are qualified, so they will gauge your suitability based on your qualities, experience, and motivation.
- **Emotionally:** they will check if there is a connection; do you fit in the team?

At the same time, a job interview is meant for you as an applicant to find out whether the job matches your wishes and expectations.

Preparing for a job interview

Get to know the company

- **Read up on the organisation.** Check their website, strategy, annual plan, and latest communications (social media, the news).
- **Research who you will be talking to.** Look them up on the website or via LinkedIn.
- **Adjust the clothes you wear to the organisation, but do not overdo it.** It has to fit you as well; you must feel comfortable in it. Through the website of an organisation, you can often find out how employees present themselves. When in doubt, err on the side of formal rather than casual.
- **Prepare your trip to the company and make sure to be there on time.** Go for a walk in the neighbourhood and report at the front desk 5 to 10 minutes before the interview.

Preparing questions

- **Highlight qualities and tasks in the job posting.** Matter that recurs more than once are important to the organisation. A recruiter or employer likes to hear examples so that they can imagine what your behaviour is like. Explain your qualities and interests using an example. Use the checklists (see the appendix).
- **Prepare answers to the frequently asked questions** during a job interview (see appendix).
- **Think about the questions you could ask** about the position and the company (see examples in appendix). This will make you appear interested and will show that you have thought about the job.
- If you are **nervous**, it may help to practise the interview with someone prior to the interview and watch Amy Cuddy's TED Talk. Remember that everyone gets a little anxious before an interview. Accept the fact that you are nervous.

Course of the job interview

The interview consists of the following parts:

- The application committee introduces itself;
- An introduction is given about the organisation, the team, and the position;
- The applicant introduces themselves;
- The interview committee asks the applicant questions;

- The applicant asks questions to the application committee;
- The application committee informs about the further procedure;
- The interview ends.

Depending on the organisation, the style may be looser (a conversation in which questions are asked back and forth) or more formal (more of an interview).

Arrival

- **Be polite to everyone from the moment you enter the building.**
- **Pay attention to your non-verbal behaviour** and maintain an open posture: shoulders back, back straight, balance on two legs, arms hanging lightly along your body. Look at the person you are talking to and turn your body towards them. Put a smile on your face and a twinkle in your eye.
- **Make sure your phone is switched off.**
- **Give a firm handshake** and pronounce your name clearly. This is an important first impression!
- **Create a positive atmosphere:** pay a compliment, say something positive about the weather or ask a simple question to start a conversation, e.g., what someone's job is or how long they have worked here. This determines your first impression and says something about your social skills.

The interview

- An interview is a **two-way street** - so be curious and ask questions.
- **Maintain an open posture:** your body turned towards the interviewers, sit and stand up straight, hands loosely on your lap or the table and look at the interviewers. When you answer, alternate your gaze so that everyone feels involved in the conversation. Do not fuss with your hair, make sure your voice is not monotonous and smile.
- **If you do not understand a question, let the interviewer know.**
- **Think for a few seconds about a tricky question.** Say "That's a difficult question, I'll have to think about it". That is not a problem at all; it makes you come across as powerful. It is better to give a conclusive answer than a quick but poorly thought-out one.
- **If necessary, make notes for the next interview.**
- **Switch between brief, concise answers** (leaving room for questions, so that it remains a conversation) **and examples.** By giving examples of your experiences, you convince the committee of your suitability. Tell briefly about the context, what you did and what the result was. This may seem like a long and artificial answer, but it will come across more naturally if you practise it more often. Do not make a bad impression with complicated language.
- **When answering the questions, keep in mind which qualities you want to highlight.** You do not have to wait for someone to ask you about your strengths to name them.

Example:

You want to emphasise your independence, but are asked: 'Why did you choose study x? Answer: 'I deliberately went looking for a study with plenty of room for independent work. I also find it interesting to study the following subjects: ...'

- **Ask the questions that are important to you but be careful not to get ahead of yourself.** Often the practicalities of working conditions, such as salary and working hours, will be covered in a later interview. Pay close attention to the interviewer's reaction (non-verbal). If you notice that they respond enthusiastically to your questions, feel free to ask more questions. If you notice that someone is not up for it, for example, because the interview is running late and they have another appointment, keep it as brief as possible.

After the job interview

- **If a response is slow, feel free to contact them again after about two weeks.** Make sure you do not sound desperate, pushy, or impatient, but ask about the situation and show that you are still interested in the position.
- **Are you through to the second round?** Well done! You are one step closer to the job. Then ask what the procedure is now and what is expected of you. Do not share this news on your social media until you have signed the contract and informed your current job about your departure.
- **Not through to the second round?** That is unfortunate, but do not be too discouraged by it. Turn this rejection into an opportunity by finding out more about how others see and judge you. Call or email and indicate that you would like to learn from this experience. Ask about the reasons for rejection and try to follow up with questions. With this information, you will have a better chance in your next interview.
- **What to do if you have multiple job interviews? Do you indicate to an organization that they are a second choice or the preferred option?** It may be that the timing of the two applications is inconvenient. For example, if your second choice gives you an offer sooner than your first choice. You can ask for time to think it over, and possibly say that you are waiting for a response from another company. Indicate that you are happy with the offer you have received, but that you would like some time to think about it. You must decide which of the jobs suit your personality and interests best.

Optionally, you could say that you would like to compare the two offers. In some cases, this can lead to a better negotiating position. However, it may also be the case that the employer insists on hearing your answer as soon as possible. Then you will have to make your choice. You can try to speed up the application process of your first choice by explaining your situation to this employer and see if they can be flexible.

- **How to politely decline an offer?** List several arguments why this job is less suitable for you. When turning down a job, it is important to be honest and professional. You do not have to describe in detail why you are turning down the job, a short answer will suffice. Thank the company for the offer and end the conversation nicely. If you are still interested in working for this organisation in the future, you can say that. In any case, it is smart to maintain a good relationship.

Online interviews

It can happen that you have an online interview. Bear in mind that, especially in the preparation, things sometimes go slightly differently. Here are a few handy tips:

1. **Make sure your surroundings are quiet.** Inform your housemates or hang a note on the door so that there is no noise or distraction. Also, keep your pets out of the room.
2. **Provide a quiet background.** A white wall is convenient, but not always available. Clear away as much junk as possible. In most programmes, you can 'blur' the background by checking this option beforehand.
3. **Position your device so that the camera is at eye level.** A camera that is too low will never give a good picture. If the camera is too high, the other person is looking down on you. Not very handy either.
4. **Make sure there is no light source behind you.** A light that illuminates your face from the front is good. Check beforehand what gives the best effect.
5. **Check the platform.** If the platform is new, practise with it first. You can also ask your employer if it is possible to test the technique the day before.

6. **Strong Wi-Fi.** Find out where you have a good signal. If necessary, disconnect other devices from the Wi-Fi so that your signal is optimal. In any case, turn other devices off or silence them (not on vibrate) so you are not disturbed by notifications.
7. **Have a pen and paper ready.** Nothing is as annoying as someone who is typing during a video call.
8. **Look into the lens while talking, not at your own image on the screen.** If you keep enough distance from the camera, it will seem as if you are looking at the person you are talking to. But in the meantime, you can also follow their facial expression on the screen.
9. **Repeat the question.** Confusion is more likely to arise online. To indicate (or test) that the question has been properly understood, repeat it before answering.

Practising a job interview

Are you struggling with formulating your answers? Or do you want to practice with the questions? Make an appointment with the Career Officer!

Appendix: frequently asked questions

Questions with response examples

1. What do you like about our organisation? Why do you want to work here?

Choose something that matches one of your positive qualities. This gives you a good opportunity to draw attention to it.

2. What are the current market trends?

Make sure that you have thoroughly researched the organisation and that you are up to date on current projects. Check the latest news updates, know the mission/vision of the organisation, and focus on matters that highlight your strengths.

3. Why should we choose you?

Answer briefly and to the point. It is better to have one convincing argument than a series of lesser ones.

4. Where do you see yourself in 5 or 10 years? What is your vision for the future?

Do not get carried away; an applicant who expresses too much ambition may come across as someone unlikely to stick around. But answering 'no idea' is certainly not helpful. Indicate a direction. For example: "I would like to develop myself further in the direction of managing and guiding others."

5. Why do you want to leave your current job?

Although this may be tempting, you should refrain from describing your current situation negatively. Put a positive spin on your situation. For example: "I am looking for more responsibility" rather than: "I get absolutely no room for my initiatives now."

6. Why have you chosen your study programme?

This is a good opportunity to talk about your motivation for important matters and how you make decisions.

7. What subject did you like best and why? And what was your least favourite subject?

Emphasise your driving forces, motivation, and ambition.

8. What type of people do you enjoy working with and what type of people do you struggle with?

Your answer says something about the kind of person you are. Being able to indicate what you struggle with is a strength. It shows that you have self-awareness.

9. When quitting your studies: why did you choose not to complete your study programme?

Give an honest response, there is nothing wrong with having made a 'wrong choice' or having chosen a path that was not right for you. Emphasise what made you realise it was not a good fit and what you subsequently did to find a different path. Indicate what you have learned from this.

10. What are your best qualities?

Do not be too modest, but do not exaggerate either. Are you struggling with this? Try the following: people around me say I am

11. What are your weaknesses/ areas that need improvement?

Name things that are easily justifiable, the downsides of your positive qualities or things that are not relevant to the position. But stay honest. A clear answer to this question shows that you have self-awareness.

12. What are you proud of? What is your best achievement?

Name something that demonstrates your strengths. Examples from your internship, student job, study project or something related to a hobby or sport.

13. What do you do in your free time?

14. Do you have more job interviews planned these weeks?

An organisation may be curious whether you have any other applications pending and therefore asks if you have other interviews. If that is the case, you can indicate that you have multiple conversations. After all, a job interview is a time to discover whether a job and organisation suit you. You do not have to make any statements about which job you prefer, how far you are in the application process or for which organisations you have applications. Indicate that you would like to weigh up the options to make a well-considered choice for a job that suits you well.

Questions about yourself and your qualities

- What can you tell us about yourself? Or in the form of a statement: 'tell us about yourself'.
- What are your strengths or positive qualities? How would you like to use these in this position?
- What are your weaknesses or negative qualities? How do you deal with those?
- If we would call your best friend, what would he/she tell us about you?
- What hobbies or interests do you have? What do you like to do in your spare time?
- [sketch of a tough situation within the position] – could you give us an example of a comparable situation you experienced, and tell us how you handled this?
- How do you handle many different tasks at the same time?
- Can you guide us through your resume/CV?
- What can you offer us that other applicants cannot?
- Why should we choose you?

Questions about your motivation

- Why did you apply for this position?
- Why would you want to work here?

- What is, according to you, the most interesting part of this job?
- What do you like best about this position?
- What would you like to achieve within this position?
- Where do you want to be in a few years?
- Do you still have more job applications going?

Questions about expectations of the position

- What do you think the position will look like? What are your expectations of this job?
- What would you consider to be the most important skills for this function?
- What is most important to you in this job?
- Are you willing to: work overtime, take extra educational courses, etc?
- We think you are overqualified for this job; how will you deal with this?
- What do you already know or expect from our organisation? Our department? Our team?

Questions about your education

- Why did you choose this study program?
- What does your study program entail?
- Why did you choose this university?
- What was/is your favourite course?
- Why did you (not) follow extracurricular courses?
- What do you still want to learn? How do you want to develop yourself?
- Why did it take you this long to graduate?
- Why did you not finish your education?

Questions about your work experience

- What did you do in your previous job? What do you do in your current job?
- What is the most difficult part of your current job?
- What is the reason you are looking for another job?
- Why did you make certain choices in your career?
- What is your greatest success?
- How did you deal with resistance/stress/problems? (And give an example)
- What have you learned so far?
- Why did you get fired / why did you quit?
- Why have you had so many different jobs?
- You do not have the required work experience; how will you compensate for this?

Questions about your ambition

- Where do you see yourself in five years?
- What is your goal for the long term?
- What is your vision for the future?
- What is your ambition?
- How successful have you been so far?
- Have you ever failed in your education or employment? What happened then? How did you handle this?
- Are you satisfied with your career so far?

Questions about you as a colleague

- What role do you assume in a team?
- Are you more of a generalist or a specialist?

- How do you deal with criticism?
- What kind of colleagues do you enjoy working with?
- What kind of colleagues would you rather not work with?

Questions at the end of the interview

- When can you start?
- What is your period of notice?
- Are you willing to move?
- Do you have a driver's licence?
- Do you have a car?
- What impression did you get from our company/department/team/of the position?
- What did you think of the interview?

Sometimes an interviewer will ask you what you thought of the interview. You are not intended to return at length to matters of the conversation, just reflect in a few words/phrases.

Questions that you do not have to answer

You are not required to answer questions related to your health or medical past. However, you are obligated to indicate matters that could hinder your work (for instance, if you apply for a job as a florist, but you cannot bend down due to a back injury. An employer is then allowed to stop salary payment and can fire you).

- Are you pregnant?
- Do you want to have children?
- Are you religious?
- Are you a member of a political party?
- How is your (mental) health?
- What is your sexual orientation?
- What is your race/ethnicity?

Sometimes the application committee is not aware of the fact that questions like the ones above should not be asked. If such questions are asked anyways, you can (kindly) respond:

- By bouncing the question back: 'this question frankly surprises me a little. Is there a specific reason for you to ask this?' / 'Does the job involve a certain amount of pressure on private life?' / 'How is this relevant for the position?'
- You could also answer the question with a joke, with which you do not give a substantive answer.
- Or you could say: 'I consider this a very personal question which I would rather not go into' / 'I always like to keep work and private life separated'.
- Sometimes your medical history can be an advantage, for instance when sometimes you can understand people better because you are an expert by experience. You should, however, be very certain that your health will not become a problem again. Clearly show how you learned to deal with your health, live with it, how it made you stronger or how it made you more aware of where your boundaries are.

Questions you can ask

- What caused this vacancy?
- What expectations do you have regarding my job/performance?
- What is the most important regarding this job?
- Suppose that your chosen candidate will soon be working here. How would you notice one day that things are going in the right direction? (Ask about behaviour and effect)

- What would a week in this position be like?
- What would my first tasks for this job be?
- What is my position within the organisation?
- What does the department that I would come to work in look like?
- Could you tell me a little bit more about the culture within the company?
- What makes it fun to work here?
- What does the team composition look like?
- What educational possibilities does the organisation offer? What opportunities are there to further develop myself?
- What does the selection procedure look like?

From doubt to advantage

During an interview, you may encounter doubts from the application committee, such as 'you are too young'. You may also have doubts yourself during the interview. Below you will find answers with which you can turn such doubts into plusses.

You are too young

- New, fresh ideas
- Quick with modern technology
- Motivated and enthusiastic
- Flexible in terms of working hours
- Flexible in content and way of working.
- Knowledge is up-to-date, aware of the newest scientific insights.
- People who have been working for years, have also started too young and inexperienced.
- Cheaper

You do not have enough experience

- I developed my skills within other situations, such as... (voluntary work, side jobs, sub-positions, and internships)
- I am willing to further develop myself (extra education/courses)
- I know I can do this because... (example)
- I am a fast learner and I easily adapt
- I am extra motivated
- I am committed/involved in this position/organisation
- I have had a good education with grades above average
- I meet the requirements for his position

You are too educated

- I am very motivated for this job

No clear line in career path (varying background)

- I like new challenges
- I am broadly interested
- I am entrepreneurial, curious, and open to new things
- I have carefully thought this job through
- Try to show the similarities between different experiences

Wrong experience/background

- The basic knowledge / educational level is present
- I am broadly interested
- I have developed these skills through different experiences, namely...

You do not understand the question

If you do not know what to say right away, just ask:

- What exactly do you mean (by this question)?
 - I do not understand it; can you be more specific?
 - Is it relevant to the job?
 - Or you could say: 'Gee, that is a good question, I will have to think about that...'
- 