

Interview Preparation Guide:

Private Sector Roles

Why read this guide?

This guide sets out the typical question types and answer formats, behaviour frameworks and additional research you will need to carry out when preparing for your interview.

This background information represents the foundations which underpin good performance.

To help you prepare answers a STCAR template is also attached for behaviour and experience-based questions.

Question types and answer formats:

- i. Opening Questions – Your personal sales pitch
- ii. Behaviour or Competency Questions (including Scenarios)
- iii. Experience Based Questions
- iv. Strength / Direct Questions
- v. Technical Questions

Throughout the course of an interview, or more typically during a series of interviews, a range of different question types will be used to assess your skills, knowledge and experience. Hence it is important to extract from the job description / person specification exactly what skills, knowledge and experience they are looking for and I would advise making a list.

i. Opening Questions: Your Personal Sales Pitch

Most interviews start with an opportunity for you to tell the panel about yourself, the question can be phrased in several different ways, for example:

‘Tell us about yourself?’, ‘Take us through your CV / application?’, ‘Tell us why this role is the next natural step in your career?’.

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All of these questions are essentially asking for the same information – take us through the Skills, Knowledge and Experience you have which is relevant to the role.

Timing: Your answer should be 3 – 4 minutes.

Focus: Only focus on the things you have done (your roles and achievements) which are relevant to the job.

Structure: Generally, I believe it's best to start with a summary of your background, especially if your qualifications are important to the role.

Next, work through your career stating why you moved roles and what skills, knowledge and experience (relative to the advertised role) you gained along your career journey.

Summary: Your answer should culminate in why therefore this is the next natural step for you and why this is the company you wish to work for.

Even if the interviewer /panel does not ask this opening question, I believe everyone attending an interview, at all levels and grades should have worked through this answer so that they are clear on why this is right next step and what they will bring.

ii. Behaviour or Competency Questions (including Scenarios)

Competency based questions are the most common type of interview questions. They are used to understand 'how' you behave in challenging situations.

Some of the common behaviours or competencies (as they are also called), are based around:

Leadership - Setting strategy and direction / implementing change / improving performance / leading through ambiguity

Communication and influence

Delivering under pressure: Being organised and able to work under pressure

Team working

Service Delivery

Change Leadership

Questions generally start with 'Can you tell us about a time when.....?' or 'Please give an example of a time when.....?'. Then it's over to you to tell your story, demonstrating how you delivered on your task.

You should use the STAR approach which is a recognised way to structure answers. I have added a 'C' in STAR hence ST**C**AR, where C describes

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the challenges faced. If you think about this structure carefully what you are telling the panel is:

Situation – Where you were (your role and organisation), what was happening to create a challenging situation with consequences if not resolved.

Task – Be succinct – this is what you were tasked with doing to resolve the situation.

Challenges – It is important to set out the challenges facing you because of the task. If you think about, when we are faced with a difficult task, we generally set out what challenges we need to overcome before starting on any actions.

Actions – Now the important part! This is ‘How’ you overcame the challenges to deliver on the task thus resolve the situation. You must stay close to using ‘I’ and not ‘We’ when recounting your story, always place yourself at the centre of your story – we need to hear what you did, not what others did.

Result and Reflection – We need to know what happened! and what you learned from the experience and why it’s a good example of the behaviour.

Timing of answers is important. The more senior you are then generally the more complex your example, but in any event answer timing should generally follow this structure:

Situation: 30 seconds

Task: 20 seconds

Challenges: 45 seconds

Actions: 2.5 minutes

Result / Reflection: 30 seconds

Total answer time: 4 minutes 30 seconds to 4 minutes 45 seconds

iii. Experience Based Questions

Even though you will be demonstrating your depth of knowledge and experience while providing answers to competency-based questions, interview panels will also be looking for specific experience and to test this they may ask scenario-based questions or direct questions on elements taken from the job description.

To prepare for these questions extract from the job description all the points which list ‘experience’ for example, ‘Experience of managing and motivating agencies / suppliers to deliver exceptional results’

.....then identify example(s) from your career which demonstrate the experience you have gained.

iv. **Strength / Direct Questions**

These questions are designed to understand how you think, feel and react to challenging direct questions such as 'What motivates you?' 'What are your strengths?' 'Tell us about a weakness you are working on?' 'How do you feel when plans change?'

A strength is something you enjoy doing, do regularly and perform well, hence you should come across as being motivated by the question and spontaneous when giving your answer. Write down your strengths thinking about the role you are applying or interviewing for.

Answers are short and always back up any claim you make with a brief example.

By way of an example, let's assume you are going for a role in planning, we would expect you to be detail orientated and able to adapt quickly to changes in requirements, for example, a question could therefore be: 'How do you feel when plans change?'

v. **Technical Questions**

Many roles will be asking for very specific knowledge, for example Legal, Engineering, Industry or Sector specific and so on. A job description will set out what's required, often as a minimum, hence make sure you can satisfy all of the requirements with the necessary qualifications and knowledge.

Your experience and technical knowledge can also be assessed by an exercise or through a presentation.

And finally,

Research:

To strengthen your answers, you should take time to research the company or organisation in detail. Aligning your answers with the company strategy / values / objectives and culture helps to evidence that you are a strong fit and are not simply seeking out a new role but genuinely want to work within the organisation.

- Research the company – strategy, culture, values
- Research their business / Sector
- Know the people, especially those on the panel