

Interview Preparation Guide:

Civil Service Roles

Why read this guide?

Before we get started on our coaching sessions, I felt it would be helpful to provide a little background reading. This will enable us to move more swiftly towards focusing on your examples, your answers, your communication and the areas we need to work on together to ensure you are able to prepare, practice and be confident.

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. I ask that you take time to read through and list any questions you have so that they can be addressed. We will be covering the frameworks which have specific relevance to the role in more detail so don't try to over analyse these at this stage – what is provided here is a good reference point.

To help you prepare answers a STCAR template is also attached.

Question types and answer formats:

- i. Opening Questions – Your personal sales pitch – not generally asked at interview, but an important answer to have ready should it be needed
- ii. Behaviour or Competency Questions (including Scenarios)
- iii. Experience Based Questions
- iv. Strength / Direct Questions
- v. Technical Questions

Throughout the course of an interview, a range of different question types will be used to assess your skills, knowledge and experience. These will be set out / listed in the job description or advert.

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i. Opening Questions: Your Personal Sales Pitch

Civil Service interviews occasionally 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 statement?’, ‘Tell us why this role is the next natural step in your career?’

Where the question is asked it is not generally scored. I believe for every interview – public and private sectors, you should have thought carefully about why you are there, why this role appeals to you and what you have done which makes you the best candidate.

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

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| Timing: | Your answer should be 3 – 4 minutes. |
| Focus: | Only focus on the things you have done (your roles and achievements) which are <u>relevant</u> to the job. |
| Structure: | <p>I believe it's best to start with a summary of your background, especially if your qualifications are important to the role.</p> <p>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.</p> |
| Summary: | Your answer should culminate in why therefore this is the next natural step for you and why this is the organisation 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.

The Civil Service work to nine behaviours and the Success Profiles document lists each, and a description for each grade.

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Bringing these to life and providing a good demonstration of each framework is not so easy – especially if you are new to the CS.

Watch my videos on YouTube where I describe each one individually. There are also downloadable sheets on our website to help you with the framework.

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.

Answers are scored out of 7, (occasionally 5). You need to be aiming for a 5 (3.5). 4 is a pass but not generally enough to secure the highest score overall.

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 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

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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 through 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. Use the STCAR format to answer.

Answering a 'How would you.....?' Question.

To answer these questions, you must first start with the list of things you would do, then follow up with a brief STCAR example. Keep total answer time to 5 minutes.

iv. Strength / Direct Questions

Strength questions are designed to understand how you think, feel and react situations.

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.

There are 36 strengths listed in the Success Profiles Strengths Dictionary. Identify the strengths which underpin the behaviours in your JD, read the short description for each and think of a brief example you could use to demonstrate the strength.

Your answer to these short direct questions needs to appear spontaneous (hence a natural strength) and then follow up with an example to support your claim. Total time 60 – 90 seconds. Strengths are scored out of 4, and you should be looking for a 3 or more. If you don't back up with an example, I would suggest you will not be able to score more than 2 in any circumstances.

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By way of an example, let's assume you are going for a role in project delivery, 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 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 department or organisation in detail. Aligning your answers with the 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 organisation – strategy, culture, values
- Know the people who will be interviewing you (Civil Servants don't typically belong to LinkedIn which can make it difficult).

Matt Eastlake has coached over 1000 civil servants at all grades, professions and departments since 2018. He is the Founder and Coach at Interviewperformance.co.uk.

Visit our site and book a free, no obligation consultation. I will call you to hear where you are at and discuss what needs to happen to boost your chances of landing the role.