Interview skills for non-research jobs (for postdocs and research staff)

This Quick Guide is designed to help you with interviews for non-research positions including in business, administration and communications. It is aimed primarily at research staff, although the material will be useful to anyone preparing for an interview. Not all the questions or guidance will be relevant to every job interview, so select the parts that will be relevant to the sector and role you are interviewing for.

The information in this guide has been put together using feedback and insights from employers and Cambridge postdocs who have attended interviews across the UK and abroad.

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1. General interview tips

Preparing for an interview

1. Review your application material

It’s important to be familiar with the job description and how you presented yourself and your experience in your application, as this will be used as the basis for the interview. Re-read the job description and further particulars fully again and highlight the areas where you match, as well as any gaps.

2. Anticipate questions and prepare your own answers

Following on from the first point, think about the questions you might be asked. You will almost certainly face something unexpected, but the more you prepare, the less frequently this will occur. There are lots of example questions in this guide and in our interview feedback folders at the Careers Service – think about different ways the same question might be phrased. Also think about the questions that you would like to ask the interviewer(s).

3. Practise your answers

Once you have an idea of what questions you may be asked, spend some time thinking about how you would answer the questions. It is best not to write out full answers and learn them as a script, as this is likely to make your delivery ‘robotic’. However, you can have some idea of the points you might make for each question. Rehearse your answers several times out loud to get used to saying what you want to say fluently.

4. Use informal contacts

Use your own networks, your friends, peers, and informal contacts to find out as much as you can about the sector and type of role. More often than not, there will be someone in your extended network – a friend of a friend – who works in this area. Ask around
and consider getting in touch so that they can give you some idea of what is expected. GradLink is an online database of Cambridge alumni, run by the Careers Service, which can also help you find people in different sectors – see the Careers Service website for more information.

Can you predict or do you know who will be on the selection panel? What are their interests? What are they looking for in the selection process? Can you find out what kinds of questions have been asked in the past?

5. Have an interview training session

You can book an appointment for an interview training session with one of the postdoc careers advisers, who can discuss the interview with you and/or take you through some of the typical questions you might expect. If you wish, the interview can be recorded so that you can see afterwards where you need to improve.

On the day

- First impressions count – a firm handshake and a smile are important.
- Make eye contact, be enthusiastic and positive, and avoid drawing attention to negatives.
- Structure your answers – don’t ramble.
- Listen carefully to questions and make sure you are answering the question you have been asked.
- Be specific with your responses; focus on your personal achievements.
- Dress appropriately – if in doubt, go smarter.
- Always think what is unique about you. What can you offer that could make you stand out from other candidates being interviewed?
2. Motivation / knowledge questions

Interviewers will usually be very keen to find out more about your motivations for applying for the job. You need to build their confidence that your motivation to move into the job role and organisation are strong. It is best to focus on the positives of the new role, rather than on the negatives of the position you are leaving.

Here are some examples of how they might ask about this:

- Tell us about yourself.
- Why should we employ you?
- Why are you applying for this job? And why now?
- Why do you want to work for this company / organisation?
- Why is now the right time for you to move into this?
- Where do you see yourself in 5/10 years’ time?
- Are you sure you want to leave research?

Another way that an interview may probe your level of motivation is to ask you more specific questions, to test your understanding of the sector or role you are moving into. For example:

- The job involves [describes the role], is this what you expected?
- What do you think this job is about and what skills are required?
- Do you have any suggestions of how we can improve our practices / do things better?
- Who do you think our competitors are?
- What activities are currently encouraging developments in this sector at the moment?
- What are you most looking forward to in this position? And what are you most concerned about?
- How can science contribute to policy? (for a policy role)
- How do you think our publication/organisation is different to [name of leading competitor]?
- Who do you think our readers are? (for a publishing role)
- What is your opinion of scientific grant reviewers? (for a research administration role)
• How do you think our website/service can be improved?

To prepare for these types of questions spend some time before the interview thinking about what the job you have applied for really involves. Also think more broadly about the organisation and sector – do you understand what the organisation does and key issues affecting the sector you are planning to work in?

3. Competency questions

Competency questions are a common form of interview question that are used across many different sectors. They are designed to test whether you have the skills and experience (competencies) required for the role. Specifically, the employer wants to see examples from your past experiences to prove that you have these competencies. Even if your interview is not formally a ‘competency-style’ interview, preparing for competency questions related to the role you have applied for is good preparation.

The questions asked in a competency interview will typically be linked very closely to the job requirements. To predict what type of questions may come up, you should re-read the job description and person specification and any other relevant information provided. From this you should be able to work out the competencies that the interviewer will be most interested in.

Examples of competencies are problem-solving, analytical skills, teamwork, communication, leadership, time management, influencing, and organisation. There are many more that may be specifically listed in the job advert or implied in the description of the role.

Questions around competencies often take the form, ‘Tell us about a time when…’

For example:
• Tell us about a time when you had a difficult team member. What did you do about it? (testing for the competency of teamwork)
• Give us an example of where you have shown determination or drive. (drive)
• Tell us how you have persuaded someone round to your way of thinking in the past. (persuasion)
• Tell us about a negotiation you have conducted. (negotiation)
• What is the most challenging team situation you have found yourself in? (resilience, teamwork)
• Tell us how you have demonstrated leadership skills in the past. (leadership)

They may be more direct, such as:
• How do you feel about deadlines? (time management)
• How do you know you’re a good team member? (teamwork)
• What makes a good leader? (leadership)

To prepare for competency questions, for each competency that the interviewers may be interested in, you should think of several examples of where you have demonstrated that competency. Your examples should be as recent as possible, and should have had a good outcome / result.

You then need to practise telling the ‘story’ for each example. The STAR technique can help you with this.

Situation – Describe the situation you found yourself in
Task – Describe the task you were trying to accomplish
Action – Describe the action you personally took (this will form the main of your answer)
Result – Describe the result of your actions

It is very important to choose an example where you personally had a positive impact. You should be prepared for follow-up questions. In some cases the interviewer may ask you to talk about times where something didn’t go well. In those cases you could include in your answer what you learned from the experience and what you would do differently in the future.
4. Questions about you

Interviewers will be interested in finding out more about you and may ask you questions about your CV and career to date. They may also ask what your salary expectations are. Examples of these questions are:

- Why did you choose to do a PhD?
- What are you most proud of in your CV?
- Tell us about something you have and something you haven’t enjoyed during your life. Please don’t give us the answer you think we want to hear; we want to know what is important to you.
- What motivates you?
- What are your strengths / weaknesses?
- Why should we employ you?
- What skills could you bring to this job / organisation?
- What do you like to do outside work?

Before the interview, prepare for these types of question by reflecting on your career to date. Think carefully about the potential effect of what you say on the interviewer, as they may read more into your answer than you intend, and it is easy to get carried away when talking about yourself. For example, a joking reference to your inability to turn up for things on time may cause the interviewer to doubt your ability to self-manage. Keep your answers positive.

- What are you expecting in terms of salary?

It is always worth being prepared for a question about your salary expectations, although it is better for you as the candidate to leave any salary negotiations until after you have been offered the job. If you are unsure of the appropriate salary level, then you need to do some background research before the interview. This may involve speaking to personal contacts or using resources such as Glassdoor (www.glassdoor.co.uk), which is a website where people upload their job title and organisation and salary details anonymously.
5. Technical questions / case studies

For some interviews there may be a focus on more technical questions, e.g. for quantitative finance roles you may be asked maths teasers or finance questions. For software or IT-related jobs you may be asked how you would tackle a programming problem. For some sectors, such as consultancy, you may be given a case interview, where you are given a business problem and asked to talk through it. Typically you will be told what sort of interview you have been invited for. To prepare for specialist types of interview, see the Interviews section of the Careers Service website, or read the ‘Case study interviews’ Quick Guide. See also the resources in the Careers Service library (in particular the postdoc interview feedback files), ask contacts for advice, or get in touch with a careers adviser.

6. E-tray exercises

This is when an employer gives you typical work material to test your ability to deal with tasks the job involves. Examples of E-tray exercises including commenting on manuscripts (for a role in journal publishing), writing a test article, drafting an email for a challenging work situation, deciphering data, or writing a presentation based on information the employer has given you. In some cases you might be given these tests to do at home, but often they are conducted in the interview under time constraints. E-tray exercises are a useful opportunity for you to see if you like the type of tasks that the role involves. Check out the postdoc and student interview feedback files to see if E-tray exercises are common for the role / sector you are interviewing for.
7. What to ask the interviewers

It is typical for an interviewer to give you the opportunity at the end of an interview to ask them any questions you may have. It is a good idea to have some questions prepared. Good questions to ask focus on the job itself rather than on benefits for you. If you find that your questions have already been answered during the interview, it is fine to say so.

8. Further help

Postdocs can book a practice interview with a postdoc careers adviser by emailing:

- Life Sciences: pdoclif@careers.cam.ac.uk
- Physical Sciences/Technology: pdocphys@careers.cam.ac.uk
- Arts/Humanities/Social Sciences: pdocAHSS@careers.cam.ac.uk

PhD students can book a practice interview via the Careers Service online diary, or by calling (01223) (3)38286 / (3)38283 if all the online slots are full.