

Interview Techniques

Preparing yourself as the interviewer

There are a number of aspects of critical importance in planning the interview:

- Timing - enough time must be allowed for the interviews and making notes between each. Each candidate should be given the same length of time in the interview. There should be sufficient breaks built into the interview programme.
- Re-read the application form or CV, job description and person specification to identify areas which need further exploration or clarification.
- The appointment panel should agree the format of the interview and identify questions to cover the key competencies required by the post. The different subject areas should be allocated between the panel members in advance of the interview date.
- The panel should agree how they will operate as a team during the interviews. The first interview of the day should not be used as 'a dress rehearsal' - otherwise the appointment panel could be accused of acting unfairly.
- The venue of the interview should be of an appropriate size and one which encourages the interviewee's concentration. It should be comfortable for both interviewers and the candidate (seating, heating, lighting, ventilation, noise level) and be well sign-posted with a waiting area containing literature about the organisation. There should be no interruptions and mobile phones should be switched off. Reasonable adjustments must be made to the facilities as necessary where a candidate has requested this because of a disability.
- The reception arrangements for candidates should be welcoming and the receptionist briefed.
- The seating arrangement should be as inclusive as possible so that the candidate does not feel isolated.

Preparing the candidate

Prior to the interview the candidate should have sufficient information about the post, the requirements of the post and the organisation. Candidates should be given adequate notice of the interview date, panel composition and designation and, ideally, be given a brief tour of the place of work prior to the interview. Candidates are asked to produce documentary evidence of their qualifications which are stipulated in the person specification.

At the start of the interview, the candidate can be helped by:

- the Convener introducing the panel and having name cards placed in front of the members;
- the panel putting the candidate at ease;
- the Convener explaining the structure and length of the interview;
- being informed that notes will be taken to ensure a fair assessment to be made;
- being asked whether they have any queries after the introduction;
- the use of an opening non-discriminatory 'warm-up' question.

Structure

Working to a structure is a major step towards improving the quality of interviewing, as it helps to:

- ensure that nothing significant has been missed;
- keep track of how the interview time is being used;
- give candidates a sense of progress through the interview;
- help ensure consistency between candidates.

Questions must be planned in advance. It is usual to have a series of questions that are posed to every candidate with specific ones for individual applications based on information in their application forms. The need to raise additional questions will arise in order to probe candidates responses and these should be asked at the appropriate time. No question should be asked of a discriminatory nature e.g. asking a female candidate about her childcare arrangements.

The interview should be structured as follows:

- the Opening - this will include introductions, advising candidates of the structure which will be followed and that note-taking will occur. A few moments of small talk will help to relax the candidate and establish rapport.
- the Body - this is the main part of the interview where the required evidence about the candidate's suitability for the post against the key criteria is obtained.
- the Close - Candidates should always be given the opportunity and sufficient time to ask any questions they may have. They should be informed of the timescales and methods of notifying them of the outcome and should be thanked for attending the interview.

The Disability Discrimination Act 1995 does not prevent you asking questions about a candidate's disability but this information must not be used to discriminate. When asking a candidate how their disability may affect their ability to do the job it is important to focus on competencies required by the post, place these questions in the latter part of the body of the

interview, and indicate where possible a willingness to make those reasonable adjustments which would enable the job to be performed.

Questioning techniques

You should aim to have the candidate talk about 70-80% of the time, as the key aim of the interview is to obtain evidence from the candidate. Effective interviews depend on well-thought out and well-structured questions.

There are various types of questions:

Open - these questions enable candidates to provide facts and information, describe things, express feelings or opinions etc. They encourage candidates to start talking. They typically start with the words 'what, why, how?'

Example - 'Tell me about the most challenging project you have completed in the last year.'

Closed - the number of possible answers is limited and are usually either 'yes' or 'no'. They are useful to check facts, or your understanding of answers or to close the interview.

Example - 'Did you have responsibility for a team in your last job?'

Multiple - these occur when two or more questions are asked at one time. Candidates will normally only answer one of them - the one they find easiest or heard last. These types of questions should not be used in interviews.

Example - 'Why have you applied for this job, and why do you want to leave your present job?'

Leading - the answer which is expected is suggested in the question, and thus are not appropriate for selection interviewing.

Example - 'We need someone who has good planning skills. How well do you plan ahead?'

Hypothetical - is where the interviewer describes a situation to the candidate and asks him/her how he/she would respond. Too many of this type should be avoided as the reply might be completely different from what the candidate would actually do, and you have no way of evaluating the answer consistently.

Example - 'What would you do if two members of your team had a fierce argument in the office?'

Behavioural - are useful questions, as you gain evidence of how the candidate has handled similar situations in the past, and these can concentrate on the specific skill areas of this post.

Example - 'Can you give me an example of when you had to deal with a difficult customer complaint?'

Probing - these are used to follow up after receiving answers to open questions, in order to explore an area in more depth. The questions should be designed to 'funnel' the information obtained from general to specific information.

Example - 'How would you do it differently next time?'

Reflective - these are powerful and seldom used with skill or consistency. Each question is based on the previous answer and reflects its content.

Example - 'So, you think that there could have been some improvements. What would have altered the outcome?'

Listening techniques

As the interviewee will be talking for the majority of the time it is vital that interviewers actively listen. The candidate is providing a lot of information and the interviewer has to be able to recall it, use it, relate it to the key skill areas and check it for inconsistencies. Reflective questions can be used to pick up on a point the candidate has made and enable you to probe further. You should concentrate on what the candidate is saying, look at the candidate and ensure that your physical position reflects your interest. It is vital that all the panel members listen carefully to every answer, even though they may not have asked the question.

Examples of effective non-verbal responses by interviewers include nodding of the head, smiling and occasional noises of encouragement. Actions to be avoided are looking at your watch, critical frowning, staring out of the window. Care should be taken by panel members that non-verbal signals are not communicated between them, indicating what they feel about the candidate. Interrupting a candidate can be interpreted as discourteous and showing a lack of interest in what the candidate is saying. However it may be necessary to do so if the candidate has misunderstood the question.

Good active listening involves:

- identifying feelings and intentions behind words;
- probing answers with further questions;
- clarifying and summarising;
- evaluating the quality of the answers.

By being empathetic, you will lead the candidate to speak freely and could well reveal information that he/she would not do if an interviewer was being overbearing or critical. Silence is one of the most effective probing devices. When used at the appropriate time, it encourages candidates to elaborate their answer.

In short - listen to :

- what is being said;
- how it is being said;
- what is not being said.

Body Language of candidates

Candidates send messages non-verbally which can reveal their emotional state and are well worthwhile being noted by the panel. The communications expert, Albert Mehrabian's analysis of typical face-to face communications showed that non-verbal communication has an enormous impact on the understanding of the messages sent by the interviewee in any interview. His results were :

- Words alone - 7%;
- Voice tones - 38%;
- Body language - 55%.

Non-verbal messages are much less likely to be under conscious control and are therefore harder to disguise. They are often difficult to interpret and care needs to be taken in analysing such messages e.g. a candidate may fold arms as he/she is cold, not necessarily because he/she is being defensive.