

You've worked hard to make a successful application, perhaps passed some psychometric tests, and now you've been called for interview or to an assessment centre. How will you make the most of the opportunity you've earned?

## Interviews – preparation

Before you go for interview, it is essential that you find out as much as possible about the job you've applied for, the organisation interviewing you, and what they are looking for. You will have done some of this work whilst preparing your application but interviewers commonly cite poor company knowledge as one of the worst habits of interviewees.

Search the employer's website, the sites of major newspapers and other relevant resources (many of which are listed in the Careers A-Z section of the Careers Centre website). Make use of Saint Connect and LinkedIn to identify St Andrews alumni who could give you some detailed inside knowledge. Think about whether you have any personal contacts who could lead you to further sources of information.

Prepare answers to the following topics, which are bound to be explored:

- Why do I want this job, with this employer?
- Why should the organisation pick me?
- What are my strengths and weaknesses?
- What have I gained from my course?
- What skills have I developed from work experience and extra-curricular activities?
- What are my longer-term career goals?

Most interviews will either follow a **competency-based framework**, a **CV based one** or – one which is becoming increasingly popular – **the strengths-based model**. In a competency based interview you will be asked to supply evidence you have shown competence in areas that are crucial to them, whereas a CV based one concentrates on the potential shown from your past, indicating you suit the position. A strengths-based approach is used to find out if you have the natural ability and enthusiasm for the job.

### You can systematically prepare yourself:

- First, remind yourself of the employer's criteria for the job and write them down on one axis of a grid. On the other axis, list the major areas of activity in your life to date. Include education, extra-curricular activities, work experience, part-time jobs, volunteering etc.
- Take each of the employer's criteria in turn and record the evidence which each of your activity areas can offer, of you having met that criterion in the past. If you go through this exercise systematically, you will have lots of evidence with which to answer any of the questions which employers ask you eg *Can you give an example of a time when you used your initiative?*
- Use the **STAR technique** to plan your answers to **competency-based questions**. Pick up the Quick Guide or visit 'The application process' section of the Careers Centre website for further details.
- Some jobs may require specific technical knowledge which you can expect to be questioned about. Other sectors - management consultancy is the most obvious - will include case study questions. It is vital that you seek to **find out the scope and style of your interview in advance**. Most employers will tell you, but ask if they don't, so you can prepare yourself properly.

Remember to prepare your own questions to ask the interviewers. Good questions are ones which have a real point for you. If you can't think of any information you need, ask about the interviewer's own experience with the employer in respect of issues which matter to you eg *how have they found the training or opportunities for secondments or promotion?* Once you have your questions selected, print them to take along. If all your questions should get answered before you have the chance to ask them, you'll still have evidence that you took the time to prepare.

## INTERVIEW SIMULATOR

This Careers Centre resource allows you to record and playback your own practice interviews – the next best thing to a real interview!  
Visit **'The application process'** section of our website to access this resource.  
[www.st-andrews.ac.uk/careers](http://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/careers)

### Interviews – performance

You can be the world's best prepared candidate but if you fail to successfully communicate why you are suited to the opportunity you will not succeed. What matters by the end of the interview is what your interviewers have observed, noted and remembered.

#### Practise, practise, practise

Once you have your material prepared - practise. Get a friend to ask you the questions you have identified. What do they think of your responses? How is your body language? Visit a careers adviser and ask them to quiz you with some of your questions. Find out what practice interview events may be currently offered at the Careers Centre. Practise on your own as well.

#### Be memorable - use narrative

Interviewers often sit through hundreds of interviews so if you have an individual story to tell it will make you stand out. As you prepare for interviews, consider how to tell your story so that it demonstrates how you have shaped your career aspirations and education eg *"I chose St Andrews after doing research on the best Economics courses in the UK and also the fact it has a very diverse student body..."* - shows you make informed decisions and enjoy an international environment – both key attributes for many jobs.

#### To be interesting you need to be interested

Once you get to the interview itself, focus relentlessly on the interviewers. Listen to the questions carefully and make sure you answer what is being asked. Make sure you have **eye contact with all the panel**, not just the person asking the question and try to create a dialogue, if possible, which shows you are also interested in them. The interviewers are trying to discover your strengths - do all you can to understand what they want and give them all the help you can. If you sense you are not meeting their expectations, check out why. Are you answering on the right lines? Have you said enough or too much? That way, you are more likely to reply appropriately and be successful.

A focus on your interviewer will also help you overcome the natural nervousness you are likely to feel - enthusiasm and a positive attitude go a long way.

#### Look out for signs

Most interview panels want you to do well, so look out for signs they give to indicate you may have gone off in the wrong direction. If you are asked the question, or part of it again, this is a clue you aren't answering it the way they hoped for. Interruptions such as *"but could you just expand on this ..."* mean the same. A silence at the end of your answer usually means they are looking for a more extensive response.

#### Key skills and experience

From your research on the job and organisation you should have a clear, positive objective in your mind of which facts and experience you want to have highlighted by the end of this interview. Visualise yourself leaving the interview having achieved this objective. You will only convince others to the extent you are convinced yourself.

### Strengths-based interviews

Several employers are turning to strengths-based interviews which take a more wide-ranging approach to assessing your personal attributes. While competency-based interviews focus on what you can do, strengths-based interviews focus on what you like doing and what you are naturally good at. Interviewers look more closely at your body language and tone of voice to identify if you are genuinely interested, or have really taken pride, in what you are describing. The questions may be less probing and asked at a faster pace. See 'The application process' section of our website for more information.

## Video interviews

Interviews by telephone and Skype are common, but another growing phenomenon is the video interview where your connection with the interviewer is recorded, rather than live. The questions are typically displayed on a screen and you are given a specific time to answer each question with a countdown timer also being shown. This offers you the convenience of being able to choose a time and location without having to travel, as well as saving the employer on travel expenses.

Use our interview simulator or a phone to practice, (see p.2), and watch back. By doing this several times, you will become more comfortable and confident in the process. At the beginning this may seem very unnatural as you will not be receiving any verbal or non-verbal signals and feedback from an actual person but stick with practicing and you will soon gain confidence.

### Tips for successful video interviews:

- Record while you practise and watch back
- Dress smartly (wear solid colours and stay away from white), light into face, clean background
- Smile and gesticulate moderately (in view of camera), especially if strengths based.
- Do not feel you have to use the full time allowed if you are going to end up rambling.

### Technical hints:

- Position the camera at the same height as the top of your head - You look better when the camera looks down on you.
- Look directly into the camera, not the screen as this gives the person watching the recording the impression you are making eye contact with them.
- Rules of thirds – eyes should be in middle of upper third of screen.

Video can make you look smart and competent or it can make you look unprepared and nervous - make sure you do all you can to come over as the former.

## Assessment Centres

*(This heading covers the following sections)*

A successful first interview with a large employer will often lead to an assessment centre/day. What should you expect? Typically, you will join a group of (often 6 to 8) candidates and will be asked to undertake a series of assessments designed to demonstrate your potential. The team of selectors will measure you against a set of competencies/criteria. The programme for the day is often busy and you might be required to stay overnight. If the format isn't clear, ask the employer in advance.

### Group discussions

It is common for the group to be given a topic to discuss, reach a consensus and make a proposal. You will be given a briefing pack and may be asked to take on a particular role. This type of exercise allows you to demonstrate communication and influencing skills, teamwork, and your ability to manage a project and deal with changing priorities. Remember you don't have to be the leader – assessors aren't impressed by people who hog the discussion or by those who contribute nothing. Well-regarded candidates include those who address others by name, encourage quieter group members to contribute, and who keep the discussion and planning to time. A good rule of thumb is to do everything you can to ensure your group completes its assigned task successfully.

### Psychometric assessments

The most commonly used psychometric assessments are aptitude tests, personality questionnaires and situational judgement tests. Some employers, with online aptitude tests at an earlier stage of the selection process, repeat them during an assessment centre to check that it was actually you, and not a friend, who sat them. More information and practice resources can be found on 'The application process' section of the Careers Centre website.

### Interviews

If you have already had a first interview, this 'second interview' is likely to be more in-depth, and may probe any weaker areas that emerged earlier, including your performance in the tests and exercises you have just encountered. Treat this interview as independent from an earlier one – never assume your interviewer is familiar with your previous answers.

## **Written Exercises**

A typical written exercise is an e-tray exercise, designed to test how you analyse a lot of complex information within a limited time. Careful prioritisation and management of your time is essential, as is the use of language in any replies or responses you are asked to make. A written report or recommendation is usually expected. The way you structure this is important so look at examples of business reports online – these are much more concise than essays, using headings, sub-headings and bullet points for ease of reading quickly. Make sure you always finish your report with a conclusion.

## **Presentations**

It is common for you to be asked to give a presentation to the selectors. This may be a set topic, perhaps related to one of the other exercises, or you might be given a free choice. You may be asked to prepare your presentation in advance or it may have to be produced on the day. Again, as with interviews, a focus on your audience is the most important consideration. Keep things simple. If you manage to get them to remember three key points, you will have done well. It's a good idea to bring things to life with examples or stories.

## **Social events /networking**

Use every opportunity which arises to talk to recent graduates. Remember, however, that you are being observed and assessed all the time so don't let yourself down by asking inappropriate questions, or drinking too much. Behave consistently and try to show genuine interest in what other people do by asking questions such as *"What work have you been involved in over the last 6 months?"*, and go prepared with a simple, interesting answer to the question *"Tell me about yourself"*. You may have the opportunity to meet fellow candidates, current graduate trainees and staff at informal events, eg lunch, dinner and coffee breaks.

Remember that where there are several vacancies, you will be assessed against a standard and not against the other candidates in your group. Also, it is not necessary to excel in every exercise; a great performance in one may balance a modest performance in another. Never criticise any other candidates, even in an informal setting, unless invited to do so as part of the task. If asked for your thoughts on yours and others performance, be honest and give a well-balanced critic highlighting both the positive and not so positive aspects of the performance. Don't forget to be charming to everyone you meet in the organisation, including receptionists and porters – you'll be under scrutiny from the moment you enter the building until you leave.

## **Practicalities for interviews and assessment centres**

- Find out as much as you can about the assessment format in advance.
- Know how to pronounce the name of the organisation and contact person.
- Plan your journey carefully, leave plenty of time and take a map and contact details.
- Take your application, preparation notes and invitation email with you.
- Dress appropriately and neatly - always err towards formality if in doubt.

## **Interview Skills Workshops**

The Careers Centre runs interview skills workshops during semester – visit CareerConnect for more details and to sign-up.

Visit **'The application process'** section of our website for further advice on success at interviews and assessment centres.

**[www.st-andrews.ac.uk/careers](http://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/careers)**

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