

How to Excel at Interviews

James Sweetman



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James Sweetman

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1 Getting Started

1.1 Introduction

The purpose of this book is to help you prepare thoroughly for an interview. If you have an important interview scheduled, or if recent interviews have not gone your way, or if you haven't attended an interview in years, in the chapters that follow you will discover tips, questions and insights that will support and challenge you to walk into your interview as prepared as you can be.

So let's get started.

1.2 What's ahead?

Over the course of this book we will explore the different elements of interview preparation. In Chapters Two and Four you will discover the common questions interviewers ask, why they ask them, and most importantly tips on how to answer them.

Most interviews today are competency based interviews and this topic is addressed specifically in Chapter Three. When you know the competencies that are required to be successful in the role, the organisation has given you the structure they are going to use to assess you during the interview. In other words, you know the categories of evidence they are seeking. In Chapter Three we will examine some common competencies, the ways interviewers assess them, and a framework for structuring your responses.

During an interview, it is not just what you say, but how you say that is important. In Chapter Five we will look at ensuring all aspects of your communications are consistent. We will explore body language at an interview as well as the wider topic of personal branding, so you can shape the experience you want the interviewers to have when they interact with you.

Managing interview nerves is a reason why many people seek assistance with their interview preparation. A little anxiousness means you are emotionally invested in the outcome, but you don't want to be paralysed by your nerves. In Chapter Six you will learn ways to manage your nerves and how to portray confidence, a vital quality for interview success.

1.3 Getting the most from this book

You will get most benefit from this book if you approach reading it with a pen and paper to hand. This book contains many interview questions and you can start your interview preparation by writing out how you would respond to them. You may also be prompted to carry out additional research, so also note your ideas and action points. As the saying goes 'ink it, don't think it!'

The focus of this book is on interview preparation for employment positions. However the same principles are relevant if you are applying for a position on a course.

You will find sample answers to some of the common interview questions in this book. These are shared only as a guide as to how to structure an answer. It is important that you develop your own answers based on your unique experiences and achievements. Equally, interview answers should not be learned off by heart. The best interviews are flowing conversations and overly rehearsed answers only come across as robotic.

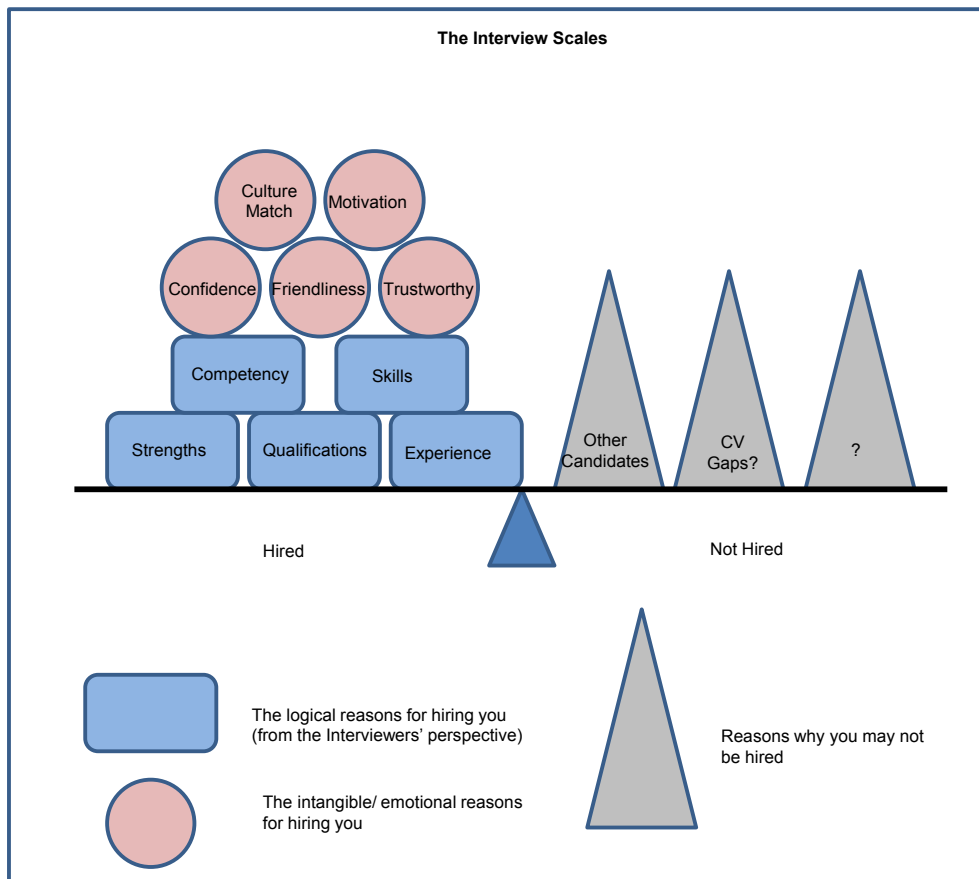
1.4 What is the purpose of an interview?

From an employer's perspective, the purpose of an interview is to gather information about you, so they can determine whether or not you are the best person for the job. From your perspective, the purpose of the interview is to provide information to the interviewers so they can make their decision, preferably in your favour.

Interviewers are not trying to catch you out. In most instances they want you to be at ease, because when you are relaxed, you will speak more fluidly and it is easier for them to learn about you and your potential to be successful in the role.

To support the decision they have to make, interviewers seek evidence, evidence that determines whether or not you are the most suitable candidate. They are in charge of the structure of the interview and how they will gather the information they need, but you are in charge of your preparation and how you come across during the interview.

1.5 The Interview Scales



The Interview Scales summarises your task at an interview. Putting it bluntly, you will either be offered the job or you won't. Obviously you want what is stacked on the left side of the Interview Scales to outweigh what is on the right.

Stacked on the left side of the Interview Scales are the reasons why the interviewers should hire you. These reasons fall into two broad categories; the logical reasons and the intangible reasons.

From the interviewers' perspective, why would it make logical sense to hire you? This is the underlying question the interviewers are seeking to answer. Your strengths (which we will explore in Chapter Two,) your past achievements and qualifications (as listed on your CV or application form) and your experience in demonstrating the required competencies (Chapter Three) all fall within this category.

Also on the left side of the Interview Scales, are the intangible reasons for hiring you. Do the interviewers trust you? Do they feel you could just slot into the role? Do you suit the culture of the organisation? Do they feel you have potential to be successful in the role? Do they feel confident that you would be a safe pair of hands?

Before the interviewers can make the decision to offer you the role, they have to feel, not just think that you will be the right person for the job. Their decision isn't just a logical one, it is an emotional one. This brings into play how you come across at the interview, not just what you say, but how you say it. These factors, which shape the interviewers' broader experience of interviewing you, are explored in Chapter Five.

On the opposite side of the Interview Scales are the reasons why the interviewers may not offer you the role. Again these fall into two categories. The first category contains the factors that are outside of your control, for example, the calibre of the other candidates.

The second category of reasons as to why you may not be offered the role, are the more personal ones. The way to discover what these might be is to ask yourself the question –

- What question would I hate the interviewers to ask me, or what issue would I hate them to bring up?

This is a great question for shining a light on an area where you don't feel comfortable or confident. For example, maybe there is a gap in your CV, or you have changed jobs frequently in recent years, perhaps there is an aspect of the role where you feel you lack experience, or maybe you were made redundant from your last job.

Whatever you note in response to this question, think about how you would approach dealing with that issue should it come up during the interview. As you will discover in Chapter Six you cannot control what you will be asked at an interview, but you can always control your response to it.

By the end of the recruitment process, the Interview Scales will tip to the right or to the left. Your job is to minimise the influence of the factors resting on the right-hand side, and emphasise the factors on the left. In the chapters that follow you will learn the tools to do just that.

2 Knowing your strengths & shaping your answers

2.1 Your strengths – what you want interviewers to know about you

When you think about it, top of the list of things you want interviewers to know about you are your strengths, the positive reasons why it makes sense to offer you the job. Interviewers obviously endeavour to uncover your strengths during the interview, but you are making their job easier, not to mention selling yourself in a positive and proactive way, when you go into the interview clearly knowing your strengths as a candidate.

So what are strengths?

Strengths can be talents or aptitudes you have, for example, being a good communicator or listener, being naturally empathetic or good with numbers and so on. They can be learned skills like marketing, accountancy or IT skills. Strengths can also be personal qualities or characteristics, for example having an optimistic or can-do attitude, being friendly or self-motivated.

Determining your strengths, and packaging them in a way that ties in with what the interviewers are seeking, is where good interview preparation starts. Before I share with you some questions that will help you discover your strengths, let's look at the different questions interviewers will ask to identify your strengths.

2.2 Questions interviewers ask to uncover your strengths

If you have attended interviews in the past, you will probably remember some of these questions. You are practically guaranteed to be asked at least one of them during an interview.

- Talk me through some of your strengths
- What do you consider to be your main strengths?

This is the direct way of asking the strengths question. But there are other ways that may not be quite as obvious at first.

- How will you add value to this organisation?
- What do you see yourself bringing to the role?
- Why would you consider yourself to be an asset to the team?
- Why do you think you are the best person for the role?
- Why should we employ you? (The harshest way of asking it.)

Remember, that irrespective of how it is asked, your answer to all these questions is drawn from your awareness of your own strengths.

The interviewer may be very specific in asking the question.

- What is your greatest strength?

This can be a tougher question to answer because you can only emphasise a single strength. Although it is not explicitly asked, you would also explain why you have selected that strength as your main strength.

There are other questions that interviewers can ask that also lead us into the territory of strengths.

- If I was to ask one of your colleagues or your current (or past) manager to describe you, what do you think they would say?

This is an opportunity to speak about your strengths whilst at the same time the interviewers are inviting you to view yourself as you think others see you, which also informs them of your level of self awareness.

- What qualifies you for this job?

This is a very direct question. You answer it by referencing your experience, qualifications, your main strengths and your ambition to succeed.

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- How would you describe yourself? (Tell me a bit about yourself.)

This is a very open question, sometimes asked at the beginning of an interview (and often by less experienced or prepared interviewers.) It is such a wide question that candidates can struggle to answer it. You don't give the interviewers your life story, but you can seize the opportunity of such an open question to shape your answer around your strengths, mixing in a little of your career history or personal interests at the same time.

So if the odds are you are going to be asked the strengths question in some shape or format, it makes sense to clearly know your strengths in advance of the interview.

2.3 Uncovering your strengths

The questions that follow will help you uncover your strengths. There is a possibility that you could be asked some of these questions at an interview, but we are using them here as a way for you to identify the building blocks you will work with when constructing your answer to the other questions listed in this chapter.

- What are you good at in the context of your work?
- What comes easily or naturally to you?
- What have you been complimented on in the past for?
- What aspects of work do you enjoy the most?
- At work, when are you at your best?

Another way of identifying your strengths is to think about those activities or situations that just make you feel strong on the inside.

Examples of strengths include –

- Good organisation skills
- Being self-motivated
- Good with people
- A reliable team player
- Strategic thinker
- Leadership skills
- Friendly, easy to get on with
- A keen learner
- Committed to furthering your career
- Good with detail
- A good listener

- Professional – eager to do good work
- A track record of achievement
- Enjoys a challenge
- Effective communicator

2.4 Packaging your strengths into an answer

When packaging your strengths into an answer you will have one eye on the job description, and the competencies the employer is seeking (Chapter Three is all about competencies.) For example, if the competency ‘interpersonal skills’ is used in the role description, use it, as opposed to synonyms like ‘relationship skills,’ or ‘people skills.’

When asked the strengths question you are not going to list every one of your strengths. You choose three or four of your most impactful strengths and shape them into your answer.

Q – What would you bring to the role?

I would like to think I would bring a strong track record of achievement. I try to be professional in everything I do because I'm eager to do good work. I'm a good organiser and I enjoy working with people, I'd be a committed team-player.

Q – How do you feel you would add value to the team?

I would describe myself as self-motivated, so I would like to think I'd bring energy and enthusiasm with me into the team. I enjoy working with others and being part of a team, I think there is no greater buzz than achieving a goal with colleagues. Listening, accommodating other people's points of views is vital when part of a team and I think this is a strength of mine, my ability to get on well with a diverse group of people.

It would be easy for the interviewer to note the key strengths from answers like these. Your strengths are your building blocks and you structure your answer around them.

2.5 More tips for shaping your answers

Anyone who has been to an interview can recognise the following scenario. You are asked a question and you begin to answer it. Words are coming out of your mouth and you hope by the time you stop speaking that you have said something at least semi-logical and have not rambled off the point entirely. Whilst we cannot predict every question we will be asked, we can have a plan as to how we will go about structuring our answer to any question.

2.5.1 Think of your answers as linked bullet points

Most interviews today consist of at least two interviewers. One interviewer may have a HR (Human Resources) background; the other might be a manager from the business unit where the vacancy is located. Interviewers will probably have decided in advance what questions they will ask and they will write down the key points of your answers.

When we respond to a question without some preconceived idea of what we want to communicate, it is very difficult for the interviewers to note our salient points (because we don't know them!) Ideally you want to be able to influence what the interviewers are jotting down about you. If your answers are punchy, built around two or three key points, the odds of them noting your key points are far higher.

In preparing your answers you don't want to come across as robotic, blunt or too succinct, nor do you want to waffle away talking semi-nonsense. The right balance is achieved by thinking of your answers as linked bullet points, two or three key points moulded into a flowing answer.

Now it is not possible to do this all the time, but when thinking about your answers to the questions in this and subsequent chapters, think about your two or three key points and how you will link them. Put yourself in the interviewers' shoes and imagine them writing on their notepads the key words and phrases you are communicating in your answer.

2.5.2 Using the conditional tense

A great phrase to remember and use at an interview is '*I would like to think that.*' At an interview you are being asked to sell yourself, to talk yourself up. Many people are uncomfortable doing that because they don't want to come across as arrogant. Using the phrase '*I would like to think,*' gives you permission to sell yourself, to talk about all your strengths and positive points, and you won't come across as big-headed or brash. Contrast these two answers.

Q – Why do you think you are the best person for the job?

I'm a strong team-player but I'm able to take the lead when I have to. I've a great track record and good experience in this area and I'm not afraid of hard work.

Using the conditional tense

I would like to think that I'm a strong team-player but I'm able to take the lead when I have to. I believe that I have a great track record and good experience in this area and on top of all that I'm not afraid of hard work.

The second answer flows better and starting your answer using the conditional tense allows you to use even stronger, more assertive language in your response.

3 Competencies

3.1 What are competencies and why are they important?

Most interviews today are competency based interviews. It is a phrase that can be confusing. A competency is simply an important skill or attribute that is required to do a job effectively. In every job there are specific skills and attributes that the person in that job needs to have in order to be successful in that role. For example, if the job is working in a call centre handling customer service queries, one of the competencies required will be good communication skills.

Companies know the competencies they are seeking in candidates and most of the time the five or six competencies they have identified will be listed in the job description. Competencies that frequently appear in job descriptions include –

- Communication Skills
- Organisational Skills
- Being a Team player
- Interpersonal Skills
- Leadership Skills

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By assessing levels of competency during the interview, the employer seeks to learn if you have the skills, knowledge, judgement and experience to be successful in the role.

Sometimes competencies may not be clearly listed in the job description; the emphasis may be on tasks, duties and responsibilities instead. If this is the case, you can identify the competencies by noting words and themes that are repeated. For example, if working cooperatively with others, establishing good working relationships and utilising a network of contacts, are all contained in the job description, then interpersonal skills is a likely competency. You can also determine the competencies by asking yourself what skills are required to perform the tasks listed.

In most cases, if you are told the interview will be competency based, then the competencies being measured will be clearly advertised.

Competency based interviews are also known as 'structured interviews' because the competencies provide a framework around which the interviewers structure their questions and assess candidates. They are also referred to as 'behavioural interviews' because by gauging your level of competency, the interviewer is determining if you will be able to behave or act in a specific way in the working environment.

3.2 How interviewers assess competencies

Interviewers assess competencies in three ways – past examples, hypothetical scenarios and competency definition.

3.2.1 Past Examples

This is the most common way interviewers will endeavour to assess a competency. They will ask you to share examples of how you demonstrated the required competencies in the past. For example, talk me through a time when your communication skills helped to achieve a specific goal. This approach is based on the thinking that the best indication of future behaviour is past behaviour.

3.2.2 Hypothetical Scenarios

The second way a competency can be assessed is providing you with a hypothetical situation and asking you how you would approach dealing with it. For example, to assess your organisational skills you could be asked – if two clients are seeking something from you urgently, how would you go about prioritising their requests?

Hypothetical scenarios are often used when candidates may not have past experiences to draw upon, for instance if they are starting out in their careers. They can also be used to test candidates' ability to think on their feet. Hypothetical scenarios can be challenging because they cannot be predicted, though they will usually be based on real life situations. (They can also be used to assess innovative or creative thinking, see 3.3.8 below.) If a candidate is able to answer the hypothetical questions satisfactorily, it gives the interviewer confidence that they would be able to manage themselves well in that scenario in the work environment.

3.2.3 Competency Definition

The third way a competency is assessed is when the interviewer asks you to share your understanding of what a competency means. This line of questioning is generally only used in tandem with one of the other competency assessment methods.

You may have your examples lined up and to be asked a question like – what are the qualities of a good leader, or what makes for a good team player, could easily throw you. So for each of the competencies listed in the job description, think about how you would define them as part of your preparation. You don't need to give a dictionary definition or an academic answer, think about someone who is skilled in that area and what they would do to demonstrate that competency.

Q – How do you know when someone is a good communicator?

For me, it means they have thought about what they want to communicate; they are clear as to the result they want to achieve. They have probably given some thought to the best way to communicate the message, via email, over the phone or face to face.

They will certainly have put themselves in their audience's shoes, to think about what it would be like on the receiving end of their communication, so they can tailor their approach accordingly. Of course effective communication isn't just about delivering the message, it is checking for understanding and this is where the ability to ask good questions and the ability to listen is vital.

Most companies will put a lot of time and effort into not just preparing the questions they will ask when assessing competencies, but also the type of answers they want to hear. They may score your answers against a predefined scale. As a candidate you have little control over how you are assessed, but in the sections that follow we will explore some common competencies and the types of questions asked to elicit them, as well as a framework for structuring your examples for maximum impact.

3.3 Eight common competencies & examples of questions used to assess them

The questions asked during a competency based interview will vary depending on the company and the specific role. Whilst some competencies appear on many job descriptions, organisations will have their own unique definition of what that competency means to them, shaped by their specific priorities and company culture. For example, one company's definition of interpersonal skills may not be the same as the next, so it is important to pay attention to the detail in the job description.

Here are eight common competencies with examples of questions interviewers can ask to assess your skill, knowledge, experience and judgement in each area.

3.3.1 Communication Skills

Communication skills is a broad competency and depending on the role emphasis will be placed on different aspects of it, for example, written communication, presentation skills, listening skills. If written communication (e.g. report writing) is an integral part of the job, it will probably be assessed separately. Similarly, if presentation skills are a key competency, you would usually be asked to deliver a presentation as part of the recruitment process.

Communication skills, especially verbal communication is somewhat unique because in many ways it is assessed during the actual process of the interview. So, in addition to your 'live' demonstration of your communication skills, here are some questions interviewers can pose.



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- Tell us about a situation where your communication skills made a positive difference to a situation.
- Describe a situation where you had to give someone news they didn't want to hear.
- Explain how you would go about dealing with a difficult customer.
- Talk us through a time when you felt your communication skills let you down and what did you learn from that experience?
- Have you ever dealt with people who were unresponsive or reluctant to listen? How did you deal with them?
- Tell us about a time when your listening skills helped resolve a situation.

3.3.2 Leadership

Leadership is another broad competency. For more senior positions it will often be divided into several competencies like strategic thinking, vision and execution. In general terms, qualities that are sought under the heading of leadership include being proactive, setting standards, being a role model, and managing change. It can overlap with other competencies like influencing skills, managing conflict and motivating others.

- Tell us about a time when you made a positive contribution to a team.
- Talk us through how you approach managing change in an organisation.
- Give us an example of how you inspired or motivated a team to improve their performance.
- Describe a situation where you achieved your outcomes by getting a team to support you?
- How do you approach people who show resistance to your leadership?
- How would you describe your leadership style?
- What has been your greatest lesson in leadership?

3.3.3 Team Player

This is another common competency because practically all roles today involve working co-operatively with others.

- Give us an example of how you helped a team you were part of achieve a goal.
- Describe a situation where you worked effectively as part of a team.
- In the past how have you approached dealing with conflict within a team?
- Were you ever part of a dysfunctional team? What did you learn from that experience?
- What were some common problems or challenges you have experienced in teams and how are they best resolved?
- What do you enjoy most about being part of a team?

3.3.4 Decision Making

Within the competency of decision-making interviewers are assessing your ability to make well-informed and timely decisions, to be aware of the impact of your decisions and how you approach situations when you have incomplete information. It is a competency usually associated with more senior positions.

- Talk us through a situation where you had to make a decision but you didn't have complete information.
- Describe your decision-making process.
- With hindsight, what decision have you regretted? What did you learn from that?
- How did you reach the decision to apply for this position?
- Talk us through a situation where you had to choose between two or three different options to achieve a desired outcome. How did you go about making your decision?
- Tell us about a time when you had to make an unpopular decision. How did you manage the consequences?

3.3.5 Influencing and Negotiation Skills

This competency can be viewed as an extension of communication skills. Interviewers are assessing your skills of persuasion, your ability to foster buy in, handle conflict and resolve issues.

- Give us an example of how you positively influenced someone (or a group of people.)
- Describe a situation where you had to seek agreement with people with different agendas.
- Have you ever been in a situation where you had to persuade others to go along with a decision or an idea you didn't believe in yourself? How did you handle that?
- Tell us about a time when you got your manager to support one of your ideas.
- Talk us through a situation where you were able to create a win/win with someone.

3.3.6 Organisational Skills

Skills and qualities assessed within this competency include an ability to prioritise and manage workflow, meet deadlines, achieve results, plan courses of action and an ability to approach situations in a logical and orderly way.

- Tell us about how you organise your working day.
- How do you determine your priorities?
- Tell us about a time you had to react to an unforeseen situation at work.
- Give us an example of how you have managed your time effectively in the past.
- Talk us through a situation where you had to deviate from a plan to achieve a particular result.
- Take us through the steps you have taken in the past to get a project up and running.

3.3.7 Managing Others/ Supervisory Skills

This competency can be viewed as a subset of leadership, but is often used separately for team leader or junior management positions. Achieving through others, co-ordinating workflow, delegating, managing conflict and dealing with non-performers are examples of skills that are assessed within this competency.

- Talk us through how you go about delegating a task.
- Give us an example of where you delegated something in the past, but it didn't work out. What did you learn from that experience?
- Give us an example of how you went about gaining the respect of a team you managed in the past.
- Tell us about a time when you dealt with someone who was not performing in their role.
- Describe a situation when you had to manage conflict within your team.
- Describe a crisis you managed recently.
- Give us an example of how you improved morale within a team you were managing?

3.3.8 Innovative Thinker

This competency will appear in the job description of any creative role (e.g. advertising) but if a company is seeking lateral thinking, or a flexible approach to work, it can be included in other job descriptions as well. Under this heading interviewers will assess your ability to think creatively, seek new solutions or simply think outside the box.



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- Give us an example of how you brought a new solution to an old problem.
- Tell us about a time when some lateral thinking led to a welcome result.
- Take us through an example of where you tried to solve a problem with a totally different approach.
- Tell us about a time where you tried something new, but it didn't work out. What did you learn?

Hypothetical situations can also be used to great effect by interviewers to assess your ability to think laterally. Some companies have developed a reputation for asking very strange questions to test innovative thinking. For example, list five ways you could use a pen with no ink!

3.4 The STAR Approach – How to structure your answers

As you will have noted from the above examples, most of the questions used to assess your competency in a particular area will start with the phrases –

- Tell us about a time...
- Describe a situation where...
- Talk us through...
- Give us an example of...

A useful way to structure your answer is with the mnemonic STAR.

S/T = Situation or Task

You are setting the scene, giving a brief description of the situation or task you were facing.

A = Action or Ability demonstrated

You outline what you actually did, how you approached handling the situation. You are emphasising the skills you displayed. When describing what you did, avoid using broad generalisations or clichés, the more specific you are the better.

R = Result or Resolution

This is where you wrap up your answer by sharing how your actions resolved the situation or completed the task. Sharing what you learned from the specific example is a nice way to conclude your answer, especially when the outcome of the situation wasn't what you expected.

Here is an example of how to structure an answer using the STAR approach.

Q – Give me an example of how you dealt with a non-performer on your team (could be asked to assess a range of competencies – leadership skills, managing others, motivation, supervisory skills.)

There was an instance a few months ago where one person on my team was consistently missing deadlines. His work was good otherwise, but he just didn't seem to have the sense of urgency that was required and it was impacting on the other team members who had to pick up the slack. (Situation is explained.)

I firmly believe that the vast majority of people come to work to do a good job, so his behaviour was a symptom; I wanted to discover the cause. I arranged a 1-2-1 meeting so I could discuss the situation in broad terms, not task specifically, as I had done before. I tried to set the appropriate tone; my role was to help him, because I knew he cared about his work. I listened, giving him an opportunity to talk through the challenges as he saw them.

Two main issues came to light; one was his fear of making a mistake which for me demonstrated real conscientiousness. I explained that we are all only human; if a mistake happened it was my role to deal with it. I emphasised the good work he was doing.

The second issue was a minor training issue. There were alternative ways he could approach a particular process so I arranged for him to sit with a more experienced colleague to learn from her. I emphasised the importance of meeting deadlines and for him to ask for assistance if he felt he was getting behind. We agreed to meet again to revisit the issue. (Actions outlined.)

I could see almost immediately that he approached his work in a more relaxed way. He was never going to be the fastest in completing tasks, but he was more confident in what he was doing and now asked for help sooner if he felt a deadline was in jeopardy. Interestingly he was adamant that he didn't want to let the team down, which just reinforced for me that when team members feel you support them, that you are willing to listen to them, most issues can be resolved. (Result with learning noted for good measure.)

3.5 Ten additional tips for demonstrating competencies

1. A simple way to identify examples to use to demonstrate competencies is to ask yourself the question – in recent years what have I been most proud of. This question will bring your focus to your recent achievements, where you have probably demonstrated a number of the desired competencies.
2. Have at least two examples of situations where you demonstrated each required competency. If the job description highlights five competencies, that's ten examples you want to be able to draw upon.
3. You can use a non-work situation to illustrate a competency. For example, if you were part of a sports team you could draw upon that experience to illustrate your effectiveness as a team player.

4. Always be mindful of the detail within the competency contained in the job description. For example, within the competency of communication skills, the job description may mention good written and oral skills and an ability to listen and work with a diverse group of people. Ideally you want your examples to show all aspects of the competency.
5. When you are sharing your examples make sure you use the past tense. If you slip out of the past tense (I approached) into the present tense (I approach) or the future or conditional tense (I would approach) the interviewer will wonder if the example is genuine, because you should be describing something that has already happened.
6. Avoid using people's names in your examples, either keep it general as in the above example, or if you have to, say you will use a fictitious name for confidentiality purposes.
7. Make sure you own your examples, there is a time for using inclusive language ('we did,' 'our approach was,') but this is not one of them. You want to emphasize what you did, what your thought process was, so use the first person singular ('I did,' 'my approach was.'). The exception to this of course is the competency of teamwork.
8. When preparing your examples, ask yourself what would the interviewers need to hear to understand the situation and to be clear about how I demonstrated my expertise in handling it? This will help you determine the level of detail to share.
9. The interviewer may ask you to speak about a situation where with the benefit of hindsight, you wish you had handled it differently. For example, give us an example of a time when you failed to communicate something appropriately. Instinctively, when preparing examples we will select those that put us in a positive light, so a question like that could throw us. Just in case, for each competency think of an example where you would have done something differently, emphasising what you learned from that experience.
10. Lastly, remember that you can also be asked to share your understanding of what each competency means, or what someone who is skilled in that competency would do or not do. For example, what is an essential part of effective influencing skills, what would a good leader never do, what are some of the disciplines at the heart of great organisational skills? So as well as preparing your examples know how you would define each competency.

4 Questions you should be able to answer

There are a number of questions you are almost guaranteed to be asked at an interview, so it makes sense to give them some thought beforehand. You don't want your answers to be rehearsed to the point of being robotic, but you do want to know the key points you want to communicate. Below are some of the common questions asked at an interview, as well as some tips for answering them.

4.1 What are your weaknesses?

Interview candidates often fear this one. Let's face it no one likes to dwell on their weaknesses. You want to be honest, but at the same time you don't want to shoot yourself in the foot.

In the past, candidates used to answer this question by taking one of their strengths and exaggerating it, as too much of any strength is a weakness.

'I'm so dedicated to my work, that occasionally I can come across as impatient, but it is only because others may not be as efficient as I am.'



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Impatience is the alleged weakness, sandwiched between the strengths of dedication and efficiency. Whilst a ‘spin’ answer like this can still work, most interviewers are now wise to it, so I would recommend a different and more straightforward approach.

The key to answering this question is to realise that the interviewer doesn’t really want to know your weaknesses. They ask this question to discover how self aware you are. The best way to answer this question is to reference an area that you feel is not quite a strength yet, and to emphasise how you are consciously working on improving it.

‘In some situations I’m not as assertive as I would like to be, so I suppose a weakness would be that I’m a little reticent, but it is something I’m working on. When the opportunity comes along to volunteer for a task, I will put myself forward. If I’m at seminar or a workshop now I make a point of asking a question which takes me outside my comfort zone.’

The absolute wrong answer to give to the weaknesses question is *‘I don’t think I have any weaknesses.’* Someone who responds this way is only advertising their arrogance and their lack of self awareness, ironically two real weaknesses!

4.2 Where do you see yourself in five years time?

This is the ambition question. The reason an interviewer asks it is to determine if you are someone who is interested in shaping a career, as opposed to just getting a job.

Alternative ways of asking this question are –

- Do you have a plan for your career?
- How do you see yourself developing in your career?

The wrong way to answer this question is *‘to be sitting in your chair doing your job.’* Even when said in a humorous way, you will still come across as a little arrogant and it also shows you have not prepared for the question.

Nowadays most interviewers know that people are not expected to remain in the same job, or even the same organisation, for the duration of their careers. So you don’t need to be too specific in your answer. A good way to approach answering this question is to keep it industry specific and include the main factors that are important to you in terms of your career development.

‘I am committed to working in this industry and I would hope that in five years time I will have advanced in my career, having gained valuable experience and learned new skills. I would like to think that I have the potential to go far. Feeling that I’m progressing and growing in my role is what’s important to me, as opposed to just having a specific future role in mind.’

Common sense will of course dictate that if you know exactly where you want to be in five years time, for example, running your own business, you will keep that to yourself!

4.3 What motivates you?

If the last question was the ambition question, this is the motivation question and as well as being asked directly, it can be broached indirectly.

- What gets you out of bed in the morning?
- What excites you (about your work?)
- What element of your work brings you the most satisfaction?
- What's important to you about your work/career?

The clue to answering the motivation question is in the word 'motivation' itself. The first part of the word, if we add in an 'e' is 'motive,' why something is important to you. If we add a 'c' to the second part of the word we have 'action.'

So, what's important to you about your work/career? Reflecting on this question will help you shape your answer to the motivation question. How would you answer that question right now? The following are factors that often figure in candidates' answers.

- A sense of achievement
- Good working relationships with my colleagues
- The ability to develop new skills
- Achieving goals and targets
- Overcoming challenges and solving problems
- Working towards realising my potential

4.4 Why have you applied for this job?

This is another question interviewers will use to discover your motivations. When answering this question it is best to focus on the future, what you hope to bring to the role and what you hope to gain from working with the company.

If your main reason for applying is to be able to leave, what you consider to be a toxic working environment, for example, you dislike your current manager, best to keep that to yourself. Complaining about your current or past employer, will not serve you at an interview, focus instead on the future and why you feel the company is a good match for you at this stage in your career.

4.5 What do you know about this company?

A competent interviewer will always ask you this question because it is the quickest way for them to gain an insight into how well you have prepared for the interview. The level of detail in your answer will reveal how serious you are about getting the job. If you haven't done your homework on the company, the seed is sown in the interviewer's mind that perhaps you will struggle to demonstrate initiative, or motivate yourself at work.

Knowing the basic information contained on the company's website is the minimum that is expected in response to this question. If the company has been in the news recently you would also be expected to be aware of this. For senior positions, knowledge of the industry as well as social and economic issues impacting the company would be required.

Interviewers can ask a range of questions to unearth your knowledge of their company. For example,

- What do you know about what we do?
- Who do you think are our main competitors?
- What suggestions do you have for our company?
- What do you feel are the main issues facing our business?

Here are two suggestions for carrying out the research necessary to answer these questions competently.

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4.5.1 Set up a Google Alert

Google Alerts is accessed by clicking 'more' on the Google homepage. The 'Alerts' function allows you to monitor new postings to the web that relate to the search criteria you enter. If you enter the name of the company into the search criteria and follow the other simple instructions, you will receive email updates from Google alerting you to new information posted to the web relating to the company. You will receive links to newspaper articles, press releases, survey results, even blog posts. It is free tool and a great aid to research of any kind.

You can set up as many Google Alerts as you wish. Perhaps it would be useful to establish a search criteria for specific industry phrases, news items, or even people. You will receive information that is not relevant, but equally you may get some really useful insights that will give you a competitive edge at the interview.

4.5.2 Use your network

It is said we have moved from the Information Age to the Relationship Age. Information is becoming a commodity, so it is not what you know, but who you know that makes the difference. Do you know anyone who works in the company where you are interviewing? Do you know anyone who works in the same industry? From my experience, when we approach people in a friendly and professional way, they are happy to offer their advice. There is no better way to gain an understanding of what it is like to work in a specific organisation than to speak to someone already working there.

4.6 Do you have any other questions?

This is the one question you are guaranteed to be asked. Before exploring ways of how to use this opportunity at the end of the interview, a word of caution, I would avoid bringing up the topic of salary or remuneration especially if it hasn't been raised already by the interviewers. The same goes for holiday entitlements or other employment benefits. These topics can be discussed later, either at a subsequent interview, or when hopefully you are offered the job.

In Chapter One I stated that the purpose of the interview is for the interviewers to gather information about you so they can make an informed decision as to whether or not you are the right candidate for the role. From your perspective it is useful to think about what you would like to learn about the organisation to help you decide if the role, or the company, is the right one for you. If all your initial questions about the company or the role have not been answered, then this is your opportunity to seek clarity.

Examples of questions to ask –

'What training will the successful candidate receive?'

'Who would I report to?'

'To be considered a success in this role, what would the successful candidate need to achieve in the first six months?'

'When will I hear about the outcome of this interview?'

Of course you don't need to ask a question, but there are ways you can use this time at the end of the interview to your advantage.

4.6.1 Asking a question that demonstrates your knowledge

Traditionally, interview candidates try to think of a question in advance to ask at the end of the interview that will impress the interviewers. Maybe you have read something about the organisation online and you shape a question that displays your knowledge and interview preparation. You don't want to come across as a know-it-all, but a well phrased question about something topical, that is relevant to the company, will usually be well received.

4.6.2 Adding to an earlier answer

Often during an interview we will be asked a question that with hindsight we wish we had answered differently. Even by the end of the interview we may have thought of one or two additional points we could have made. Rather than leaving the interview wishing you had said something else, use this opportunity to seek permission to supplement your answer.

'I don't have a question per se, but I've thought of one or two additional points I'd like to share about (the question asked earlier.) Would it be ok to share them now?'

The majority of the time, the interviewer will say go ahead. You can then make your additional points. The only occasion when this may not be possible is when the interview is strictly timed and the interviewer may feel it would be unfair to the other candidates to allow you to redress an earlier response.

4.6.3 Drawing attention to a strength or competency

This one is only for the brave and usually only relevant for more senior positions. This is an opportunity to refer to a skill or strength that you feel wasn't discussed during the interview. You have to be careful with how you phrase it, as you don't want to come across as pushy.

Here's an example. Suppose 'leadership' is a competency listed in the job description and it is also a strength you wish to emphasise, but the topic wasn't addressed directly in the main body of the interview.

'I don't have a question as such, but I know from the job description that leadership is a required competency for the role. You may have all the information you need from me already, but I would like to think that leadership is one of my main strengths and I would hate to leave the interview without mentioning it.'

A statement like this may prompt the interviewer to ask a few questions on the topic, or the interviewer may say they have what they need. Either way, you are being proactive and you won't leave the interview regretting not raising the issue.

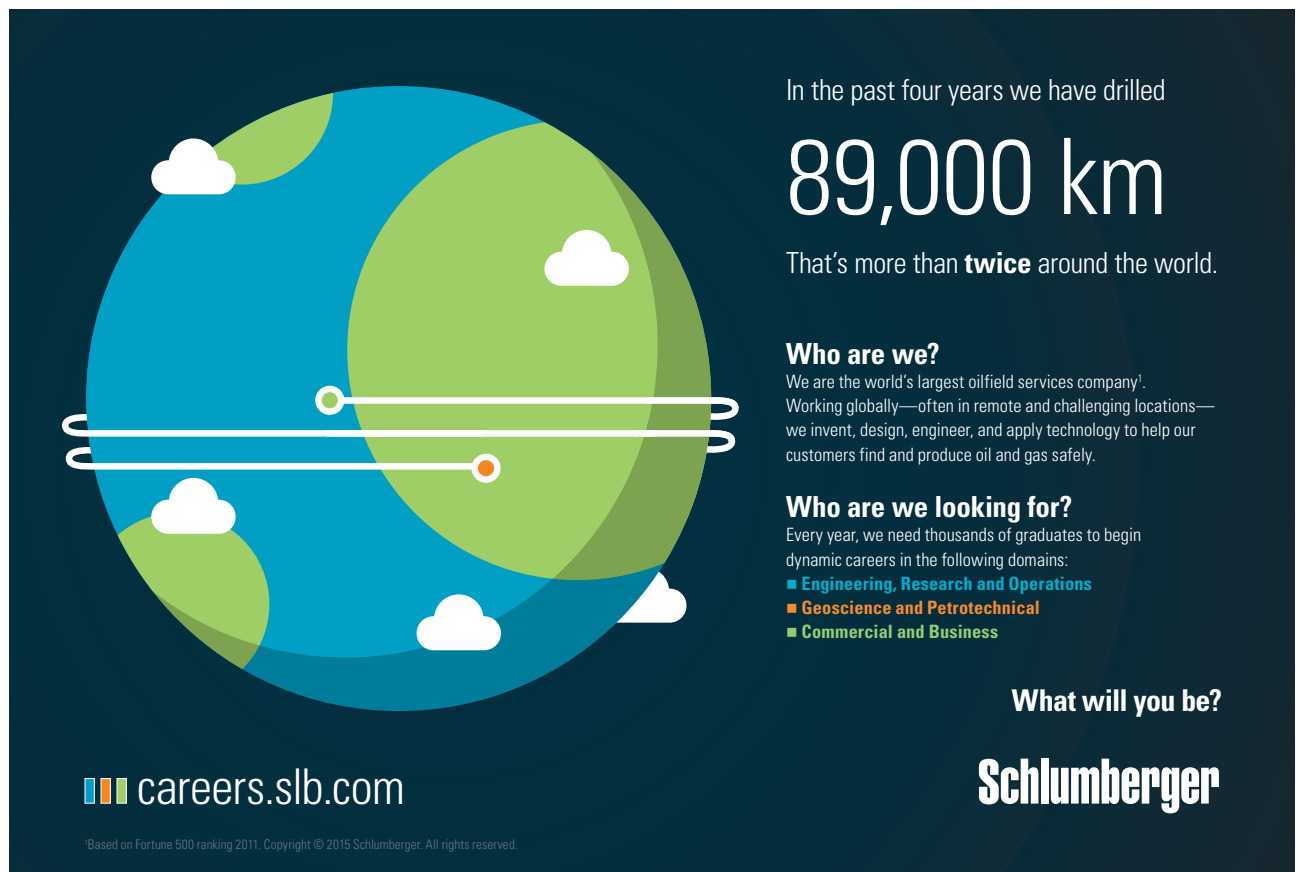
4.6.4 Closing on a strong positive note

Whether you have an additional question or not, this part of the interview, when the floor is open to you, is an opportunity to conclude the interview leaving a good impression in the minds of the interviewers. It is always nice to thank the interviewers and to make a brief positive statement.

'I don't have any additional questions, but I would like to thank you for inviting me for interview. This role sounds exciting and I would relish the opportunity of working here.'

4.7 The Curveball Question

Before we conclude this chapter there is one additional type of question that is worth exploring – the curveball question, the one we didn't see coming.



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If you are applying for a senior position or a role where dealing with stressful situations is part of the job, the interviewers will usually endeavour to create an environment of stress in the interview to see how you respond. The most common way they do this is to ask you some questions where they don't expect you to know the answers. It can also happen that one member of the interviewing panel will play the role of devil's advocate. He or she will ask the challenging questions and may come across as unfriendly and unsympathetic. That is the role they are playing, so don't take it personally!

When the interviewer asks you detailed, testing questions, remember the main reason they are doing this is to determine how you react. Do you try to waffle your way through? Do you go to pieces? Do you just sit there in stunned silence? Ideally you want to respond in a professional way that demonstrates your self control, even your unflappability.

Challenging, stress-inducing questions generally fall into two categories. The first are technical or legal questions where a very detailed level of knowledge is required to answer them. You will obviously answer every question to the best of your ability, but if you feel you don't have the knowledge to answer the question as accurately as you would like, say so. Rather than saying 'I don't know' which implies you have zero knowledge, use the phrase 'I'm not 100% sure' which implies some knowledge. If you have some ideas on the issue raised, share what you know.

The second category of challenging questions is when the interviewer outlines a hypothetical scenario and asks you how you would deal with it. A hypothetical scenario requires you to offer your opinion and remember your opinion is always valid, because it is your opinion.

'To the best of my knowledge this is what I would suggest doing now..., but I would be confident that if I was faced with that scenario in real life, I would know where to find the information and if necessary I would ask a colleague for their assistance or advice.'

In the real world that is usually what would happen anyway!

More general interview questions are listed in the Appendix.

5 Congruent Communication & Your Personal Brand

5.1 Verbal Communication – The Components

You probably have not heard of Professor Albert Mehrabian but you may have come across his widely quoted rule. In his studies, Professor Mehrabian found that:

- 7% of the message communicated (pertaining to feelings and attitudes) is found in the actual words that are spoken.
- 38% of the message is paralinguistic (the way that the words are expressed e.g. tone.)
- 55% of the message is found in facial expressions.

Whilst the 7%:38%:55% rule is often used out of context, it is a useful reminder to us that only a small part of what we communicate comprises of the words we speak. Facial expressions, our body language and the way our words are expressed, play a significant part.

When we think about preparing for an interview, we will put a lot of time and effort into preparing our possible answers, the words we want to say. Now we are going to look at how we express those words and the impact the non-verbal aspects of our communications have on the interviewers.

5.2 The ways we can use our voice

In most conversations we are not consciously aware of how we are using our voice, other than to express words. Going into an interview it is useful to be aware of the options available to us in terms of vocal delivery.

- Volume

We want to be easily heard, so we need to speak loudly enough so the interviewers are not straining their ears.

- Tone

A monotone voice is boring and lacks emotion. Equally, at an interview you don't want to come across as animated or forced. When we vary our tone we are demonstrating energy and enthusiasm. If you feel you struggle in this area, practice by repeating the same sentence portraying a different emotion each time.

- Clarity

You want to speak clearly and be in control of your words. This conveys confidence. If you have a tendency to mumble practice repeating the vowel sounds which works the vocal cords (it's what singers do!)

- Emphasis

We will naturally emphasise words to draw attention to the important points we are making. Emphasising words punctuates our delivery and it steers the interviewer to the key parts of our answer.

- Speed

Speaking too fast is a common trap people fall into during interviews, usually as a result of being nervous. When we are breathing quickly, we will speak quickly. The antidote is to control your breathing (see 6.3.2.) A measured delivery demonstrates confidence and leadership.

- Pauses and Silences

If you are nervous the tendency can be to jump into answering the question before the interviewer has stopped speaking. If we pause just for a second before answering, it gives us a moment to think and to respond in a considered way.



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5.3 Beware of verbal fillers

In linguistic terms, a verbal filler is a sound or a word used in conversation to indicate that you have paused to think, but are not finished speaking. Some of the common fillers are ‘like,’ ‘you know,’ ‘basically,’ ‘right,’ ‘I mean,’ ‘actually,’ ‘just,’ and ‘mmm.’ We will all be guilty of these from time to time, but during an interview we want to eliminate them as much as possible. Too many verbal fillers suggest we are unsure, lacking in confidence and inarticulate.

As mentioned in Chapter Three (3.3.1) communication skills is a competency that is measured during the actual interview. Excessive use of verbal fillers will negatively impact on the interviewers’ assessment of you. Some verbal fillers, like the words ‘just,’ ‘I suppose,’ and ‘basically,’ devalue what follows them. The overall effect of too many verbal fillers is that they communicate uncertainty and to be successful, you want the interviewers to have confidence in what you are saying.

5.4 How to minimise verbal fillers

How we speak during an interview is partly determined by our speaking habits and partly determined by our thinking about the interview process. For example, if you believe that interviews are tricky and that the interviewer is trying to catch you out, you will probably speak too fast in an effort to get the interview over with as quickly as possible. Similarly, if you have some limiting beliefs about your own abilities, these will come across in how you speak. For example, if you believe that your answers won’t be good enough or that you don’t deserve the job, there will be plenty ‘justs,’ ‘I supposes,’ and ‘basicallys’ in your language.

More positive thoughts, more empowering beliefs will minimise your verbal fillers. How about these beliefs?

- The interviewers want to learn about me so they want me to be relaxed and to speak clearly.
- The interviewers cannot wait to hear what I will say to them.
- The interviewers are professional at what they do and I’m professional at what I do, so this is really a conversation between equals.

Not only are beliefs like these helpful, they are probably true!

5.5 A quick note on listening

When we think of poor communicators we usually think of poor listeners. Whilst the interviewers do most of the listening in an interview, we have to listen attentively as well, to ensure we are answering the actual questions being asked.

We all know how to listen, but equally we know that just because we are not speaking doesn't mean we are necessarily listening, we could be distracted by a range of factors including the voice in our heads. When we are nervous our mind can race, making it more difficult to listen attentively, all the more reason to keep our nerves under control. (See Chapter Six)

5.6 The do's and don'ts of Body Language

We might like to think that we don't judge books by their covers, or people by their appearance, but the reality is different. Research has shown that we form our impression of someone within seconds of meeting them, often before we have even shaken their hand. This impression is based on non-verbal communication, that is, the person's appearance and their body language.

Interviewers are usually not experts in body language; they are not going to scrutinise your every move and gesture. They will however notice if you are uncomfortable, or if your body language is not consistent with what you are saying.

Body language is not an exact science, different postures and gestures can mean different things depending on the context. However what follows are some general guidelines, some do's and don'ts when it comes to body language during an interview.

5.6.1 Handshake

Sometimes an interview can be over before it even begins. Many interviewers operate on the premise that a weak handshake denotes a weak candidate. Similarly a bone-crunching handshake can mean over confident or someone trying too hard. We only notice handshakes when they are not right. If you are not sure about yours, practice it and ask for feedback.

5.6.2 Facial Expression

A pleasant expression communicates you are relaxed and friendly. Unfortunately, a nervous expression can easily be confused with a stern, defensive or unfriendly one. As a general rule it is better not to show too much strong emotion during an interview as it can bring your self control into question. Sometimes when we are nervous we will laugh, but avoid laughing at your own answers. Smile and nod as you normally would during a conversation. Remember an interview is not an interrogation.

5.6.3 Upright posture

When the interviewer offers you a seat, you want to sit upright and a tip to ensure this happens is to keep your lower back against the back of the chair. This also means you are not perched on the edge of the chair which can indicate being tense or uneasy. An upright posture allows us to breathe more easily which helps us feel calmer. Slouching is to be avoided as it gives the impression you are too relaxed, maybe even lacking in enthusiasm or self-esteem. Leaning to one side, can be viewed in the same way, or perhaps that you are not comfortable in the room.


5.6.4 Open body Language

During most interviews you will be seated at a table, so the lower part of your body may not be as visible. Today many interviews take place at a round table or even on sofas to create a more relaxed informal atmosphere, but the rules for open body language remain the same.

If crossing your legs is comfortable for you make sure they are loosely crossed at the knee. Crossing your legs higher up can communicate a defensive attitude. When we are interested in a conversation, we will naturally lean forward. It can be difficult to do this when our legs are crossed.

Keeping both feet on the floor is a good default position (and it also makes us feel more supported.) An alternative is to cross your ankles under your chair. Men will sometimes rest an ankle on top of the other knee, at an interview this can come across as too casual and possibly even a touch arrogant.

Your upper body will be visible, so don't cross your arms. It might be just your habit, and of course it is something we instinctively do to protect ourselves, but to the interviewers it will communicate defensiveness and being uneasy in the room.

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5.6.5 Visible Hands

A great default position for your hands is to clasp them loosely either in your lap or on the table in front of you. Visible hands denote openness and trustworthiness. Sometimes people do strange things with their hands at interviews; they might sit on them or conceal them between their knees. This conveys anxiousness.

If your hands move when you talk, this is just part of who you are and usually is an indicator of energy and enthusiasm. However excessive hand motions can be a sign of nervousness and uncertainty. As a rule the more stable your hands and arms, the more confident and assured you are, but balance is key, you don't want to come across as rigid or stilted.

Knowing what you plan to do with your hands means you won't be tempted to fiddle with your hair, or rub your face. These little ticks and habits at an interview communicate uneasiness, nervousness and a lack of professionalism. Many body language experts will say that touching your face, particularly your nose and lips, is an unconscious indicator of lying.

Sometimes, men in particular will clasp their hands behind their head or on top of their head. Both postures are to be avoided during an interview. Leaning back with hands joined behind the head may just be a comfortable habit, but during an interview it will be seen as arrogant. Clasping your hands at the crown of your head communicates you are feeling challenged and thinking deeply. So if in doubt, keep your hands loosely clasped in your lap or on the table in front of you.

5.6.6 Eye Contact

Eye contact is essential as it is a key element in creating rapport with the interviewers. Poor eye contact, even if it is a symptom of nervousness, will make it difficult for the interviewer to relate to you.

Like a handshake we only notice eye contact when it is not right. During a normal conversation we will hold eye contact with the other person. Generally, it is the person speaking who will break eye contact for a moment before resuming it. Too much eye contact during the interview and we will come across as challenging or even aggressive. You want your eye contact to be as natural as possible.

The interviewers will probably take turns asking questions, so as we would do in a normal conversation, the person who asks the question will get most of our eye contact, but we will include the other interviewers in our answers by making intermittent eye contact with them as well.

It can be disconcerting when the interviewers are not looking at us when we are speaking, especially if they are taking notes. Whilst considered rude in a normal conversation, this is just what happens at an interview.

We know that looking down communicates shyness and lack of confidence, but it can also communicate insincerity. Avoiding eye contact by looking either side of the interviewer can communicate lack of trustworthiness or even aggressiveness. When we are thinking we may break eye contact and look upwards, this just means we are momentarily searching our brain for an answer.

5.7 Some final body language tips

5.7.1 Do a quick body language check during the interview

You can plan your body language, how you want to sit and how you want to position your hands before the interview. During the interview itself, your focus will be on responding to the questions as best you can, but it is a good idea to monitor your posture once or twice during the interview. It only takes a split second and you can do it easily when taking a sip of water. Sometimes a curve ball question might distract you and next minute you realise you have wrapped your legs around the legs of the chair. Similarly you might have relaxed into the interview and are now leaning to the side, in danger of toppling over.

5.7.2 Don't pay any attention to the interviewers' body language

Some candidates try to figure out what the interviewers are thinking by reading the interviewers' body language, but remember body language isn't an exact science. If an interviewer is sitting across from you with arms folded and legs crossed, that might just be his habit or maybe he is cold! Either way, you have enough to be focusing on during an interview without paying too much attention to the interviewers' posture.

5.8 Determining your Personal Brand

When we think of the term branding, we usually think of big organisations who spend millions on determining the experience they want customers or potential customers to have when they connect with any aspect of their business. Personal branding takes the same principles and applies them at an individual level.

In essence, personal branding is about how we market ourselves. It is the experience we want others to have when they interact with us. At an interview, your personal brand is the words the interviewers will use to describe their impression of you and their experience of interviewing you. To stand a chance of being offered the role, the words you want the interviewers to use to describe you need to be positive. It therefore makes sense to give some thought to how you want to be perceived. In other words, you want to work on defining your personal brand.

You start to think about our personal brand by asking yourself this question –

- By the end of the interview, what words would I like the interviewers to use to describe me and their experience of interviewing me?

You might come up with words like ‘professional’, ‘enthusiastic’ and ‘confident.’

You then ask yourself –

- How can I portray these qualities during the interview?

Tone of voice, body language and the content of your answers will all contribute to how you are perceived by the interviewers. So too will your qualifications and past experience. However, there are other factors that come into play as well.

5.9 Factors that influence your Personal Brand in an Interview

The interviewers are going to ‘brand’ you one way or the other. In the bigger scheme of things, the factors outlined below shouldn’t make a difference, but the reality is they do. By being aware of them, you can ensure that at minimum they don’t distract the interviewers from the quality of your answers. Some you can harness to your advantage.

5.9.1 Appearance and grooming

Are you appropriately dressed for the interview? This is the first thought interviewers will have when they see you. Their first impression of you will be formed before they ever ask you a question.



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The number one rule for appearance at an interview is that you want to be dressed professionally and in accordance with the accepted norms of the company. A traditional financial services firm will require a suit and tie for men and a business suit for women. Most companies in the IT or creative fields will be more relaxed. You want to communicate through your appearance that you look like someone who can just slot into the role.

You are not going to be offered the job based on what you are wearing, or how well groomed you are, but if what you are wearing is not appropriate, or if you look unkempt, you are negatively impacting on your chances of interview success. Interviewers will wonder that if you cannot put time and effort into how you show up for an interviewer, will you put time and effort into your work.

To avoid any last minute panic, plan in advance what you will wear. Attention to detail is important. For men, this means if you are wearing a tie, make sure it is straight, and the top button of your shirt is closed. Scuffed shoes or dirty fingers indicate a lack of attention to detail.

5.9.2 Accessories

You don't want any of the accessories you are wearing or carrying to distract the interviewers and detract from their overall experience of interviewing you. For example, it looks more professional to have your paperwork in a folder, rather than carrying them loosely. Some common pitfalls include chewing gum and having sunglasses perched on your head, both communicate that you are not taking the interview seriously.

5.9.3 Punctuality

In a business context, being late signifies a lack of professionalism. An interviewer will think that if you cannot be trusted with time, what else can you not be trusted with. If you are late for the interview, at best you have an uphill struggle to reverse a poor first impression, at worst they won't even meet with you.

A key part of interview preparation is knowing exactly where the interview is taking place and how you will get there. If you are not sure of the location seek directions and if the area is unfamiliar, consider visiting it beforehand. Factor in contingency time as well, just in case traffic is bad or the train is late.

5.9.4 Social Media

A new factor that influences our personal brand is our social media presence. If a company types your name into a search engine what will they find? LinkedIn is the social media platform that lends itself to business professionals. Do you have a profile? How does it read? More and more companies and interviewers will investigate your online presence particularly for more senior position and for roles that involve social media and digital marketing.

6 Managing nerves & portraying confidence

6.1 Why do we get nervous?

It is perfectly natural to be nervous before an interview because it is not something you do every day. Being interviewed is outside most people's comfort zones and when we are outside our comfort zone we feel self-conscious. Being asked to deliver a presentation (when you are not a frequent presenter) evokes a similar emotional response. At an interview, we are being asked to present/sell ourselves, and for many people that is like being in a spotlight, where any feelings of lack of confidence or nervousness are magnified.

It is important to remember that you are only nervous before an interview because you care about doing well and because you want the job. In other words, you are emotionally invested. If you didn't care about the job, you wouldn't be nervous, but you probably wouldn't do a very good interview either because you would be complacent.

A little nervousness and anxiousness is a good thing, the adrenaline in our body keeps us alert. That anxious feeling in the pit of our stomachs is also the price we have to pay in advance for the adrenaline buzz we will feel afterwards. So a little nervousness indicates that we care about the interview, we are emotionally invested in the outcome and it keeps us alert.

Experienced interviewers know that most candidates will be a little nervous especially at the start of the interview. Interviewers want to learn as much as they can about you, so in most instances it is in their interest for you to be comfortable in the room so you can converse with them more easily. (The exceptions to this are explored in Chapter 4.6) For this reason, the opening questions at an interview often relate to your personal interests, a topic interviewers feel will ease you into the interview.

Before we explore strategies for managing nerves and portraying confidence it is useful to remember that feelings of stress, anxiousness, nervousness, even fear, are all symptoms, the root cause is a feeling of not being in control. Therefore the better our preparation, the more in control we will feel, and the more in control we feel, the less nervous we will be.

During an interview there are many factors we cannot control; unpredictable questions, the interviewer's mood, the calibre of the other candidates, but one factor that is always within our control is our response to the uncontrollable. Managing ourselves, controlling our responses and how we are feeling, is really what the rest of this chapter is all about.

6.2 Why confidence is important

Interviewers want to feel confident that they are making the right decision in offering you the job, but it will be difficult for them to have confidence in their decision and in you, if you don't feel confident yourself.

Some people get confidence mixed up with arrogance. Arrogance is an unattractive quality. Arrogance raises its head when confidence outweighs competence. (If our competence outweighs our confidence then we are selling ourselves short and that really does us no favours at an interview.)

What is confidence? The origin of the word confidence is the Latin word *confidere* meaning to trust or to have faith in. So to approach something confidently is to approach it with faith, faith in ourselves, faith in our abilities and faith that everything will work out for the best.

6.3 Strategies for managing nerves and boosting self-confidence

The six strategies that follow will help you manage excess nervousness and connect with your self-confidence. They can of course be adapted and used more generally, not just in preparing for an interview.



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6.3.1 Visualisation

We visualise all the time, but we may have labelled it something else, like day-dreaming or even worrying. Visualisation is basically imaging scenarios in our heads. Picture the scene – it's the eve of an interview, you are lying in bed at night struggling to sleep. Your mind is racing, thinking about the day ahead. Although you are in the comfort of your bed, your head is at the interview and therefore you feel uneasy, even anxious and stressed.

In the above scenario which we can all relate to, we are visualising the interview, but in a haphazard, unfocused way. Our instinctive sense of self-protection prompts us to imagine everything that could go wrong – getting stuck in traffic and being late, going blank, being asked difficult questions, knocking over our glass of water and so on. This type of contingency thinking can be useful, we imagine the worst case scenarios which helps us prepare for all eventualities, but dwelling on them, allowing our mind to race doesn't serve us, nor is it conducive to a good night's sleep.

Visualisation as a specific preparation technique is most frequently associated with elite athletes and performers. However we can apply the same principles to assist us in our mental preparation for an interview.

Purposeful visualisation is about rehearsing in your mind how you want to perform a task. With your eyes closed you imagine, as best you can, every aspect of the interview. You won't know all the details in advance, but there is plenty you can work with.

- You know what you will be wearing to the interview.
- You know how you will be travelling to the interview.
- You will probably be waiting in a reception area, so you can visualise yourself getting composed before going into the interview.
- You may know where the interview is being held, so you can visualise yourself walking into the building or room.
- You may know the number of people interviewing you; you might even know who they are.
- You know the content of your CV or application form that will be the source of the initial questions.
- You will be sitting in a chair so you can visualise yourself sitting as you would like to sit.
- You won't know all the questions you will be asked, but you will be able to predict a good number of them and you can visualise yourself communicating your answers articulately.
- You may know the competencies they are seeking so you can visualise yourself sharing your examples that illustrate those competencies.
- You know you are going to be asked 'do you have any questions' and you can visualise your response.
- You can even visualise being asked a difficult question and how you take a moment to compose yourself and answer it to the best of your ability.

When you rehearse your interview in your mind, you are creating a roadmap for success. Positive purposeful visualisation allows you to harness all aspects of your preparation. It also enhances your feelings of control and the more in control you feel, the less stressed or nervous you will be.

6.3.2 Slow down your breathing

We all breathe, but sometimes we don't breathe as effectively as we should. When we are anxious, nervous or stressed we breathe high and fast in our chest. We are thinking nervous or stressful thoughts and our body is responding. When we do the opposite of what our body instinctively wants to do, that is, breathe slower and lower in our chests, we are sending a mixed message to our brain. We recognise that we are breathing more calmly, so our minds will relax too.

To breathe more deeply try this simple exercise. Place your hand on your stomach. (Breathing lower in our bodies means our diaphragm has to move down and our stomach needs to get out of the way. So breathing deeply will mean you will feel your hand moving in and out.)

Breathe in through your nose to the count of three. Hold your breath for a second, then breathe in again for a second count of three. (The second in breathe really expands the lungs.) Then slowly release your breath through your mouth to the count of six. Repeat this several times and feel your shoulders relax.

Breathing has the paradoxical benefits of both energising us (for example, breathing heavily after exercise) and relaxing us. Increasing our oxygen in-take boosts our alertness, but we will also feel calmer on the inside because we feel more in control of our body.

6.3.3 Three simple questions for re-focusing the mind

These short questions are a great quick fix for refocusing the mind.

- What's the worst that can happen?

This question gets us to view head on the specific issues that are worrying us. So what's the worst that could happen at an interview? You are not offered the job. You go blank. You waffle. You blush. In the bigger scheme of things so what. You will learn something and move on. When we look at the issues that are worrying us straight in the eye, they lose their power over us.

If we are in the habit of focusing on the negative, or worrying excessively, for a few moments why not focus on the opposite? So the second question is –

- What's the best that can happen?

This question gets us to think about our definition of a successful interview (above and beyond being offered the role.) Your answer might include – everything runs smoothly, I come across as professional and enthusiastic, I speak clearly and share some good examples, I manage my nerves and leave the room feeling I did my best.

Many people hope to ‘just get through’ an interview. You are going to ‘get through it,’ but to excel at the interview you want a higher benchmark of success.

- What’s likely to happen?

Because we are experts in knowing ourselves, our answer to this question will usually be quite accurate. It might not be exactly what we hope the ideal interview will be (the best that could happen,) but it probably won’t be the worst case scenario either. This question ensures our thinking is balanced.

6.3.4 Who do you admire?

This simple internal exercise is a great way to access our inner wisdom when we are feeling stressed or lacking in confidence. Why not give it a go now?



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List three people you admire. They may be people from your own circle, family or friends, or they may be in the public eye, you may never have met them but if they are in a newspaper or a magazine you might read about them. Maybe there is a business leader, an actor, a sports person you admire. There are no right or wrong answers, just go with whoever pops into your head.

For each person you note, list three qualities about them you admire. For example, one person I admire is Richard Branson and the qualities I admire in him are his determination, entrepreneurial spirit and his relaxed professionalism.

When we have listed the people we admire and the qualities we admire in them, we can then use this information to boost our confidence in two ways.

Firstly, we can ask ourselves what would one of the people I admire do if they were in my shoes, or, what advice would they give me if I could have a conversation with them right now. I may not know exactly what Richard Branson would say, but I could imagine it would be along the lines of ‘give it your best shot, be yourself, what’s the worst that can happen, it is only an interview.’ Useful sentiment to refocus my mind.

The second way we can use this exercise is to examine the qualities you have listed. Working with my example of determination, I can ask myself, how can I display more of this quality, how can I show more determination. Could I try to personify the qualities of the person I admire before and during the interview? If you approached your interview preparation with the mindset of one of the people you admire, what would you be doing differently?

This is an effective exercise because we are human beings, not human doings. When we focus on the qualities we want to portray, we are determining how we show up. This influences our demeanor at the interview and shapes the overall impression the interviewers will have of us.

6.3.5 Put on the Uniform of Confidence

In Chapter Five (5.6) we explored the topic of body language and how it is important to be aware of our body language to ensure the messages we communicate are congruent. Now we are looking at body language from a different perspective, we are using it as a tool for managing ourselves.

Picture for a moment someone standing at the top of a room and they are nervous, uncomfortable and seemingly lacking in confidence. What would their body language be like? They might be looking at the floor. Maybe their arms are folded and their shoulders are hunched. Perhaps their legs are crossed too or they are shifting from foot to foot.

In this instance the body language of the person at the top of the room is simply displaying the natural instinct we all have to protect ourselves. For example, folding our arms is a way of protecting the ribcage area, our heart and lungs in case we are physically attacked! Our heart beats faster and we breathe faster when we are nervous in case we need to 'fight or take flight.' Although we are not physically under threat during an interview, we can feel that our sense of self is under threat. To put it another way, we feel we can't simply be ourselves in the situation and therefore our body responds accordingly.

Now picture someone seated or standing at the top of the room and they appear to be a confident person. How would you know by just looking at them? What would their body language be like?

They are probably sitting or standing tall, shoulders back and spine straight. Their arms are relaxed and by their sides or in their lap. They will be looking outwards and making eye contact with other people. This body language is what I refer to as the 'uniform of confidence.' It is the body language you are displaying when you are naturally feeling confident and brimming with self-belief.

But here's the trick. If you know what the body language of confidence is (sitting straight, shoulders back, good eye contact) then why not put on the 'uniform of confidence' purposefully?

The 'uniform of confidence' communicates assurance and poise to the interviewers and although it may feel strange to you at first, it will also make you feel stronger and more supported. The time to practice wearing the 'uniform of confidence' is not at an interview, try putting it on during a meeting, or even when sitting at your desk. Initially it may feel like you are faking it until you make it, but with practice you will forge a new habit of body language and all the interviewers will see is someone who is comfortable being in the room.

6.3.6 Ask yourself Empowering Questions

If we want to feel more confident, we have to think more confident thoughts. Logical? Thoughts are simply a series of questions and answers in our heads. For example, look at what you are wearing right now. The clothes on your body represent the answer to many questions you asked yourself (some conscious, some unconscious.) For example, is this clean, is this smart enough, will this be warm enough, does this match and so on. The questions we ask ourselves determine our focus. So an effective way to manage ourselves, our feelings and our thinking, is to purposefully ask ourselves more empowering questions.

If you are feeling nervous going into an interview you are thinking thoughts that are fuelling those feelings. You will have a range of disempowering questions rattling around your head.

- What if they ask me a horrible question?
- What if I go blank?
- What if I don't get the job?

- What if I blush?
- What if I forget everything I have prepared?
- What if I'm late?

These are understandable questions, they are a symptom of our self-defence mechanism, but embarking on an interview, they are not the most useful questions to focus on.

When we ask questions that start with the two words 'what if' we are putting ourselves at the mercy of external events. These are contingency questions. We are thinking of the worst case scenario. Unfortunately we rarely answer these questions purposefully. (What if I go blank? Well, I'll take a deep breath and a sip of water, ask for a moment if necessary and then answer the question to the best of my ability!)

So what would be a better type of question to ask ourselves? Questions that start with the three words 'how can I?' bring us into the solution. When this question construct is combined with a positive focus, that is, something you want to do or achieve, then it becomes a powerful internal strategy for managing our mental state going into an interview.

Imagine the difference if you focus on these questions prior to your interview.

- 'How can I relate well to the interviewers?'
- 'How can I remain confident, yet relaxed throughout the interview?'
- 'How can I show them that I am the right person for the job?'
- 'How can I demonstrate motivation and enthusiasm during the interview?'
- How can I 'wow' them?
- How can I enjoy this experience?
- How can I learn from this?

By asking yourself empowering questions like these you are engaging your mind in a positive way. Even if you cannot consciously answer them, you are training your mind to search for an answer.

Changing our thinking habits requires conscious effort. We have to do it purposefully. Like the other tips shared in this chapter you can use this empowered questioning technique in a range of situations, before an important meeting, a presentation or even a date!

7 Final Tips

Over the last six chapters we have explored questions you are likely to be asked at an interview, how to demonstrate the required competencies, how to present yourself and hone your communications skills, and how to manage nerves and portray confidence.

Here are some final tips for before, during and after your interview.

- As well as getting you in the door of an interview, your CV and/or your application form will also be used by the interviewers as a source for questions. Make sure you are very familiar with all the information contained in them, especially if they were composed a few weeks prior to the interview.
- It is always a good idea to be able to explain your career path to date, the circumstances around changing jobs/ employer.
- As mentioned in Chapter Five (5.9.3) ensure you know exactly where the interview is taking place. Know your route for getting there and factor in some extra time just in case traffic is bad, you can't get parking, or your bus or train is delayed.
- Whilst waiting in the reception area to be called for the interview, practice relaxing by being conscious of your breathing. Remember, deeper breaths calms us down and also allows us speak in a more measured and purposeful way.
- If you want to practice your interview skills, consider applying for a job that you are not particularly interested in, for the sole purpose of polishing your skills. If the first interview you attend is for the ideal job that you really want, you are putting quite an amount of pressure on yourself.
- Use flashcards to aid your preparation. On one side, write the interview question and on the other, the key points you want to include in your answer. Shuffle the cards and invite a friend or family member to run through them with you. Rehearsing your answers aloud is more effective than just repeating them in your mind.
- When you have prepared well, don't fall into the trap of using your great preparation as a rod to beat yourself with. After an interview we can have a tendency to focus on what we didn't say, what we could have explained better, or the punchy phrase we forgot to include. Your thorough preparation means that even if the outcome of the interview is not what you would have hoped, you know you went into the interview having given it your best shot.
- If you are not offered the position, you will always have learned something from the interview process. It can be tough to do, but asking for feedback when you haven't been successful will help you prepare for the next interview.

- Harness your own learning by asking yourself these two questions after the interview.
 - What did I do well before and during the interview?
 - Next time, what would I do differently?

These questions will embed your learning and ensure you never get complacent when it comes to interview preparation.

One last piece of advice – at an interview your primary role is to be yourself, the best of yourself. If you try to be someone you are not, you will come across as insincere and it will be difficult for the interviewers to relate to you because you are not relating well to yourself. You are the expert at being you and you want to be hired for who you are.

Finally, let me wish you the best of luck for your future interviews, remembering of course the words of the Roman philosopher Seneca – ‘luck is what happens when preparation meets opportunity.’

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8 Appendix

Additional Interview Questions

Chapters Two, Three and Four contain the most common interview questions. Most interviewers will also ask questions relating to the specific role and your career path to date as outlined in your CV. Here are fourteen more generic questions that interviewers may ask.

1. What brings you the greatest satisfaction at work?
2. What preparation did you undertake for this interview?
3. What was the level of supervision in your last job?
4. What IT systems are you familiar with?
5. What words would you use to summarise your approach to your work?
6. Change is an on-going reality in companies, how do you respond personally to change?
7. Have you considered the option of doing more study/ gaining new qualifications?
8. What was the last book you read, or what's your favourite movie? (Innocuous questions, but could be asked if you have reading, or going the cinema noted as interests on your CV.)

For more senior positions –

9. In your opinion what are some of the key things an organisation has to do to manage diversity effectively?
10. What does an organisation need to get right to be known as a company that fosters staff development?
11. If we were to ask some of the people you managed in the past about you, what do you think they would say?
12. In your opinion, what are the main challenges facing the department, the company, the industry?
13. What words would you use to describe your ideal working environment and culture?
14. What business leaders do you admire and why?

9 Author Profile – James Sweetman

James Sweetman is a highly-rated and well-respected Executive and Personal Coach, Trainer, Motivational Speaker, Author and Columnist.

A leading authority on Staff Engagement, Motivation and Leadership he works with individuals and groups supporting and challenging them to realise their potential.

James has twenty five years experience in business and prior to establishing his own coaching and training practice in 2003, he held senior positions in a number of blue chip companies, working in the areas of change management, sales and business development, and customer relationship management.



James completed a MBA (Masters of Business Administration) in 1998 receiving a first class honours for his thesis on the topic of Motivation. He is also a certified NLP (Neuro-Linguistic Programming) Master Practitioner.

James Sweetman – Interview Skills Coach

James specialises in assisting candidates prepare for interview. He has helped hundreds of clients, from senior managers to those starting off in their careers to be successful at their interviews.

'I got the job, so thank you James. The Interview Skills Coaching session was extremely helpful. The feedback from the interviewers was that I came across like a leader and presented myself in the correct manner and that was thanks to you.' B. Ennis (Dublin)

James Sweetman – Executive & Personal Coach

James is now the 'go-to' coach for many international companies and is a sought-after personal coach for people who want to refocus or even revolutionise their lives.

As an Executive Coach, James works with people in three broad areas, skills enhancement, career development and work/life balance.

As a highly respected Personal Coach, James encourages and challenges his clients to connect with their passions in life, to refocus on what truly matters to them and to discard the limiting beliefs that hinder them from pursuing their dreams.

“Since completing my series of Executive Coaching sessions with James, I am more efficient and effective at work. I am achieving more whilst at the same time being less stressed about it. I am now able to work through tasks and challenges that would have troubled me in the past, with a greater sense of ease. My organisational, time management and communication skills have all improved. In my view anyone who wants to be more effective in their role would benefit from the type of coaching James Sweetman offers.” N. Ennis, Insurance Claims Manager (Dublin)

“What a fabulous coaching session; healing, restorative, enlightening, freeing and many more delightful words. James’ attuned sense of what I was willing to let go of, as well as what was most appropriate to my needs was spot on.” F. Bhrian (Dublin)

James Sweetman – Motivational Speaker

James’ ability to inspire and empower audiences comes from his unique blend of professionalism, insight and humour. This teamed with the directness and honesty that his topics require, has resulted in an impressive client list.

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James' talks are designed around specific themes that fall under the umbrella headings of Personal Development and Leadership. All his talks include an engaging combination of exercises and activities to ensure audience engagement and learning.

"After you reach a certain age, people (including me) tend to think that they've seen it all, done it all...nothing can surprise me" – Man was I wrong! What James presented to us was nothing but AMAZING! The strategies he shared were exactly what I needed, ways to stop negative thinking and how to boost the way I view myself and my confidence." A. Williams Microsoft (Norway)

Visit <http://www.jamessweetman.com/services/speaking> for more information.

James Sweetman – Trainer & Facilitator

James specialises in what are generally referred to as 'soft skills,' but which most organisations realise are really the 'hard skills.' These are also the skills that are the differentiating factors between average and outstanding performance in most fields of endeavour.

All of James' training programmes are tailored to meet the needs of the client organisation and the attendees. His style of delivery whilst professional and thought-provoking is informal and relaxed. James always endeavours to create an energised environment as this not only aids people's learning, but it makes the training more enjoyable. He blends training and coaching techniques during his workshops to embed learning.

Common training topics include;

- Professional Effectiveness
- Leadership
- Time Management & Organisational Skills
- People Management
- Supervisory Skills
- Personal Branding
- Communication Skills
- Presentation Skills
- Motivation & Goal-Setting
- Team Building
- Empowerment, Confidence & Assertiveness
- Train the Trainer

"The course presented by James was one of the best courses I've ever attended. James's delivery was very comprehensive and covered all the subject areas expected and more. The course was well structured and enjoyable. I would happily recommend James as a trainer and coach and I'd be very happy to attend one of his courses in the future." M. Gee, Aer Lingus, Ireland

"I thought that the course (Influencing & Negotiation Skills) was fab. James is a really effective trainer. I tend to go to a lot of seminars, talks and training courses so I interact with trainers all the time, but James' whole style and method was just in a league of its own." N. Lyons, RiseCreatives, Ireland

James Sweetman Author

James is the author of 'Graduate to Success – a guide book for climbing the career' and 'Soar – Powerful Questions that will transform you Life.' He has also produced a number of audio CDs including 'How to Excel at Interviews' and '15 ways to boost your Self-Confidence.'

View James' books and CDs at <http://www.jamessweetman.com/products>

James writes regular columns for a number of industry magazines. In 2005 he launched 'Next Steps,' a monthly business and personal development ezine which is read by thousands of subscribers in over 30 countries. He also writes a popular blog in which he discusses his own learning experiences as well as sharing tips and insights on a range of topics.

Browse James' blog and subscribe to 'Next Steps' his free monthly ezine at <http://www.jamessweetman.com>

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