Here’s the Good News!

Most interviews follow pretty much the same format – regardless of what the job or the company is. What most interviewers are concerned about can be categorised as follows:

- Your Awareness of your own Value
- Your Motivation
- Your Previous Decisions
- Your Skills/Strengths/Personal Qualities
- Your Awareness of the Business

Preparation is Key!

Most people find interviews a bit daunting – however, you can put yourself in the best possible position to succeed if you put the effort in before you even walk through the door of the interviewer’s office! Below is a series of steps that you need to have clear in your mind so that you are able to convince an employer that you are the best candidate for the role.

3 Essential Lists!

Begin your preparation by creating 3 essential lists that will help you to answer about 50% of the questions you will be asked at the interview.

**List 1:** Identify your strengths/assets that you believe you will bring to both the role and to the organisation as a whole

*Hint: Focus on your ‘assets’ that most closely match the needs of the employer!*

**List 2:** Identify your personal reasons for wanting to work for the organisation?

*Hint: Are they YOUR reasons? Are they specific to that particular organisation?*

**List 3:** Identify what has made you decide to apply for a job in this particular field?

*Hint: Demonstrate your career planning ability and role awareness.*
Typical Question Types

Q. Why did you decide to.....?

Very often an employer will be keen to find out why you made particular choices at various stages of your life so far. The most common questions in this area include, “Why did you decide to study your degree subject? "Why did you choose Heriot-Watt?” “Why have you decided to embark on a career as an .......?”

Decision Making: Any ‘decision making’ question can be answered using the following structure

1. First you might want to talk about the context that led to a decision needing to be made
2. Next, talk about the specific ‘outcomes’ that you wanted to achieve with this decision
3. Talk about how you investigated all the possible options that were available to you
4. Talk about how you used your outcomes 'list' to narrow down all possible options
5. Finally, talk about what it was specifically about the option you eventually did decide upon that made it the ‘best’ decision for you

Q. “What are your Strengths/Weaknesses?”

First the easy bit - you have already identified your strengths in List 1 (see over), so now it’s just a case of telling them how your strengths will benefit you in the role - and the company as a whole.

Let’s be honest - the ‘weaknesses’ question that often throws candidates during an interview. The main problem is that most people think that it is a trick question designed to catch you out and expose you as an unsuitable for the role!

Good news! The actual reason that employers ask this question is to find out how aware you are of your development needs and to be sure that you have considered how to deal with this.

Try to consider any question relates to your weaknesses along the following lines

1. Think about what you would like to include in any training plan that the company might put in place for you and highlight:
2. What technical skill are you would like to develop further
3. Why will this be useful to you in the role
4. What form this training/skills development might take

Hints: Avoid discussing your personal qualities. Try to focus on a technical skill that can be improved through training. Make sure that you avoid talking about skills that are central to carrying out the role!!

Q. Tell me about a time when you.....?

Now we get to the heart of any competency based interview – describing your skills/strengths in a way that clearly demonstrates you have what the company is looking for and you know why they are important to the job you have applied for.
Competency Questions

Any ‘competency’ question can be answered using the following structure.

1. **CONTEXT**: Place your example story in context, explaining what the main elements of the situation were.

2. **ISSUES**: Demonstrate that you were able to identify what the critical issues were in this situation.

3. **PROCESS**: Talk about the thought process you went through to arrive at your ‘action plan’.

4. **ACTION**: Tell the story of how you implemented your action plan and highlight any issues you had to overcome.

5. **IMPACT**: Finally, talk about how your critical thinking and direct actions had a positive impact on the situation and, as a result, a positive impact on the company’s business.

Hint: Make sure that in telling your story, your interviewer has a clear picture of you being competent in: Dealing with Problems --> Identifying Critical Issues --> Taking Direct Action --> Having an impact

Business Awareness

First and foremost, you MUST be clear about what the organisation does and how the role you are applying for fits into the future success of the business.

Most companies will also expect you to demonstrate evidence of your awareness of the main issues affecting that organisation in the short and longer terms, the key issues that affect the business sector you hope to be employed in and the implications of current ‘big changes affecting the world of commerce and industry.

Commercial Acumen: The following are some suggestions to help you deal with this type of question:

1. Know the overall business, the sub divisions of the business and your own future service line
2. Be clear about how the business operates and makes its money
3. Know what makes the organisation you are applying to successful in its field
4. Think about a successful company you know and try to identify what makes it stand out from its competitors

Hint: As well as the more well known names, you can also talk about the company you have worked for part-time whilst studying at university as you should have good knowledge about how they go about their business; their market; their products/services; their competitors etc.

Remember!

- You need to know about the employer
- You need to know about the job.
- You need to know how you can add value to the organisation!
- You need to be able to tell stories of how and when you made a positive impact
On the day of the Interview

Travel
- Give yourself plenty of time to get there.
- Confirm where the interview is being held.
- Decide how you will get there and the time it will take
- Take contact details for the company in case of unavoidable delays.
- Decide what you need to take with you.

Dress Code
- Personal presentation is crucial to the image you convey
- Think how people generally dress in the organisation you have applied for.
- In general, it's best to be conventional so wear a suit or smart dress.

Final Preparation
- Have a copy of your CV or application with you and focus on your key strengths and achievements.
- Try simple relaxation techniques such as taking a few deep breaths.

The Format
Interviews can vary in format from what is billed as ‘a casual chat’; a formal structured panel interview with several interviewers; a telephone interview or, increasingly, video interviews.

Most graduate interviews are competency based, i.e. they ask for examples of when you have already utilised your skills effectively.

Whatever the format, your preparation and performance should be the same in all instances as the purpose of the interview is always the same.

The interview could last from twenty minutes to more than an hour.

Your Questions
It is important to work out your own questions based on what you need to know. Areas you might want to consider include:

The organisation - current projects, future developments.
The job - what you would be doing on a day to day basis, typical projects and timescales.
Training - what opportunities there would be for new graduates, support for professional exams/chartered training, mentoring or appraisal systems.
Colleagues - who you would be directly working with, who would supervise you.
Location - where you would be based, how much travel would be involved/mobility.
Prospects/salary - criteria for promotion, opportunities for specialisation or moving to other departments within the company. **It is not a good idea to ask about salary**, especially if this is the only question you ask!! If salaries are not discussed during the interview or stated elsewhere, there would an opportunity to deal with this when a job offer is made.

Notification of the outcome of the interview – ask the interviewer when a decision is likely to be made or what the next stage of the selection process will be.

Hint: Make sure you don’t ask the interviewers anything you could have found out from the information available to you. On the other hand, don’t embarrass them by asking anything too technical or obscure.