Guidance on preparing for and conducting a job interview

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1. Introduction

Conducting an interview is one stage of the recruitment process where preparation and structure are essential. An interview which is badly prepared and conducted could mean you lose a great candidate, as during the selection process candidates are deciding whether they want to work for you just as much as you are trying to decide whether to hire them. Therefore a consistent, methodical approach to interviewing will allow you to overcome some pitfalls, whilst enabling you to identify and engage with the best person for the job.

Here are some tips to help you prepare for and conduct a good interview. Many of these are common sense, however often the basics are omitted which leads to a poor experience for both the candidate and the interviewer and could potentially risk a discrimination claim.

2. Preparing for the interview

- **Fully explain the interview process to the candidate in the invitation**

  Make sure there are no surprises and no uncertainties for the candidate on the day of the interview. In the candidate's interview invitation, ensure you provide full details on:

  - when the interview will be
  - who the candidate will be meeting (provide job titles and departments for all interviewers)

- where they need to go
- who to ask for on arrival
- approximately how long the interview will be
- what they need to bring (e.g. evidence of right to work in the UK; academic qualifications)
- what they need to prepare
- any access issues relating to the venue
- if they require any reasonable adjustments.

If there are any job-related selection tests, provide full details on what the test will entail, how it will be delivered and any associated timings. For example if there is a presentation required, provide a clear and concise brief, and advise on whether any equipment will be available (such as a laptop or flip chart) and how long the presentation should be.

Always provide the interview details in writing with as much notice as possible, ideally at least five working days before the interview. The same written information should be given to all candidates.

If you need any guidance or support with regards to reasonable adjustment requests, please contact the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion team (equalities@ucl.ac.uk).

- **Review the candidate's application**

  Fully review the candidate's application form or CV, along with any other accompanying documents submitted as part of their application; this will show the candidate that you have taken the time to ensure a productive interview takes place. However, avoid developing any preconceptions. Do not assume anything; the interview will allow you to gain a better understanding of what the candidate can bring to the job so always take an open-minded approach when you interview.

- **Truly understand what you need**

  Thoroughly familiarise yourself with the Job Description, particularly the criteria as defined in the Person Specification, as you will be assessing the candidate against this criteria. This will also ensure that you will be able to explain all aspects of the Job Description if asked by the candidate. You should determine the required outputs and performance success factors for the job, and define a list of the key competencies and behaviours you believe that a candidate needs to be able to perform the job.

- **Consider the use of job-related tests**
  Using job-related exercises as part of the selection process can be useful to assess elements of the Person Specification that are difficult to test at interview, providing supplementary information to enable you to make an informed selection

decision. These can consist of presentations, role plays, in-tray exercises, and aptitude tests. Tasks chosen for the test should be representative of the job and should include important aspects of job that can be measured by clear criterion. If you chose to include a job-related test as part of the selection process, you must advise candidates of this in advance.

- **Prepare your interview questions**

  Ask each candidate the same set of structured questions to provide a standard basis to compare candidates' answers after the interview process. You should allow sufficient time to devise the interview questions in advance, and ensure that the questions fully reflect what you are looking for in the successful post holder.

  There are many different approaches to creating interview questions (see below). Whatever approach taken, you should ensure that they are open ended ("how", "what", "when", "why") to encourage more input from the candidate, and avoid questions which are leading or closed-end (questions which elicit a "Yes" or "No" response).

  Different types of interview questions:

i. Fact-based or general questions are a good way to start the interview as they ask for clarification or elaboration on the information provided in the candidate's application. For example, you could ask that they talk you through their career highlights or their two most recent jobs, or their technical experience and knowledge. The aim of these questions should be to assess whether the candidate is a good match to the criteria as set out in the Person Specification within the Job Description. You could also ask questions about their aspirations for their next role and their motivation for applying for the vacant job (e.g. "Can you tell us what attracted you to apply for this role?" or "How do you see this role fitting in with your career aspirations? What are you looking for in your next role?").

ii. Hypothetical questions ask the candidate to explain what they would do if placed in a certain hypothetical situation (e.g. "What would you do in a situation where…?"). However be aware that the candidate could give you an expected answer which is not truly reflective of how they operate in real life situation.

iii. Values-based questions will help you to understand whether the candidate's priorities are aligned with your team's / UCL's goals, what the candidate prioritises in the workplace, and what drives their behaviours at work. Whilst it is important to hire the best qualified candidate, it is equally important to hire the most suitable candidate who will be the best cultural fit for your team and UCL and who shows an affiliation with and commitment to UCL's core values (as outlined below).

UCL’s Core Values	
Commitment to excellence and advancement on merit	Openness
Fairness and equality	Ethically acceptable standards of conduct
Diversity	Fostering innovation and creativity
Collegiality and community-building	Developing leadership
Inclusiveness	Environmental sustainability

Whilst candidates may intrinsically demonstrate evidence of the core values when answering questions throughout their interview, it is recommended that a couple of values-based questions are asked directly. Therefore you should consider which are the most relevant and crucial to the vacant job, and design some questions around those values to establish the candidate’s fit with UCL’s culture.

iv. Competency-based or behavioural questions ask for specific examples of past performance and competency or behaviour. “Competency" is a concept linking three parameters – knowledge, skills and attitude. For example you might have good interpersonal skills (skills), but will not be competent to join a company as Project Manager unless you possess adequate education and experience (knowledge) and the right temperament/behaviour (attitude).

The below gives a non-exhaustive list of the more common skills and competencies that you can ask candidates to demonstrate:

Skills and competencies for competency based interviews		
• Adaptability / Flexibility • Analytical Thinking • Compliance • Communication • Conflict Management • Drive for Results • Influencing and Negotiating	• Innovation and Change • Integrity • Leadership • Leveraging Diversity • People Management • Planning and Organising • Problem Solving / Decision Making	• Relationship / Partnership Approach • Quality, High Standards and Controls • Resilience and Tenacity • Service Excellence • Team Building / Team Working

It is recommended that three skills/competencies are assessed in the interview, therefore (as with the core values as referenced above) you should carefully consider which are the most relevant and essential to the job.

An interviewer can drive a host of positive objectives and outcomes simply by using competency or behaviour based questions. Candidates are asked questions relating to their behavior in specific circumstances, which they then need to back up with concrete examples from their past experience. Valuable insight can be learned including pinpointing the candidate’s strengths and suitability for the job, and uncovering potential developmental areas.

Please note that this approach to interview questioning is recommended when assessing the Ways of Working themes for professional services roles. When interviewing for such roles you should ask questions relating to the Ways of Working indicators you referenced in the Person Specification; there is no need to additionally ask questions relating to other competencies. For more information on Ways of Working please visit this page or speak to your HR Business Partner, who have access to an extensive bank of interview questions which align to our Ways of Working and have been formulated based on the grade of the role.

In order for competency or behavioural questions to be most effective, they require three elements:

- The lead
- The question
- The behaviour

Using these elements and taking the Ways of Working theme of 'Personal Excellence' as an example, an illustration of a robust behavioural question would be:

'At UCL we value commitment and delivering a valued service when working to achieve an objective. Describe a time you were able to respond quickly to a request for support.'

The above question is robust because it uses:

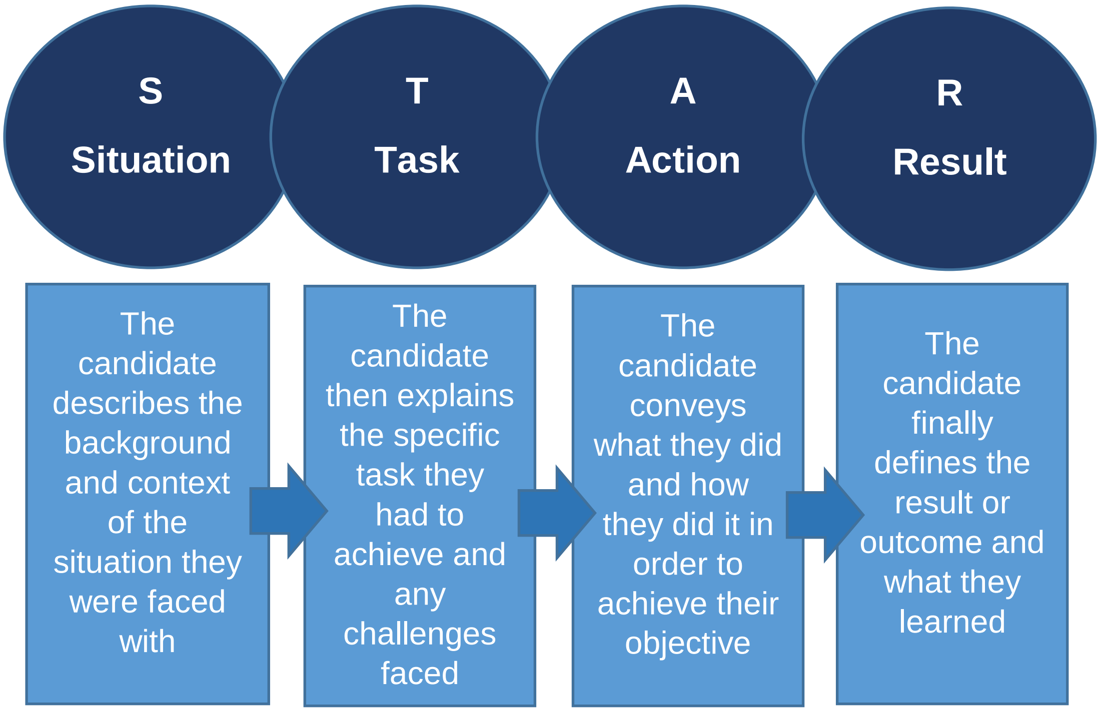
- **The lead** – 'At UCL we value commitment and delivering a valued service when working to achieve an objective'. An opening line like this informs the candidate of what we're expecting in the job and telegraphs what we are looking for. A good lead will make it easy for the candidates who have what the interviewer is looking for to differentiate themselves and make the hiring manager's decision as simple as possible.

- **The question** – Behavioural questions should ask candidates for a narrative and story that demonstrates the qualities you are looking for. When asked correctly, behavioural questions encourage a longer answer than candidates are normally inclined to give. Questions often take the form of:

  Tell me about a time when…
  Describe a situation where…
  When have you had to…?
  Share with me an example of you demonstrating…
  Give me an example of a situation when…
  Think of a time when…

- **The behaviour** – This is closely linked to the lead. The lead provides an idea of the job we want a person to do and the behaviour looks at how they approached a relevant scenario in the past.

This approach to interview questioning, which can also be applied when asking values-based questions, will enable the candidate to use the 'STAR' technique to structure their answers clearly and concisely, ensuring their responses are based on a specific examples from their past experience. 'STAR' is an acronym for four key concepts:



Answers that are elicited using this technique will allow you to evaluate each candidate using a structured and consistent approach. Therefore, as well as devising the questions for each competency, you should determine which type of answers (sometimes called 'model answers') would score positive points and which types of answers would count against the candidate. For example, for a question on the competency 'Planning and Organising', the positive and negative indicators may be as follows:

Planning and Organising	
Positive Indicators	**Negative Indicators**
• Shows awareness of time limits or fixed time periods. • Employs a specific time management strategy or style. • Is able to handle multiple responsibilities simultaneously. • Shows evidence of preparation before undertaking a complex task. • Is able to work with, utilise or collaborate with multiple separate parties. • Shows evidence of commitment and focus towards the stated goal.	• Shows little or no awareness of time constraints or fixed time periods. • Does not employ a time management strategy or style. • Only handles a single responsibility at any given time. • Does not show evidence of preparation before undertaking a complex task. • Is unable, or unwilling to collaborate with multiple involved parties.

• Provides pragmatic and practical approaches to organisation. • Shows evidence of “taking responsibility” for actions. • Provides examples of undertaking tasks and responsibility beyond what is merely required. • Adopts a medium/long term perspective to achieving goals.	• Does not provide evidence of pragmatic or practical approaches to organisation. • Does not “take responsibility” for their own actions. • Only provides evidence for the minimum amount of responsibility required. • Adopts a strictly short term perspective to achieving goals.

- **Prepare your scoring system**

  A rating/score should be allocated to each of the candidate’s answers, depending on the extent to which the answer matches the positive and negative indicators for each competency. In some cases, negative indicators can be split into two further sections: minor negative indicators (which do not matter that much) and decisive negative indicators (which are more important).

  This same scoring logic can be applied to the answers to non-behavioural questions, such as general questions about the candidate’s experience or qualifications, and values-based questions.

  Here’s an example of how you would mark each of the candidate’s answers:

- **Questions to avoid**

  Some topics should be avoided to ensure the interview does not fall foul of discrimination legislation. Questions regarding whether the candidate has a protected characteristic (as defined by the Equality Act 2010) or around circumstances arising from a protected characteristic should be avoided for example, such as “Are you married?”, “Do you have children?”, “How old are you?”. The act of asking the question is not in itself a discriminatory act; the risk lies where these questions have been asked and then the job is not offered to that person, as they could claim the answer to the question influenced the decision to not offer them the job.

- **Create an interview question and evaluation form**

  Once you have devised your interview questions, the positive indicators for each competency and your scoring system, draw up an interview evaluation form to be completed independently by each selection panel member after each interview has taken place. This scoring sheet can take a number of different formats, however should include the following:

  - candidate’s name
  - role the candidate is being interviewed for
  - interviewer’s name / all panel members’ names
  - interview time and date
  - interview questions and associated competencies/behaviours/skills being assessed
  - scoring scale parameters (i.e. 1 = no evidence; 2 = areas for concern etc.)
  - score for each of the candidate’s answers
  - notes / comments section for each of the candidate’s answers.

  If you would like an example of an interview question and evaluation form, please contact your HR Business Partner.

3. <u>Conducting the interview</u>

- **Provide a welcoming environment to develop a rapport**

  To get the best out of a candidate, you need to create a welcoming environment; and it is in your interest to develop a rapport with the candidate as soon as possible so that you can get the best out of them in the interview. Ensure you make a good impression! Be warm, personable and forthcoming. Introduce all panel members and provide the context of how each of their roles will interact with the post holder of the vacant job. Have water available and where possible ensure that the room is not too cold or hot.

  Often a candidate can be overcome by nerves, so do what you can to alleviate their unease. Some non job-related questions can go a long way, for example ask some ice-breaker questions initially such as how their journey was or how their day has been so far. It helps to talk the candidate through the structure of the interview so that they know what to expect, as well as allowing you both to keep focused. If a candidate is so nervous that they are unable to answer your question, rephrase the question and add an example, or elaborate on the question with more detail.

- **Converse, don't interrogate**

  An interview should be a two-way conversation, a mutual exchange of information, rather than the candidate (or the interviewer) doing all the talking. Allow the candidate sufficient time to answer each question, and phrase each question in a way that will allow the candidate to expand. As an interviewer you should be fully engaged – not just a person who reads out the questions. If the conversation takes a turn off topic, go with it, but do not let such a diversion change the total direction of the interview.

  The most revealing answers often come from follow up questions, so follow the candidate's initial answer with "why…?", "when…? , "what was the outcome?", "who did what?" etc.

- **Be productive, not disruptive, with note-taking**

  Strike a balance between active note-taking and active listening, and do not let your note-taking be distracting to the candidate. While taking good notes is important, so is maintaining eye contact and engaging in a conversation that will elicit the information you need to learn. Limit your note-taking to the candidate's most important or revealing words or phrases.

  The General Data Protection Regulation (2016/679 EU) (GDPR) gives candidates the right to request copies of personal data that an employer holds about them, whether personal data put on paper and held in a structured filing system or computerised personal data. Therefore be aware that candidates could request to access their interview notes. All interview notes must be treated as strictly confidential and be scanned and stored electronically for 12 months from the date that the selection decision is made. This will help UCL protect itself from potential claims, such as discrimination.

- **Allow the candidate to interview you**

  Expect the candidate to evaluate you and UCL in their interview, therefore give them time to ask questions and be open and candid with your answers. Do not oversell the job but be realistic in managing the candidate's expectations about the job and working at UCL.

- **Explain the next steps**

  At the end of the interview always explain what happens next in the process; explain what you will do and when you will do it. Be realistic in when you will be able to go back to the candidate with a decision.

- **Evaluate the candidate's interview**

  Firm up your notes for the candidate immediately after the interview as you may not trust your memory to recall the details of the interview at a later point in time. For each candidate complete an interview evaluation form. Each selection panel member should do this independently and not discuss candidates between interviews.

  Once all the interviews have been completed, the selection panel should compare the candidates in line with the ratings each panel member has given. The panel chair should allow each interviewer to talk through each candidate and their associated ratings, and guided by the chair, the panel should reach a consensus on which candidate to hire. Be mindful however that decisions should not be made purely on a numerical basis; your scoring system should support the decision making process, not rule it.

- **Close the process with feedback**

  Always ensure there is closure at the end of the interview process, and ensure it ends on a good note. Providing timely and helpful feedback to all interviewed candidates is essential and should be given verbally. Be clear, honest and constructive with your feedback, and back up your comments with relevant examples from their interview. Remember that forums such as Glassdoor are often used by prospective candidates, so you should always ensure that all candidates have a great interview and feedback experience, even if they are not successful in gaining the job.