The Job Interview

LUND UNIVERSITY | CAREER INFORMATION
Tips before the Interview!

Typically 5-10 applicants are selected for an interview. There will often be 1-3 people that comprise the interview panel, and the interview will last around an hour. A second interview may follow with 2-4 ‘finalists’. If there are numerous positions being offered (i.e. for graduate trainee positions) a significantly higher number of candidates may be interviewed.

First round selections may be performed via a telephone interview. Make sure you have your CV, cover letter, the job advertisement and your researched information about the employer in front of you. A second method for first round selections could be the group interview where several candidates are interviewed at once. For some jobs, a case study interview is used where the applicant is given specific exercises to solve based on the employer’s workplace requirements. Qualities they may be looking for include problem solving skills, performance under stress, and ability to work as part of a team. Various types of knowledge, skills, and personality tests can also be used.

The job interview/test plays a major role in whether or not you will get the job. Your CV, cover letter and references provide the interviewer(s) with a rounded picture of who you are. Here are some important things to think about before the interview: preparations, practical advice, questions, and also how you should follow up with the interview.

PREPARATION CHECKLIST

Condense information about the job: highlight key points of the job advertisement, the company’s website and other news or articles about the company. Summarize the company’s mission statement/business statement, Human Resource policies, annual report, strategic plan and their market and future priorities.

Condense information about yourself: highlight what you emphasized most in your CV and cover letter. Don’t get confused with other jobs you may be applying for at the same time!

Consider what questions the interview might ask. Formulate and practice your answers and base them on practical and relevant examples from your CV and cover letter.

Ask yourself:
• What skills and qualities does the employer require and find desirable? Do you possess those?
• What do you want to emphasize about yourself?
• What have you learned from previous interviews?
• What questions do you want to ask?

It is beneficial to get someone to give you a mock interview so that you can gain confidence and ‘warm up’ to the process. Inform your 2-3 references what is required of the job you are applying for. You may also want to send them a copy of your application and job advertisement to make it easier for them if they are contacted. Remember: select suitable references for the job in question.

PRACTICAL ADVICE

• Get a good night’s sleep before, and eat lightly (you do not want to be hungry or full during the interview, but balanced and comfortable)
• Check where the interview will be held and make sure you have good directions to get there
• Allow ample travel time and plan to arrive at least 15 minutes prior to the interview, in order to have time to calm down and regain focus
• Park smartly and put extra money in the meter so you are not stressed
• Turn off your cell phone!
• It’s acceptable to take a pen and paper with you to take notes of key points, or to prompt yourself when answering questions
• Bring copies of certificates, transcripts, dissertations, samples of previous work (if relevant), and 2-3 references
• Greet the interviewer(s) with a firm handshake and look in the eye
• Accept the offer of something to drink - this will help put you and the interviewer(s) and ease by breaking the ice
• Wait to be shown where to sit and settle comfortably
• Relax and remember to breathe slowly
• Speak clearly and slowly
• Listen attentively
• Maintain eye contact with the person who is asking the question, and acknowledge all interviewers when answering
• Short pauses to compose a response are okay, and do not hesitate to ask for clarification if you are uncertain about a question
• An obvious piece of advice is to dress sharp. The interview is an important meeting and dressing professionally will show respect. Your outfit should match the company’s dress code. Look to the website for images of the staff, call the company to inquire, or make a quick visit.
• There are no established rules for how an interview should be conducted and therefore there are no definite answers as to what you can expect. The interview is a conversation between you and the interviewer(s) and is determined as much by your personality as the experience and knowledge you put on your CV.
• The interview is a dual process: 1) a tool for the interviewer(s) to get to know you and decide if your personality and qualities will be an asset to their company, and 2) an opportunity for you to see if the company and responsibilities of the job are suitable to you.
• It is a good idea to take a back seat during the first half of the interview and listen carefully to see what they are focusing on. This will make it easier for you to respond with relevant examples and questions.
• Be perceptive! If the interviewer(s) are silent, take this as a signal to develop your answers further.
• Ask questions about the company that you actually want to know; this will steer the conversation into areas you want to talk about, and your interest will not be forced. Ask yourself, do the interviewer(s) still look interested? Don’t get carried away and overstep your boundaries by dominating the interview.
• If the interviewer(s) criticize something you say or even try to provoke you, keep cool and try to be objective. Don’t take it personally.
QUESTIONS
ABOUT YOU
AND YOUR SKILLS

Tell us a bit about yourself?
This is a common ‘getting started’ question. How good are you at summarizing the most important aspects of your life in 3-5 minutes? (Because this is what the question is really asking of you.) What qualities make you stand out, such as: your education, your work experience, your interests, involvement in any societies or clubs, time spent abroad, family situation, etc. Try and stay in the present, and limit using details from the distant past. Don’t go too much into detail during this answer either. The interviewer(s) will often respond with questions. Your answers should reflect how well structured you are and what you prioritize about the job in question. Formulate your answers based on the information you gave in your CV and cover letter.

What are your career ambitions?
This question is asking what different possibilities you can see when working with the employer in questions - both in the department you are applying for, as well as in others. Are you aiming for a specialization or a more general work setting? Specify your areas of interest, such as: communication tasks, internal affairs, international affairs, document translation, project management, etc. Think about what you wrote in your CV and cover letter, as well as what you focused on during your studies and various degree projects.

What are your strengths?
This is the most important question you should be prepared to answer. You should have 3-4 of your major strengths in mind, along with at least one good example to back-up each one. Examples can come from your work experience, studies, or volunteering positions. Try and choose strengths and examples that are applicable to the job in questions and will be of interest to the employer.

Do you have any weaknesses?
This is a trick question! We all have weak points and to deny them is not credible. You can be certain that the interviewer(s) know their weaknesses, so you need to know yours. Give fewer examples of your weaknesses than you give for your strengths, and instead of examples to validate your weaknesses, offer ways in which you are working to correct them. The interviewer(s) are looking for two things when they ask this question: 1) that you are aware of your weaknesses and, 2) that you are working to improve them in a concrete way.

How do you go about making important decisions?
This question is aiming to get a better understanding of your methods. Are you quick to decide, or does it tend to be a more lengthy process? Do you consider outcomes in the short or long term? Do you ask for advice (and from whom), or do you approach decision making alone? How do you gather information to make an appropriate decision? How do you approach changing a decision if you feel it is inappropriate? Do you have difficulty admitting to a wrong decision, or are you willing to admit and take responsibility? These are all things to consider, and what you should try and include in your answer.

How do you take criticism?
This question seeks to understand how you react to both positive and negative criticism, from management as well as from colleagues.

It is of course easier to take positive criticism, but it is important to know how to accept and learn from negative criticism. Negative criticism is good, as long as it is said directly to you and phrased in a constructive way. Your answer to this is not only a reflection of how well you take criticism, but is a reflection of how you offer criticism.

Describe a setback you suffered, and what you did to overcome it.
Similar to the question regarding your weaknesses, everyone has endured setbacks and it is not credible to deny that you have experienced one. What is important about this question is how you dealt with the setback and what you learned from it. Be prepared to offer a concrete, detailed example: consider what led to the setback (was it primarily you or was it due to others), were you able to realize the setback yourself or did others bring it to your attention, what steps did you take to address this setback, and finally what conclusions did you come to, and what did you learn overall.

Tell us about your work experience.
The work experience you offer in an interview should mimic the concise and relative pattern offered in your CV and cover letter. Since your CV and cover letter are very brief and condensed, the interview is your chance to elaborate a bit more on crucial points.

Why did you choose to study XXX?” – or – “Why have you chosen this profession?”
This question is used to see if you are a motivated and focused individual. Think about the influences that motivated your studies or career pursuits, and whether your journey has been a straightforward one or you wavered before finding your focus. Not everyone begins their education or career search with a clear goal in mind, but it is important to show that you have attained a goal and are now focused on achieving it.

What are your interests?
Having a life outside of work is a quality that employers appreciate. Having hobbies and utilizing your free time shows that you are active, which in turn suggests that you will be active in the workplace. In addition to just naming your interests, you should also include the qualities you exercise when doing them (i.e. taking initiative, planning ahead, skills required or gained, etc.). Remember that your interests are not limited to traditional hobbies, but include anything that occupies your free time.

What is your family situation like?
What interviewer(s) want to know is how much of an impact your home life may have on your work (i.e. are you moving, is parental leave required in the short term, etc.). It is advisable to answer this question generally, for example “we’re not planning anything soon, I am really focused on my career for now” or “we have childcare in place and it works well”. This question may be too personal for you, and it is appropriate to redirect the question with another question, such as “in what way could this affect my work?” This will put you in the position of answering with a simple yes or no. Just remember to be polite and not defensive.
QUESTIONS ABOUT THE JOB YOU ARE APPLYING FOR

Why did you apply for this job? What stood out to you the most?
Here is where your research about the company and the position you are applying for is crucial; interviewer(s) want to know that you were genuine when you applied for this job, and that it was not something you chose randomly. As mentioned above in ‘practical advice’, taking a notepad into the interview is acceptable, both to write down information you gain during the interview, as well as to prompt yourself when answering questions. Highlight your favorite parts concerning the company as a whole, Human Resources, various departments, expansion prospects, international aspects, etc. (anything that stands out to you about the company and/or position). You can look to the company’s website, “google” it, read news articles, etc. – anything to gain insight into the company. Talking about the company’s most recent activities is impressive and shows that you are up to date. You should refrain from discussing company activities that happened more than a year ago.

Having someone to refer to at the company is a huge benefit, but not essential to having a good interview.

Never say that you applied for the job because you are unemployed and need money! You must have an interest in the responsibilities of the position, and show that as your ambition for applying.

If you are over-qualified you may want to point out individual aspects and tasks about the position that interest you, and talk about interesting aspects about the company that may be applicable to your future career. Talking about characteristics of the company that will be of interest to you in your future career is also an appropriate response to the question “where do you see yourself in 5 years’ time?”

Describe your dream job.
The interviewer(s) is trying to see whether you will be truly stimulated by the demands of the job, or whether you are delivering the answers they want to hear in order to land a job. Be genuine and bold when answering this question – give a personal answer (but, don’t forget the job you are applying for!).

Do you have any experience in this type of work?
Interviewer(s) genuinely want to know if you have experience, in order to gage the time it will take you to acclimate into their workplace. If you have experience, give clear and concrete examples, and mention any successes you have had.

If you do not have experience, present yourself in a positive and attractive way. Emphasize that you are a quick learner, enjoy developing new skills, and have qualities and capabilities that are well suited to this job in particular. You can offer examples from previous work, internships, volunteer positions, etc.

How do you feel about traveling as part of your job?
If traveling is applicable to the job in question it should be indicated in the advertisement, in order to give you time to seriously consider if you are willing and able to spend periods of time away from home. Asking about expenses and allowances is acceptable in regards to this question. Methods of transport can also be discussed here (i.e. your car, company’s car, plane, etc.).

Do you have any Customer Service experience?
This question will come up if you are applying for a service company/position. Interviewer(s) will be looking for you to describe your previous experience with customer contact. If you have no Customer Service experience interviewer(s) want to know that you understand how to interact with clients appropriately. Emphasize that you are a people person, that you see Customer Service as an enticing opportunity and that you have a commitment to sustaining the level of Customer Service present in the company.

What does service and quality mean to you?
Quality assurance is a high priority for any company, and therefore this is a loaded question. Interviewer(s) want to see you link your response to their company – how are their values about service and quality similar to your own. Draw from your own experiences to show how you have demonstrated those values. Be honest and genuine. Look to their website beforehand, and read their mission statement, which will usually indicate the company’s view on service and quality.

How will you get to work?
Depending on how far you are commuting for this job the question may or may not arise. The interviewer(s) want to see how long days will affect you, your commute time, your transportation options and alternatives, if flexible hours are necessary, if moving is a possibility. The interviewer(s) may even ask your feelings toward changing your position within the company to better fit your situation.

Have you had any period of unemployment, and if so, what were you doing during this time?
Unemployment is a fairly common thing and it is not necessarily a red flag to the employer. What is important about this question, and what the interviewer(s) are looking for, is how you made use of this time. They want to see that you were active during this time, making contacts, developing skills, etc. Emphasize ways in which you were active and made positive use out of your unemployment period, and avoid mentioning anything that can be construed as a waste of time.
QUESTIONS ABOUT PREVIOUS EMPLOYMENT

Why did you leave your last job?
Leaving a job is rarely seen as a positive thing, but what interviewer(s) are looking for is a positive answer to this question. Give reasons that the interviewer(s) cannot turn back against you (i.e. “I was looking to move on and try new challenges”, etc.).

Focus on the positive aspects of your previous job and try to relate you leaving to a desire to achieve more. Remember, what you answer can be verified, so answer honestly. Avoid criticizing your previous employer in any way, as this reflects negatively on you and not your previous employer.

How is your health?

Did it in any way affect your last job?
This question is really aimed toward understanding absences from previous jobs (which can be checked, so answer truthfully). If you have had higher than average absences from work due to health related reasons do not deny this, instead present it in a positive way by saying that you are well now and have learned from the experience. Absences related to health can be varied: own illness/ injury, illness in the family, or a disability that affects your ability to perform. Mention any support you receive to cope with an illness or disability (i.e. family, Public Employment Service, etc.).

This question should come at the end, and so should any answers that might taint the positive image you are trying to create for yourself. You want the interviewer(s) to have had the chance to see all your advantageous qualities and skills first.

Can you explain any gaps you have had in your employment history?
Like the question regarding unemployment in general (question 8 above), interviewer(s) are looking to see how you are spending this ‘free time’. Gaps in employment history can come in many forms: periods of unemployment, illness, travel, etc. You want to be sure to explain your reasoning in a positive and honest way.

What would your colleagues say about you?
The interviewer(s) are hoping to understand the positive ways in which you impacted your former place of work. Your answer to this question may be compared to those given by your references, so it is advisable to not fabricate responses and to talk to your references beforehand.

Describe your current/most recent position.
Here the interviewer(s) are hoping to understand how you felt about your former work place. The theme remains: describe positively! Try and make connections between your current/most recent job and the one you are applying for, this will demonstrate interest. Mention the skills you have gained within said position, as well as any progress you provided to the previous employer and this will demonstrate what you can provide as well.

Which jobs have you enjoyed the most, and why?
The answer to this question will help the interviewer(s) see which tasks you enjoy the most. Describe your favorite job/position, and try and have it relate to tasks you would enjoy doing in the job you are applying for.

What are your reasons behind your unemployment?
This question is very similar to numbers 3 and 8 above. To reiterate: unemployment is not uncommon or necessarily a negative thing. An important thing to remember is that interviewer(s) are, in a way, testing your honesty with this question. If you were fired, do not lie. Be as objective as possible when explaining the reasoning. Your answers can be easily verified.

What are your reasons for changing jobs?
What the interviewer(s) are trying to see is how long you typically remain with a job, as well as what plans you may have in regards to a future career. Consider if this company you are applying for something you see in your long term future, or if it is simply a transition phase. Be careful when replying: do not let the interviewer(s) know if this job is something you do not intend to keep long term.

What aspects of your current/most recent job did you find least stimulating?
Interviewer(s) are trying to eliminate applicants who might find this position boring, so you want to be careful when answering this question – do you see aspects of this job that are reminiscent of a past job, and are less than desirable? If so, a safe answer can be “every job has its routine aspects, but they have to be done, and it doesn’t stop me from performing at my best.”

Can you tell us about some concrete results you achieved in your previous jobs?
Interviewer(s) want you to take this opportunity to wow them. You can talk about projects you have personally suggested, implemented, and/or worked with that have contributed to the company in a positive way. If this project can relate to the position in which you are applying, you will impress the interviewer(s) even more.

If you have no relative work experience, or no hands-on experience that contributed to the company, you are encouraged to discuss ways in which you influenced your studies and internships, or if you initiated/helped developed an association/society or project.

Where do you see yourself in 5 years’ time?
Here interviewer(s) are asking you to share your goals and ambitions. Likewise, this is where your research about the company’s various activities come into play. If this is a company you see a future with, try to relate your goals and ambitions specifically to the company; however, if this is not a company you see a future with, vaguely relate your goals and ambitions to that of the company.
OTHER QUESTIONS

How well do you handle pressure and stress?
Stress and pressure are to be expected at some point, in any work environment. Interviewer(s) want to know that you are able to handle periods of high stress, heavy workloads, or overtime. You want to demonstrate that you are able to keep calm, prioritize, and organize (not just yourself and your own work, but also that of others). Provide examples from previous work, volunteer positions, studies, etc.

What does being creative mean for you?
Describe your perception of creativity in the workplace, but link this to yourself and previous jobs you have had. Creativity can also be demonstrated via studies and other arenas beyond work. Interviewer(s) want to see that you know what creativity is and that you are capable of bringing creativity to their workplace.

What are your salary expectations?
Let the interviewer(s) bring up the question of salary. You also want to be prepared for this question by consulting a trade union or professional association to find a reasonable estimate. You should take into consideration the length of your studies, whether you have obtained a degree, experience, and previous salaries. If you are unprepared to respond, you can ask the interviewer(s) to suggest a salary. You can then go home and consider the offer. If they insist that you need to state your expectations first, it is advisable to give a specific sum instead of a general range. The salary may be locked at a certain level; however, it is always possible to negotiate further. If you are unprepared to respond, you can ask the interviewer(s) to suggest a salary. You can then go home and consider the offer. If they insist that you need to state your expectations first, it is advisable to give a specific sum instead of a general range. The salary may be locked at a certain level; however, it is always possible to negotiate further.

Why should we hire you?
This is a pretty common final question to an interview. Take some time to reflect on what the interviewer(s) have focused on during the interview. Does your CV and cover letter fall in line with what was stressed? Offer a summary of your best qualities, most relevant experience and education, and repeat a couple of relative examples you gave. Use this final question as an opportunity to refresh the interviewer(s) memory as to why you are the best applicant.

EXAMPLES OF QUESTIONS YOU SHOULD ASK

Asking questions at the end of the interview is essential if you want to increase your chances of actually getting the job. When you ask questions you are showing that you are present and attentive during the interview process, and that you are generally interested in the position. You must find a nice balance between asking too many/aggressive questions and avoiding questions about salary. Here are some examples of appropriate questions to ask:

How would you describe the ideal candidate?
This question allows transference – the interviewer(s) are able to see you in the position, and you are able to prove that you fit the position. When they describe assets of the ideal candidate that you fit, take notes (mental or actual), and when they finish their description, take the opportunity to tell the interviewer(s) that you can do what they want.

How do you envision this position supporting you?
This question shifts the focus of the interview from you to the interviewer(s), which is a welcomed change. Subtly this question also allows the interviewer(s) to see how you will make their life easier, which subconsciously will put you at the front of their thoughts.

How does this position fit into the company long term?
Questions regarding long-term status allow you to see if this job is something you can keep, or one that is temporary. Here you can also inquire about the previous employee and/or why the job was created.

How would you define ‘success’ for this position?
Success is a positive word, and one that will sit well with your interviewer(s). This question is two-fold: 1) you demonstrate to your employer that you want to achieve success 2) you see what type of management you can expect (i.e. hands on/off styles).

What can I do as a follow-up?
There is a crucial difference between asking “when can I expect to hear from you?” and “what can I do as a follow-up?” The first version makes you appear passive and needy, typically not qualities that are desirable to employers. The second version, however, makes you appear willing to take initiative and eager to be a part of the company.

Remember: you can always use this opportunity to ask for clarification about aspects mentioned in the interview (i.e. “can you tell me more about …”), or to ask specific questions about the company that you have based on your research.

AVOID questions about salary. The main reason behind avoiding this question is that you are not officially part of the company yet, and therefore you have no negotiating power. Avoid questions that make you appear unintelligent as well.
CASE STUDY
INTERVIEWS
AND TESTS

Case studies are being used more frequently, because they are good indicators of how well suited you are for the position in question. Case studies can come in both written and oral form, and can be delivered individually or in a group.

The circumstances of the case study revolve around real situations that you would find yourself in at the workplace. The interviewer(s) are looking to see how you take in information, analyze problems, and your work method.

Always keep in mind that you have practiced these skills before in your academic studies or previous jobs, and now is your time to show what you have learned.

POST INTERVIEW
THOUGHTS

- Did I conduct myself properly? (i.e. talked at a normal pace, made eye contact, acknowledge all interviewer(s) etc.)
- Did I emphasize my strengths and not boast?
- Did I portray my weaknesses as something I am working to improve?
- Did I give clear examples to back-up my own experiences?
- Did I let my nerves prevent me from sharing any important information?
- What is my responsibility on the follow up?

These are important things to reflect on because if you see your errors you can correct them for a future interview. If you do not get the job, it is appropriate to inquire as to why.