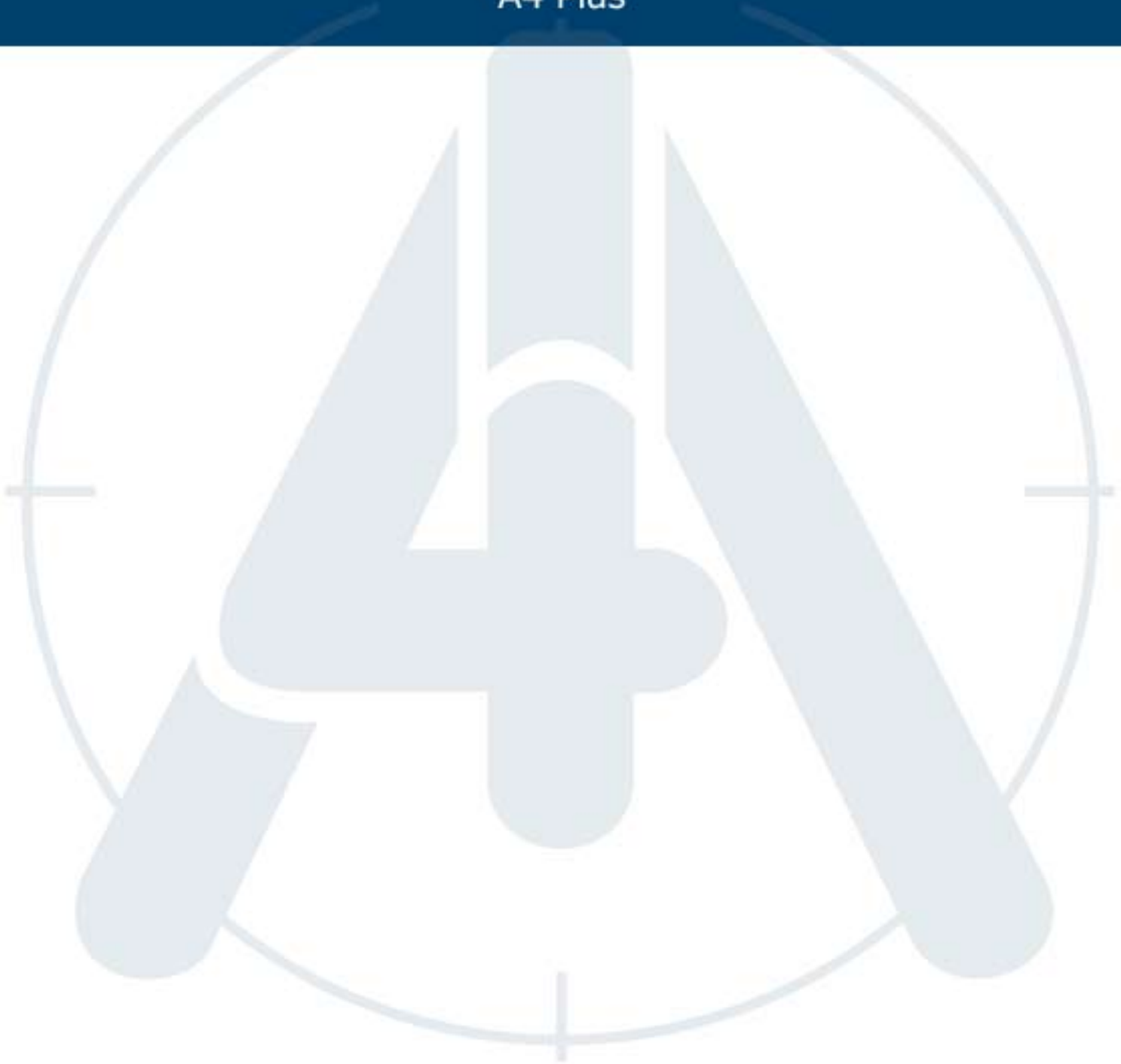




A4 Plus



# **SAMPLE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS**

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## SECTION 1: INTERVIEWER QUESTIONS

### SECTION 2: INTERVIEWEE QUESTIONS

#### General

These tips are provided as general guidance for interviewers and interviewees. Please refer also to our other sections; job interview tips and techniques, sample interview letters / templates and second interview guidelines.

## SECTION 1

### STRESS AND PRESSURE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

When dealing with questions that put pressure on you or create stress, be confident, credible and constructive (accentuate the positive) in your answers. And make sure you prepare.

Stress and pressure questions come in all sorts of shapes and sizes. Three commonly used types of pressure questions are those dealing with weakness and failure; blame; and evidence of ability or experience.

#### WEAKNESS AND FAILURE QUESTIONS

“Tell me about your failures....”, or “What are your greatest weaknesses.....”. are the interviewer’s equivalent to “Are you still beating your wife?..”.

Don’t be intimidated by these questions - you don’t have to state a failing or a weakness just because the interviewer invites you to.

“I don’t generally fail”, or “I really can’t think of any”, are perfectly acceptable answers. Short and sweet, and then wait smiling for the come-back - you’ll have demonstrated that you are no mug and no pushover. If you are pressed (as you probably will be), here’s your justification answer, or if you wish to appear a little more self-effacing use this as a first response:

“I almost always succeed because plan and manage accordingly. If something’s not going right I’ll change it until it works. The important thing is to put the necessary checks and contingencies in place that enable me to see if things aren’t going to plan, and to make changes when and if necessary.....”

or

“There are some things I’m not so good at, but I’d never say these are weaknesses as such - a weakness is a vulnerability, and I don’t consider myself vulnerable. If there’s something I can’t do or don’t know, then I find someone who can do it or does know.”

Do you see the positive orientation? Turn it around into a positive every time.

#### BLAME QUESTIONS

Watch out also for the invitation to rubbish your past job or manager, especially in the form of: “Why did you leave your last job?”, or “Why have you had so many jobs?”

The interviewer is not only satisfying curiosity..... if you say your last boss was an idiot, or all your jobs have been rubbish, you’ll be seen as someone who blames others and fails to take responsibility for your own actions and decisions.

Employers want to employ people who take responsibility, have initiative and come up with answers, not problems. Employers do not want to employ people who blame others.

So always express positive reasons and answers when given an opportunity to express the negative. Never blame anyone or anything else.

“I was ready for more challenge”, or “Each job offered a better opportunity, which I took”, or “I grow and learn quickly and I look for new opportunities”, or “I wanted to get as much different experience as quickly as I could before looking for a serious career situation, which is why I’m here.”

A great technique for exploiting the blame question trap is to praise your past managers and employers. Generosity is a positive trait, so demonstrate it. Keep your praise and observations credible, realistic and relevant: try to mention attributes that your interviewer and prospective new employer will identify and agree with. This will build association and commonality between you and the interviewer, which is normally vital for successful interview outcomes. They need to see that you think like they do; that you’ll fit in.

## **PROVE IT QUESTIONS**

These can be the toughest of the lot. Good interviewers will press you for evidence if you make a claim. So the answer is - be prepared.

Watch out for closed questions: “Can you do so-and-so?..” , “Have you any experience in such-and-such?...”

These questions invite a yes or no answer and will be about a specific area.

If you give a yes, be prepared to deal with the sucker punch: “Can you give me an example?.....”

The request for examples or evidence will stop you in your tracks if you’ve not prepared or can’t back up your answer.

The trick is before the interview to clearly understand the requirements of the job you’re being interviewed for. Ask to see the job description, including local parameters if applicable, and any other details that explain the extent and nature of the role. Think about how you can cover each requirement with examples and evidence. Wherever possible use evidence that’s quantified and relates to commercial or financial outputs.

Companies are interested in people who understand the notion of maximising return on investment, or return on effort. If your examples and evidence stand up as good cost-effective practice, they’ll clock up even more points for you.

Make sure you prepare examples of the relevant capabilities or experience required, so that you’re ready for the ‘prove it’ questions. You can even take papers or evidence material with you to show - having hard evidence, and the fact that you’ve thought to prepare it, greatly impresses interviewers.

If you don’t have the evidence (or personal coverage of a particular requirement), then don’t bluff it and say yes when you’d be better off saying, “No, however...”

Use “No, however ...” (and then your solution or suggestion), if asked for something that you simply don’t have.

Give an example of where previously you've taken on a responsibility without previous experience or full capability, and made a success, by virtue of using other people's expertise, or fast-tracking your own development or knowledge or ability.

On this point - good preparation should include researching your employer's business, their markets and their competitors. This will help you relate your own experience to theirs, and will show that you have bothered to do the research itself.

In summary, to deal with pressure questions: Keep control. Take time to think for yourself - don't be intimidated or led anywhere you don't want to go. Express every answer in positive terms. And do your preparation.

## **COMPETENCY-BASED AND BEHAVIOUR INTERVIEWS QUESTIONS 'HOW WOULD YOU DO THIS...?'**

For interviewers these are powerful and effective questions. These questions make the interviewee tell you how they would approach, handle, deal with, solve, etc., a particular situation, problem, project or challenge that is relevant to the job role in question. The situation could be from the interviewee's past experience, a hypothetical scenario, or a real situation from the interviewing organisation.

As the interviewer you should judge the answers objectively. Avoid the temptation to project your own style and feelings into the assessment of whether the answer is good or bad. Look for thoughtfulness, structure, cause and effect rationale, pragmatism. The candidate may not approach the question like you do, but they may have a perfectly effective style and approach to the answer just the same.

The answers will indicate the interviewee's approach, methodology, experience and competency in relation to the scenario, to how they get things done, and also the style by which they do it.

From the interviewee's perspective, these questions commonly start with a scenario and a question as to how you as the interviewee would deal with it. Or the question might ask you to give an example of how you have handled a particular situation or challenge in the past. Or the interviewer might ask how you would approach a current situation in their own organisation.

In these cases the interviewer will often judge your answers according to how much they agree with your behavioural approach. The questions may initially seem or be positioned as competency-based, but often the interviewer will be treating this really as a question of behaviour and style.

And as ever, without going to unreasonable lengths your answers should reflect the style expected /preferred/practised by the interviewer/organization. People like people like them.

For instance - a results-driven interviewer, certain high achieving dominant personalities, aspiring MD's, certain ruthless types, will warm to answers with a high results-based orientation (eg '....I focus on what needs to be done to achieve the task, to get the job done, to cut through the red tape and peripherals, ignoring the distractions, etc. Strong incentive, encouragement, clear firm expectations and timescales, deliverables, etc.....' - the language of the achiever.

Alternatively, if you find yourself being interviewed by a persuasive, friendly, influential, egocentric type, (lots of sales managers are like this) then frame your answers to mirror that style - '....I use persuasion, inspiration, leading by example, helping, providing justification, reasons, empathising with the situation and people who are doing the job, motivating according to what works with different people, understanding what makes them tick...' - all that sort of stuff.

HR interviewers are often 'people-types' and will warm to answers that are sensitive, and take strong account of people's feelings, happiness, well-being, sense of fairness and ethics, honesty, integrity, process, accuracy, finishing what's been started, having a proper plan, steady, reliable, dependable, etc. - the language of the fair and the disciplined.

Technical interviewers, eg., MD's who've come up through science, technical, finance disciplines, will warm to answers which demonstrate the use of accuracy, plans, monitoring, clearly stated and understood aims, methods, details, checking, measuring, reporting, analysing.

These are generalisations of course, but generally relevant in most interview situations when you are asked 'How would you ...?'

Obviously be true to yourself where you can. It's a matter of tint and orientation, not changing your colour altogether.

Occasionally you might meet a really good interviewer who is truly objective, in which case mirroring is not so useful - whereas confidence, maturity, integrity, flexibility, compassion, tolerance, pragmatism are, and as such should be demonstrated in the way you answer questions of a balanced mature non-judgemental interviewer.

Interviews can be a bit of a game, so when you see that it is, play it - the more you see subjective judgement and single-track behaviour in the interviewer, then the more advantage there is in mirroring the interviewer's style in your answers.

People like people like them. Which very definitely extends to assessing behaviour-based competency.

## **SECTION 2**

### **QUESTIONS TO ASK AT INTERVIEW - FOR INTERVIEWEES**

While this section essentially gives guidance and tips to interviewees these ideas and principles will also help interviewers.

At job interviews it's as important for you the interviewee to prepare questions to ask the interviewer as it is to prepare answers and readiness for the questions that the interviewer will ask you.

If you are the interviewer, ensure you offer the interviewee the opportunity to ask questions about the job, the management, the organisation and the market within which it operates. The questions that job candidates ask at interview provide valuable insights as to their attitude, maturity, capability and strategic understanding of the role and the organisation, so for interviewers, questions asked by interviewees form a significant and illuminating part of the interview process. Listen to and learn from what interviewees ask you - often the questions that interviewees ask will provide more information to the interviewer than anything you ask them.

As the interviewee, take full advantage of opportunities to ask questions. Asking good well-prepared and researched questions is your chance to demonstrate that you are better than the other candidates, and to show that you have a tremendous capability and understanding and potential, irrespective of what the interviewer asks you.

Preparing and asking great questions at your own job interview dramatically reduces any dependence that you might otherwise have for the interviewer to ask you 'the right questions'. It won't matter if the interviewer doesn't ask good helpful questions, or fails to prompt the sort of discussion that allows you to show how brilliant you are - instead, you can control this area of discussion yourself by asking the interviewer great questions that will make them sit up and realise what an excellent candidate you are.

An helpful although not absolutely essential aspect towards asking the interviewer good questions is good research (which follows later on this page).

A key to asking great questions at your interview is to **ask questions that impress the interviewer**. Most candidates just ask about routine details that they think they ought to know, or which they think of on the spur of the moment, but which will probably be provided in due course anyway in documentation about terms and conditions. This is meaningless twaddle and to be avoided.

Instead focus on the job priorities and scope, on the organisation and ways to make a difference or an improvement. Try to think strategically like a manager, and for very senior positions, like the CEO. Try to adopt the mind-set of a helpful advisor who needs to ask helpful facilitative questions. Focus on the organisation not on your own needs.

Try to prepare and ask questions that make the interviewer think to themselves, "Wow, that's a good question - this candidate has really thought about the role, and understands the sort of issues we need them to handle/the sort of responsibilities/initiatives we want them to take.."

Aim to ask questions that make the interviewer think, (depending on what the organisation and role requires), "Wow, that's an unusual question - this candidate is special - they are demonstrating to me that they understand people/understand about communications/have great integrity/a strong value system/great humanity/maturity/a good strategic mind/etc, etc."

Think before the interview about what the successful candidate will be like - ask yourself beforehand, what great questions would the successful candidate ask? And then be that person.

When you research the job look into the sort of challenges the organisation is facing, and think how this affects the vacant role. What does the employer need from the successful applicant? How might the role be extended to contribute more to the organisation if the job were performed by a suitably positive and capable person ? (That's you incidentally.) The job advert or job specification might give you some clues. Do your research so that you understand as much as possible about the priorities of the job position, and the organisation and its situation, and then think about the ways that the role could be extended to provide greater support towards achieving organisational challenges.

This sort of background thinking will help you to prepare questions that will seriously impress any interviewer, whatever the role. It is possible also to think of good positive impressive questions just by using what you know of the role and the sort of issues that face modern employers. The point is, you need to think about it and prepare beforehand.

### **QUESTIONS TO AVOID ASKING**

Contrast the expansive, positive strategic questions above, about job scope and contribution to organisational effectiveness, with this stuff below. Interviewers will generally react negatively (secretly usually) to questions such as the following examples, so unless you are a very junior person going for a very junior role with an employer who has not prepared in advance this type of routine information, avoid asking questions like these at your interview.

"How many weeks holiday do I get?.."

"When would I get a pay-rise?.."

"What are the lunch times?.."

"What sort of car do I get?.."

"What other perks are there?.."

"What are the pension arrangements?.."

"Do you have a grievance procedure?.."

“What expenses can I claim for?..”  
“How soon before I could get promoted?..”  
“When is going-home time?..”  
and others like these **Do not ask these questions**

**These are warning-sign questions to most interviewers. Do not ask these questions at interview unless you want to be seen as someone who cares more about the pay and perks than the job and the organisation, let alone making a positive difference in the place.**

Generally speaking these questions suggest to the interviewer that the candidate is mostly interested in what the organisation can give the employee, rather than the other way around. Interviewers want to meet and recruit interviewees who see things in terms of what the employee can do for the organisation.

Find another way to get this sort of information if you really need to know it at the face-to-face interview. Good employers will explain all this to interviewees during the interview or in written terms and conditions, which many employers will send out prior to the interview. As suggested in the tips at the start of this page ask prior to the interview for a copy of the employment terms and conditions or an employee handbook. If they don't have this or can't send it, and you have a burning question about these sort of 'hygiene factors', the best way to approach it is to ask something like:

“What's the best way for me to see the routine details about the employment terms and conditions relating to this role? Do you have a handbook or sample contract for example? I don't want to waste time here going through incidentals...”

By doing this you demonstrate several important things, that:

you regard these things as secondary - implication being that you regard doing the job as the priority you respect the value of time, since you appreciate there are better things to concentrate on during an interview.

you understand the principle of efficient information management and communication, on the basis that all this detail will be available somewhere to read rather than have to waste effort asking individual questions.

you are professional - because providing information like this in the way you suggest is the most professional way to do it.

Of course the job-grade and seniority of the vacancy and the size of the employer organisation will affect the significance and transfer of this sort of information. In an interview with a tiny little company for a junior clerk's position the interviewee can be forgiven for asking these sorts of questions relating to terms and conditions, not least because the company might not be professional or organised enough to have produced a proper handbook or contract, nevertheless, whatever the role and size of employer, the less time spent asking about all this sort of information the better. And certainly avoid the entire area in interviews for professional positions with professional employers, especially in commercially competitive functions and industry sectors.

A final point about questions to ask at interviews when you are the interviewee: