

Preparing for Interviews – Quick Reference Guide

An interview is your opportunity to highlight your achievements, past experience and strengths to the hiring panel, and determine if the job opportunity is the right one for you. However, it is often a challenging experience for job seekers, filled with anxiety and uncertainty. The following information and tips will help you prepare for ‘the unknown’ and go into the interview with increased confidence.

This *Quick Reference Guide* touches on three main aspects of interviewing:

- Preparation – advice for preparing effectively for your upcoming interview
- Interview Questions – types of questions you may be asked
- The Interview Experience – strategies to ensure you have a good interview experience

Preparation: The Key to Interviewing

Why Prepare?

- Shine the best light on yourself.
- Be able to answer questions knowledgeably and comfortably.
- Calm your nerves.
- Project confidence.
- Determine what you need and/or want from the interview.

Preparing for the ‘Unknown’

- Do some research to learn about the department or division, and to gain a sense of the job and perhaps also the working environment – check:
 - The department’s public website;
 - Their intranet – you can look up their intranet here: <http://iweb.gov.ns.ca>;
 - Talk to someone who works in the department or division, preferably a person who is familiar with the job or the work of the division.
- Study the job posting and zero in on exactly what is described/asked for.
- Determine likely topics of questions and write down how you would answer potential questions.
- Practice! – try it **OUT LOUD!** (alone, with a friend/co-worker/family member, or record yourself on video).
- You may also find some good information in the job description – which you will receive, or can request, if you’ve been invited to an interview.

Analyzing the Job Posting

- The job posting provides a concise overview of the duties of the job and qualifications needed to do the job effectively.
- Review the posting carefully by taking note of the skills, experience and competencies outlined – this can provide you clues about the topics of questions.

HINT

If a particular type of skill or experience seems to be emphasized in the posting (referred to more than once), expect a question on that topic.

EC Competencies

- If interviewing for an excluded (EC) position, you will want to be familiar with the behavioural competencies associated with that level of position – these are often listed in the job posting.
- Information on the appropriate competencies will be provided to all candidates interviewing for the position.
- Competency information is available on *MyHR* in the 'My Job' section, under 'Competencies'.

Interview Questions: The Main Types

Knowledge-Based/Technical Questions

Knowledge-based or technical questions deal with technical or basic knowledge required to perform the duties of the position. These questions are designed around the key functions of the job and determine what you know, can do and have experience with.

Examples:

- Describe your understanding of XXX.
- Tell us the components of XXX.

Situational/Hypothetical Questions

Situational questions describe hypothetical job-related situations that focus on relevant qualifications. These questions require candidates to reply with what they would do in a given situation. These questions can also be referred to as *problem-solving questions*. The situational question is based on the notion that what people say they would do is related to what, in fact, they actually will do in the situation.

Example:

- If you were asked to XXX, how would you respond? Describe the steps you would take.

Behavioural Questions

Behavioural interviewing techniques involve asking candidates standardized questions about how they handled past situations that were similar to situations they may encounter on the job. This style of interviewing is based on the premise that the best predictor of future performance is assessing examples of past performance in similar situations.

Examples:

- Tell us about a time when...
- Describe a time when...

Is It Situational or Behavioural?

When you first hear a situational question, it may sound like it's behavioural, or vice versa. Here are a few differences that can help you tell them apart:

Situational	Behavioural
Hypothetical experiences	Real experiences
Future-focused	Past-focused
What <i>would</i> you do?	What <i>did</i> you do?
No examples required	Examples required

HINT

Be specific when answering a behavioural question. If you use language like "I usually do" or "in circumstances like that," your answer is too general. Isolate one incident and talk about what happened that time.

STAR

One of the most effective ways to prepare for potential behavioural interview questions – and to keep yourself focused during the interview – is to remember the acronym STAR. Your answer will be most effective and complete if you touch on all four aspects of STAR:

- Situation:** Describe the circumstances of the situation so the interviewers have context. Be concise.
- Task:** Specify your role within that situation. What was it that you were responsible for?
- Action:** Outline the steps you took to address the situation. What were your actions?
- Result:** Discuss the outcome of the situation and any lessons learned. What happened as a result of the actions you took?

Once you've determined possible topics of interview questions, think of examples from your past experience and plan your answers using the STAR technique.

HINT

Some sources recommend STARR. The second R stands for Reference. If you can, mention a person who could verify or confirm the accomplishment you describe in your story.

The Interview Experience: Strategies and Tips

When You Get the Call

- Ask who will be on the interview panel and their titles, so you will know who, and how many people, will be interviewing you.
- If there is some type of assessment before, or as part of, the interview (for example: an MS Excel test; a presentation; or a briefing note writing assignment) you will be informed about this when you are called.
- If you will be given an opportunity to review the interview questions before the interview, the person who calls you will let you know and tell you when to arrive at the interview location.

HINT

Confirm the date, time and location of the interview. Don't assume where the interview is being held, and get directions if the location isn't familiar to you.

Nervous? Normal!

Everyone feels nervous before and during an interview – some more than others. Here are a few strategies to help you deal with interview nervousness:

- Prepare, prepare, prepare – and practice the hard parts.
- Clear your mind right before the interview; make a mental transition from what you were doing before arriving for the interview.
- Listen carefully to the questions – ask for questions to be repeated, if needed.
- Take notes to remind yourself what you've been asked or about points you wish to make – or questions that have arisen in your own mind.
- Remembering STAR can focus your thoughts when answering behavioural questions.

- Try controlled breathing in the interview to calm your mind by increasing your oxygen intake:
 1. Breathe slowly in through your nose;
 2. Hold briefly;
 3. Breathe slowly out through your mouth;
 4. Pause briefly.
- Don't 'over-prepare.' When you've done all the appropriate preparation, stop. Preparing too much can make you more nervous.
- Avoid cramming your preparation into the night before the interview. Cramming has been proven to increase stress.

Receiving the Questions in Advance

In many cases with government interviews, candidates are given the interview questions prior to the interview, usually 15 to 30 minutes beforehand. Here are some suggestions for the next time you have that experience:

- Read through all the questions first, so you become familiar with what you'll be asked.
- Then decide the best use of your time:
 - Concentrating on any questions you didn't expect;
 - Focusing on the lead question – or a question you find easier – in order to build your confidence;
 - Jotting quick notes to decide what scenarios to use for each question.

HINT

If reviewing questions in advance increases your nervousness, you do not need to focus on the questions during this time. Use the time to focus on notes you brought in with you or to calm your nerves.

Do You Know the Panel Members?

It is not unusual to know – and have worked with – one or more of the panel members. Perhaps you work with the hiring manager right now. A few things to remember:

- Answer the questions as if the interviewers do not know you.
- You must tell the panel exactly what you've done – rather than assuming they already know.
- If you do not say something, it cannot be written down by the interviewers – and the interviewers cannot score anything they haven't written down.

Asking Your Own Questions

At the end of the interview, you most likely will be asked if you have any questions. Prepare some meaningful questions to ask the interviews, taking into consideration what you need to know about the position in order to know if it is the right one for you at this time. This is also a wonderful opportunity to:

- Communicate that you are serious about the job;
- Illustrate that you've done some research and have formed some knowledge about the position;
- Add to your overall understanding of the nature of the work, and possible pressures and priorities.

References

- Prepare your reference list to take with you.
 - Your list should include three work-related references with phone numbers and email addresses.
 - The best references are recent – people who have worked with you (and can speak to your work performance) in the last five years or so.
- Contact references in advance!
 - Ask permission to use each person as a reference, even if they have agreed before – and especially if some time has gone by since the last time.
 - Tell them about the position and offer to send them the job posting and your résumé and cover letter.
 - Be confident each person will give you a good reference.
- Make sure your list includes at least one supervisor, either current or past.

HINT

You do not have to include your current supervisor on your reference list. However, you may be asked permission to contact this person.

Interview Debrief

If you are not successful in an interview, consider requesting an interview debrief to learn how you did in the interview and how you might prepare better for the next one. Here are some tips:

- Ask to schedule the debrief when you are called about not getting the job, or shortly afterward. Don't ask for a debrief on the spot.
- The debrief should be with the hiring manager and in person.
- Don't expect details about every answer or each score; and never ask details about other candidates.
- Go into the debrief with the objective of finding out how you may improve your interview approach.