How to prepare for a job interview

General Features



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Many things have changed in the last few years, but some basic principles and some top tips will help you when it comes to preparing for a job interview – whether virtually or in person.

Key Points

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What is the issue?

On average, in an interview you have less than an hour to impress a future employer so it’s worth putting in some time beforehand to do some preparation.

What does it mean for me?

Before an interview, reread your CV. Look at it from an employer’s point of view and how it matches to the job spec. Think about what you would ask if you were the

interviewer.

What can I take away?

If you are nervous about attending an interview – be the best you can. Spend two minutes standing in a power pose. Better still, do it with a grin on your face, as this will make you feel happier and more confident.

There has been a paradigm shift in the way that interviews take place in the tax market following the pandemic in 2020. Whereas once we met in offices, shook hands on arrival and sat across from each other in a meeting room, now virtually all interaction is online. So how can you prepare for an online interview? And what happens if they ask you to come into the office for a second round?

Technology

First of all make sure that the technology works. Try out your Microsoft Teams, Google Hangout or Zoom link with a friend. Make sure that you can take the call somewhere quiet which has a professional background – so try not to sit on your bed; a table or desk will look far more professional. Double check that there is nothing in camera shot that you might be embarrassed about, such as a stupid book title, piles of laundry, etc.

On the day of the call make sure you log on with plenty of time to spare.

What to wear

You may not be in an office but this is still an interview so think business-like. You don’t need a full suit but a shirt and tie or business-like top are definitely the way to go. Don’t dress casually – it will come across to the interviewers as if you haven’t made an effort and don’t take their time seriously. Don’t make the mistake of wearing tracksuit bottoms with a nice top. If the doorbell rings or you have to stand up, you will look ridiculous!

Preparation

On average, in an interview you have less than an hour to impress a future employer so it’s worth putting in some time beforehand to do some preparation. After all, as a tax professional you wouldn’t do a pitch to your clients or to the board without a

considerable amount of preparation.

No matter how good your CV, experience and qualifications, I recommend the following steps.

Research the organisation

Research the organisation thoroughly. An obvious starting point is their website. Ensure that you have read their press release section and are aware of any recent transactions. See whether they have an entry on Wikipedia or Glassdoor.

If the organisation is a company, try to get hold of their most recent accounts from either their own website or Companies House. If it's a law firm, look them up on www.icclaw.co.uk to find out what they specialise in. Also look at their rating in www.chambersandpartners.co.uk.

Look to see if there are any relevant tax articles written by the interviewers (try googling their name and company name). Talk to any of your friends who work for the firm. Remember to subtly mention some of this research in the interview.

Research the role

Another obvious point, that is frequently forgotten, is to ensure that you are aware of exactly what role you are being interviewed for. You shouldn't make assumptions, always ask for a job spec (if there is one) and get your recruitment consultant to brief you on the position.

It's sensible to then try to match your own experience to the job spec, work out where you might be light on experience and think about how you would answer questions on any part of the spec. Think about things you have already done which match the spec and which you could bring up in the interview.

The interview itself…

Before an interview, reread your CV. Look at it from an employer's point of view and how it matches to the job spec. Think about what you would ask if you were the interviewer. Make sure you know who is interviewing you. Are they a partner? Are they in HR? Think of questions that you want to ask them.

Don’t ask about salary or benefits in the meeting though – an employer does not want to think that your only motivation for moving is monetary. You should only discuss the financial package if asked directly by the interviewer. Many interviewers find talking about money embarrassing and they also may not be the person who has the authority to agree a salary package. It is best to let your recruitment consultant do the negotiating on this – it is after all what they are trained for.

Finally, practice makes perfect, so prepare for a range of interview questions - hypothetical questions, those that test your competency, and those designed to ‘get to know you’.

Common interview mistakes

- **Being too negative:** Be positive. Don’t focus on the negative elements of your current role. No matter how unhappy you may be at your current company, be careful not to criticise as it can make you appear bitter. Focus on the reasons why you want the new position and why you think you can do the job, rather than the reasons why you want to leave your current role. Remember, this is your chance to sell yourself. Be honest, but don’t emphasise anything detrimental to your application.
- **Humble bragging:** In 2015, Harvard University researchers discovered that candidates who tried to dissemble and make a ‘strength out of a weakness’ during interview questioning came across as dishonest, whereas an honest assessment of weaknesses came across well (see bit.ly/36j3UzO). So honesty really is the best policy.
- **Not showing enough enthusiasm!:** There is nothing more frustrating than hearing an interviewer say, ‘The candidate can do the role, but I didn’t really think they wanted the job.’ Not showing enough enthusiasm for the role is a sure fire way of failing an interview. Make sure you ask questions, and that you showcase the research that you have done.
- **Don’t leave early!:** Another common fault is not leaving enough time for the call and having to leave it early for a work call.

Returning to an office environment

Now that some firms are returning to the office, I’m beginning to find that some second round interviews are returning to a face to face basis. However, the rules of face to face interactions have changed so be mindful:

- Leave extra time to sign into an office.
- Wear a mask on arrival and follow the interviewers lead about whether or not to shake hands on arrival.
- Watch their body language to ensure you pick up cues on whether they are socially distancing.
- If there is hand sanitiser in reception, use it.
- Check whether you need to do a lateral flow test before going on to their site.

Image

BE MENTALLY PREPARED: THE POWER POSE

In an interview, adrenaline can help you to answer questions and think on your feet, but too much adrenaline and stress hormones like cortisol can actively damage your ability to come across as calm and rationale.

Anyone who has seen me talk at training events will know that I swear by social psychologist Amy Cuddy's theory that power poses help you to feel more confident. Find the time to watch her 2012 Ted Talk 'Your body language may shape who you are' (see binged.it/3LqytUk).

Amy studies dominance behaviours. Primates and humans both use fundamental poses to show dominance. When Usain Bolt wins a race, he instinctively throws his arms in the air in a 'pride pose'. Even congenitally blind children will do this when they win a race – it is hardwired into our system.

Amy started trying to work out how to help female students at top American Universities. Where male and female undergraduates had started a degree with the same grade point average, in their final year the female undergraduates were falling behind the males. The key difference in the final year was the amount of marks awarded for class participation. Amy found that many of the girls sat back and didn't have confidence to speak up in class, while the boys spoke up more often.

She discovered that dominant individuals in the class would unconsciously use a range of power poses and experimented to see what happens when you strike a pose like the 'pride pose'. Amy discovered that after two minutes, this actually affects your body chemistry by increasing testosterone and lowering cortisol (the stress hormone) to make you feel more in control and confident.

So if you are nervous about attending a meeting or interview – be the best you can. Before you go into an event, spend two minutes in the toilet in a power pose (the pride pose is to me the easiest). Better still, do it with a grin on your face as this will also release endorphins and make you feel happier and more confident.