

## Tips on doing well in job interviews

This article is meant as a quick guide to help people going into interviews in social intervention fields. It is not a guide on how to fool the interviewers into believing that you know more than you do, nor do I mention here the importance of preparation and presentation. It is written from the point of view of an interviewer (which I have been often) fully aware that good workers often don't do themselves justice in the interview scenario and could, by baring a few things in mind, perform much more adeptly.

### It's all about structure

The biggest mistake that most interviewees make when being interviewed is that they don't structure their answer. I have seen good applicants squirm their way through an answer, missing all the salient points that they are fully capable of making because they didn't take a few seconds to compose themselves. It is because of a lack of structure that interviewees: go miles off subject, forget the question, forget the most important points (and often end up paying great attention to trivial points), or, worst of all, fall mute. Before answering any question ask yourself, how will I structure this? I'll give you two useful analogies:

- The first analogy is of an essay. If I asked you to write an essay titled: 'Where do you draw your support from?' (a common question in this field). You wouldn't start it with the sentence: 'My mum and dad, and my friends, and um my colleagues, oh yeah and supervision and um my family.' Interviewees often fall into a stream of consciousness beginning in the middle and working their way to the end via the beginning. Think about each question as a mini-essay you have been asked to write. There is no *perfect* way to answer the question 'where do you draw your support from?' But one that begins

something like: 'I've found that in this line of work, knowing where I can get my support from is important, both formal support that my employer would provide and less formal support that I can turn to when I need it. In terms of formal support...etc.' is much better than a mental ramble. Thinking like an essay gives you time to compose yourself and splits up an answer - now you get to think about all the types of formal support you can draw on, and then switch to the less formal. It's clearer for the interviewer and the structure makes it much easier for you to think by narrowing the brainsearch (if I say *all* support your brain becomes overloaded, if I first ask for formal support and then less formal support your brain can fit more easily into these boxes and come up with answers).

- The next analogy is decorating a Christmas tree. When answering a question there are certain key phrases and ideas that your interviewer will want to hear. Now, you might come up with something completely new which is wonderful but by and large the interviewer has a checklist and most of your work is about getting ticks on that checklist (only when you are confident that you have ticked off the checklist should you start coming out with newer ideas of your own). Think of these ticks as decorative baubles that you have in a box ready to be shown. In most interviews interviewees take these baubles and throw them all over the place without the slightest structure (half of them end up left in the box, half on the floor). What you need to try to do is set up a structure, like a Christmas tree in this analogy, that you can hang the baubles on and be clear about where you're putting them. If I asked you, for example, why people return to homelessness there is a danger in an unstructured answer of replying: 'Ah drugs, and um, rents, and mental health, and prisons and daily living skills...etc.' All these are fine baubles and tick off the checklist but you do them little justice without structure (in fact, what will usually happen is that 5 minutes into the answer the interviewee will say: 'Have I said mental health?'). To give your answers the best opportunity to be heard structure is required.

### Applying a structure

The structure to an answer is cemented in the first minute, after that it is just about filling out your structure, letting the structure (or foundations if you will) do most of the work. It doesn't matter if your answer is a concise 5 minutes or well-developed 15 minutes, structure is the key to success. The beginning of any good answer should reflect a sequence of certain foundational components:

1. The first part of structuring an answer is to fully understand the question. Very often interviewees hear a version of the question muddled through anxiety and anticipation and let it dictate their answer without actually understanding the full question. Sometimes questions come in two parts and interviewees forget a part (think on the question: 'what risks and challenges are there in working with recent prison releases?' It has two components but I can guarantee you that 80% of interviewees will miss this). Within many questions there will be an ethos setting word or phrase, it is important to

grasp this. My first piece of advice to anyone going to an interview is to take a pen and paper and make a note of the question as it's read out. When people do this it doesn't seem weird, it seems organised. Now you can look at it whenever you like and writing it down allows you to process it a bit more deeply.

2. Having understood the question, don't just jump in. As I said earlier, most make the mistake of starting in the middle. Your first words should instead be a paraphrasing of the question. Some questions might not be very clear or specific and by paraphrasing them you can narrow them down to a finer point. It allows you to talk through where you think the question should go (if you are slightly off track a kindly interviewer might even tell you or elaborate at this stage rather than let you miss the salient point). You are also buying a little time when you paraphrase, while your brain scrambles about.

3. Next, a little bit of thought with a couple of breaths (it is okay to take a couple of seconds to cogitate so long as you look in control – like you have a hundred excellent things to say and you are just working out a suitable order). It can be useful to use a linking statement like: 'I think this question covers a very interesting aspect of work practice, one that it is important to look at very closely.' This helps to show that you are interested and going to be thoughtful, it again buys you a bit more thinking time.

4. Finally, having got the question down, having taking a second or two and made a linking statement, here's your chance to put in some sense of structure. Make a statement like: 'I think in answering that question I want to look at two aspects...etc.' Or: 'I always try to look at this from three points of view, in the first...etc.' With the earlier question on *risks and challenges* for example you could say: 'I think first it would be useful to talk about the risks that are faced by the prison releases and then the challenges for us as workers.' Find a way of narrowing the amount of thinking and remembering your brain has to do and turn it into an introduction to your answer. Find a way of chopping up the question into digestible pieces. This is something you can practice over and over by reading through questions and then working on them. Once you do this you have a general structure and you'll find yourself pulling many more ideas out of the bag (and you are more likely to remember what you said and what you haven't yet said).

Let's imagine three questions and the beginning to three answers.

### **What is the most innovative thing you have done in your current job?**

This is a tricky question. It makes you think quickly and it's likely that the perfect answer (that brilliant protocol that you set up, or new assessment that you created) will completely disappear from your mind (and likely reappear after the interview). So in answering you might say something like: 'So, we're looking for a new protocol or practice that I set up and one that had a real impact

(paraphrasing). I think it's a good question, we face a lot of challenges in our work and I think the capacity to bring creativity to the support work we carry out can make a huge difference (now you've had ten seconds to think). I think the most innovative thing I've put in place was x, and it proved innovative because I think there was a genuine problem that x solved...' Here's your structure: what was the problem, what process led to X, how did X work, how did you review X's success, what did you learn, what skills does X demonstrate that you have and can bring to the new role.

**As an outreach worker, how do you meet the balance between time spent on outreach and time in the office?**

First of all *hear* the question, the central component is *balance* though it is also clear this is an *outreach* post. So off the bat a good answer might begin: 'For me the central component in that question is balance and how important it is to get that balance right in outreach. Part of the clue for me is in the question, the role is outreach and the time spent in the office has to be about making outreach as effective as possible. For my answer I'd say there are essential things that are carried out in the office and I'd like to look at them and how they assist outreach and then look at how we can balance them and how we can check we have the balance right.' And here's the structure: what are the things that *need* to be done in the office (maybe even a look at what would happen if they weren't done), how they augment the quality of outreach, what the balance is (maybe examples of times that you felt the balance was not met, or theoretical examples of what could go wrong) and then finally what checks and reviews should be in place to indicate you have the balance right.

**What does a harm-minimisation approach mean to you?**

Again, hear the question. The danger is that you just list a range of harm min interventions but the question is asking about an approach to working. An approach is not just a number of interventions it is almost a philosophical stance, so: 'Right, it's a question about what harm-minimisation in all its aspects means to me as worker and I guess what impact that would have on this role. I think it's interesting to look at what it means as an approach rather than just a series of actions. For me when you talk about harm min I immediately link that to substance use so for my answer I'd like to say a bit about harm min in substance use and then how that approach can be expanded to all aspects of client-working.' Here's the structure: harm min aspects in substance use, what this means as a stance, and finally what kinds of actions and advice could you give to clients in the new role using this stance.

These are not perfect answers to these questions – they could all be answered differently. But the important thing to remember is that you have set a structure in place and now the answer should flow fairly neatly (it will also give each answer a natural end point rather than the common extended pause and: 'Yeah, I think that's all I can say on that one.').

## A few additional components of a good answer

Once you have a general structure in place there are other important components interviewees often forget but should form the core of a good answer.

1. The most important is still somewhat structural, it is that every question has a top aspect and a bottom aspect and every answer should recognise this. We work in very technical fields governed by policies and legislation, funded through funding streams that come with strict expectations attached – any worker that can't talk a little bit about this won't do themselves justice. So it doesn't matter whether the question is on homelessness, diversity, drug treatment, safety at work etc, there should be some mention of the policy or context that that work is carried out in. Each aspect of our work can be thought of as a continuum of ideas and this needs to be represented in an answer. It isn't as complex as it sounds. Let's give some examples:

- Back to the subject of your **support**. At the bottom end it is about you having a chance to talk to someone, it is about you exploring ideas, challenges and frustrations etc. This is all very important to evoke in an answer but even at project worker level you should be able to also say that at the top it is about employers having suitable support structures so as to best meet the needs of its staff, it is about supervision policies, it is about commissioners expecting that staff are able to perform at their best. In the middle it is about the professional agreements you make with your line manager, when you will have supervision, where.
- Most people answering a question on **anti-discriminatory practice** (equal ops), tend to dwell only on the bottom end of the subject – talking about how they like to act or what they have or would do in certain situations etc. But anti-discriminatory practice is more than just 'treating everyone the same' or 'treating everyone with respect' or a well-worded soundbite; it is a legal requirement that your organisation interprets into policies, failure to follow these policies should rightly lead to disciplinary action, it should lead to disciplinary action because each organisation should strive to do its utmost to guarantee that opportunity for all persons is at the core of its thinking and actions. You interpret the policies through close attention to your own work practice and those of your colleagues, it is important that you have forums for sharing and exploring ideas and experiences etc etc – TOP and BOTTOM.\*
- A question on addressing **addictions** should talk about substitute prescribing, therapy, meaningful occupations and harm min at the bottom and should talk about the National Treatment Agency, DAATs, tensions in commissioner expectations versus client needs, funding availability for substance use but not alcohol interventions at the top. In the middle there would be talk about DANOS for example.

I cannot stress strongly enough that a project worker doesn't need a perfect knowledge of every piece of relevant policy or legislation but should be able to evoke a sense of these things as driving forces which inform the approach to ground-level working. Again, structuring your thinking this way also allows you to mine seams of thought you might otherwise omit. Think at the start of the question, *what is the top and bottom of this subject?* And at the end, *have I covered both aspects sufficiently?*

2. Use real life experiences, but be careful. They can be extremely powerful but they come with certain pitfalls. The first is that it is so much easier to talk about a time you got a client engaged in treatment, for example, than, say, treatment modalities that there is then the danger that your brain will clutch at this story like a sinking man's straw and drag it out into a twenty minute epic for fear of having to move on to the next part of the answer. Keep your stories succinct and to the point. The other pitfall is that one man's story of a moment of enlightenment is another's horror story of poor boundaries and bad practice – stories are rarely as powerful when being told them as they are when you experienced them. If your interviewer has been around a while you are unlikely to tell them a story that will amaze them (just aim to demonstrate your competence, that's enough).

The only other thing to say about using real life stories is that it is okay and often useful to use examples of things which didn't go as well as you wanted them to go. It can be useful to say: 'Here's something I learnt from and it has allowed me to be better at...etc.' However, don't reveal anything that makes you sound foolish or irredeemably unprofessional.

3. Have an eye on the next job along. It is a useful approach to think that someone going for a project worker post should at times sound like a team leader in interview and a team leader should sound like a service manager. The perfect way to seem at an interview is as someone happy to take on the challenges of a project worker position but with a growing knowledge and skill base akin to a team leader. The interviewer should be able to think: 'If I went away for two weeks I'd trust this person to keep things ticking over.' Most of this will come across in your presentation but remembering things like the top and bottom of questions will give you that air of competence.

4. Be solution-focused, active and initiating in your answers. Believe that all barriers can be worked around if workers apply themselves. In a recent recruitment, interviewees were asked a question about resources they could draw on (I won't be too specific), most answered adequately. The follow up question was put, *what would you do if the resources you are used to drawing on are no longer working for you?* This threw virtually everyone. Some people even suggested they would have to leave the job (which is not something an employer wants to hear). No one gave the answer that we were expecting (and would have scored well for): 'I would have to get creative about finding new resources.' Come into the interview with the belief that all problems can be overcome and make it clear that this is your stance as a worker, this is what you will bring to the new role. As a caveat to

this, if you suggest new ideas or protocols that could be employed always stress a period of review. If asked, for example, to suggest ways of encouraging BME groups into treatment you might suggest all manner of outreach, posters, community groups etc. After suggesting things it is appropriate to then suggest a period of trial and review. Something like: 'Well we could try a van-based outreach service, give it a month's trial and review the figures.'

5. Attune yourself to the core values of the company or team which holds the post. This is massively important and your attunement will mostly be a product of your preparation. Read everything you can. Learn mission statements. Most employers will have a website. If you are brave, contact the company beforehand and ask for literature, if you're braver ask for the annual report (I even know good workers who have requested a meeting with the current post holder!). Decide, is this a sensitive, small operation that is looking for pleasant team players or is this a go-getting, problem-solving organisation that wants workers who can mix it up and get results? When in my work we are interviewing for posts in rough sleepers outreach a big mistake that many applicants make is to not fully grasp that this is professional problem-solving outreach with close ties to substance misuse services, enforcement agencies, psychiatric services etc. Some applicants come in imagining the post to be a kind of befriending service and channel all of their answers to demonstrating their suitability for a befriending role but never mentioning having to challenge behaviours. Instead they should be using language that actually reflects the core values of changing lives through effective working (of which, of course, befriending is an important though not a stand alone component).

6. The job specification should be something you can almost quote verbatim. This is one of the key clues to attuning yourself to the post. Borrow language from it. Here's an example of a point from a job spec:

The post-holder is required to work in partnership with a range of staff and agencies working within the substance misuse sector, criminal justice system, and wider health and housing arena, along with other agency staff to provide and deliver a range of services. Developing and nurturing sound relationships and protocols with all internal and external stake holders and partners to ensure effective and integrated treatment pathways is an important feature of the post.

When you read this it becomes clear that there is a definite ethos involving the: 'nurturing of sound relationships.' It wants you to ensure: 'effective and integrated treatment.' At some point in your answers the terms: partnership, relationships, stakeholders (internal and external), effective, integrated, and pathways should appear. When you read the spec don't just scan it, highlight key terms – use one colour for statements that reflect ethos and another for useful words you will paraphrase.

7. Stress service user feedback. For every question there is a problem articulated and where there is a problem it is an excellent opportunity to turn to service user research to both involve the client group in the work and also to, maybe, obtain answers that you might not otherwise come by (or legitimise answers you do have). People have a narrow view of SUF but it is a tool that can be applied everywhere and anywhere. In interviews there may be questions on substance use, housing, ASBOs etc – it is good to throw in to the answer an element of SUF - feedback you've obtained before and feedback you can imagine obtaining to solve challenges in the new role. Back to the question of BME communities and treatment uptake, if you don't mention talking to the communities and soliciting ideas you'd be remiss (and SUF is always two way, stress talking to both those that did chose to use the service and also those that chose not to).

8. Finally think about benchmarking. Benchmarking is a corporate term to mean measuring yourself against the success of others. This counts at all levels. In most fields there will be at least someone doing something similar to the post being advertised and the team it will be within, mention that it would be useful to look at other successes and challenges. Talk about meeting with teams out of area to share good practice. It just all sounds good (it returns you to point 2 of seeming solution-focused, active and initiating).

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I know it seems that there are a lot of components to remember here. I am not suggesting that you go into an interview thinking: 'Split the question up, top and bottom, be active and initiating, don't forget service user feedback, what's the job spec say?' What I *am* suggesting is that all of these are components of an overall ethos of taking a little thinking time in your answer and applying a structure and getting down some sound mental foundations. When you can learn to do this (it can be practiced) everything will be a little bit easier, and everything will flow a little more smoothly. Good luck.

\*For those who haven't figured out the best answer to the question of equal ops, it is that every aspect of our work is about generating equality. It isn't necessarily about race, creed or sexuality for us, it is about those people who cannot garner the same status as others in society because of their behaviours, addictions, upbringings, criminal records etc. Support is always about trying to achieve a degree of parity between the supported and what we would expect of an empowered member of the community.

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