Answering interview questions (using STAR method)

There is rarely a "correct" answer to any question the interviewer asks. The most important thing to remember is that the interviewer is probing you for information about yourself that relates to their business and the skills you have in order to perform the job well.

A lot of companies are now conducting competency based interviews (CBI), or behavioral interviews, to ascertain if you are the right person for the job. This style of interview gives the interviewer valuable insight in to your style of working and enables them to predict your likely behaviour towards work situations. This method of questioning results in candidates giving situational examples of times when they have performed certain duties or achieved positive outcomes using their skills.

Below is an example of a CBI interview question and how to use the STAR method to answer it.

It’s worth noting that if you find yourself in a less structured interview that is not CBI driven you can still adopt this method of answering questions. It is a quick and easy way for any employer to gauge your abilities.

**STAR - Situation, Task, Action Taken, and Result**

**Question:**
Tell me about a time when you had to overcome a difficult situation? How did you handle the situation?

**Answer:**
**Situation**
When I worked at Never Consultancy as a Junior Infrastructure Engineer, I was half way through an overnight software upgrade project for one their major clients at their site and the power to the office was cut off.

**Task**
I had to complete the upgrade by 8am when employees arrived in the office.

**Action**
I located a night duty Building Supervisor who was able to give me details of the emergency contact for the office. On calling this person I was able to determine where the electrical room was and gain entry to it in order to check the fuse box. The electricity had been tripped which I rectified.

**Result**
Within 30 minutes I had resumed the software upgrade and successfully completed the work well in advance of the 8am deadline. Our client was extremely happy that they did not have to come in to the office in the middle of the night and that the upgrade was a success.
Choose examples where you can talk about what YOU did, not what WE did. The interviewer wants to hire you, not the team you worked in. They are interested in what happened, what your task was, what action you took and what the positive outcome for the business was as a direct result of the action you took.

Keep your answers succinct and relevant. Don’t describe situations in minute detail or go off on tangents and always choose examples that end in a positive result. It goes without saying that you should never speak derogatively about your current or previous employer. Nobody wants to hire someone who approaches their work with their glass half empty.

Some interviewers may not have much experience interviewing candidates so be prepared to lead them in to your CV by discussing examples of work/projects you have undertaken. When necessary don’t wait for them to ask you or you could leave the interview feeling deflated and frustrated that you didn’t get the opportunity to discuss your skills in depth.

Obviously you will have digested the job description ahead of the interview but don’t forget to familiarise yourself with your own CV and have a copy with you. Prior to your interview think about some difficult situations you have managed, what your biggest achievements have been, what was the biggest mistake you have made, what is the greatest challenge you face in your current role etc. This way, you will have your STAR answers ready to roll off your tongue and you won’t have to stumble around for answers.

Don’t give general examples. The interviewer is looking for solid evidence and specific examples that demonstrate your competencies including:

- Problem solving / using initiative
- Business acumen / achieving results
- Flexibility / adaptability
- Negotiation skills
- Teamwork / leadership skills
- Work ethic

Sample interview questions you may be asked

Below are some interview questions you may be asked. Think about some positive key points you could make in advance of your interview, using the STAR method when appropriate.

- Give 3 adjectives that best describe you?
- How would your manager describe you?
- What has been your biggest achievement to date?
- What has been the biggest mistake you have made in a job?
• Describe a time when you have had to overcome a difficult situation? How did you handle it?
• How much do you know about our company and this role?
• What appeals to you the most about this role?
• What are your strongest skills for this role?
• What motivates you most in a job?
• What are your greatest strengths?
• Can you name some weaknesses?
• How do you cope with stressful situations?
• Describe a time when you have had to convince a colleague or client to your way of thinking?
• What do you enjoy most about your current role? What do you least enjoy about your current role?
• Do you prefer to work on your own or as part of a team? Why?
• Are you able to work on several assignments at once?
• Are you considering other roles at the moment?
• What hobbies/interests do you have outside of work?
• What are your long term career goals?

Sample questions to ask the interviewer

Asking the interviewer logical and intelligent questions lets the interviewer know you have a high degree of interest in the role and the company. The interviewer will realise that you have taken the time to prepare properly for your interview and that you have given the role considerable thought. We suggest you prepare a few relevant questions to ask during the interview.

Below are some examples of questions you may want to ask although we suggest you prepare a few of your own that are geared toward the specific role you are being interviewed for.

• How long do you expect it will take to become fully operational in the role?
• What kind of projects might I expect in the first year?
• How does this role fit in to the company structure?
• Does your company encourage or provide training?
• How often are performance reviews given?
• What products are in the development stage now?
• Does the company have any plans for expansion?

• What characteristics do the high achievers in this company seem to share?

General tips

• Know where you’re going and make sure your mobile is charged and you have our telephone number in your phone in case you need to call us.

• Have coins with you in case you need to pay for parking.

• Dress to kill as first impressions do count. Fully suited and booted unless we’ve advised otherwise.

• Don’t overdo the perfume or aftershave.

• If you smoke, stub out at least an hour before your interview.

• If you drive to the interview, be aware that you may be in view of the person interviewing you from the car park when you arrive.

• As soon as you step in to reception, you are being interviewed. Receptionists are often asked for their impression of candidates.

• Be prepared. Conduct thorough research on the company and your interviewers (via LinkedIn etc.) and take the job description and your CV with you.

• Stand up in reception while waiting to be met by the interviewer. It gives a stronger first impression.

• Offer a firm handshake, not a limp one. If you are prone to sweating, dry your hand.

• On route to the interview room you may want to discuss how easy it was to find the office, or ask if the interviewer if they have had a busy day, or reiterate how grateful you are that they have taken time out to meet with you. Small talk at this time is acceptable.
• During the interview be articulate, listen and keep the conversation relevant.

• Be aware of your body language. Try to relax, shoulders back, equal eye contact with everyone interviewing you and if you are prone to fidgeting, clasp your hands lightly in your lap. Don’t forget to smile.

• Don’t talk about salary unless invited to. We’ve already advised them of your salary expectation.

• If you are feeling anxious during the interview, some discrete deep breathing will help oxygenate the brain and allow you to think more clearly. It works!

• Be professional, confident, positive and above all else, be yourself. The interviewer wants to see the person you are and not the person you think they want to see. Be authentic.

• Be enthusiastic about the company and the role.

• When the interview is drawing to a close, offer your thanks for their time again and if you are interested in the role, let them know why by briefly summarising your most applicable skills and why you think you are well suited. This is a gentle way of asking for the job and shows you are keen.

**Job candidates have under 7 minutes to make an impression**

Holding eye contact, a firm handshake and the way a candidate has applied their makeup are all significant factors in the six minutes and 25 seconds that job candidates have to impress a perspective employer during an interview.

Research by jobs website Monster.co.uk has shown interviewers take just 385 seconds to decide if the candidate is right for the role, meaning that first impressions do make the ultimate difference in whether a candidate is offered the job.

The study of interview experiences from more than 273 managers and 3,280 employees revealed that half of interviewers said they judge a candidate based on a handshake.

Six in ten bosses say an interviewee’s dress sense affects whether they are viewed as employable.

Whilst the majority of bosses (82%) want their potential staff members to be able to hold eye contact during conversation, and 60% are influenced by the interviewee’s quality of ‘banter’ or small talk, 70% also make their first impression on the way a candidate applies makeup.

Most employers, however, still rank a candidate’s work experience as their most important attribute (36%), ahead of first impressions at interview (24%) and their education (12%).
However, from the opposite side of the table, 70% of job seekers are just as likely to be swayed by their first impressions, with 60% deciding whether to accept the job based on the interviewer’s handshake and 50% based on dress sense.

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And last but not least

To secure an interview you have already put in a lot of effort. You’ve crafted a unique and engaging CV, you have uploaded it to various job boards, trawled through numerous job descriptions, expressed interest in jobs and spoken to various recruitment agencies.

Our desire is for you to succeed and get the job so if you have any questions prior to your interview, we are always here to help guide you through the process. Any one of our Consultants would be glad to help and can be contacted on 0131 344 4778. Good luck!