

## **Advice for Public Sector Interviewers - From One Interviewer to Another**

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The Commission for Public Service Appointments (CPSA) has a statutory role to ensure that appointments in Public Sector organisations subject to its remit are made on merit and as the result of fair and transparent appointment processes. Their [Code of Practise](#) sets out standards for recruitment and selection (which you can find on [www.cpsa.ie](http://www.cpsa.ie)). In this article, Tina Kinirons provides insights on good interviewing practice that is in line with the Code of Practise – from one interviewer to another.

### **1. Draft questions that will help you find the right candidate for the role**

You need to be very familiar with the detail of the job description, the selection criteria (mandatory and desirable) and the definitions of the competencies. Then focus your questions on the requirements of the role. Good competency questions are looking for the candidate to explain, using their previous work experience, how they have accomplished a task or handled a situation. In doing so, they are providing us with evidence of their competencies, skills, knowledge and experience. The questions that we draft must keep this in mind, that we need to hear as much as we can about their relevant previous experience.

It's good practice to note down some of our potential follow-on probing questions before the interview. Be clear about what you are expecting to hear from a superb answer and use that to inform both your probing questions and to ensure you are clear about what the pertinent evidence you have heard when it comes to the scoring conversations. Thankfully, in most interviewing situations, we are not starting from a blank page and will be given some questions we can work from – but still, we can critique those and make sure we are happy with the questions we will be using and the way they are worded.

### **2. Ask set questions during the interview, followed by your probing questions**

The best interviewers I see in action adopt a lovely conversational style and are personable, yet still professional, which helps put the candidates at ease and gets the best from them. At the same time, they are incredibly thorough in making sure they know exactly what it was that the candidate was doing, who else was involved and what the outcome was. None of the follow-on questions are designed to catch out the candidate who genuinely performed the work they are discussing. Don't be taken in by an answer that is simply a list of desirable attributes (such as "team player", "enthusiastic", "self-starter", "resourceful") – we need to ask more questions to get behind that and find the supporting evidence from the candidate.

If a candidate strays off-point, the best interviewers bring them back on track without unnerving the candidate. It's worth thinking about how you can do that. And as an interviewer, make sure you don't stray off point – stick to the prepared questions and keep your follow-on probing questions job related, avoiding any questions that would contravene Equality Legislation.

### 3. Take relevant notes for the interview record as well as evidence to help with scoring

You may have the luxury of a dedicated note-taker or you may be rotating the note-taking amongst the interview panel members or all of you may be taking notes. If you are a note-taker, it's often not possible to write everything down a candidate says, so keep the notes factual, and stick to key words and phrases. If you are a note taker, it's not possible to write everything down that the candidate says – so keep the notes factual, go for key words and phrases and remember it is the official record of the interview (and can be accessed under Freedom of Information). When you are not the official note taker, it is also useful to write occasional keywords, the evidence you hear that you will use later when scoring. You need to be prepared for the scoring conversation that will come later and be able to back up your score with the evidence you heard (or reference what was specifically missing from the answer). It's never good for a candidate to see all the interview panels members with their heads down taking notes throughout and no one left for them to properly interact with, so agree how to avoid this before the first interview.

### 4. Score the candidates fairly through consensus, while being aware of unconscious bias

There are different rating systems in use in different parts of the public sector – but essentially, in all interviews, a candidate needs to have “passed” each and all the competencies to be deemed to be successful at interview. In some cases, successful candidates are then placed in an order of merit, while in other cases there is just one role and one successful candidate. It's a very responsible role to be asked to be part of the serious decision as to whether a candidate has been deemed to be successful or not. We need to be prepared to listen to the other interviewers' viewpoints and be ready to have our own viewpoint challenged. We need to be ready to back-up our scores with the evidence we heard during the interview – or sometimes explaining our score by listing the evidence that should have been included in the answer but was not. We each score separately first, but then need to come to a consensus.

Be wary of coming to a consensus too quickly or too often. That can be an indication of unconscious bias, where our unconscious mind uses shortcuts to make instantaneous decisions. At interviews, we might not realise we are being influenced by someone's accent, where they were educated, their looks, their gender or their weight (to name but a few). To overcome this, we firstly need to be aware of unconscious bias and then we might need to slow down the decision-making process and to reconsider reasons for decisions. The simple fact that several interviewers in an interview panel helps with this.

### 5. Provide meaningful feedback to candidates

The CPSA guidelines ask that “clear, specific and meaningful feedback that explains the basis for the decision reached is provided when requested by candidates.” This means going further than simply writing a sentence that merely translates the score back into a sentence (the candidates can do that for themselves)! We need to challenge ourselves to come up with something that is a little more meaningful and helpful to the candidates than that, while realising that we're not being asked to give them career advice. We can reference the evidence the candidate presented during the interview.

