

Interview Tips for Civil Service and Public Sector Interviews

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Attending an interview can be a daunting task. In the civil service and public sector, you will face an interview board (often three members) who will ask you competency-based interview questions. This article is written by Tina Kinirons, who has interviewed in many competitions and has seen first-hand the variation in how candidates deal with the interview situation. The advice in this article is based on this interviewing experience and provides advice that will help you to interview success.

1. Be clear about how your experience matches the requirements of the role

Be clear in your mind about how your experience matches the role you are going interviewing for. What is the public sector organisation looking for? Is there a job role description or a set of competencies describing what is required? What do you have to offer (skills, knowledge, competencies) and how do these match what is required? There is variation in what materials are available to you – for example, the definitions of the competencies in the civil service and local government competitions, and you will probably have a role description and/or competency definitions for many of the public service roles.

It is worth spending some time on this. Try to tune into the requirements of the role. If you are applying to a public sector organisation that you have not previously worked for, research what the organisation does, what kind of roles they have and see what more you can find out about the role you are applying for. If you invest some time in preparing how your skills and experience matches the requirements of the role, it will help you in several ways. It helps you when writing a summary or position statement (on the application form), when writing your cover letter (if submitting a CV), and it in turn informs how you will answer questions throughout the interview. Especially questions such as why you want the role, how your experience matches the requirements of the role or if you are asked to summarise your experience. It also underpins all your other answers when at interview, because you need to be able to clearly articulate how your previous work experience matches the requirements of the role.

2. Read the application form carefully when answering competency questions

Many public sector competitions are now using application forms instead of a CV. The application form has a work experience section, so you complete this section as you would the work experience section of a CV. Most of those application forms also ask several competency-based questions or look for your summary of particular areas of experience. Read the information provided carefully, as in many instances, the information you provide on the application form is being used as part of the shortlisting process. Some application forms look for the details of one example for each competency, some for two examples per competency, while others ask for a summary of your achievements and expertise in the competency that

makes you suitable for the role. You need to be clear about which type of answer you are providing. If you are asked for one or two examples per competency, you can use the structure outlined in the next section of this article. If you are instead asked to summarise your achievements and expertise, you need to pull together an overview of the highlights of your career that are particularly relevant to the competency in question.

3. Structure your competency answers – a) Context b) Actions c) Results

Whether you are providing the details of one competency example on an application form or answering a competency question at interview, keep this three-part structure in mind to help you frame your answer. Think about your best example for the competency and remind yourself of the details of both what you did and what you accomplished. A good scoring answer (on paper or at the interview) will require you to be clear and confident about that detail.

Follow this structure for your answer:

- a) Outline the **context** – briefly explain the nature of the task, problem or objective of the piece of work that you are using to outline your experience in the competency (this is the Situation and Task parts of the STAR technique).
- b) Detail what you did and how you demonstrated the skill or quality. Be clear about what your contribution was and what **actions** you took (this is the Action part of the STAR technique).
- c) Summarise the outcome, impact or **results** of the work that you did (this is the Result part of the STAR technique).

Talk a little about the context, a lot about the actions you took in that situation and a little about the impact or outcome of what you did. The actions you outline allow the interviewers to match your experience to the requirements of the new role. The outcome or results of your actions give the interviewers some indication of the contribution you made and the quality of your work. The interviewers need to understand about the context to help them in judging your actions and the outcome.

4. Be specific about your actions; be concrete, not theoretical

When at the interview, use sentences that start with “I”, not “we”. You may well have worked with others or been part of a project team, but the interviewers need to understand what you did and what your contribution was. You need to include specifics and be concrete in the information you include. The interviewers are not looking for a theoretical answer, they are not looking for buzzwords, and they are not looking for a textbook answer. Instead they want to know what you did to display the skills, competency or behaviours that they know will be needed in the role.

You need to outline the detail of your actions. Focus mostly on what you did and include a little bit of why you took that approach. This is where your homework will stand to you, as you really need to be clear and confident of the detail of what you have done, even if that piece of work was from a few years ago. Where possible, lead with your most recent work example. Only use a non-work example when you have no other example that you can draw on to illustrate your competence.

5. Prepare for an oral exam, not a written exam!

Remember that an interview is an oral exam, not a written exam. So many candidates put huge effort into writing up lots of notes and act like they are preparing for a written exam. But on the day, the interview is an oral exam, a formal business meeting where you have to deliver your answers in person. So do the preparation. Write out the main points of your examples, but don't forget to practise those out loud.

Don't let the first time you answer a question be in the interview itself. Practise in front of a mirror, with a friend or colleague, turn on the video of your phone, and make sure you get a chance to practise answering those questions out loud.

6. Prepare a summary of your experience as well as the detail in a competency

It can be very helpful to have prepared both the depth and the breath of your experience. By depth I mean being able to detail all the actions that you took using one detailed example of where you have displayed a particular set of skills and behaviours. Some interview questions (and indeed application forms) instead require you to be able to summarise the breadth of your experience, to give an overview of your achievements and expertise in an area. For example, a depth question about report writing would be *"Can you take us through an example of a report that you wrote recently and talk us through the process you followed when writing that report?"* Here, the interviewers are interested in knowing the detail of the process you followed when writing a report, you could mention the type of report, the audience and then expand on the process you followed. A breath question about report writing would be *"Can you summarise your experience of report writing?"* In answer to this second question, the interviewers would expect a candidate to talk about the extent of their report writing experience, the types of reports they have authored, different audiences they have written for, different topics they have written about – they would be expecting a summary of the candidate's report writing experience, rather than the specifics of just one of those reports.

7. Don't worry if you stumble over your words

Interviewers know how nerve-wracking interviews are. They know you will be particularly nervous at the start of the interview and will do their best to welcome you to the interview and help you settle in. Interviewers are not looking for an utterly flawless performance. If you stumble over a word, or ask for a question to be repeated, or come back at a later point in the interview with a rework of an earlier answer – all of that is ok and will not detract from your scores. The interviewers are focussed on the details of your previous work experience and understanding whether your experience, knowledge and skills are a match for the role's requirements. Focus on the detail of your answers and getting your experience and skills across to them. The interviewers are willing you on, they want you to do your best.

8. Manage your nerves

There are things you can do to help manage your nerves. If you prepare well and know that you are well-prepared, this will help. Get there early and don't put yourself under any unnecessary additional pressure. When you are waiting to be called into your interview, calm your breathing and relax your shoulders. When we are nervous, our voices dry-up, so sip some water before you start the interview (take a bottle of water with you – you can always leave it in the waiting area when you go in for the interview). At the start of the interview remember to shake hands, smile, make eye contact and then sit up straight. Pay attention to your body language - our body language influences how we think and feel about ourselves, which in turn changes our behaviour and changes our outcomes. It's a little bit of "fake it until you make it", which new research shows is more like "fake it until you become it".

9. Make sure you answer the right questions

It's important that you stay on track during the interview and answer the questions that are being asked. If you stray off topic, the interviewers can't award you marks as they are looking for your experience in specific areas. Even though you may be nervous, listen carefully to the question being asked. If you are not sure what the interviewer is looking for, don't be afraid to ask them to repeat or clarify the question. If

you can think of more than one way of answering the question, ask for clarification. Remember, an interview is a formal business meeting. In any other meeting, you wouldn't start answering a question if you weren't sure of what had been asked, so do the same in an interview.

10. Ask questions at the end (if given the opportunity)

If you are given the opportunity to ask questions at the end of the interview, I would encourage you to do so. Look at the information you have received about the role and try to imagine yourself starting out in that role. What questions could you ask that show your interest in the role, while at the same time, not showing up your ignorance about something you should have been able to research or answer for yourself. Interviewers will expect you to have done your research.

Examples of good questions I have been asked by external candidates for public sector roles were

- *"How many people are working on the team?"*
- *"Is there a training plan in place for the successful candidate?"*

Alternatively, you could mention some strategy, policy, or other change and ask how that affects some aspect of the role. You are always safe to ask, *"What are the next steps in the process"*. Quite often internal candidates say they don't have any questions to ask and that's ok. And similarly, candidate in interview for the general grades also don't ask questions.

