

All About Interviews – A Guide

For most law firm positions, applicants will be expected to attend at least two formal interviews. For some – particularly more senior roles – candidates will find themselves attending four or five sets of interviews. It goes without saying, but this is make-or-break time. Although some lawyers are undoubtedly naturally better interviewees than others, there are certain things that every applicant can do to improve their performance and chances of success at interview. The key is preparation, presentation and technique.

Preparation

No one doubts that it can be hard for busy lawyers to find the time to prepare properly for interviews, but law firms often report how surprised they are at how little thought some candidates seem to have given to the whole interview process. Sensible interview preparation really can (and often does) make all the difference between success and failure at interview and it can be very frustrating to know that you missed out on a sought after position solely because you didn't put in the necessary 2 or 3 hours preparation time in advance. If it was worth taking the time to draft a CV and booking the time off to attend the interview, it must make sense to give the interview itself your best shot. What is more, the more organised and prepared you are, the more relaxed, confident and composed you are likely to be at the interview itself.

Although there are no short cuts to good interview preparation, there are a number of things that you need to be thinking about each and every time:

1. **Logistics** – Make sure you know the precise time and location of the interview, your route, how long it will take to get there and where you'll park etc. Make sure you have confirmed which office you'll be attending – do not assume! The last thing you want to do is turn up late, rushed and hot and bothered. Prepare what you are going to take with you to the interview (copy of CV, interview confirmation letter, contact telephone number etc), but keep your baggage to a minimum.
2. **Interviewer(s)** – Who are you meeting? Check full names, positions/titles and pronunciation. Find out as much as you can about your interviewers, such as: what position(s) they hold; what department and sub-groups they're in; what their special interests are; recent cases or transactions; previous firms; memberships; interests etc. Don't be thrown if your interviewer(s) is substituted at the last minute and, if possible, try to anticipate who else is likely to interview you should this happen.
3. **The position** – Find out as much as possible about the position you are being interviewed for: why is the firm recruiting; who will you be working for and with; what will your responsibilities be; the nature of the work and clients; non-fee earning duties; ball park salary etc. Also ask about likely interview format and structure. Be prepared, however, to attend the interview without all of this information - some firms are much better than others at providing full details in advance.
4. **The firm** – You can't (and won't) be expected to know everything there is to know about your prospective employer. Concentrate on recent and major events in the firm's history and focus on the work of the department/team you are looking to work for. Investigate size, offices, structure, clients, competitors, values and visions, recent hires (and losses), financial performance, mergers (and acquisitions), key personnel etc. There are various resources readily available to help you with your research.

Some of these are listed below, with full links in the “Resources” section of our website:

- a. The firm’s website and marketing brochures;
 - b. Chambers & Partners guides to the legal profession (on line or directory);
 - c. Legal 500 guides (on line or directory);
 - d. Legal media including, The Lawyer, Legal Week, Legal Business, The Law Society Gazette, The Times legal section. Most of these have searchable archives;
 - e. Google/Yahoo! searches;
 - f. Legal news portals such as Roll on Friday;
 - g. Your recruitment consultant;
 - h. Friends/former colleagues – particularly those at the target firm - perhaps the most useful resource of all.
5. **You and your CV/Business Plan** – Don’t forget about you. After all, that’s what the employer really wants to find out about. Make sure you know your CV/Plan intimately. Remind yourself of previous employers, roles and responsibilities and think about what you learned and achieved in each position and the reasons you had for leaving. Satisfy yourself that you are happy to talk about all work matters listed and are able to discuss your interests, clubs, memberships etc. Mentally rehearse the interview and consider which aspects of your CV/Plan and past experience best evidence the points you most wish to get across to your interviewers. Prepare some simple ‘sound bites’ about you, your achievements and your skills and experience. This is the most crucial aspect of your interview preparation, but if you spent time preparing your CV/Plan carefully, a lot of this work will already have been done at that stage. Don’t neglect to consider why you are at the interview in the first place and why the firm or position is of interest. Think about your future aims and objectives and short, medium and long term strategies and goals.
6. **The law** – More junior lawyers in particular may receive a certain amount of technical questioning during their interview. It’s impossible to prepare fully for this - you can’t go back to law school at this stage - but make sure that you are at least prepared to talk confidently and coherently about your personal involvement in the matters you have listed in your CV. If you have time, you could brush up on some basics and remind yourself of the ‘hot’ issues in your field.
7. **Psychometric Assessment and Other Tests** – More and more law firms are introducing some form of psychometric assessment into the recruitment process; typically consisting of ability/aptitude or personality assessments. These tests are designed to be completed without any prior preparation, although some suggest that crosswords, puzzles and reading the financial pages can be helpful practice for the popular numerical and verbal reasoning ability assessments. Another fairly common form of ‘test’ is the scenario. Candidates are presented with a scenario or ‘real life’ problem shortly before the interview and asked to prepare to discuss it with the interviewers during the interview itself. Whatever form the assessment(s) take, don’t forget that they are only one factor in the overall recruitment decision and are never a substitute for the traditional interview itself. If possible, find out in advance from your recruiter the format of the assessment(s) and what is expected of you, but when the time comes, simply take your time, be yourself and do your best. If you would like further information about what is involved in psychometric assessment or decide that you would like some practice, visit the “Psychometric Services and Career Counselling” section of our website.
8. **Dress and Personal Presentation** – Smart, clean, professional and conservative is the general rule. First impressions count. It’s best to dress up even if your target firm has a dress down policy, although it is becoming more common for candidates to wear smart-casual gear to an interview where their own firm has a dress down policy and the individual is concerned about creating suspicion by changing into business wear. If this is the case, ask your recruiter to ‘warn’ the firm in advance and explain

the situation again to the interviewers on arrival. Negative feedback from law firms most commonly involves, 'comedy' ties, too much jewellery, short skirts/tops, overpowering aftershave or perfume, unpolished shoes and bad B.O. and/or breath. It may sound like a John Cleese corporate training video, but we really do have the awkward task of having to address these issues with some candidates after their first interview. Prepare your outfit and personal hygiene routine in advance.

9. **Interview Questions** – Don't forget that the interview is a two way process and that you also need to be getting the information/answers you will need to enable you to make an informed decision on the target firm and the opportunity. We have included below a sample list of potential questions that you may wish to ask at interview, but no doubt your interview preparation will have raised plenty more. Feel free to take them with you to the interview. Even if everything you really wanted to know has been addressed by your interviewers, it's still a good idea to have a couple of additional intelligent and pertinent questions up your sleeve – at the very least to avoid that awkward silence at the end of the interview. However, don't feel that you have to save your questions up for the end. The best interviews are two way conversations. In addition to preparing questions to ask at interview, it is vital that you have also spent some time considering your answers to some common interview questions. Of course, you'll never anticipate every possible question, but you're likely to come across as much more articulate, coherent and self-assured if you're not approaching every question or issue completely 'cold'. Once again, we include some of the more common interview questions below to get you started.
10. **Nerves** – Interviews are inherently stressful events and the vast majority of interviewees will experience a certain degree of nerves on the big day. If you are an anxious person and are concerned about your nerves getting the better of you, make sure you that you practice some relaxation techniques in advance and have some strategies for controlling your nerves, both before and during the interview, in your armoury. Exercise, sleep, meditation, visualisation, deep breathing and thorough preparation can all help, and try not to resort to alcohol, caffeine, cigarettes or other stimulants. Your interviewers will expect you to be a bit nervous and will make some allowances. Most people find that their nerves depart quickly once the interview has started and the extra adrenalin helps them to perform at their best.

Techniques and Tips

There is no such thing as a perfect interview. Even if your immediate reaction is that the interview went as well as it could possibly have gone, the chances are, as time goes by, you'll think of questions you would have answered in another way and things you would have said or done differently given your time again.

Even if you do get interview feedback later on, the reality is that you'll never really know exactly what your interviewers thought of you. However, by avoiding the most common pitfalls and making the best use of body language and other simple interview techniques, you'll give yourself the best chance of doing yourself justice at interview and of impressing your potential future employers.

We set out below some general common sense interview tips and 'do's' and 'don'ts' for you to think about before and during your interview.

- Don't be, but if you are late make sure you call as soon as possible to let your interviewers know.
- The interview starts the moment you enter the law firm's offices. Be polite to everyone you meet (including receptionists and other support staff) and act professionally at all times.
- Turn off your mobile phone.
- Shake hands firmly.
- Make sure you know who's who at the interview. If you didn't catch a name, ask the interviewer to repeat it.

- Speak up and don't mumble.
- Think about your opening line or ice breaker – particularly if you're nervous. There's usually a bit of general chit chat and get to know each other at the start and this can often set the tone for the whole interview. If you can, try to relax your interviewers by initiating some light hearted small talk, whether about the weather, your journey, the Wimbledon Championships or your lucky interview breakfast!
- Wait to be seated and then sit comfortably with both feet on the floor. Do not slouch and lean slightly towards the interviewer(s).
- Try not to fidget or fiddle. Don't play with your hair or jewellery and keep your hands out of your pockets. Think about holding your hands together in your lap if you think this could be a problem or if you tend to over gesticulate.
- Avoid defensive gestures such as folding your arms, crossing your legs or hiding behind your papers.
- Maintain natural eye contact with all your interviewers without lapsing into psychopathic staring! If there's more than one interviewer look at who is talking and direct your answer to them, but try to include all interviewers in the response if possible.
- It's probably best not to smoke, even if offered.
- Try to look and sound interested, energetic and enthusiastic at all times, even (especially) if you're interviewer looks tired or bored.
- Make sure you listen attentively as well as talk. Nod and acknowledge comments as appropriate.
- Don't forget to smile, try to relax and be yourself.
- Try not to answer questions with a simple 'yes' or a 'no'. Be expansive in your answers, but don't waffle.
- Be positive and confident, but avoid arrogance, aggressiveness or conceit.
- Don't lie or make things up. Be as honest as possible.
- Don't worry about pausing before answering tricky questions.
- Try not to be too derogative about former employers.
- Don't panic if you don't know the answer and don't guess. Admit you are unsure and if possible try to talk intelligently around the problem. For example, suggest alternative answers and/or how you might find out, talk about the commercial solution you'd be aiming to achieve for your client or compare and contrast the problem to situations you do know about. Interviewees often score lots of brownie points by demonstrating calm, logical thinking and initiative despite not knowing the strict 'answer'.
- If you do experience an attack of the nerves or mysteriously go blank, front up to your interviewers straight away. You won't be the first person this has happened to and you'll probably find that they are very understanding and supportive. Take some deep breaths, have a few sips of water, re-focus and get on with the job.
- Try to avoid salary/package negotiations wherever possible. This is best dealt with outside the interview and through your recruiter and it is appropriate to say so. If necessary refer to market rate and/or turn the question around and ask the interviewers what they pay lawyers at your level. Be prepared to disclose your current salary, however, if asked and do think about your salary expectations just in case.
- Don't give up, even if you think things are going badly. Interviewees often underestimate their own performance and, in any event, you may find that you have an opportunity to turn things around later in the (or the next) interview. Occasionally interviewers will give you a hard time just to test your reaction.
- Don't be surprised if you have to cover a lot of the same ground at subsequent interviews. Quite often there's a lack of continuity in interviews and it's important that you get 'buy in' from all the relevant decision makers. Make sure your answers are just as well prepared and enthusiastic for interview 5 as they were for interview number 1.
- For 'social' interviews (often with your prospective team over lunch or a glass of wine), a certain level of informality is expected. Do relax and be yourself, but remember that it is likely that the people you are meeting will still feed back to the decision makers. Don't drink too much – only you will know what that means – and remain guarded. Use this exercise to ask some of the more difficult and delicate

questions you didn't feel comfortable asking at formal interview, but make sure you still come across as keen to get the job.

Closing

- It is very important to leave your interviewer(s) with a positive impression at the end of your interview. Thank them for sparing the time to meet with you and, assuming that you are, make sure that they know that you are still interested in the position. If you are in any doubt, it's best to be positive at this stage and keep your options open.
- Enquire about the next step(s) in the recruitment process. If you are offered the job on the spot, but would like some time to think it over and/or consider all your options, be polite and tactful and try to give the interviewers an idea of likely time scale for a decision.
- If at all possible, take up any offer to tour the offices and/or meet other lawyers in the firm. This is usually a good sign, but remember that it will still be part of the interview process, so don't drop your guard too far.

Follow-Up

- As soon as possible after the interview, jot down your thoughts and impressions and make a note of any questions or concerns you want addressing. Do this while the interview is still fresh in your mind.
- Contact your recruitment consultant as soon as possible following the interview. Most firms expect quick feedback from candidates and are often reluctant to pass back their own thoughts until they have heard from the applicant. Be open and honest with your recruiter who will be able to discuss tactics with you.
- Some candidates write to or email their interviewers to thank them for their time. Some partners love this, others loathe it. Ultimately, it's your call, but direct contact is not expected and it's probably safest to let your recruiter pass back your thanks and feedback on your behalf.
- Learn from any mistakes. Note down what you did well and less well during the interview and think about any questions you were asked that you might need to work on for future interviews.
- Unfortunately, not every interview will lead to a job offer and you should be prepared for rejection. Often you will have done nothing wrong. Ask your recruiter for any feedback they might have received on your interview performance from the employer and for any advice they might have. Remember that all interview practice is good practice and try to take the positives out of every interview you attend. After all, each new interview is a fresh opportunity to impress.

Common Interview Questions - to be asked

It's impossible to prepare for all the questions you might be asked at interview – and the ability to think on your feet is probably one of the attributes that your potential future employer is looking for - but it is a very good idea to have given some advance thought to some of the more common interview questions. We list some of these here to get you started, but we have also included some links to additional questions in the "Resources" section of our website.

- Why do you want to leave your current firm?
- What do you regard as your greatest achievement in your current role?
- What is the hardest decision you have ever had to make in a work context?
- What will you miss most about your current position?
- Describe your relationship with your team? How would they describe you?
- When did you last present to colleagues/clients? How did it go?
- What's your greatest strength and worst weakness? What have you done to address the latter?
- Describe your management/supervisory style?
- Give an example of a difficult client you have had to deal with and how you managed.
- Tell me about a conflict with a colleague. How did you handle it?

- What's your proudest client 'win'?
- What would you have done differently in your current position given the chance?
- What would you do if you were unable to meet a commitment or deadline?
- When did you last show real initiative at work?
- What excites you about this position?
- What do you know about our team?
- Are you willing to relocate?
- Describe your approach to business development.
- How will you add value to our firm?
- How reliable is your stated following?
- What are your short and longer term career goals?
- What do you think is the biggest issue facing the legal profession/private practice/our sector at the moment?
- What will you/your current firm do if we offer you the position?
- What do you do to relax?
- Who would you most like to meet? Who's your hero?

Common Interview Questions - to ask

What you ask will very much depend on what you want and need to know and, of course, also on your level of seniority. Try to avoid asking questions that have already been addressed during the course of the interview and try to appear as though you are genuinely interested in the answer. As we say earlier, the best interviews are genuine two way discussions between the interviewer(s) and interviewee, so don't feel that you have to leave all your questions until the very end. If you need to, take your questions with you and refer to them at the interview – there is no reason for your interviewers to object.

Some questions you might like to ask include:

- Why has the position become available?
- Describe the role to me. What will my responsibilities be, whom will I work for/with, supervise etc?
- Describe your ideal recruit.
- What sort of candidate has been successful in the past?
- What aspects of your team's performance are most pleasing to you?
- What are my career prospects?
- Describe the career development programme. And the appraisal system.
- What is the partnership structure?
- What is the firm/team's growth strategy?
- What training and development opportunities are available?
- How does the firm/team compare with its major competitors? Who are they?
- What is the working and social culture of the firm/team?
- How/why did you come to join the firm?
- What are the next steps?

Further help

Career Counsel is a specialist recruitment and careers adviser to the legal profession.

If you need any further advice or assistance about successful interviewing, have questions or comments on any aspect of this Guide, or would like to discuss your career options, please do not hesitate to contact us at:

Career Counsel Ltd
 Tel: (0117) 927 7636
 Email: enquiries@careercounsel.co.uk
 Web: www.careercounsel.co.uk
 © Copyright Career Counsel Ltd 2005