



Alter

your trajectory

Career Trajectory Series

4. How to succeed at interview



At Alternatives we connect with precision the best with the best, and all the time with unrelenting integrity, passion and expertise.

To help you on your career journey, we have developed the **Alternatives Trajectory Toolkit**. Whether you are simply planning or reviewing your career; taking an initial look at potential opportunities; applying for a specific role or actively interviewing, we have tips and insights to share with you, accumulated by our team, over many years.

In our **Career Trajectory** series we share:

1. How to plan your career

2. Evolving marketing competencies and how to build them

3. How to write a winning cv

4. **How to succeed at interview**

5. How to prepare for a competency based interview

And of course, you can contact our **specialist talent team** at any time to advise you along the way. They are industry and talent specialists of standing, who recognise the complex and rapidly evolving world of marketing, digital, and customer focused careers. They can advise, and at times challenge you. They will go the extra mile to ALTER your trajectory.

We hope you find these insights useful and we look forward to hearing from you.

From all of the team at Alternatives



How to Succeed at Interview

Pre interview/ Prep checklist

- Job description
- Prepare competency and technical interview questions
- Know what you would do in first 100 days in the role
- Prepare some questions for them and your final pitch
- Research the company, products, competitor set, market context and recent developments in it, latest news, their ambitions & strategy.
- Check relevant social media channels and developments relevant to the role and area- eg latest marketing, digital, data developments
- Do "user" test- eg if in retail have visited their stores and have a view
- Double check time, location of interview and time to get there.
- If a remote interview, please check our remote interviewing guide
- Check LinkedIn and online profiles of all interviewers
- Print out CV, have notebook.
- Bring presentation on memory stick and/or bring own laptop

Succeeding at Interview

Interviews are a journey of two parts. The preparation before and the delivery on the day(s). We share our advice on both below.

Before the Interview

Preparation is Key

Succeeding at interview is a result of two factors: the relevance of your experience and capabilities in relation to the position you are being interviewed for and your ability to communicate them well to the interviewers. Very few people are naturally good at interviewing, so preparation is vital.

- Talk to people who work or have worked in the company to get an understanding of the structure & culture.
- Prepare to be asked a mix of questions personal and competency—some directly on your CV & key achievements, others more competency based. Quantifying your achievements comes across very well.

Your interviewers will typically be looking to assess:

- Have you the right skills and experience for this role? What value will you add?
 - Have you a good track record of performance and delivery and is this track record strong enough to ensure that you will deliver in this role?
 - Are you the right cultural fit? What are you like to work with? Can you effectively engage and influence team and key stakeholders?
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Review the Job Specification in depth

Know exactly what the role is about. The interview is likely to be used to assess your suitability to the role outlined, so be very clear what it is the employer is looking to achieve from this role, what success within it looks like for them, and how you specifically, with your experience, can deliver on this role.

Conduct an in-depth background check into the company and the role.

- Use the web, trade journals and any company literature that you can find
- Familiarise yourself with their social platforms (website, Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn etc.). What is the latest news on the company? Are there any recent press releases you can read up on?
- What are their key brands/products/services? Have they recently done any marketing campaigns? What are the latest company results? Who are their key competitors? Who is the current CEO etc.
- If the company has a customer care line, phone it to see what the customer experience is like. If the product is targeting a consumer market, check out retailers, their POS, promotions etc.
- Find out what agencies they use etc.
- Look at the company from expansion & growth perspective– is there potential for future growth within their brands etc.

Prepare your Interview –Both Technical & Core Competency

See later in document for detail on technical and core competency interviews and preparing for them.

It is critical to prepare fully because it can be difficult to respond under pressure to question after question with good examples. You should assign several hours to reflect on your answers with your most powerful and succinct examples.

Ensure that each example explains succinctly the context, what you did, why, who else was involved and most importantly what the outcome (result) was.

This takes a lot of work the first time, but do it in a word document and over time you only have to add new, up to date examples to it.

Practicing out loud, with a friend or colleague can help, so give it a try.

Know who you are meeting with

Not just their name, but what their specific role is within the organisation and where they have come from. Ensure you have reviewed their LinkedIn profiles at the very least.



During the Interview

First impressions count

It sounds obvious, but don't be late. Know in advance where you are going and leave plenty of time.

First impressions do last, so smile, give a good handshake (don't take their arm off, but don't be frail and weak with your hand). Be aware of your body language and stay relaxed. Dress smartly and professionally, but also appropriately for the organisation. It is better to be over-dressed than under-dressed.

Bring a copy of your CV to the interview. Bring a notebook and pen and note occasional things of interest, if relevant.

If it's a remote interview, prepare your environment

Decide where you would like to conduct your interview from within your home or office. Make sure the room you are conducting your interview in is clear of all background distractions and has a good internet connection. You want to make sure you can see the screen well from your position and that you are in a well-lit room, ideally with the light facing in front of you.

Dress formally, as you would do if you were attending an in-person interview.

Listen

It might sound simple but particularly over a video call it's important to allow the interviewer to finish asking their question before jumping in with an answer. Allow yourself some time to pause and answer when you're ready. Using a smile and nod of the head while they talk will let the hiring manager know you are listening and following what they are saying. If you didn't understand a question, it's important you inform them you cannot hear to ask them to repeat it.

Be Real: Show Your Personality

Remember that the interviewer is not only assessing your skills and experience, but also whether he/she likes you, and above all, whether they think you'll fit in, **so don't be afraid to show your personality and to be yourself!** It is important to try to develop a rapport with your interviewer - help put them at their ease too-without being over familiar. The more comfortable the interviewer feels with you, the better the interview will go. Maintain plenty of eye contact, be upbeat and energetic and be careful not to go off point - watch for any signs of boredom on behalf of the interviewer.

If it's a remote interview, showing your enthusiasm across a video call can be more challenging than face-to-face, but don't allow that to stop you from showing the interviewer why you want to work for their organisation.

Know Your Story

Firstly know your CV inside out and be able to talk in detail about everything that is written on it. If you can't do so, then the interviewer will be left wondering at worst if your CV is accurate and at best if you have not bothered to prepare. Either way you will not get a second interview.



Competency Based Interviews

Competency-based interviews tend to be the standard format that most companies use at some point in the interview process, either at first or second round. Preparation is key for this interview style.

A competency-based interview approach aims to gather evidence of how well a candidate will perform in a particular role. Past behaviour is believed to be a strong predictor of future behaviour.

Competency based questions are either:

Behavioural – which work on the basis that the best predictor of future behaviour is past behaviour

Situational – where the candidate is presented with a potential future scenario and asked how they would be likely to handle it, or

In these interviews you would normally have a representative from HR and the hiring manager, or another senior member of the team. HR tend to focus on some of the more cultural-based competency questions, whilst the hiring manager tends to go into specifics that are relevant to the role itself.

HR focus: Competencies

The HR Director/ Manager is likely to focus on a list of competency questions which will probe areas such as strategic ability, leadership, ability to prioritise, work under pressure etc. If you know that the interview will be conducted using a competency-based framework then it is essential that you prepare for a competency based questionnaire in advance of the interview.

You will need to prepare by writing out a number of strong examples (2-3) to all the questions, ensuring that you answer with concrete examples of what the situation was, how you responded to the situation and what you achieved.

Competency based questions are deliberately constructed to eliminate waffle and require factual, evidencebased examples. It is also critical to distinguish the “I” from the “we”.

Whilst you should not appear over-rehearsed, preparing these questions fully is key. (See our document on core competency interviewing for more information on this)

Hiring Manager Focus: Technical experience –e.g. Marketing, digital etc.

The Hiring Manager (eg Marketing or commercial Director or CEO) is likely to focus on your marketing / digital/ strategy etc. experience to probe the depth and range of your experience and in what way have you contributed to the success of your brand or company in the past.

It is essential as a start point to know the basics such as the market share of your brand, budget spend, contribution, competitors. Use the research and knowledge that you have about the role and the company. This will not only assure the interview that you know what you are talking about, but it will also show that you really want the role.

The most effective marketer knows how to position thier brand and advertise all the benefits that are relevant to the needs of their target market. Similarly, to impress any future employer, you need to effectively market the benefits of you as a brand, which in this case are your strengths, work experience, industry knowledge, contacts, skills, abilities and successes.

It is important for you to be relevant to the market you are talking to and highlight the key transferable skills you possess which will add significant value to a potential future employer. Remind yourself of what your core strengths and abilities are. Ask your friends to tell you what they see as your strengths and, if you think you can take it, your weaknesses – it helps to get an outsiders view on this and focus strategically going forward.

If the role is focused on communications, as an example, you should demonstrate that you are passionate



about the area. You should be able to talk about the brands that have inspired you and your favourite TV ads or campaigns. If you can't do so, you are simply not credible. Research inside out the company you are being interviewed by and be fully conversant about their brand or products and marketing campaigns. Listen to what it is you are being asked. Don't assume the question before it has finished and jump into the answer without thinking about it.

Demonstrate your experience/your achievements

It is essential that you are able to demonstrate your achievements. These will distinguish you from the other candidates who may have similar experience to you. It is really important to distinguish the "I" from the "we". You may have worked primarily in cross functional teams on cross functional projects, but what has been your unique contribution to each project?

Where did you add value? How did you make a positive difference? Tell the interviewer about you and your experience. Do not say "We did..." always describe your work as "I have done..." and give personal examples of your achievements.

When asked what achievements you are most proud of, answer chronologically backwards starting with your current position. If your proudest achievement was ten years ago, then your interviewer will wonder what you have been doing since then.

Don't side step the "weakness" or other uncomfortable questions

This is a question used to probe your self-awareness & to get insight into the real you. You must be able to communicate a genuine weakness or developmental area and crucially how you are addressing it. E.g. I realised that I did not have the social media skills needed for the position so I took a Digital Marketing diploma or I felt I need to boost my numerical ability by taking a course in finance...etc. I am now very competent in this area."

We all have weaknesses, but it is how we manage them that is important.

Equally, if you have obvious skills or experiences gaps don't bury your head in the sand. It is likely to come up in an interview. Prepare ways of addressing it to the best of your ability. For example, "I know I haven't worked with an online company before, however in my previous position, digital was a very important channel for us and I managed X, Y,Z..." or "I know I don't have experience in your particular industry, but I have successfully changed sectors in the past & my skills in X, Y,Z are transferable..."

Show your motivation-Passion is Priceless

There are some things that money just cannot buy and a motivated individual can be priceless...it can be the compelling asset that makes the difference between you and a fellow candidate seeking that dream role. It can sometimes compensate for not possessing quite the right experience. So wear your heart on your sleeve and show that passion when you do find the role you want.

Prepare questions to ask the client

Interviews are done not only to find out about you, but also for you to find out more about them! Good questions will allow the prospective employer to gauge your suitability for their role, but importantly, it will allow you to ascertain if the role is right for you! But ask intelligent questions - the quality of your questions says a lot about you as a candidate.

Be real about your motivation for leaving your current or ex-employer, but don't bad mouth them. Do not reveal sensitive or commercial information about previous or current employers even if you think your interviewer will be interested. It shows a lack of discretion and may reflect badly on you. Only quote publicly available statistics/market figures, and let your interviewer know they are in the public domain.



The more experienced you are, the more you need to prepare

Senior Marketers please note: do not fall into the trap of thinking because you may have been headhunted, or are more experienced and have a fantastic CV that you can get away with less preparation. It may be obvious to you that you can do the job, it may also be obvious from your CV, but unless you can demonstrate that with passion during the interview then you will not secure the position.

It may also be a while since you have interviewed for a role, so you will need to prepare thoroughly. It is a competitive marketplace and you need to approach any interview as if it is a competitive sport – you need to be better than your competition if you want to win the game.

And your final pitch!

A lot of people can sell, present to clients and get a positive outcome from their meetings. They forget this when it comes to selling themselves!! If you are interested in the role let the company know that you are impressed with them and end with a strong positive statement about yourself and how much you want the role.

Be careful what you say after the interview when leaving the building. Don't fall at this final hurdle with an off-hand comment—just stay professional right to the very end!

Potential challenges and responses for remote interviews:

- Difficulty hearing interviewers and interrupting: It's okay to ask the panel to pause or repeat the question
- Technical issues with weak signal and lagging videos/sound: It's okay to suggest rescheduling if the video/sound completely fails during the interview
- Difficulty reading the room/first impressions: Be more aware and expressive with your use body language, hand gestures, facial expressions (nodding, smiling, etc.)

Some don'ts

- Don't enquire about salary or remuneration on first meeting; it gives the impression that you are only looking at the job for financial gain. Have checked before with us. Negotiations will follow later, if an offer is likely.
- Don't make derogatory remarks or run down your current/previous employer/ boss.
- Don't relax and rely on your resume / profile to do your selling for you. Surprisingly this is where a lot of people fall down.
- Don't be evasive or appear arrogant, it is one sure-fire way of putting the interviewer off you.

So in summary, our Top 10 Tips for succeeding in an interview

- Turn the brief inside out
- Revise your CV to highlight your fit for the role
- Research the company, products, competitor set, market context
- Prepare for a competency interview. Write down all your answers. Rehearse! Rehearse! Rehearse!
- Listen to and answer the questions asked
- Provide recent examples of achievements that highlight YOUR value & where YOU made a positive difference in each of your roles. Distinguish the "I" from the "Team".
- Demonstrate your passion and enthusiasm for the role
- Plan what you would do in the role, especially in the first 100 days.
- Ask your own questions
- Share the real you



Contact us

We hope you find these career insights useful. For further guidance on how to plan your marketing career, contact our specialist team at Alternatives.

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We look forward to hearing from you.

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