



Path Counselling

Career Path Counselling

Interview guidance for researchers

So you got yourself an interview - well done! Now the hard work starts. Being a good interviewee is a skill, and like all skills it can be learned and honed with practice.

1. Do your homework

The more prepared you are, the less nervous you will be. Do your background research on the firm, and as much as possible on the people who are likely to be interviewing you. That way you can ask them relevant questions and make sure that your answers are appropriate for your audience.

2. Showcase the best of you

Go into each interview with a checklist in your head of your key personal attributes. Match these to the job description, and have one or two practical examples for each one. As each question is asked, pause, mentally file through your checklist, do any of your key attributes fit the answer? At the end of the interview, you can check again and make sure that you have had a chance to mention all of these: if not, then make sure that you do. This avoids you later subsequently remembering something wonderful about yourself which you completely failed to talk about.

For each question they will be looking for a to-the-point answer, expanded upon with some recent examples/proof to back up what you are saying.

Example checklist for a researcher 2 years' into their career:

Key attribute	Examples of how you have used this
Enthusiastic, motivated, keen to learn	Enjoyed learning a new sector, took an opportunity to step outside your comfort zone and learn a new skill, made approaches to senior staff working in other areas to learn about what they do.
Highly Organised	Implemented a new record-keeping system that others adopted, helped organise a new starter, refreshed company use of the database/processes.
Excellent written communication skills	After six months, was asked to write all the initial candidate approaches for the team. Published an article on LinkedIn/the company website.
Excellent verbal communication skills	Moved onto speaking to candidates more quickly than usual/immediately. High levels of initial success with telephone reach-outs. Allowed to contribute early to client conference calls.
Committed to search/your organisation/team	Volunteered to stay late when helping with a pitch, joined in with an out-of-work activity such as charity



	fundraising, researched rival firms, joined a professional organisation.
Good team player	Assisted a colleague with their search without being asked/ found a candidate for someone else in your team. Liaised between researchers and senior management.
Empathic/diplomatic	Smoothed over a tricky situation by chatting with a candidate (or even client). Asked to resolve a dispute between colleagues.
Presentation skills	Asked to present to team/company on a specialist topic. Presented successfully to a client or at an industry event.
Personal career strength/highlight	Everyone has one, the top moment of their career, make sure that you don't leave the interview without mentioning it!

3. Competency-based questions

These usually form the main part of an interview, they are vital as they check that you can do the job. The STAR or CAR framework is great to use for this. When you are asked a question, you give an example from your past experience as follows:

Challenge – What problem needed to be solved?

Action – The important bit, what you actually did, you can expand here

Result – What happened as a result? This should always be positive and evidenced

Some common questions which you can use CAR to answer

How did you handle a stressful situation?

How have you dealt with conflict?

Example of a mistake that you have made? (admit / resolve)

Have you ever had to deal with an irate client/co-worker?

When have you had to be flexible in a work situation?

Have you ever disagreed with a supervisor?

When have you completed a difficult task/project?

When have you learned a new skill?

When have you achieved excellence at work? What are you most proud of?

When have you worked successfully as part of a team?

What have you done when someone else in your team has been underperforming?

Have you ever changed as a result of feedback?

Have you ever turned a negative situation into a positive one?

See <https://thehiredguns.com/car-technique-secret-interviewing-weapon/> for an introduction to this method. There are also lots of examples on YouTube.



4. Sample answers to common questions

After each question is asked, pause for a few seconds and collect your thoughts. They are looking for 1-2 key points, backed up with practical examples from your experience. If you can fit in some of your above attributes, then all the better.

‘Tell me about yourself’

This is not an invitation for a lengthy chat about your childhood. It is actually an opportunity to summarise why you are perfect for the role. Three or four points is enough, with practical answers to back these up. Use your ‘personal attributes’ checklist as a starting point, which of those fit this role well? When you have stated all of these, STOP TALKING. If they want you to elaborate on any of this, they will ask you.

Example answer (for a Life Sciences Researcher role at a SHREK firm)

“I enjoyed studying biology at university, and was a founding member of the Biomed Geeks club. After uni I was headhunted into xxx generalist search firm, where I was recently promoted to Senior Researcher. I’ve really enjoyed learning the tools of good research, in particular (eg) being the middle-man between the client and the candidate (brief example). I feel that now it’s time for me to find a bigger company where I can learn more about how search works in a global context, and learn from the best in the industry. I also feel that it’s time to focus on an industry specialism and I have always been interested in Life Sciences/enjoyed working on LS roles.”

‘Why do you want this job?’

Although it’s tempting to be rude about your present company, be very wary of doing this. It’s not professional, and you come across as negative and complaining. Mention that you are not getting enough exposure/experience/whatever at your current firm, allude to management problems if that’s what’s happening, but make most of your answer focus on the positive aspects of the interviewing company. There will be lots of these and they will love hearing you sing their praises.

Do your research into the firm, find out their strengths so that you can reflect these back to them. Even better if you can find out the strengths of the specific team you are interviewing for.

‘What would you do if we gave you 10 assignments to work on at once?’

This question is all about how you handle pressure. There is usually a question about this in some format. It’s about how you prioritise work, and if you feel able to ask for help.

Example answer

“This happened to me recently when I was working for two separate consultants who both asked me to do x assignments each. It was potentially stressful, but I worked out a list of priorities based on the shortlist deadlines and level of seniority for each role. I then took this to both consultants to discuss with them. We agreed a revised timetable together.”

Where do you see yourself in 2/5/10 years’ time?

This question is checking your ambition, whether it fits into their organisation, and how realistic you are being about it. It is fine to not have an exact career path planned out, but you do need to have some ideas about where the role could take you. Look at career paths in their company, how many years in are people promoted to Senior Researcher/



Consultant/Partner? Match your answer to what you see there. Also, be honest. If you enjoy research and want to remain in this area, say so, you could potentially ultimately aim for a Head of Research role. If you think you might want to become a Delivery or billing Consultant, then also state this. But it's also good to keep plans flexible as you never know what interests you might develop, and stating this will make you sound realistic. The classic film and TV answer of 'In your chair' is a no-go!

'What are your strengths?'

You already know this (see above list) but focus here on one or two of your best ones and expand the answers slightly to give some colour/detail. This is where you can try and stand out from the crowd and make them remember you. *"I was asked to present to a potential client after which they hired us"*. Although this is where you show off, you need to also indicate that you want to grow these skills and that this new organisation can help you. No-one likes a know-it-all.

'What are your weaknesses?'

A horrible question designed to catch you out. Best to play it down to minor things and, crucially, show that, whatever they are, you are working on them. So "I used to feel that I needed some help with how to let rejected candidates down, so I went on a training course/asked senior colleagues for some pointers, which helped a lot." "I could probably do with some professional development on how to use Powerpoint more effectively". If all else fails, "I can work too hard, but time-management training has helped me to prioritise" usually goes down quite well.

'How do you know you have done a good job? How do you target where you need to improve?'

Both these questions are about evaluation. How do you evaluate your own and your team's processes? Is it just done on number of roles filled? If your company has a 360° evaluation scheme in place, talk about this and highlight a recent experience of it. If there is nothing, then think of something that you personally do. The best answers contain a qualitative element (ie asking a colleague to evaluate your search and suggest where you could improve next time, getting feedback from the client), as well as a quantitative one (KPIs/targets and how these are met and reviewed).

'Are you interviewing anywhere else?'

This does two things:

1. It checks how committed you are to the industry. If you say yes, I'm interviewing for ten completely different roles in a variety of sectors, then they will conclude that you don't care about search particularly, you just need a job.
2. If they like you, they want to see if there is competition for you. It doesn't hurt to be honest and, if this is true, say 'Yes, I've actually got a second interview with a SHREK/boutique firm tomorrow, but I prefer the atmosphere/sector exposure/training here.' If you are only interviewing with them and nobody else because they are your dream firm, then say so. They will be flattered.

5. Is there anything you would like to ask us?

Yes, always! Prepare a list of sensible questions. More senior people can be asked about



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the organisation's direction and ethos. A great idea is to look on their website to see if they have any Company Values stated, then ask how these play out in the day-to-day. Middle management appreciate you asking practical questions about how tasks are approached/delivered. Also 'What kind of people get promoted here?' is a sneaky way to find out what sort of workers they value. Potential new team-mates are good to ask about daily routines/task allocation/support/common gripes.

Do not ask about holiday allocation, days off, whether you can leave early, do you all go away to South America for team-building etc. Do not ask about pay. This will all be covered further down the line. For now, it does not make you look motivated by the right things.

Generally, an interview is not the right place to ask about package. This can be done afterwards, if an offer is forthcoming. Obviously it is fine if the employer brings it up, but this is unusual.

Finally

An interview is your opportunity to show them what you've got. Relax, enjoy it, follow where it leads. If it turns into more of a conversation then you are doing well, but remember that, however nice they seem, it is not a cosy chat, so stay professional.

Completing a 'Strengths' profile can be a big help in answering interview questions, enabling deeper understanding of both your strengths and your weaknesses. Email carolyn@careerpathcounselling.co.uk if you would like to do one of these.



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