

Interview Techniques

Creating the Right First Impression

Interviews are daunting – especially since most of us leaving the forces have little experience of being grilled about ourselves. You've been invited to convince the person interviewing you that you have the necessary skills, experience, personality, drive, enthusiasm and sense of humour.

There is a lot of advice out there, but we've picked out the vital points from our candidates' and clients' experiences.

Appearance and Bearing

'You'll not get a second chance to make a first impression'

Often clients comment that the ex-military candidates are usually the best turned out and best prepared. This should come naturally to us, shouldn't it? It has cost people the job time and time again because they thought they didn't have to wear a suit. Dressing for success and proper grooming are essential. It's important to wear suitable clothing, be neat and tidy, and smartly dressed. Never arrive with any kind of food in your mouth or on your teeth, and try not to smoke right before the interview.

Just as you'll plan an outfit or iron a shirt, prepare online. Look up the company's website for a start but you may find that the individuals interviewing you are on LinkedIn and/or Facebook as well, so why not find out about their backgrounds? They will have searched for your name so make sure your LinkedIn and Facebook profiles are up to date and don't contain awkward comments or photographs.

Your Arrival

The first person you're likely to meet is the Receptionist. Don't underestimate them. Be polite: you never know if they are going to be consulted about their first impression of you! Arrive about 15 minutes early so you have time to find the exact office, perhaps with a stop at the washroom to conduct a final grooming check. Read any press cuttings and the company notices that are on display. You might pick up some relevant information on members of the interviewing panel or the company's recent performance. Or use this time to check their website or profiles. When you're called through, if you haven't already done so, turn off your phone!

Smile!

However uncomfortable it may feel it is important to squeeze out a natural smile when you first meet your interviewers. With the odd exception, interviewers are normal people

who will respond positively if you appear in the interview room with a smile on your face. You may feel more like crying than smiling but resist the temptation. Don't force yourself but do give it a try. What usually happens, unless the interviewer is trying to play bad cop (very rare), is that they smile back. The ice is broken and you have leapt the first hurdle.

The Interview

Nine times out of ten you will be greeted with a handshake and this little act can have immense consequences. We've all experienced the flabby wet handshake from someone at some point and you'll remember the feeling that it left you with. A limp lettuce or a bone-crusher all leave their mark on the interviewer's psyche and it can be several minutes before the effect wears off. Go, if you can, for the middle ground – firm and dry. If you don't know what kind of handshake you have, practice with a friend. It is important that as you shake hands, you make eye contact.

A great deal of communication between two people takes place through the eyes, so during your interview you need to look at the interviewer/s. Aim for an open, confident gaze rather than a fixed stare. Remember, they liked you enough to invite you for an interview, so they will be happy to see you. The interviewer is not your enemy – there's nothing they want more than a successful interview.

Maintain a decent level of eye contact throughout the interview, but especially at the start. Don't maintain it to the point of falling over furniture on the way to your chair or making them feel uncomfortable, but an appropriate level of eye contact will show confidence and that you are personable. Also, share the eye contact between the interviewing panel. Staring at one throughout will make the others feel excluded.

Humour

As servicemen/women, we have developed what can only be termed as a 'warped sense of humour'. Our levels of banter can at times be described as extreme and to be honest, it is something that is rarely understood outside of the forces. It's what gets us through the tough times, the hardships and sometimes even the losses. Unfortunately, sometimes when we're nervous, it has a habit of surfacing. Don't let even mild 'squad-die' humour slip out at your interview! You'll risk blowing your chances of what could be your dream job for a 'one liner'. Relax – but don't forget they still need to offer you the contract.

Self-Awareness

Always try and remember that it's highly likely someone interviewing you will have little connection with the military. They will not understand the terms "square bashing", "O Group", "RSM and CO" or "NAAFI Break" so please refrain from using military dialect and try to use a language that they will understand. Why not ask them what experience they've had of hiring ex-Forces? There are still some people who have a stereotypical view of the Armed Forces so do be aware and try your best to put them at ease, after all you're just a decent human being who wants to work and add value to their business. We have always found that a touch of humility goes a long way!

Be Interested

Remember you also need to check that you like them and the company. So if there is a pause, at the beginning or the end, or you are waiting for something, ask them about themselves if nothing else and you may find your heart rate slow down.

Answering questions

It's very easy to ramble when answering a question with the end result being that you don't actually answer the question. Don't be afraid of pausing to think. We advise using the STAR technique which stands for 'Situation, Task, Actions, Results'.

Situation - provide them with a background or context of the example you're about to give i.e. *"I was the Fleet Manager for 140 specialist vehicles and 700 personnel when we were due an audit when the whole regiment was delayed on return from..."*
Or... *"I was part of the team organising a display of weapon firing effects to industry."*

Task – explain what you had to do

i.e. *"I was responsible for ensuring all departments knew their timeline and that all vehicles were pre-checked..."*

"In order for the event to be successful I had to arrange for safety personnel to be distributed at key road crossings to ensure no lives were put in any danger. They also had to be able to point visitors to the correct facilities."

Actions – what you did (not 'we') to make it happen.

i.e. *"I prioritised the vehicles and communicated this order to the convoy commander. I put a team of mechanics on standby for their return which meant liaising with the security manager (provost) about the guard shift rota."*

"I asked all departments for two volunteers and arranged two briefings prior to the day. They all attended a rehearsal on site and I quizzed them about dealing with certain situations. They all had hand-out reminders and I visited every site prior to the event and during the event to ensure they were in place, alert and informed about the situation themselves."

Results – Try to define the success, numerically if you can: think about it in terms of 'the opposite of failure'.

i.e. *"The audit happened on time and all 140 vehicles were seen. We passed and were commended on the..."*

"The delegates and high ranking officers who attended commented on how helpful all the crew had been. There were no incidents or infringements..."

Make sure that you have a handful of examples that you can use that demonstrate your leadership, organisational skills, ability to operate under stress and perhaps where you have helped others or improved process. Read the job description/website thoroughly beforehand and try to use those words in your answers.

Sell Yourself

We're encouraged to be humble in the Military and leave thinking nothing of what we do on a day to day, but unless you tell them, they won't know that you didn't just polish your boots. You are trying to impress them – find something to be enthusiastic about and you'll find them looking much more interested. It sounds, and is, a bit like a performance so make sure you rehearse – then after a few (and expect a few at least), it will become a natural performance.

Be punctual, be smart, do your homework and give yourself the best chance of success.

Good luck!