



RCN Career Service

Interview skills

Overview

An interview is essentially a performance and, like all performances, success depends on careful preparation and practice. The following guidance offers advice, tips and examples for a successful interview.

Preparation

- Go through the person specification or job description, if available. Underline all the statements that indicate the skills, experience and personal attributes required for the role. Look back on your career to date and list examples that illustrate that you meet the requirements for the post. Be prepared to expand on information given on your application form or CV.
- Update your portfolio and be prepared to take this to interview.
- Look at the list of common interview questions (page 4). Practise responding to these questions by arranging a mock interview with a friend, relative, senior colleague or careers adviser. Ask for constructive feedback and arrange to practise again if necessary. It is even helpful to rehearse the actual interview process (see *During the interview*).
- Prepare some questions to which you would like answers.
- Try to arrange an informal visit, where you can talk to staff and assess whether the post and environment will meet your needs and get some answers to your questions.
- Make sure you are up to date with local and national initiatives in health care by searching relevant health websites or reading current nursing journals.
- Plan your route to the interview. How long will it take you? Allow time for delays beyond your control, such as traffic jams. Practise the route, if necessary.
- Gather and prepare any documents requested by the organisation, such as certificates, passport and an up to date portfolio. (Guidance on compiling a portfolio is available from the Learning Zone on the RCN website www.rcn.org.uk).
- Plan what you are going to wear for the interview. You need to look smart, clean and comfortable, but won't be expected to spend a fortune on a designer suit!
- Get a good night's sleep before the interview. Make sure you have time to prepare on the day, allowing time for breakfast, getting ready and having a final mental rehearsal. Use relaxation techniques to help you focus.

Breathing exercise to help you relax prior to interview

When you are nervous you breathe more shallowly and starve the brain of vital oxygen. To help you relax, follow this simple deep breathing technique a few minutes before the interview:

1. stand up, if you can
2. inhale slowly and try to fill your lungs completely. Try to do this naturally, without taking a great deal of forced effort
3. after a count of three, slowly exhale through your mouth
4. do not overdo it so you hyperventilate. Take time to do the exercise gently for three or four minutes. With practise you can do it without other people noticing!

During the interview

- Smile when you walk in.
- Shake hands with members of the panel.
- Take your time to get comfortable.
- Ask if you don't understand a question.
- Keep good eye contact.
- Don't rush your answers.
- Ask questions at the end.

Body language during interviews

- Smiling shows friendliness and openness.
- Nodding shows that you're paying attention.
- Eye contact shows sincerity and confidence, but don't stare!
- Crossing your arms makes you look guarded.
- Sitting well back in the chair makes you look more relaxed and comfortable.
- Try not to hunch your shoulders.
- Avoid fumbling with jewellery or fidgeting.
- Hold your head up to avoid mumbling into your chest.
- Begin your answer by looking at the person who asked the question, then direct it at the entire panel.
- Try to spread your eye contact evenly towards each member of the panel.

After the interview

If successful:

- wait for confirmation in writing before resigning from your current post
- make sure you are sent a contract and details of the terms and conditions. Clarify any concerns before accepting the job in writing.

If unsuccessful:

- reflect on your performance, write down what worked and what didn't. List the most difficult questions. How would you respond next time?
- contact a member of the interview panel and ask for constructive feedback on your performance
- if you believe that discrimination – on the grounds of sex, race, age, sexuality or disability – has occurred contact your RCN representative.

Coping with difficult interview questions

What are your weaknesses or development needs?

Think about ways of turning a negative into a positive.

For example – ‘in the past, I have had a tendency to try to take on too much, but I have dealt with this by learning how to delegate responsibilities, prioritising by writing lists and planning my day in advance, and attending a time management course’.

Remember you will be new to the job, so you can discuss possible weaknesses in terms of support that will help you to adapt to the new job, such as mentorship, a good induction programme, or a short course on skill development, such as IV drug administration.

Please give an example of a work situation that didn't work out very well.

To avoid dwelling on weaknesses, focus on the past, rather than the present and finish with what you learnt from the experience. For example:

‘As a junior staff nurse, I didn't fully appreciate the importance of advocating for the patient. A junior doctor was trying to take blood from a patient and found it very difficult to find a vein. The patient was anxious and moving their arm around. The patient was clearly in a lot of pain and eventually the doctor had to give up and a more senior doctor took blood. I am now very experienced at venepuncture and can see that if the doctor had used a pillow to support the patient's arm he would have had more success. I would now have no hesitation in taking the doctor aside to discuss training on venepuncture and to suggest more effective ways of taking blood. I would have intervened earlier to support the patient and halt the procedure’.

What would you do if you were the only qualified nurse on duty when:

- a patient falls out of bed
- a colleague cuts themselves on broken glass

- you notice that some drugs are missing
- a patient complains that some of their belongings have been stolen?

The interview panel will want to know that you have common sense, and that patient safety and wellbeing is your priority. For many scenario situations there is a similar process that involves:

- assessment of the situation
- taking appropriate action
- following procedures and guidelines
- appropriate communication
- record keeping
- evaluating and learning from the situation.

Another approach is to prepare examples from your experience which back up responses to questions. Use the STAR technique to help you provide as much detail as possible. Start by describing the **S**ituation; state the **T**arget you were trying to achieve; detail the **A**ctions you took and finally give the end **R**esult.

For example:

I was shift co-ordinator when two neighbouring patients started arguing about one person's belongings taking up too much space. The discussion was becoming quite heated and I noticed other patients and relatives looking anxious. To diffuse the building tension I suggested calmly we discuss the matter in a quieter area of the ward. I invited them to both to sit down and gave each the opportunity to express their grievances, while I took on the role of facilitator. To demonstrate I was listening I summarised their grievances and conveyed how the other person's behaviour made them feel. I tactfully tried to help them see the situation from each other's point of view and to agree a way forward. The outcome was that one agreed to keep his belongings closer to his bed and the other apologised for 'flying off the handle', explaining he was having a 'bad day' as his stay in hospital would be longer than expected. This then gave me the opportunity to discuss these concerns with him later in the shift.

Tell us about a national initiative in nursing or health care

You don't need to be an expert on every aspect of health care development and policy.

- Read summary documents on major initiatives.
- Browse through useful websites, such as those of the Health Departments in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales.
- Visit www.rcn.org.uk for news and publications on areas such as Agenda for Change, clinical governance and the national nursing initiatives. You can also ring RCN Direct on 0345 772 6100 to order copies of publications.

What do you understand by the term ‘diversity at work’ ?

Try to avoid saying ‘treating everybody in the same way’ as this can appear over simplistic. This question is usually about equality of access to services and treating colleagues with support and respect too. It is also about being self-aware and how your own background, upbringing and culture may affect your interactions with those who are different from you. Try to get hold of the organisation’s equal opportunities or diversity statement if there is one and ensure that you have a general awareness of relevant legalisation around sex, race, sexuality, age and disability discrimination.

Other sample interview questions

- Why do you want the job?
- What skills and experience would you bring to the role?
- Tell us about a recent situation where you were required to use your own initiative.
- How do you cope with pressure/stress?
- What makes a good team player?
- What role do you play in a team environment?
- What motivates you as a nurse?
- Where do you see yourself in two/five years’ time?
- How would you deal with a relative who was aggressive and verbally abusive?
- What would you do if a patient told you he wanted to make a complaint about the nursing care on the ward/unit?
- Please give example of a situation where you have collaborated with the multidisciplinary team.
- How would you apply research findings to your practice?
- Please describe your involvement in teaching/how would you help to create a learning environment.
- What are your strengths?
- How do you keep up to date with developments in nursing practice?

More sample questions are available from the RCN Career Service on 0345 408 4391.

Forms of assessment used by the interview panel

To ensure fairness, many interview panels use a points based system to score the quality and detail of your response to each question. They will then add up the scores for each applicant and award the job to the person with the most points. If you follow the tips given above, you will maximise your ability to gain a high score.

Other forms of assessment interviewers may use include paper based tests, covering drug calculations or a written scenario asking you how you would solve a problem or dilemma. The RCN Learning Zone, at www.rcn.org.uk includes a useful section on how to improve your numeracy skills. Your local nursing or RCN library will house publications on drug calculations which will enable you to become competent in these essential skills.

More recently some recruiters have employed techniques from the business sector by holding ‘assessment’ days. They may be used to recruit ‘batches’ of nurses for a pool of jobs, for example as newly qualified nurses, in specific areas, such as NHS Direct, or for senior manager positions. Some trusts use this tool for recruitment to all nursing and midwifery posts.

Typically the assessment, or staff selection, day may include some or all of the following:

- problem solving exercises
- group discussion about a scenario question
- role play scenarios – for example dealing with an NHS Direct call
- a presentation
- arithmetic assessments
- a one-to-one interview
- psychometric aptitude or personality tests (but these tend to be restricted to those applying for senior management roles).

Whilst the prospect of an assessment day may seem daunting, it has the advantage of allowing you to make up for a weakness in one area with a better performance in another type of assessment.

A separate fact sheet is available on presentation skills, by emailing wrg@rcn.org.uk

Questions to ask at interview

At the end of a job interview a good interviewer will offer you the opportunity to ask questions. Having survived a grilling at interview, your first temptation may be to say that you don’t have any questions and make a bolt for the door. However, remember that an interview is a two way process and you want to know whether this is the job for you. Questions that may help you to find out more about the organisation and also impress the employer include:

1. **what do you offer in terms of continuing professional development?** This will show your commitment to learning. The answer you receive will also help you decide if you are being employed merely as a ‘pair of hands’ or whether the employer will help you to advance your nursing career
2. **how would you describe the work culture?** This can help you to find out whether the employer is committed to issues such as work/life balance.

You may also glean information about the team dynamics and whether you will be working in a positive environment. This question will indicate your keenness to work in a positive environment and you will be seen as someone who would contribute in a positive way

3. **what are the most significant issues that the ward/unit/organisation will face over the coming months?** This shows your ability to see your role in the context of the bigger picture. You can also find out how your role may be affected by forthcoming changes or projects
4. **I notice that you have recently introduced... How will this impact on the ward/unit/organisation?** Similar to the question above, this demonstrates that you have taken the time and effort to research information about the organisation
5. **do you have any doubts about employing me to this position?** You may feel nervous about asking this question, but it does give you the opportunity to address any issues raised. It also shows your willingness to learn from constructive criticism.

If you would like any further support, contact the RCN Career Service on 0345 408 4391.

Useful resources

To make sure you are up to date with current issues in nursing, visit the government health websites in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

Department of Health (England) – www.dh.gov.uk

Health of Wales Information Service – www.wales.nhs.uk

Scotland's Health on the Web – www.show.scot.nhs.uk

Health and Care Northern Ireland – www.healthandcareni.co.uk

RCNDIRECT

www.rcn.org.uk/direct

0345 772 6100

RCNONLINE

www.rcn.org.uk

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