

Interview skills

An RCN guide for health care assistants and assistant practitioners

Whether you're applying for a first job, or moving to a more senior position, the RCN is here to help you get that perfect role



Royal College
of Nursing

Interview preparation

- Go through the person specification or job description, if there is one. Underline 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 how you meet the requirements for the post. Be prepared to expand on the information given on your application form or CV
- If you have completed a portfolio for an NVQ or any similar qualifications, look through this and remind yourself of examples which demonstrate your competencies in areas such as communication and patient safety
- Look at the list of common interview questions in this booklet. Prepare answers to the questions, and practice responding to them, 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
- Prepare some questions to which you would like answers (see 'questions to ask at interview' section for help)
- Try to arrange an informal visit to the workplace, where you can talk to staff and assess whether the post and environment will meet your needs and provide some answers to your questions
- 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

- 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. Try the relaxation technique on the next page to help you focus.

Researching information

You will need to research information on the employer and relevant topics. RCN members can download articles from the RCN's e-library, which lists over 700 journals. They also offer a service called Frequently Asked Selected Topics (FAST), which is a list of frequently asked topics, with details of recent information references. Further information is available at **www.rcn.org.uk**

Stay relaxed before the interview

When people are nervous, they breathe more shallowly which starves 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, trying 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 the time to do this exercise gently for three or four minutes.

During the interview:

- Smile when you walk in
- Shake hands with 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 the interview

Do

- Smile – shows friendliness and openness
- Nod – shows you're paying attention
- Make eye contact – shows sincerity and confidence, but don't stare!
- Sit well back in your chair to look more relaxed and comfortable
- 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.

Don't

- Cross your arms – makes you look guarded
- Hunch your shoulders
- Fumble with jewellery or fidget.

After the interview

If unsuccessful:

- Reflect on your performance, write down what worked and what didn't. List the questions with which you had most difficulty. 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 has occurred, contact your RCN representative.

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.

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?

How would you deal with a relative of a patient 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 at your workplace?

What are your strengths?

What are your weaknesses/development needs?

How do you keep up to date on your skills and knowledge?

What do you understand by the term 'diversity'?

Coping with difficult interview questions

Question: What are your weaknesses/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, prioritise by writing lists and planning my day in advance. I have also attended a time management course'.

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

Question: 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, what would you do if you were the first person to:

- find a patient who had fallen out of bed
- be approached by a patient who wanted to make a complaint
- find a patient in cardiac arrest.

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 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:

Situation, then state the

Target you were trying to achieve, then the

Actions you took and finally, give the

Result.

For example:

Situation:

I was allocated to a bay where two neighbouring patients, who had both been on the ward for several days, started arguing about one person's belongings taking up too much space. The discussion was becoming quite heated and I noticed that other patients and relatives looked anxious.

Target:

I wanted to diffuse the tension which was building.

Action:

I therefore approached them both and suggested calmly that they should come and discuss the matter in a quieter area of the ward. I invited them to sit down and gave each the opportunity to express their grievances.

Result:

The outcome was that one agreed to keep his belongings closer to his bed and the other apologised for 'flying off the handle' and explained that he was having a 'bad day' as he'd been told that he would be in hospital for longer than expected. I therefore asked him if he would like to discuss his care with the ward sister.

Question: 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 equal support and respect. You will also need to describe how you are self aware, and that your own background, upbringing and culture may affect your interactions with those who are different to you. Try to read the organisation's equal opportunities or diversity statement if there is one.

Questions to ask at interview

At the end of a job interview a good interviewer will offer you the opportunity to ask questions. Having completed the interview, your first temptation may be to say that you don't have any questions and leave as soon as you can. However, remember that an interview is a two way process and you need 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:

- **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 and obtain useful qualifications.
- **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 indicates your keenness to work in a positive environment. Hopefully you will be seen as someone who would contribute in a positive way.
- **Are there any significant issues that the 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.

Types 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 within this guide, you will maximise your ability to gain a high score.

Other forms of assessment interviewers may use include paper based tests, covering basic numeracy and literacy. The RCN Learning Zone, at www.rcn.org.uk, includes a useful section for RCN members on how to improve your numeracy skills.

Skills for Health also have developed a literacy and numeracy tool which can be accessed from www.skillsforhealth.org.uk/careers-individual-skills-development/developing-my-skills/Intro-the-Initial-Assessment-Tool.aspx

Notes

RCN members can obtain further guidance, advice or feedback on getting the perfect job by calling **RCN Welfare Rights and Guidance on 0345 408 4391**.

Membership of the RCN also offers an abundance of further support and information both online and over the telephone, and a whole host of learning and development opportunities to help you progress with your career, including HCA specific workshops, funding towards study days or conferences, and the largest nursing-related library in Europe.

To join the RCN or for more information and advice, **call RCN Direct on 0345 772 6100** or visit **www.rcn.org.uk/membership**

Also in this series: The RCN guide for HCAs and APs to **writing a CV** and the RCN guide for HCAs and APs to **application forms**.

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