

THE LET'S ROLE JOB SEARCH SERIES

BOOK 4



WINNING IN INTERVIEWS

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A RECRUITER'S GUIDE TO ANSWERING ANY QUESTION
THROWN AT YOU (EVEN THE WEIRD ONES).

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WINNING IN INTERVIEWS

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CHAPTER 1

WHAT'S AN INTERVIEW FOR?

Now it says here on your CV that you began your last role in May of 2013, but our investigative team found that it was, in fact, June 2! What do you have to say for yourself, you filthy scoundrel?

This is the sort of question that echoes in our heads as we wake up in a cold sweat the night before a job interview. This is because many people seem to get the word 'interview' confused with the word 'interrogation'. They fear that their interviewer is out to get them: to catch them out and to push the big red button hidden beneath the desk that summons two burly security guards to toss them out of the fifth floor window.

It only takes a few seconds of looking at interviews from the interviewer's perspective to realise how ridiculous this is. Firstly, the company already *want* to hire you. If they wanted just to throw out your application, they already would have. The purpose of the

interview is to see if there are any glaring red flags that they should consider before hiring you, and to see if your personality matches the culture of their business. The interviewer will understand that you're human and will not expect you to be perfect (and if they do, then that's a red flag on *their* side that should concern you). This leads quite nicely on to our next point.

Interviewers are human, too. Remember this throughout the entire interview process and don't forget to treat them as such. This means allowing for small mistakes and not placing them on some distant pedestal. By all means, be respectful, but if they speak to you in a relaxed tone, you're allowed to respond in kind. In fact, as a general rule, always match the tone that the interviewer uses: if they make a joke, laugh and make another one later; if they are more formal, maybe leave the jokes in your head; if they speak about their personal life, ask them a (non-invasive) follow-up question or tell them about a similar experience you've had recently; if they're strictly business, so are you.

All of this is intended to help you feel less nervous about your interview, but it is important to know that it's fine to be a little nervous (though if you're leaving puddles of sweat everywhere you go, that may be a problem). Nerves about a situation only indicate that you care about its outcome. Similarly, admitting that you're nervous is a strength, not a weakness, as it demonstrates self-awareness and a willingness to admit fallibility. A good interviewer will appreciate this and open with some casual conversation to help you relax.

With that out of the way, we'll start with a simple checklist of *dos* and *don'ts* to get you through the interview.

CHAPTER 2

WHAT AND WHAT NOT TO DO

Obviously, we're going to go into a bit more depth during the rest of the book, but we thought it'd be a good idea to begin by laying some things out simply so that you can come back and refer to them later.

DO

- ✓ Research the industry (if unfamiliar), the company and your interviewer
- ✓ Do practise interviews with friends and family
- ✓ Plan to arrive 15 minutes early
- ✓ Plan your travel route and allow extra time for traffic or unexpected disruptions

- ✓ Dress according to what your research has suggested is appropriate, erring on the side of formality
- ✓ Take a copy of your CV with you
- ✓ Bring your notes with you, but don't carry them into the room
- ✓ Be friendly and engaging with *everyone* you meet (you never know who will report back about you!)
- ✓ Match your interviewer's tone and body language, *but*
- ✓ Remain authentically *you*
- ✓ Be calm and confident, but not apathetic or arrogant
- ✓ Find something in common with your interviewer
- ✓ Ask questions throughout, including 'Why do you do [...] that way?'
- ✓ Answer questions in detail, explaining the 'why' or the 'how' rather than just the 'what'
- ✓ Back up your claims with facts (brands, names and numbers)
- ✓ Anticipate the interviewer's concerns
- ✓ Be honest and secure in your weaknesses, and explain how you're dealing with/working on them
- ✓ Prepare stories that demonstrate your skills
- ✓ Ask challenging questions at the end
- ✓ Ask for next steps and have closing statements
- ✓ Finish with a thank you
- ✓ Evaluate every interview with what went well, what you struggled with and, from this, what you need to work on

DON'T

- ✗ Over-rehearse your answers: you'll come across inauthentic and robotic
- ✗ Dress too casually: at the *very least* wear a buttoned-up shirt/blouse with black jeans and smart shoes
- ✗ Be late, or blame someone else if you are
- ✗ Sit on your phone in the lobby while you wait – strike up a conversation, study your notes or at least read a book
- ✗ Be overly familiar or casual in tone
- ✗ Swear, even if *they* do
- ✗ Bad-mouth your current/previous employer; it will only reflect badly on you
- ✗ Say you don't have any questions – even if you say they've already answered the ones you were going to ask, this will only tell them you didn't prepare enough
- ✗ Ask questions with the intention of catching the interviewer out or making them seem less smart than you; this will paint you as vindictive and unpleasant
- ✗ Use empty clichés like 'I'm a team player' or 'I'd say my biggest weakness is being a perfectionist'; this shows a lack of imagination and preparation
- ✗ Disrespect/mock the company to the interviewer as a way to gain familiarity (sounds silly, but it happens!)

This list contains some general advice for any interview. However, as with any rule, there are exceptions. Take, for example, 'Don't bad-mouth your current/previous employer'. In an interview, you might specifically be asked to identify a situation where a previous employer may have gone wrong. The purpose of such a question is to see how good you are at finding problems, so if you deny the existence of any by saying your employer never went wrong at all, this wouldn't help you. The difference would be to make sure that you still speak respectfully, never attacking the character of any individual manager/colleague, instead stating simply what you would have done differently and why.

What we're trying to say is that every interview is different, and you need to adapt to the tone and style of the room. That is, if you're both in the same room at all...

CHAPTER 3

PHONE AND VIDEO INTERVIEWS

We're writing this book in 2020. Right now, in-person interviews are somewhat *less frequent*. For this reason, phone and video interviews are on the rise. On the surface, these seem easier than face-to-face interviews: they're less formal with lower pressure. To a certain extent, this is true. There are, however, drawbacks. The more barriers there are between two people, the harder it is for them to communicate. The harder it is to communicate, the less complete a picture they will be able to draw of each other. Incomplete pictures create doubt, and a company is less likely to hire someone about whom they have doubts.

It follows, then, that over these interviews you need to ensure you break down as many of these barriers as you can or, if breaking them down isn't an option, at least try to make them more transparent. Let's begin with phone interviews.

PHONE CALLS

More often than not, a phone interview will be purely introductory, to get to know your background a little and confirm the details of your CV. This doesn't mean, however, that they are unimportant; on the contrary, introductory phone interviews can be one of the biggest hurdles in the interview process. As long as you've been honest in your CV and your application, though, you should be absolutely fine. All you need to do is take the phone call seriously.

There's a chance that you'll be called out of the blue by a recruiter or hiring manager regarding a role that you've applied for. This can be stressful, especially if you're busy. Don't worry, they will always ask if you have time to talk because they understand that you're a human being with a life to live. They won't throw away your CV if you politely tell them that now is not a good time and ask that they call you back later, especially if you specify when you'll be free. If you don't tell them you're busy, and then try your best to rush your way through the conversation so that you can get back to whatever it is you were doing, this will tell them that you don't care all that much about the role.

Before they ask if you have time to talk, they'll identify themselves and the company they work for and then say that the call is regarding a role that you applied for. The correct response here is excitement, not 'Which one?' If you're keeping track of your applications (and, as an aside, you absolutely should), the role they're talking about will become apparent fairly quickly. If the first thing

you communicate to them is confusion, this sets you off on the wrong foot.

Your next concern should be making sure that the conversation can be heard clearly at both ends. All this means is trying your best to find somewhere quiet, with good phone service, where you're not going to be interrupted. If this is a problem, it is absolutely fine to say so. If you ask to call them back in five or ten minutes so that you can make sure you're in a better environment, this will tell them that you genuinely value the conversation.

If you decide not to delay the conversation, this is where it's important to be prepared. You will be asked questions about your CV and your background. If you don't know the answers, then you'll risk implying that you threw your CV together without much thought. You'll also need to know the answer to other standard questions like 'Where did you hear about the role?', 'When would you be looking to start?', 'Are you interviewing with any other companies right now?' These questions aren't intended to test you, they're only there so the company can gather data about their applicants. However, if you don't know the answer, you'll risk seeming like you're not paying much attention to your job search.

Related to this, if you've had the opportunity to prepare for the phone call, whether it's a planned interview or you delayed an impromptu one, then use this opportunity to be ready. Prepare some notes on the company and have your CV in front of you. This way you can ensure you'll be able not only to *answer* questions clearly, confidently and accurately, but to *ask* relevant questions, too. If you're taking the call at home, you can also use

this time to make sure anyone you live with knows not to barge into the room asking you why you've left the washing-up in the sink for the third time this week.

You'll likely be given some next steps at the end. They might say you'll get another call in the next couple of weeks, or an email regarding an in-person or video interview. On the off-chance that they don't give you a next step, ask for one. A simple 'So what comes next?' is all you need to say.

Other than that, make sure you follow as many of the *dos* and *don'ts* listed in Chapter 2 that apply, and you'll sail through the call.

VIDEO CALLS

Video interviews introduce the element of sight, which is like adding a new dimension to a picture, bringing it from 2D to 3D. Suddenly there's this whole other direction to worry about, on top of what you already had with the phone interview. With this new dimension come new problems but, luckily, these problems are mostly quite easy to solve.

First you need to decide what to wear. On top, as with any interview, it depends on the company. Always avoid going too casual (no hoodies/T-shirts/dinosaur onesies), but if you're taking the interview at home, you'll most likely get away with a nice jumper/shirt/blouse. Obviously, you'll only be seen from the waist up, so for to intents and purposes you could wear a tutu and Crocs and your interviewer would be none the wiser. In fact, if

you feel that wearing jogging bottoms or pyjama bottoms is going to help you feel more relaxed and confident, then, by all means, go for it. However, you might find that dressing up in a full smart outfit, right down to the shiny shoes, will help you get into a more professional, businesslike mindset. Ultimately, it comes down to different strokes for different folks, so do whatever you think will give you the best edge. If you do dress more casually down south, just remember not to stand up halfway through the interview and reveal your curry-stained sweats.

Now comes the question of where you'll be. Obviously, somewhere with a decent Wi-Fi connection is a must – you could be the perfect candidate for a job, but an interviewer won't be able to figure that out if you're stuck buffering every 20 seconds. If this means having to commandeer a room in the house that's next to the Wi-Fi router, we're sure your family/flatmates will understand. We do also recommend your home rather than a public space (or, if you're insane, your current job), just so that you can be in control of who might enter the frame. For this reason, just like with phone interviews, let any housemates know about the interview. In addition to this, make sure you shut any four-legged friends out of the room – we all love a surprise dog visit on a Zoom call, but it doesn't exactly scream 'professionalism'.

Next, you have to decide what will be behind you. We know it doesn't seem like a big deal, and it isn't really. All you have to do is make sure there's nothing distracting like screens, people or street-facing windows in the frame. Movement distracts the eye, and once the eye's distracted, the ears are soon to follow. Also, if you happen to be in your bedroom, do your best not to in-

clude your bed in the shot (especially if it's unmade, or if you have novelty bedsheets). You can also use this to give yourself a little leg-up in how you present yourself; maybe you could have a smart-looking bookcase behind you or some tasteful art (but no movie/TV/celebrity posters). If you're an artist, it might not hurt to have some of your own art in the background as a talking point! If nothing else, you can't go wrong with a plain coloured wall.

Use a laptop if you can, as opposed to a phone. The bigger your display, the larger the image of your interviewer will be, and the more like a real conversation it'll feel. If you do use a phone, place it on a surface rather than holding it in your hand – it'll be distracting if your camera keeps shaking around, and placing it somewhere means you'll have both hands free for gesticulating.

Any Instagram influencer will tell you that angles are everything. Placing your camera so that it's pointing up your nose may not make you a worse sales manager, but it does mean that your interviewer can see how long it's been since you last used a tissue. Place the camera so that it's angled flatly at eye level. You might have to sit your laptop on a few books, but that's fine.

Make sure you're sufficiently lit (no, we don't mean 2017 slang for 'get a little drunk'). You don't need to invest in an intricate lighting rig, but ensuring your face is clearly visible is an absolute must. We do recommend softer lighting from lamps as opposed to overhead bulbs, but it's not vital.

Similar to the phone interview, you should have in front of you, or in a separate window on your laptop, your CV and some notes

about the company and the industry. This is one advantage phone and video interviews have over face-to-face interviews, and you should absolutely take it. All we'd ask is that you don't stare at your notes the entire time, or take three minutes to consult them before answering each question. Use them as a reference, not as a crutch.

Speaking of where to look, it's worth noting that interviewers can tell if you are constantly checking yourself out in the little self-view window. If you can't stop admiring yourself, take away the temptation and turn the self-view off. If your interviewer's image isn't near your camera, make sure to let them know, and look at the camera when answering any questions; even if you're technically looking at the interviewer, it can hinder the conversation if, according to their screen, you're looking somewhere off to the side.

You need to be much more wary of the clarity of your speech during a video interview. This is because, whereas in a face-to-face interview your voice is travelling just from your mouth, through the air, to the interviewer's ears, in a video interview it also has to pass through your microphone, your internet connection, their internet connection, and their speakers or headphones. If all are of a high quality, then these factors aren't a problem, but given that your average person doesn't have a Sennheiser studio condenser mic sitting around the house, these technological aspects can risk degrading the resolution of your voice *at each stage*. You will need to compensate for this by prioritising clarity not only in the way you speak (e.g. volume, diction, pace etc.), but by confirming throughout the interview that your interviewer

can hear you properly. This just means asking every now and then 'Did you get all that?' or 'Did I come through OK there?' Similarly, confirm that you have heard what they've said by repeating their questions back to them before you answer (though not necessarily in full). If they ask you for your biggest weakness, start with 'I'd say my biggest weakness is...'. If they ask you where you see yourself in five years' time, begin with 'In five years' time I see myself...'. It's simple, but it helps prevent any miscommunication between the two of you.

Finally, while it is more difficult to be late for a video interview, it is still entirely possible. Slow-to-start laptops, trouble opening the video call app, Wi-Fi issues, missing notes – all of these things can mean that your two o'clock call begins at ten past. Just like with a face-to-face interview, plan to be early. The worst case scenario is that you have to wait in front of your laptop for a few minutes.

PRE-SCREEN

Something that's become common in the recruitment world is a format of video interview known as a pre-screen. Instead of speaking with an actual interviewer, applicants are given a series of written questions, for which they have to record video responses. The precise details of these 'interviews' vary: for some, you get unlimited time to read the question and prepare a response, whereas others give you a limit of 30 seconds or a minute; some let you re-record your responses as many times as you need be-

fore you submit them, some give you a set number of tries, while others only give you one shot.

These pre-screens, in our professional opinion, aren't always great – the questions can be unclear, or the time limits can be inappropriately short so that candidates struggle to give a complete answer; also, there's the chance that the candidate will take a perfectly normal stumble over a sentence and be unable to start again. In short, there's much less wiggle room with a pre-screen. Despite the issues, pre-screens are being used more and more frequently in competitive markets due to their ability to speed up the recruitment process. The way to deal with them is to treat them exactly like a normal video interview, but with a couple of differences:

- First, since you don't have another human whose tone you can match, always go in on the side of professionalism – you can ease up in future, more traditional, interviews if the tone is more casual.
- Second, read the instructions carefully – you don't want to end up in a situation where your first response consisted of you stumbling over a sentence, saying 'Ah f**k, that wasn't very good', and turning off the camera only to find that you just had one chance at recording the response and it sent automatically when you hit 'stop'. If that sounds oddly specific, it's because that *exact* thing happened to Huw during his last job search. Heed our warning and study those instructions.
- Third, use whatever time you are given to prepare your

response wisely, writing down notes on what you're going to say. If you're given only 30 seconds, though, don't try to write down your whole answer so you can read it back word for word – instead, just write down the key words to save yourself some time.

CHAPTER 4

RE: RESEARCH

Everyone knows that you need to do your research before your interview. After all, you don't want to end up looking like you just walked in off the street, do you? So, you might end up in the same situation that many job-seekers do: you decide to do some research, setting aside an afternoon to go ahead and dive deep into the company, but five minutes in you've googled the company, read their 'About' page, scrolled aimlessly through the rest of their website and are now stuck. Don't worry, you're not alone.

Your research is not supposed to answer every question you may have about the company, but rather give you questions to ask. If you can't find the company's goals, vision or values, those then become questions you can ask your interviewer. You might worry about being tested on company trivia. In certain competi-

tive markets, this may well happen. They might test you to see if you have done your research, but, if they do, it will very rarely be on anything other than surface-level knowledge you can find on their website. If the year in which they were established can't be found easily either via their website or social media pages, they are not going to ask you about it.

So what *should* your research include? In addition to studying the company's website and social media presence, it's worth broadening the subject to include the entire industry. You should be up to date on the industry's trends at least over the last six months. This will help you ask more insightful, informed questions about how the company reacted to certain events or developments, or how they plan to deal with future circumstances. Look at news websites (there will be sites dedicated to industry news, you just need to look for them) or go directly to the blogs of both the company you're applying to and their competitors to find the most relevant articles.

After this, you need to narrow your search from the industry and the company to your interviewer. Contrary to your (hopefully) natural instincts, stalking your interviewer a little on LinkedIn is absolutely fine. This is because LinkedIn as a social media platform is where people will put the content they *want* their professional network to see. As a potential employee, you are being ushered into that network, so you are well within your boundaries to take a look at their post history. You're not going to find any scandalous family drama or beach holiday photos, just things to do with their professional life. This stuff is perfect to ask questions about. Just don't go investigating their Instagram.

The final thing you should research is yourself. This includes inspecting your work history as it's written in both your LinkedIn profile and your CV, making sure you know what they say and that they say the same thing. It also includes taking some time to google yourself. We spoke about your 'digital reputation' in Book 3: [Engaging With Your Future Employer](#), but to sum it up here, your digital reputation refers to how you appear online. If someone were to find all your social media profiles and anything else that exists about you on the internet, what impression of you would they draw? Do you have anything embarrassing or inappropriate that might give a potential employer any concerns? If yes, consider taking some things down or just tightening up your profile's privacy settings.

Once you've completed all your research, you would be forgiven for considering it a good idea to prove it in the interview by asking ultra-specific questions that, rather than being borne out of genuine curiosity, are there purely to demonstrate that you've done your homework. It may be a surprise, but this isn't actually helpful. Interviewers will not be impressed that you've researched the company because they consider it the bare minimum, and if you imply that you think it's deserving of praise, this will give them concern. It's like that one person we all know who goes around bragging about how 'nice' they are – the fact they seem to find common decency difficult enough that they consider it a virtue is worrying, isn't it? It's the same case here.

CHAPTER 5

BETWEEN THE LINES



Let's say your interview is at 2pm. You rock up at 1:45pm, have a chat with the receptionist, and read a book while you wait patiently for your interviewer to arrive. When they do, you stand up, smile and shake their hand. All good so far. Then they ask, *So what have you been up to today?*

You answer, *Well, I got up at about 11am, had a quick shower and then played Animal Crossing until I had to leave to come here.*

While this may well be the truth, it's the wrong answer. When your interviewer asks you this question, even if the tone is casual and you're not even in the interview room yet, they are not just asking out of curiosity. The question they are really asking is, *Do you use your time wisely?* They want to know if you've spent the morning productively, using it to prepare for the interview, run errands or work on anything. While your free time is your own

and you can use it as you wish, how a person spends their free time says a lot about them, especially the time before an interview. Now, we're not telling you to lie to the interviewer at all, we're advising you to use that time effectively so that the truth looks good. However, this doesn't mean that you can't relax on the morning of your interview if you need to calm your nerves and get in the right headspace; in that case, telling your interviewer that you spent the morning getting ready for the interview would be absolutely true, so go ahead and tell them so.

This applies to similar questions about the weekend, or just 'recently'. When interviewers ask these questions, it's to see if you actually do anything in your spare time, or spend it sitting around staring at screens. You might then ask us, *But what if I DO spend all my time sitting around staring at screens?* In this instance, our advice has nothing to do with the interview; it's simply to get yourself a hobby and make more plans to spend time with friends, and not just in the pub. Not only will this give you a good answer to these questions and make you more employable, it will also make you a more generally interesting person.

Questions with hidden meanings will be dotted all over the interview. Whether you're being asked what your strengths and weaknesses are, how your 'nemeses' would describe you, or what Pokémon you'd be and why, any seemingly simple question has layers behind it designed to determine who you are, what you can do and what you know about yourself.

Let's take, for example, *What's your biggest weakness?* Now, anyone with half a brain cell knows that *I tend to sabotage any romantic relationship I get into* is not an appropriate answer – it's too

personal and has nothing to do with your professional life. Equally, however, *I never know when to give up* or *I just care too much* are wrong answers, too. You often hear the advice to ‘turn strengths into weaknesses’, with the intent of making interviewers think, *Now wait a minute, we wouldn’t consider that a weakness at all, so if that’s a weakness to you, then you must be flawless and perfect!*

Let’s put aside for the moment the fact that interviewers aren’t idiots, are fully aware of this advice, and can smell these answers a mile off. Everyone gets the hidden meaning of this question wrong; they think the hidden meaning is, *Why shouldn’t we hire you?* In fact, it’s, *Do you have the self-awareness to recognise your own faults, and are you working on them?* Offering these pretend weaknesses is not only brazenly dishonest, it tells the interviewer that you’re not secure enough in yourself to own up to your faults. This is an issue because it will be much easier for a manager to prepare for a problem you’re aware of than one whose existence you refuse to acknowledge.

You might be wondering what you’re supposed to say if you actually are, for example, a perfectionist to a fault. As with any other weakness you might describe, you should follow a simple formula:

1. What it is: *I’m a perfectionist.*
2. How it hinders you: *I sometimes waste time polishing things unnecessarily, ignoring things that might be more important.*
3. How you’re working to improve: *I’ve started setting myself time limits for projects so that I don’t waste too much time.*

Following this formula will allow you to be honest about your

shortcomings without worrying the interviewer, as you've demonstrated your maturity in your willingness to work on them.

Every time you get asked a question in an interview, pause and consider what the hidden question might be. This will help you to answer the question properly. To assist with this, at the back of this book we've written a list of common interview questions, as well as the hidden meanings that might be behind them.

CHAPTER 6

TECHNIQUE



If you've ever been asked to give an example of a time that you showed a certain trait, like out-of-the-box thinking or integrity, you might have responded in a couple of ways. The first way was to stammer and stutter because you didn't know how your shelf-stacking supermarket job could ever have called for integrity.* The second response was to forge ahead and give it your best shot, recounting the time that you refused to give your own mother a discount, even though you had the power, because it was against policy. The beginning of the story went well, and you were somewhere in the middle when you realised you didn't have an ending. Instead, you let the momentum run down until you

*This is extremely common, and it's a result of a lack of preparation. As an exercise, sit down and write a basic answer, or at least a rough outline, for each one of the common questions in the list at the back of this book.

simply said, *So, yeah, um, I think that showed integrity...* You then looked expectantly at the interviewer, hoping they'd move on to an easier question.

This second response is symptomatic of a lack of technique: while you have a good answer in there somewhere, it gets obscured because you don't know how to articulate it properly. In this chapter, we want to give you a couple of simple techniques to help you construct responses that follow a clear through line and communicate your story effectively.

PEA

We'll start with a simple technique that suits simple questions (although again, always consider the hidden question). You might recognise this technique from English class back in school, since you were probably taught it in reference to writing analytical paragraphs. The formula is:

Point

Explain

Apply

Are memories of *To Kill a Mockingbird* or *Much Ado About Nothing* starting to flood back into your head? If so, we dearly apologise. You may remember it this way, or perhaps E and A stood for 'Evidence' and 'Analyse'. Regardless, we'll run through this technique with a demonstration. Let's say the question here was *What motivates you?*

First, we need to make our point. For the purpose of this demonstration we'll say that self-improvement is what motivates you. In this case, the beginning of your answer could be, *I'm incredibly motivated by self-improvement, whether that's in terms of my skills, my lifestyle or my knowledge.*

A lot of people would stop here, because they think they've answered the question. The trouble is that the interviewer has nothing but your word to go on. You need to explain how you know this. In this example, you might say, *During the period I've been looking for work, I've had a lot more free time, which I've spent teaching myself how to draw. While I had no skill at all to start with, I've now reached a point where if I have something in my head I can at least put it to paper recognisably. Doing this has helped me to feel productive and made it so that I feel that I'm using this time effectively.*

The last step is to bring your answer back round to the context of the interview and apply it to the role. So it could be, *I think this will really come in useful in this role, since I know it involves constantly learning new things and developing new skills.*

Giving an answer like this tells the interviewer much more about you than if you just said 'Success' or 'Money', and also shows that you know yourself very well. Remember, this interviewer has asked about your motivations because they want to know if what they have to offer will be enough to motivate you in your role, or if you'll end up bored and disinterested. This technique will work for anything that's a simple question and answer. For more complex, open-ended questions like the ones we talked about at the start of the chapter, it's better to use the next technique.

STARR

Some questions will require you to tell a story in response. For these, the **PEA** method won't fit. You'll have to use a technique that makes sure you can communicate the story clearly and effectively, hitting all the points you need to hit while staying on one coherent track. That's where the **STARR** technique comes in.

Situation

Task

Action

Result

Reflect

For this example, let's use the question *Could you give an example of when you thought outside the box?* We'll pretend that you used to be a teacher's assistant.

Your first job is to lay out the context, or the situation: *I was assisting a Year 9 English class at a historically rough school.*

Then you describe the task, problem, or challenge you were facing: *At this school, any time poetry came around in the syllabus, many male students would refuse to try because they were afraid of looking feminine.*

Next, tell the interviewer what action you took: *Before, teachers had unsuccessfully offered prizes for the 'best' poem. I instead suggested offering a prize for the 'cheesiest'.*

After that, recount the results of your actions: *While a couple of students still refused to participate, there were a few who got very*

excited about it and produced some surprisingly impressive poetry. As a plus, they also volunteered to read their poems out loud to the class, which ended up with everyone having a great laugh together.

Finally, reflect on the whole situation, asking yourself what you might do differently if you could do it again: *I think making the 'cheesiness' deliberate allowed the students to feel laughed WITH, rather than laughed AT, giving them control. However, in hindsight, there might have been students who wanted to write more serious poetry who didn't get the opportunity, so perhaps if I were to do it again I'd keep the 'best poem' prize in addition to the 'cheesy' one.*

Using this technique allows you to tell a full story without rambling on and on. It also lets you comment on your past actions, giving yourself credit where it's due but also criticising yourself when you deserve it. This way, the interviewer will be able to see that you can admit your mistakes, and what you would do in the situation *now*.

WHEN YOU DON'T KNOW

Sometimes, no matter how meticulously you've prepared for your interview, you'll be thrown a question that results in a shrug and a sorry look from your evidently empty brain. This situation is terrifying for absolutely anyone that finds themselves in it. Obviously, we can't magically bestow that knowledge upon you, but what we can do is give you a simple process to approach this situation in the best way possible.

Ask them to repeat/rephrase. It really can be something as simple as hearing the question put in different words that makes it click in your mind and gives you the perfect answer. If not, then you've at least bought yourself a few extra seconds to think about your response.

Admit you don't know. It might be embarrassing to admit that you don't know the answer, but it'll be more embarrassing if you stumble your way through a total guess. Sure, telling the interviewer that you don't know the answer won't look great, but it'll look miles better than pretending you do.

Make an educated guess. Say to the interviewer that, although you don't know the answer, you'll try your best to respond to the question. Then, give an answer that is as close to correct as you can manage.

Ask to explain yourself. Ask the interviewer if you can give your reasons for why you gave that answer. Explain that you used certain information that you do know to try to bridge the gap to what you don't.

Ask for feedback. Finally, tell the interviewer that, although you didn't know the answer and tried your best, you would be interested in hearing the correct answer and how close you were to it.

We're not saying that if you use this technique, you'll come out of this situation unscathed; depending on the importance of the question and its relevance to your ability to perform in the role, lacking the knowledge required to answer it may indicate that you don't have the level of experience that the company

is looking for. However, for questions with slightly lower stakes, where it is less vital to know the correct answer, this technique will demonstrate your ability to handle pressure, as well as a certain level of maturity by admitting your ignorance and using your logical reasoning skills to figure out some semblance of an answer despite it.

STORYTELLING

This isn't so much its own separate technique as something you should keep in mind throughout the interview. We as people are geared towards stories and narratives. Our brains like it when information is organised into a series of events that has a beginning, middle and an end, and connects with us on some emotional level. You can see this in the common memory technique known as the 'Mental Journey': if you have a list of things to remember, it can be easier to memorise the information by representing each list item with an object that you place in a story. It's much easier to remember the story, and therefore the objects that you interact with in it, than the plain information.

In the same way, your interviewer will be much more engaged if you give your answers in the form of stories (remember, though, to keep them more fact than fiction). Create narratives, victories and defeats, twists and turns, characters, suspense – the more exciting you make your answers, the more excited your interviewer will be about you. Obviously, you should pick your moments, because if you give a lengthy story answer to every question you're

asked, the interview will go on for hours, but preparing a couple of stories that you'll be able to whip out at some point is a great way to bring some character to the interview.

With those techniques covered, you should be able to answer any question sent your way. However, the interviewer's not the only one who needs to ask questions...

CHAPTER 7

GOT ANY QUESTIONS FOR ME?

We've already stressed in this book the importance of asking your interviewer questions. We've also mentioned that when they ask for those questions, 'I think you've already answered them all' is not a great response. That's because this will only be the case if you've just prepared a handful – ideally, your brain should be stacked full of 20, 50, 100 potential questions. You don't have to ask all of them, of course, just the ones that seem the most relevant or are burning the biggest holes in your head.

So, you might wonder what a good question looks like. You'll see plenty of advice online in articles titled something like '8 Great Questions to Ask in Interviews', with examples intended to sound clever and out-of-the-box: 'Where do you see yourself in five years?', 'What can I do to sit in your chair as soon as possible?', 'What's your least favourite thing about your job?'

In reality, these aren't the best questions to ask at all, because interviewers can tell that you're just asking them to sound clever and score some points. Truthfully, the best questions you can ask are the ones you are genuinely curious to know the answers to. This is why it's important to have as many questions as possible: if you have no questions, then you clearly aren't that curious about the company. Curiosity is almost a direct synonym of interest, so a lack of curiosity about the role will communicate an equal absence of interest.

That said, we recognise that even if you are interested in a company it can be a little difficult to get the motor running when trying to think of questions. To assist with this, we've prepared a list of questions you can use as a jumping-off point. If you decide to use these questions, try your best to tailor them to the company; while you shouldn't ask questions purely to show off the research you've done, personalising a question to a company does demonstrate a certain level of care and attention.

QUESTIONS YOU COULD ASK

- I know the larger responsibilities of the role, but what are some of the smaller tasks I'll be performing day-to-day?
- What are some of the most vital qualities a person needs to excel in this role?
- What would your expectations of me be over the first 30 days/six months/year?
- What do you like or dislike about the culture here?

- Where do you see the company headed over the next five years?
- Who do you consider your fiercest competitor?
- What are the biggest opportunities/challenges facing the company/department at the moment?
- What has been the typical career path for people in this role?
- What are the next steps in the interview process?
- Aside from the obvious, what are the biggest perks/benefits of working in this role?
- How has the company changed/adapted over the last few years?
- Are there any programmes in place for new employees to enter the company smoothly?
- What additional opportunities or duties might I have here?
- What projects would I begin on?
- Is this a new role or am I replacing someone else? If so, what sort of shoes will I be trying to fill?
- Are the responsibilities of this role more fixed or fluid?
- How will I be trained?
- What programmes do you have in place for professional development?
- How will my performance be measured and assessed?
- How long have you been with the company?
- Has your role changed much in the time you've been here?

WINNING IN INTERVIEWS

- I've read what it says about the company on the website, but can you tell me more about [...]?
- What are the company's current goals? Are you on track to achieve them?
- Can you tell me more about the team I'll be working with?
- Who will I be working with most closely?
- Could you tell me about the person I'll report to?
- What are the team's biggest strengths or weaknesses?
- Should I know about any topics that my team members are sensitive about?
- Are you expecting to make any more hires in this department in the next six months?
- Could you tell me about the last team event you held?
- What's your favourite office tradition?
- Do any of the team spend time together outside work?
- Do you ever hold joint events or competitions with other companies/departments?
- What have you found to be unique about this company as opposed to other places you've worked?
- Do you have any concerns about me or my background?
- Is there anything else you'd like to know about me, or anything I could provide you with?

Remember that these questions are all quite surface level; it's best to ask questions specific to the company or industry, and there's no substitute for genuine curiosity.

CHAPTER 8

AFTER THE INTERVIEW

A wave of relief may rush over you when the interviewer slaps their knees and says 'Well, I think that's everything!' That's natural, and you should let yourself bathe in that wave. However, you also need to remember that although the last question has been asked, the interview is not necessarily over.

Your first thought should be about next steps. If you don't know what to expect over the next few days – whether you'll be told your progress either way, whether you'll be required to fill out any forms, how many stages still stand between you and the job – it is imperative that you ask. Many candidates feel inexplicably awkward about this, but interviewers don't want to keep you in the dark. They won't give you any cryptic Gandalf-like instructions to *look to my coming at first light on the fifth day*. They will probably just tell you to wait for an email or phone call in a couple of days.

After this is clarified, feel free to have a more casual conversation with your interviewer (as for just *how* casual, always take the interviewer's lead). It will almost always be acceptable to ask how the rest of their day looks or, if the interview took place at the end of the day, how it had gone up until the interview. Generally, you don't want to be walked out of the building in awkward, polite silence. If the conversation becomes quite familiar in tone, be careful that your post-interview relief doesn't loosen your tongue to the point of 'incriminating' yourself – don't accidentally tell them that you lied in or made up your answers, or speak too openly about the less *professional* aspects of your personal life; remember that whatever you say may still be used against you.

However well the interview went, whether the interviewer is your new best friend or you accidentally insulted their family, you must *always* end with a handshake and a thank you. Not only is this polite, it's wise: you never know what the future holds. This interview may have gone terribly, but perhaps your good attitude will put you in good stead for a role you may interview for later. Or perhaps the interview didn't go quite as badly as you'd thought, and it's your *lack* of a thank you that pushes the interviewer to decide not to invite you back. It's always far safer (not to mention nicer) to extend your gratitude for the opportunity.

When you get home, or on your journey back, draw up some notes on how the interview went. Jot down what went well, what could have gone better, and what you need to do to perform better at your next interview. You should also detail the next steps so that you know what to expect. If you do this for every interview

you have, not only will it help you to keep track of where you are in each process, it'll give you a great picture of your strengths and weaknesses. It'll also reduce the risk of mixing up your research on one company with research on another, preventing some embarrassing situations in interviews.

If you have trouble organising notes, we really recommend a free online tool called Trello. It's used by many businesses (including ours) for project management, but it's also a great way for individuals to organise themselves. Within it you can incorporate goals, checklists, deadlines, images and attachments, with everything being incredibly user-friendly. Give it a go if you often find yourself scrolling through pages of title-less notes in your phone, trying to find the two lines you wrote about that one idea you had three months ago.

CHAPTER 9

CONCLUSION

You should now be prepared to enter any interview with the confidence to sail through it. Before we leave you, however, we want to reiterate and stress a couple of things:

Firstly, 90% of your success in an interview is down to how well you prepare for it. Think of it like an exam: you get asked questions, and you're judged on how well you answer them. You wouldn't stroll into an exam without studying, would you? It's the same here, in that the better you prepare, the better the interview will go.

That said, the second thing we want to reiterate is that while you should absolutely prepare, do not over-rehearse all of your answers. If you do, you'll risk sounding robotic and inauthentic.

Thirdly, remember to be friendly and engaging to everyone you meet. We don't mean this to say we assume you'd scowl at

the cleaning staff, but often when we're nervous we'll become self-absorbed and barely make eye contact with the receptionist, let alone smile at them and strike up a conversation. There are two problems with this: the interviewer may well ask them for their impression of you and your demeanour, and you'll have missed an opportunity to soothe your nerves by having a casual conversation with someone.

Something we haven't talked about very much is body language. We didn't want to make too big a deal of it, because while there is some truth in the theory of 'power poses' and the like, a person trying too hard to pull this off will inevitably shoot themselves in the foot with the obviousness of it, rendering the whole thing counterproductive. We did want to mention it, however, as you should be aware of the energy that you give off with your body language. You don't want to close yourself off with crossed arms, staring at the floor – this communicates a lack of confidence and, sometimes, the notion that you're hiding something. Nor do you want to pop your feet up on the desk and open your shirt down to the third button, for reasons we hope are obvious. All in all, you should be self-aware, but not self-conscious.

Finally, we spoke earlier about being friendly to everyone, and, at the risk of sounding cheesy, we include yourself within that. We say this because many people develop a self-deprecating sense of humour as part of their personality. While we aren't here to give you mindfulness or self-help advice, self-deprecation is an absolute interview-killer. Even if it's intended as a joke, if you imply you're a bad or incompetent person in any way, the interviewer is

likely to go ahead and believe you. It can be tempting, especially if you've developed a habit of breaking awkward social tension with it, but we urge you to leave that mentality at home. Similarly, if you don't make it to the next stage of the interview, do your best not to take it personally. Not being a match for a company professionally is like not being a match for a person romantically: it doesn't mean you're a terrible person, just that they aren't right for you. All you have to do is trust that you'll find your corporate soulmate eventually, perhaps with a couple of enjoyable bad decisions along the way.

That's it! If you've been keeping up with the rest of the Let's Role series, you should be prepared for every aspect of the job search process right up until you get the offer. But what comes after? How do you slot smoothly into that new role once you've snagged it? Well, that's what Book 5: [Beginning Your New Job](#) is for. We hope to see you there, and, in the meantime, please enjoy our list of common interview questions.

CHAPTER 10

COMMON INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

The questions you'll be asked in the interview can be split into three top-level categories:

1. Do you match this company's goals, values and culture?
2. Do you have the skills and qualities required to perform your role effectively?
3. Do you have goals and ambitions beyond just getting paid?*

Beyond these, there are the hidden meanings behind each question that we discussed earlier. We've split the questions into smaller categories and beneath some placed potential hidden meanings (but remember to consider the hidden meanings for the others, too). It would be wise to come up with some kind of answer to each of these questions, but remember there will be others more specific to your role.

*In fact, even this could be said to come under number 1.

PERSONAL

- What have you been up to?
Do you spend your time wisely?
- Tell me about yourself.
- If you were an animal/fictional character/chocolate bar/17th century poet, which would you be?
How do you see yourself? What qualities do you pride yourself on?
- How would your friends/last boss/family/pets describe you?
Are you self-aware? How much do you care what others think?
- What is your greatest strength?
- What is your greatest weakness?
Can you accept and work on your own faults? What should we watch out for?
- What makes you unique?
- Tell me something that isn't on your CV.
- How do you handle success/failure/pressure/stress?
- Do you consider yourself successful? Why?
What's your outlook on life? What do you value?
- Are you nice?
How much do you value kindness? Do you strike a balance between doormat and downright prat?
- What are your pet peeves?
How much/easily do you let things bother you?

- What motivates you?

Do you fit with the way we motivate our staff?

- Are you self-motivated?
- What are you passionate about?
- What are your hobbies?

Are you an interesting person?

- What are your goals?
- What is your dream job?
- Would you rather be liked or respected?
- What's your greatest achievement?
- If you could go back and re-live the last five/ten years, what would you do differently?

Do you let your regrets hold you back?

- What's the worst thing you've got away with?

Are you responsible? Do you bend the rules when you need to?

YOUR LAST JOB

- Why did you leave your last job?
- What won't you miss about your last job?

Are you going to have similar problems here?

- Why do you want to change jobs?
- Why were you let go from your previous position?

Are you willing to accept responsibility for your mistakes?

WINNING IN INTERVIEWS

- What have you been doing since your last job?
- Why have you been out of work this long?
- What was the biggest criticism you received from your last boss?

How do you handle criticism? Do you get defensive?

- What was the biggest problem you faced at your last job?
- Why weren't you promoted at your last job?

HOW YOU WORK

- Describe your work ethic.
- In what environment do you work best?
- Do you work well independently/with others?
- Do you take your work home with you?

Do you manage your time, and balance work and life, effectively?

- How would you describe the pace at which you work?
- What strategies do you use to motivate your team?
- Who was your best/worst boss and why?

What's the best way to manage you?

- What do you expect from a manager/supervisor?
- If you were 100% sure a manager was wrong about something how would you handle it? What about 80%?

What's your relationship to authority? Do you have tact?

- Tell me about a time that your boss was wrong.

- What makes a team work well together?
- Tell me about a time that you had a heavy workload and how you handled it.
- Have you ever had to deal with a problem employee?

How do you handle conflict?

EXPERIENCE AND QUALIFICATIONS

- What applicable experience do you have?
- What's your opinion of this industry trend/company?
- Are you overqualified for this position?
- What can you do for us better than the other candidates?
- Tell me about your educational background.
- Why are you taking a lower level position than your previous role?

Will you be comfortable here?

Are you going to leave as soon as something better comes along?

- What's the biggest challenge you've ever had at work?
- What have you learned from your mistakes?

Do you learn from your mistakes?

- What was your biggest accomplishment/failure at work?
- What's the biggest risk you've taken at work? Did it pay off?

Do you take risks wisely? Do you only ever play it safe?

- Give an example of a time you demonstrated integrity/showed initiative/thought outside the box/displayed leadership skills.

WINNING IN INTERVIEWS

- Why should we hire you?
- Why shouldn't we hire you?
Are you self-aware? Are you persuasive enough to flip a question?
- What was your most rewarding job?
- Can you explain this gap in your CV?

THIS ROLE

- What do you know about the company?
- How does this role fit in with your career aspirations?
Do you have aspirations? Is this just a stepping stone to you?
- What are your salary expectations/requirements?
- Why do you want to work here?
Did you apply for this job blindly?
- Would you be willing to relocate?
- Would you be willing to travel?
- When would you be looking to start?
- How would you adjust to working here?
- What will you find least/most challenging about this job?
What are your strengths/weaknesses?
- What ability/trait/quality of yours will help you best here?
- What can we expect from you in your first 30/60 days?
Do you think ahead?
- What's your impression of the culture here?

- Is there anything you'd like to know about the company or position that I haven't already told you?
- Do you have any reservations about the job?

Have you been actively listening? Are you just a 'yes' person?

THE FUTURE

- Where would you like to be in 5/10 years?
- How do you plan to achieve your goals?

Do you actively work towards your goals or just will them into existence?

- What are you hoping to achieve while here?
- What is it important for you to have in this job?

What do we need to do to make you stick around?

- What will you do if you don't get this position?

Do you plan to reapply later or just move on? How committed are you to working at this company?

CURVEBALLS

Finally, there are the questions like 'Sell me this pen', 'This apple is a bomb; what do you do?', or 'How many window washers are there in London?' These questions are designed to throw you off so that the interviewer can see how you think and how you operate under pressure. The important thing to remember when

you are asked one of these questions is that your answer isn't what matters, but how you get there. Don't panic, take your time and ask clarifying questions to define the parameters. If you can demonstrate some out-of-the-box thinking, that's brilliant, but your priority should be to keep calm and work your way through it.

There are hundreds more questions you may get asked in the interview. Almost all of them will simply be a reinterpretation of one of the questions we've listed here, but remember that the purpose of every single question is to answer just one:

Are you who we need?

WHO ARE WE?

MATT SEDGWICK

Matt is a talent acquisition specialist with over 10 years of experience in recruitment. Over this time, he has successfully owned and run two businesses, spending his working days making calls to clients and candidates and finding the right people for the right roles. In his spare time, he enjoys completing construction projects and playing with Pablo the pug.

HUW LANDAUER

Huw began working with Matt as a marketer just under a year after graduating from his Drama degree at Queen Mary University of London. Huw likes to branch out into the arts, writing plays and short stories, making music and running a webcomic (find it at @lowercasecomics). At work, he designs graphics, produces videos and edits these books.

YOU CAN STOP SWEATING NOW

EVER BEEN ASKED WHAT YOUR BIGGEST WEAKNESS IS, AND THEN BEEN MET WITH DEAD STARES WHEN YOU TELL THEM YOU'RE **JUST TOO MUCH OF A PERFECTIONIST**? OR HAVE YOU HAD TO FILE THROUGH MEMORIES OF YOUR MONOTONOUS DATA ENTRY JOB TO FIND SOMETHING THAT COULD BE DESCRIBED AS **TAKING INITIATIVE**?

THE FUNNY THING ABOUT INTERVIEWS IS THAT QUITE OFTEN, IT'S NOT ABOUT THE ANSWER, BUT HOW YOU GET THERE THAT MATTERS. IN THIS BOOK, WE'LL HELP YOU TRADE IN YOUR RUSTY BIKE FOR A PAIR OF HIGH-END ROLLERSKATES TO HELP YOU GLIDE TO YOUR ANSWERS IN STYLE.



MATT
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