

The Ultimate Guide to Landing Your Next Executive Role

Practical tips and advice for applying, interviewing and securing your next role





On average employers will interview a shortlist of four candidates for a senior role. An executive search firm may interview at least eight or possibly as many as twelve candidates to recommend a shortlist of four to the employers. So, standing out from the crowd has never been more important.

This eBook will share with you some top techniques and best practice to ensure you differentiate yourself from other top candidates and secure the career move you want.



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Writing your CV

A CV is a device for showcasing your skills and experience in the most effective way to a potential employer. It is important to ascertain what the employer is looking for, both in general and for a specific role. The CV should then be compiled with skills, experience and achievements that are relevant to the role. There are over 50+ free CV templates in Word, providing plenty of choice of readymade layouts.

Spend some time reading through the job spec and tailor your CV in a way that mirrors your skills and experience to the specific role. Write down four or five key attributes that the job requires. The job spec will often include a 'Main Purpose' and 'Required Skills & Experience' which should be your first ports of call. Looking at these, in combination with the 'Key Responsibilities' section, try to decipher what the company are actually looking for. From here, make a list of your main achievements over the course of your career and link them to the key attributes.

You may want to start with a brief 'Professional Profile' or 'Overview' to summarise your relevant experience and achievements. Then organise your CV chronologically (most recent first) and bring your achievements in these disciplines to the forefront, expanding on them, alongside any other key achievements that are specific to each role. Throughout this, really focus on the bullet points you made and question whether what you are writing is relevant to what the company is looking for.

It is important to put aside modesty and show self-confidence when writing your CV. If you aren't confident in your skills, then why should the employer have faith in you? Do not hide away, use your CV to promote yourself, and what you personally have done. Use, clear, and simple language that communicates your message, steering clear of corporate jargon and psychobabble.





10 CV Tips

1. Keep it simple - CVs should be no longer than 3 pages with a mini profile included in the first half page.
2. Make use of the CV templates in Word. There are thousands of templates so even the most design challenged can have a CV that makes an impact.
3. Use the top half of the first page wisely, this is the prime real-estate on your CV that everyone will read.
4. Include key information - personal details, including name, address, phone number, email address and any professional social media presence should be clear. It can be put in the header and does not need to take up much space. A date of birth is no longer needed, owing to age discrimination rules.
5. Career history should be displayed in reverse chronological order, with your most recent role first.
6. Include key achievements as well as responsibilities, the more tangible the better; £'s, \$'s, %'s, awards etc. Achievements should make up at least a quarter of the CV content.
7. Don't lie on your CV (many people do) – Back up statements with key figures and statistics. Also check your CV career history is consistent with your LinkedIn profile or other social media.
8. Tailor your CV to the role you're applying for - many of the background and academic details tend to remain the same, but the tone and emphasis needs to change.
9. Spell check it. Always do "Control Find" for "manger" (as opposed to manager), it is the most common typo on CV's and doesn't come up in auto spell checks.
10. Proofread it and ask at least one other person to proofread it for you.



10 CV Mistakes to Avoid

1. Lack of relevant information: Do your research and show that you have the specific skills, experience and approach required within the first half page of your CV, so the recruiter can quickly see your suitability.
2. Too generic: Many candidates write a broad CV because they want to keep their options open.
3. Insufficient Evidence: Unsubstantiated claims won't work. You need to prove you have what they need; with achievements, not just role responsibilities.
4. Spelling and Grammar: Poor writing shows a lack of care which no employer will want in their team. Never trust a computer's spell checker and always get someone else to proofread your CV.
5. Writing lots but saying nothing: Employers aren't looking for you to explain everything you have ever done, just a few key elements to persuade them that you should be interviewed for the role.
6. Leaving out information: Leaving a gap in employment will cause the employer to guess what you were doing, and they will always think the worst. Even if you weren't working, you may have picked up transferable skills that could be applied.
7. Format and Design: Make sure the format of your CV is compatible with all computers and don't overdo the design. Your CV should be clean and easy to read. Avoid masses of photos.
8. Incorrect personal details: Double check your phone number and email address are correct. Make sure your .com isn't a .co.uk
9. Using Clichés: "Good communicator"; "Works well in a team"; "Committed" - without any hard evidence of these you might as well write, "Blah, blah, blah".
10. Negative information: Your CV should only include positive information.



Interviewing

Although there is no set format that every job interview will follow, there are some questions that come up time and time again. You can almost guarantee certain questions- usually about you, your experience and the job itself will crop up.

While it's not recommended to have an overly scripted response for every interview question, it is advised to spend some time getting comfortable with what you might be asked, what hiring managers are really looking for in your responses, and what it takes to show that you're right for the job.



Interview Formats

Screening interview -Typically the first interview in the hiring process, a screening interview is designed to determine if the applicant has the basic qualifications and skills to do the job, before a more detailed second interview.

Competency based interview - A style of interviewing used to evaluate a candidate's key competencies. It provides an insight into a candidate's style of working and helps to predict behaviours. Questions will often follow the format of; "can you give me an example of when you..." leaving you to pick relevant examples from your career history that provide evidence of the competency. For more information you can refer to our Guide to Competency Based Interviews.

Informal interview -These will follow a less formal structure, informal interviews are more of a low key discussion designed to impart information and qualify interest.

Panel interview - when there are more than two interviewers it requires greater structure, the panel might each ask 1 or 2 set questions. This allows you to meet multiple interviewers in one go but can be more challenging to build up rapport. Often used for public appointments.

Psychometric tests and aptitude tests - Structured systematic tests designed to analyse someone's personality profile and identify their work preferences in leadership style and job content. Aptitude tests measure how people will perform certain tasks or skills, i.e. verbal reasoning.

Assessment day - Assess your suitability for the job through various tasks and activities. They are hosted over a day or half day period, and you'll usually be joined by several other candidates.



Top 20 Interview Questions

1. Can you give us a brief overview of your career to date.

This is often the opening question in an interview, be extra careful that you don't run off at the mouth. Keep your answer to a minute or two at most. Cover four topics: early years, education, work history, and recent career experience. Emphasise this last subject. Remember that this is likely to be a warm-up question. Don't waste your best points on it.

2. What do you know about our organisation?

You should be able to discuss products or services, revenues, reputation, image, goals, problems, management style, people, history and culture. But don't act as if you know everything about the place. Let your answer show that you have taken the time to do some research, but don't overwhelm the interviewer, and make it clear that you wish to learn more.

You might start your answer in this manner: "I've looked into a number of companies. Yours is one of the few that interests me, for these reasons..."

Give your answer a positive tone. Don't say, "Well, everyone tells me that you're in all sorts of trouble, and that's why I'm here", even if that is why you're there.

3. What's attractive about our company to you?

A good answer comes from having done your homework so that you can speak in terms of the company's needs and the particulars of the role. You might say that your research has shown that the company is doing things you would like to be involved with, and that it's doing them in ways that greatly interest you. For example, if the organisation is known for an entrepreneurial approach, your answer should mention that fact and show that you would like to be a part of that team. If the company places a great deal of emphasis on research and development; emphasise if you want to create new things and that you know this is a place in which such activity is encouraged. If the organisation stresses financial controls, your answer might mention a reverence for numbers.

If you must concoct an answer to this question – if, for example, the company stresses research, and you feel that you should mention it even though it really doesn't interest you- then you probably shouldn't be taking that interview.

Learn enough about the company to avoid interviewing at places where you wouldn't be able, or wouldn't want, to function. Since most of us are poor liars, it's difficult to con anyone in an interview. But even if you should succeed at it, your prize is a job you don't really want.



Top 20 Interview Questions

4. Why should we hire you?

Here you have every right, and perhaps an obligation, to toot your own horn and be a bit egotistical. Talk about your record of getting things done, and mention specifics from your CV or list of career accomplishments. Say that your skills and interests, combined with a history of getting results, make you valuable. If you know that you have recently successfully tackled a challenge you know this company is also facing - that is ideal to mention.

5. What do you find most attractive about this position? What seems least attractive about it?

List three or four attractive factors of the job, and mention a single, minor, unattractive item.

6. What are you looking for in your next role?

Keep your answer oriented to opportunities at this organisation. What are the aspects of the role and the organisation that appeal to you most? Make your answer oriented toward opportunity and career development, rather than personal job security.

7. Please give me your understanding of the position we are recruiting for.

This is more likely to be asked at a 2nd interview. Keep your answer brief and task oriented. Think in terms of responsibilities and accountability, try to demonstrate an understanding of their business challenges. Make sure that you really do understand what the position involves before you attempt an answer, if you are not certain ask the interviewer; he or she may answer the question for you.

8. How long would it take you to get up to speed and make a meaningful contribution to our firm?

Be realistic. Say that, while you would expect to meet pressing demands and pull your own weight from the first day, it might take six months to a year before you could expect to know the organisation and its needs well enough to make a major contribution. If there is a specific objective to be achieved, i.e. turnaround of a business unit or project, try to give a realistic (not overly ambitious and unachievable) timeframe to affect a turnaround.

9. Your CV suggests that you may be over-qualified or too experienced for this position. What's your opinion about that?

Emphasise your interest in establishing a long-term association with the organisation and say that you assume that if you perform well in this job, new opportunities will open up for you.

Discuss the aspects of the role that you think you would outperform in.



Top 20 Interview Questions

10. Have you ever had to fire people? What were the reasons, and how did you handle the situation?

Admit that the situation was not easy, give an example that worked well, for the company. Show that, like anyone else, you don't enjoy unpleasant tasks but that you can resolve them efficiently and -in the case of firing someone- humanely.

11. What is your leadership style?

You should know enough about the company's style to know that your leadership style will compliment it. Possible styles include task oriented ("I'll enjoy problem-solving identifying what's wrong, choosing a solution and implementing it"), results-oriented ("Every management decision I make is determined by how it will affect the bottom line"), or even paternalistic ("I'm committed to taking care of my team and pointing them in the right direction").

A participative style is fairly common: an open-door method of managing in which you get things done by motivating people and delegating responsibility.

As you consider this question, think about whether your style will let you work happily and effectively within the organisation. Having a clear fit around values and approach with your prospective line manager is key.

12. What important trends do you see in our industry?

Be prepared with two or three trends that illustrate how well you understand your industry. You might consider technological challenges or opportunities, economic conditions, or even regulatory demands as you collect your thoughts about the direction in which your business is heading.

13. Why would you leave your current company?

Be brief, to the point, and as honest as you can. If you were laid off in an across-the-board cutback, say so. Be prepared that if you mention personality conflicts you will likely be asked for further detail.

The interviewer may spend some time probing you your reason for leaving, particularly if it is clear that it was not your choice. Remember that your references are likely to be checked, so don't concoct a story for an interview.

14. How do you feel about leaving your current organisation having been there a while?

If you have been at your current company for a while this is likely to be a concern, naturally and it is OK to mention that, but not seem panicked. Discuss why you would leave now, the positives of the experience you have accumulated and how you would transition into a new company.



Top 20 Interview Questions

15. In your current position, what aspects do you like the most? And the least?

Be careful and be positive. Describe more features that you liked than disliked. If you make your last job sound terrible, an interviewer may wonder why you remained there until now.

16. What do you think of your boss?

If you don't get on with your line manager, you will need to be tactful but true to yourself. If you are overly critical a potential boss is likely to wonder if you might talk about them in similar terms at some point in the future.

17. What your line manager say are your strengths and development areas?

Think back to your last performance reviews and use the feedback you have received from your line manager. If you have glowing reviews, you may offer to email them to the interviewer after the interview.

18. What are your salary expectations?

Salary is a delicate topic. We suggest that you defer tying yourself to a precise figure for as long as you can do so politely. You might say, "I understand that the range for this job is between £_____ and £_____. That seems appropriate for the job as I understand it." You might answer the question with a question: "Perhaps you can help me on this one. What is the salary band for this role?"

If no price range is attached to the job, and the interviewer continues to press the subject, then you will have to respond with a number. You cannot leave the impression that it does not really matter, that you'll accept whatever is offered. If you are making a radical career change, however, you may be willing to take a small drop in earning to get experience in the new field.

Don't sell yourself short but continue to stress the fact that the job itself is the most important thing in your mind. The interviewer may be trying to determine just how much you want the job. Don't leave the impression that money is the only thing that is important to you. Link questions of salary to the work itself. But whenever possible, say as little as you can about salary until you reach the "final" stage of the interview process. At that point, you know that the company is genuinely interested in you and that it is likely to be flexible in salary negotiations.

19. What are your long-term goals?

Relate your goals to the company you are interviewing: "In a firm like yours, I would like to..."

20. How successful do you think you've been so far?

The interviewer is looking to find out about your self-awareness and ambition.

Present a positive and confident picture of yourself, but don't overstate your case. An answer like, "Everything's wonderful! I can't think of a time when things were going better! I'm overjoyed!" is likely to make an interviewer wonder whether you're trying to fool them... or yourself. The most convincing confidence is usually quiet confidence.

7 Questions You Must Ask



1. Why is the job open or why did the previous person leave?

You can learn a lot about an organisation by asking this question.

If the role has been newly created due to business growth, this can be a positive indicator of business health, investment and therefore job security. If this is the case, you may want to probe further to understand more about what would be expected of you in the role, as newly created roles can sometimes be unclear and take a while to develop.

If the role has been newly created due to structural changes, it can again be a positive indicator of a business that is responsive to change. However, it could also be due to a business experiencing challenges, so make sure you receive a satisfactory answer to your question.

When you ask this question, you can often determine, from both the body language reaction of the interviewer and the actual explanation, if there are any red flags. The interviewer should be able to tell you clearly and concisely why the previous incumbent left. If the role has been filled and vacated several times in the last few months or years, this may be an indicator of problems with expectations for the role itself, or perhaps a toxic manager or colleague(s) within the department.

2. How do you evaluate performance?

How a company evaluates performance can tell you a lot about what is important to a business.

Do they have a formal and structured process, or is an ad-hoc informal process? Understanding their approach can help you evaluate the company's priorities.

A good performance management process will in fact have both formal and informal elements to it. A good indicator of a company that is interested in their employees, is an interviewer that can talk you through the process both enthusiastically and informatively.

3. How do you ensure employees develop and learn?

Whenever you consider accepting a new role, you want to be clear about what the role and company will do for you personally and professionally. From a professional perspective, you want to be challenged, empowered, recognised for your success, exposed to opportunities to develop further and given opportunities to learn and develop new skill.

Areas to explore would be:

- What induction process would be in place?
- What leadership development do they invest in?
- Will they consider sponsoring MBA's or other qualifications?
- How do they encourage and support Continued Professional Development (CPD)?
- How do they do succession planning?
- How often do senior managers move internally between divisions and business units?

7 Questions You Must Ask



4. What scope is there for promotion in the future?

There are pros and cons to any business that just either promotes from within or brings in senior people from outside the business. What you want to hear is that a company objectively applies both approaches. It demonstrates a business's determination to grow and improves with and through people, not in spite of them.

Again, you might want to ask your interviewer about their progression to their current role.

5. Can you tell me how the role relates to the overall structure of the organisation?

Understanding where you would fit in helps you to determine if the role is right for you; where any challenges might be; the impact and influence you may have; where the opportunities for growth might be and what your overall contribution to the team, department and company will be.

Understanding how a company works together and fits together is a great indicator of whether you want to be a part of it.

6. How would you describe the company culture here?

The importance of culture fit can be astonishingly underestimated. To be able to interpret any response to this question, you should be very clear on the types of culture that you will thrive in, as well as the cultural environments that you would struggle to work within.

Although the answer to this question could be subjective and depend very much on who you ask, it is still a very worthwhile question. The result of which allows you to consider both your strengths and weaknesses to determine if the culture will permit you to work in a way that gets the best out of you to be successful in a role and company.

7. Do you have any doubts about my suitability for this position?

This is a great question that demonstrates you're open to constructive criticism and willing to learn from the experience of others at any point in your career. It also gives you a real opportunity to address any weaknesses that the interviewer may perceive that you have.

Finally, through the interview, you will have gained a good understanding of how you can contribute and be successful in the role. So re-state your strengths and how they translate in terms of you being the right person for the role.

As well as giving you crucial information that you need to be able to make the best possible career decision for you, asking questions of a potential employer enhances your appeal as a potential employee. You're demonstrating additional and important factors about your thinking, competencies, behaviour and character that the employer will inevitably benefit from should you ultimately join them.



Close & Follow Up

Your closing should be tailored to the position; your personality and interviewing style, and the interviewer. Keeping these things in mind will help you determine which closing is appropriate for you and the situation.

Express your interest in the role and reiterate what added value you can bring to the organisation. Ask them if they have all the information they need or if there is anything else you can provide.

Make sure to discuss what the next steps in the process are as this shows you are enthusiastic, and it is important for you to know when to follow up.

Leave something with them that sells you; copy of material that is evidence of your achievements.

Maintain positive body language on leaving.

Follow up – it is good practice to send a follow up email after your interview to thank them. This is an easy way to differentiate yourself from other interviewees and keeps you in the forefront of the interviewer's mind.





Close & Follow Up

Attire

Dress smartly, look bright and attentive, and speak clearly and confidently. It is always better to be overdressed than under dressed. First impressions really do count – employers, on average, decide whether to hire you within the first seven minutes of meeting you. On video interviews a shirt without tie or smart top is fine.

Body Language

Smile and use positive, open body language. Studies show that 55% of the message is conveyed in body language. If you are sitting in reception waiting, when greeted stand up to meet your interviewer with a firm handshake, make direct eye contact and smile.

When you enter the interview room take the seat you are offered and sit facing towards your interviewer. Sit upright when you first take your seat, relax and lean forward slightly

Hands should be loosely clasped in your lap or on the table, keep them away from your face. Keep your legs still, don't fidget as this will make you appear nervous. Eye contact shows respect on both sides and lets the interviewer know you're listening to them and are confident in what you have to say.

Tone

Your voice intonation should be clear and controlled. Vary your tone and pitch. Often, your tone of voice says more than your words do. You can say you know how to perform the job duties, but if it doesn't sound like you do then you won't inspire much confidence in the hiring manager.

Preparation

Being well prepared for an interview is key to overcoming nerves. Starting with some thorough research beforehand will build your confidence and ability to tackle difficult questions.

Ask for a copy of the job description prior to your interview to aid your preparation. Pre-empt the questions by comparing the required skills, knowledge and competencies with your experience.

Research the company you are interviewing with online and from speaking to people you know. You can tell a lot about an employer from the employment pages of their website. Things such as the values they have, company structure, recent contract awards etc.

You can look at annual reports, media releases and product and service information, often companies will use testimonials to attract new people. Use sites such as LinkedIn to research companies and the background of your interviewers.

Research the venue and plan your journey to the interview to be there 10 minutes early. Arriving late will immediately leave you looking unprofessional and disorganised.

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