**HOW TO PREPARE BEFORE INTERVIEWS**

**by Simon Moss**

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| **Introduction** |

During significant interviews, such as job interviews or audit interviews, individuals often experience a range of problems. For example, they sometimes

* exaggerate their strengths or dismiss their limitations and thus seem insincere
* feel the need to confess too many of their shortcomings or mistakes, overestimating the degree to which their honesty will be appreciated
* forget to communicate vital information, such as one of their key achievements
* misconstrue the questions, prompts, or facial expressions of the interviewers
* seem mechanical or rigid rather than natural, friendly, and credible

This document presents some validated techniques that have been shown to prevent or diminish these problems (for other insights on how to practice, see Tymon et al., 2019).

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| **Highlights** |

If you are too busy to read this document, here are some highlights that could be helpful. In particular, several minutes or hours before the interview, do not worry if you feel a bit anxious or nervous. At moderate levels, these emotions help, rather than hinder, concentration. However, if possible, evoke a state of mind in which you feel somewhat important but cooperative—a state of mind that improves your capacity to answer questions effectively. To achieve this goal, you could

* Recall one achievement in your role or one recent occasion in which you felt proud and important at work. You could remember a time in which you helped someone considerably
* Identify one of your strengths or talents—such as your experience in some field, your enthusiasm, your composure, your empathy, or your honesty. Recall a time in which you used or demonstrated this strength at work.
* Recall something amusing—something that elicits laughter or a smile. After you smile a few times, the tension in your body tends to subside for a while
* Recall, or even text, someone in your life who is always supportive.
* If possible, identify some quality or skill you have developed somewhat in the last few years.
* Memorize only three or so key arguments you want to express, such as a recent achievement, a plan to overcome some shortcoming, and how you will respond if uncertain of the answer.

Several hours or days before the interview, you could help prepare appropriately. Specifically, you could

* Write some possible questions you could be asked
* Write many possible answers to these questions as rapidly as possible. Do not judge your work or censor yourself at this time.
* Rearrange these answers into clusters. For example, all information about recent achievements could be placed into one cluster.
* Write this information in more detail but omit every few letters. People are more likely to remember information they read if letters are missing.

The remainder of this document extends these recommendations, justifies these suggestions, and embeds these suggestions into a more practical schedule.

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| **Preparation several days before an interview** |

As soon as you can, you should prepare, but not memorize, some answers or information you would like to convey. This section offers some insights on how to increase your capacity to remember this information effortlessly and to uncover creative but accurate answers. First, you should list some questions you are likely to be asked. The following table presents questions you might receive in a job interview, for example. You should then skim these questions as rapidly as possible.

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| Common questions in job interviews |
| **Relationships and conflict** |
| Describe how you develop and maintain relationships with stakeholders—such as business partners or other departments |
| Describe a time at work in which you needed to resolve or manage a conflict with a manage, colleague, or person who reports to you. What did you learn from this dispute? |
| Describe a time at work in which you needed to manage an angry customer. How could you have managed this dispute better in hindsight? |
| Which characteristics of people do you feel will most likely compromise working relationships? How do you manage these characteristics? |
| **Teamwork** |
| How do you balance the need to cooperate in a team with the need to work independently and assertively? |
| Describe a time in which you need to consult other people to reach a decision. |
| What are the features of teamwork you like and dislike? How do you manage the circumstances you dislike? |
| Describe a time in which you needed to adjust your behaviour to accommodate a colleague. |
| Describe a time in which you helped improved the success or achievements of a team |
| **Independence and initiative** |
| Describe a time in which you needed to complete a task with minimal guidance, support, or planning? How did you achieve the objectives |
| Describe a time in which you planned a project. How did you arrange the tasks and develop an action plan |
| Describe a time at work in which you needed to reach a very important decision. How did you decide which alternative to select? |
| Describe a time in which you needed to comply with a policy that you felt was unsuitable. How did you respond? |
| **Influence** |
| Describe a time at work you needed to persuade someone to change their behaviour? Which tactics did you apply to fulfil this goal? |
| Describe a time in which you wanted to introduce a change or initiative that some other people opposed? How did you respond to this circumstance? |
| Describe a time in which you disagreed with the recommendations of a manager or colleague. How did you manage this circumstance? |
| Describe a time in which you worked with a challenging person. What was challenging about this person? How did you manage this circumstance? |
| **Leadership** |
| Describe a time in which you inspired or motivated another employee |
| Describe a time in which you encouraged people to assist or participate in a project or initiative |
| Describe a time at work in which you needed to communicate a decision that might upset one or more people. How did you manage this situation? |
| **Time management** |
| Describe a time at work in which you needed to complete many tasks in a limited time? How did you manage your time effectively? |
| How do you help ensure that deadlines and milestones will be fulfilled? |
| **Creativity** |
| Describe a time at work in which you demonstrated creativity, initiative, and independence to solve a problem How did you uncover this solution? |
| Describe a time in which your quick response to a problem was helpful? |
| **Resilience** |
| Can you describe a time at work in which you felt very stressed or upset? How did you cope? What strategies do you apply to alleviate unpleasant emotions? |
| **General** |
| What are your main strengths and limitations? |
| Describe some of your most important attributes or proudest achievements at work. How did you develop these attributes or accomplish these achievements? |
| Describe some previous failures, blunders, criticisms, and limitations in your wor? How did you respond to these failures, blunders, or criticisms? How have you tried to overcome these limitations? How have you changed over the last few years? |
| What are the features of previous jobs you have liked or disliked? What do you prefer about this role? |

Second, you should write as many answers to these questions as possible. You can simply write the first thoughts that penetrate your awareness. Or you could search your computer or other sources for possible answers. Do not be concerned if your answers are odd or incorrect. Simply write as rapidly as possible.

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| **Did you know?** | After people choose to write or to read as rapidly as possible, their mood improves. And this improvement can generate a greater range of ideas (Pronin, Jacobs, & Wegner, 2008). |

Third, you should now uncover clusters of answers that are similar to one another. You could even blend some of these answers together to generate more creative responses.

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| **Did you know?** | After people classify specific answers into broader categories, they think more creatively (Friedman & Forster, 2002, 2005). Their motivation also tends to improve (Eyal et al., 2009). |

Fourth, if possible, for the next day or so, direct attention to other tasks rather than your interview. Then, after this delay, imagine yourself, as vividly as possible, five years in the future, in the role or position you really desire. That is, imagine you have fulfilled your aspirations. Then, return to improve your answers.

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| **Did you know?** | After a delay, especially while we feel confident or empowered, our intuitions on how to improve these answers tend to improve (Dijksterhuis, Bos, Nordgren, & Van Baaren, 2006; Sharpley, Moss, & Wilson, 2014). |

Finally, you should practice answering these questions several times. During this practice, apply the STAR method—an acronym that represents situation, task, action, and result. In particular

* first, specify the **situation** as precisely as possible—that is, the specific circumstance in which you needed to complete a specific task. For example, the situation might be that someone had blocked an initiative you wanted to implement.
* second, specify the **task**—that is, the specific goal you needed to achieve. For instance, the task might have been to address the concerns of this person
* third, specify the **action**—that is, the precise activities or responses you initiated to complete this task. For example, you might have organized a coffee with this person and merely articulated your worries about this issue
* fourth, specify the result—that is, a tangible outcome, such as what you achieved or learned.

Whenever individuals apply this method, their responses tend to seem more compelling but still concise. Therefore, to learn how to apply this method seamlessly and effortlessly, you need to practice this approach with 5 to 10 distinct questions.

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| **Habits you can develop a day or so before the interview** |

A day or so before the interview, you could perhaps develop a few suitable habits, as illustrated in the following table. The first column specifies these habits. The second column justifies these practices.

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| Habit | Justification |
| You should obviously smile occasionally. However, this smile should appear on your face gradually, over a second or so, rather than instantly | Gradual smiles have been shown to seem more genuine (Krumhuber, Manstead, & Kappas, 2006) |
| Your handshake should be quite firm, vigorous, and protracted—but obviously not excessive. | When handshakes are too flimsy or too strong, other people naturally become more guarded (Stewart, Dustin, Barrick, & Darnold, 2008) |
| Your voice should be slightly louder than usual, partly to increase your confidence. | We associate speaking a bit louder than usual with times in which we felt confident |
| If applicable, press the lever that adjusts the height of your chair to elevate yourself slightly; you should sit as tall, if not slightly taller, than your interviewers. | Oddly, we are more likely to believe people whenever we can see the space under their chin (Mignault & Chaudhuri, 2003) |
| Do not blame problems, such as conflicts, solely on someone else. Assume at least some responsibility. | If people assume some responsibility for problems, they seem more credible and capable. |
| If you feel nervous or concerned, you are welcome to acknowledge this worry—with phrases like “I’m feeling a bit more nervous than expected”—but confidently, loudly, and assertively rather than meekly or apologetically | After you allude to your feelings, the intensity of these emotions tends to subside (Tabibnia, Lieberman, & Craske, 2008). Also, you are more likely to be trusted. |
| If you are not sure of your answer, you could reply with phrases like “I can’t think of an answer immediately. My first thought, which may be relevant, was … “ |  |

Obviously, during the interview, your attention should be directed to their questions and your answers: You do not want to think about your smile, your voice, or your chair, for example. Instead, these habits should be as effortless as possible. To entrench, these habits, you could apply this sequence of exercises, called implementation intentions (Gollwitzer, 1999). These exercises, although simple, have been shown to increase the likelihood that you will initiate these habits effortlessly.

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| How to entrench these habits |
| Attempt to imagine the circumstances in which you might initiate one of these habits as vividly as possible. To help you with this exercise, you could attempt to locate photographs or video footage of the likely interviewers or room. You should even consider the emotions you could feel in this circumstance. |
| Simulate or practice these habits several times. You could pretend to shake hands with someone firmly or actually shake hands with a friend firmly, for example. |
| Again, imagine that you have achieved one of your aspirations, perhaps five or so years from now. |
| Finally, to yourself, repeat a few times a statement like “When I experience this circumstance, I will initiate this act”. An example may be “When I meet the interviewers and feel nervous but excited, I will shake their hands firmly and vigorously but not excessively” |

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| **An hour or two before the interview** |

You are now ready to skim the possible answers to your questions. Specifically, in response to the list of questions you developed, write your answers. However, to increase the likelihood you will effortlessly remember these answers later, complete these activities.

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| How to retrieve answers effortlessly |
| Write some of your answers but omit every few letters. People are more likely to remember information they read if letters are missing (see Fiedler, Nickel, Asbeck, & Pagel, 2003) |
| Practice answering some of the prepared questions. As you practice, shift your eyes from side to side—an action that has been shown to enhance memory |
| Practice each answer in a different location. Later, if you need to retrieve these answers, imagine returning to this location. This exercise often helps you retrieve memories, called a memory palace. |

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| **The 20 or so minutes before the interview** |

Most people feel anxious or nervous before these interviews. You do not need to stifle these feelings. Some anxiety is almost inevitable. And some anxiety can be helpful, improving your concentration.

Nevertheless, you do want to evoke the right mindset before the interview. This mindset will comprise a blend of emotions, including a feeling of some anxiety as well as

* Power or status—an emotion that tends to enhance your capacity to adapt your answers to unexpected questions
* Cooperation and empathy—an emotion that helps you monitor the interviewers more accurately (Mast, Jonas, & Hall, 2009)
* Openness to challenge—a mindset that improves your response to stress (Stout & Dasgupta, 2013), and
* Control over your life (Cislak, Cichocka, Wojcik, & Frankowska, 2018).

The first column in the following table specifies a few exercises that evoke this mindset. The second column justifies these practices.

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| Practice | Justification |
| Close your eyes. Recall one achievement in your role or one recent occasion in which you felt proud and important at work. You could remember a time in which you helped someone considerably | When people feel proud and important, they become more attuned to their own values and thoughts, improving their creativity (Sligte, de Dreu, & Nijstad, 2011). |
| Identify one of your strengths or talents. You might be experienced in some field. Or you might be creative, intelligent, persistent, kind, perceptive, assertive, inspiring, cooperative, stable, confident, artistic, or amusing. Recall a time in which you used or demonstrated this strength at work. | When people are more aware of their strengths, they respond to stressful events better (Harris, Harris, & Miles, 2017) |
| Recall something amusing—something that elicits laughter or a smile. | After you smile a few times, the tension in your body tends to subside for a while (Brick, & McElhinney, & Metcalfe, 2018) |
| Recall, or even text, someone in your life who is always supportive. | After people remember someone supportive in their life, they tend to become more resilient to challenges |
| If possible, identify some quality or skill you have developed somewhat in the last few years. | When people are more attuned to their capacity to change, they can withstand criticisms better |
| Consider what skills or insights you might gain from this experience | After this exercise, individuals tend to perceive stressful events as a challenge and not as a threat (Stout & Dasgupta, 2013) |
| Memorize only three or so key arguments you want to express, such as a recent achievement, a plan to overcome some shortcoming, and how you will respond if uncertain of the answer. | If you attempt to memorize too many answers, you will not feel able to response to unexpected questions |

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