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Oh, I only want the job while I save up for Oz

While most of us will never have to endure an Apprentice-style interview, our performance on the day is crucial. Claire O'Mahony quizzes the experts on the dos and don'ts of getting that job

So is it going to be Steve or Stephen? Tomorrow night – cue trumpet fanfare – all will be revealed when Bill Cullen's new apprentice takes up a €100,000 position under Mr Renault's watchful eye.



'Apprentice' finalists Stephen Higgins and Steve Rayner

However nail-biting it might be, anyone facing a job interview is probably still reeling from last week's show where the candidates went through a thoroughly uncomfortable grilling by media trainer Gavin Duffy, human resources consultant Sheena Clohessy and recruitment consultants David Bloch and Mairead Fleming of Brightwater.

Finalist Stephen Higgins was exposed as having lied on his CV, other finalist Steve Rayner was interrogated about his alcohol and gambling addictions and losing candidate Geraldine O'Callaghan had to claw her way back from describing her future employer as "cute".

The good news for prospective interviewees is that much of this would not occur in a real-life interview scenario. "This is television," Brightwater's Mairead Fleming points out. "The participants fill out questionnaires and there's no holds barred so the level that was exposed would not necessarily be exposed in a regular interview because you wouldn't necessarily have that information. You're not going to put on your CV that you're an alcoholic and a gambler so you're not necessarily going to unearth that. But one of the questions they had been asked was 'Have you overcome any difficult challenges' and Steve was very open and honest about it. The fact that he volunteered the information meant it was going to be explored."

But as many people have learnt to their dismay, your future boss is unlikely to rely on your CV alone to learn about you. Employers are increasingly using social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter to discover any unsavoury truths you might be hiding. That photo of you off your face in Ibiza? Hilarious of course to your 1,241 Facebook friends but not to the person who might be paying your wages.

"I did what I thought was a really good interview and came away feeling fairly certain I had the job in the bag," says Melissa, a 31-year-old hotel manager. "I was so disappointed when I didn't get it but then I heard from my friend who worked at the hotel that they'd looked me up on Facebook. The 'hill-walking' and 'French cinema' on my CV didn't really tally with the photos from my latest house party or the status updates that said 'Melissa is in the market for a new liver'. I was mortified and my account is now private."


While going for an interview can be a daunting experience, candidates should also be aware that they have rights. You can request the interviewer's notes for up to a year afterward for example and legally you cannot be quizzed on topics such as gender, marital status, sexual orientation, religion, age, race etc. That's not to say that the interviewers won't uncover these facts – the year you did your Leaving Certificate is a good gauge of how old you are and gaps on a woman's CV can indicate periods of maternity leave.

Anyone going to a job interview can expect a very different experience than being asked about your greatest strengths and weaknesses. In the past decade, a shift has been made away from these kind of general open-ended questions to a competency-based model. So you're a driven team worker with good interpersonal skills who enjoys a challenge? Tell the interview panel that by all means but you have to be able to back up your assertions with solid examples of where you previously demonstrated such behaviours.

"These kind of interviews are more the norm now, rather than questions that people used to dread like 'What would you do to resolve the Middle East conflict' to even 'What did you think of the front of today's papers?'" says Eoghan McDermott, who heads up the career department at the Communications Clinic. "Competency-based interviews avoid the random and the unfair and focus on specifics and evidence."

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This is good news for applicants because it means you can prepare your arsenal of answers in advance, and although it may appear obvious, lack of preparation is often the biggest mistake candidates make.

"Examples need to be prepared now, not on the spit or the day before the interview. I have people preparing for interviews in February and coming up with specific examples now," says McDermott.

And it's not enough to do basic research, as Mairead Fleming explains. "I was recruiting for a senior finance role recently for a high-profile company and there was a lot about them in the media. The downfall for two of the candidates was they weren't up to date on that."

While being very obviously nervous may go against you (You're not going to do yourself any justice if you're going after a senior executive decision and you're trembling but it may be endearing if it's a more junior position, according to Fleming), it's important not to look upon an interview as a horrific experience.

"Interview panels aren't there to catch people out," says McDermott. "In an ideal world, they will want people to perform their best and what they're looking for is strong evidence that shows that the interviewee can do the job and has relevant examples. Do that and you're making their lives easier." And of course, make that Facebook account private.

Seal the deal: how to give a great interview

- * Don't be late. This is very obvious but punctuality should be a given
- * Be as pleasant to the receptionist as you are to the panel. "I often ask the receptionist 'What did you make of them?'" says Eoghan McDermott. "It can give you some indication."
- * "Prepare and prepare. Do a mock interview," advises Mairead Fleming. "Get your recruitment company or a friend to put you through your paces."
- * Give thorough examples – the who, what why where and when. Talk about challenges that were thrown up, difficulties that were faced and the resolution
- * If asked a hypothetical question – what would you do – illustrate with example of something you've done already and not just with a theory
- * Make a strong start. Research suggests that interviewers make up their minds – consciously or unconsciously – about candidates in the first five to 10 minutes
- * Avoid jargon – 'Going forward' and 'Thinking outside the box' are prime examples of what not to say.

And what to never ever say...

- * So, what does your company do?
- * "How many young women work here?"
- * Could I have a coffee? I think I'm still a bit drunk from last night.
- * "Did I buy you a drink in Krystle last week?"
- * In five years' time, I see myself on a boat in Jamaica
- * I want to leave my current job because my boss is an asshole
- * Do you mind if I take this call?
- * I left my last job because I have a problem with authority
- * If you offer me the job, how long do I have before I have to take a drugs test?
- * What are my weaknesses? I hate questions like this.

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