



THE INTERVIEW X FACTOR

*With more firms setting tests and asking for presentations, **Simon Broomer** and **Suki Bahra** look at what might be in store for you at interview and give advice on how to shine*

So you've got an interview coming up. And now that you have racked up some PQE, the stakes are much higher; as you move up the career ladder you are likely to be even more closely scrutinized as the scope of your role, your responsibilities and your remuneration grow. Even a potential promotion in your own firm or organization could turn out to be a much more rigorous process than you had expected.

DISTINGUISHING YOURSELF

You may look great on paper – but do be aware that employers will probe much further. It is true that evidence of your technical legal skills and knowledge will count for a lot – but firms and organizations are looking for so much more than that. Being an excellent lawyer is no longer enough.

For example, I recall the senior partner of a firm addressing a group of new trainees on their first day in the office. At one point he asked the question about what they thought were the key ingredients for success in the firm. Most talked about professionalism, quality of work and superior legal skills. The senior partner pointed out that their competitor firms were also full of excellent lawyers and that in his view the recruits who would be most successful would be the ones who could keep and grow their existing client base and win new clients. He was looking for business developers.

EMPLOYERS ARE LOOKING FOR...

At CareerBalance we use a simple model - which we call the three Cs - to help our clients remember what skills and knowledge, personal qualities and attitude employers are looking for in potential recruits. These are: Competence, Commitment and Compatibility. They do overlap and for each of these you need to talk about specific examples of what you have done in your career (and even in your life outside the work place) to demonstrate that you have what is being sought. How strong is your evidence?

Competence:

This covers your ability to do the job well and includes:

- your technical legal skills and legal knowledge;
- your teamwork, people management and leadership skills;
- your ability to develop and improve the performance of others such as a junior member of your team or a trainee;
- your personal organization and project management strengths;
- your financial skills eg, ability to create a business plan, work to budgets and meet fee targets;
- your ability to sell (let's stop using the words "business development" and "marketing");
- your creative and problem-solving skills;
- your ability to think commercially and strategically.

Typical questions could be:

"Tell us about one of the most complicated transactions you have had to work on. What did you do and what skills and knowledge did you use?"

"Tell me about a project which required you to work as part of a team? What happened and what was your role?"

Compatibility

This is much more than the usual meaning of the term. It's not just about whether you are going to get on with your future manager and colleagues, but whether you will be able to relate well to others in the organisation. You may be expected to interface with a variety of individuals outside the firm/ organization – such as clients, business partners and other professional advisers. Your employer needs to feel comfortable that you will represent them well and strengthen their public image.

Typical questions here are:

"Tell us about a particularly difficult client you had to deal with. What happened and what was the outcome?"

Can you recall a situation where you had a disagreement with a colleague? How did you deal with this?"

Commitment

This is about your attitude to your work and to your employer. You need to demonstrate that you have enthusiasm and energy for what you do.

An example of a question here is: "What have you done in your most recent role which went well beyond the normal demands of your job?"

Researching and delivering a presentation, organizing a client reception or contributing an article to a professional publication are all examples. One of our clients regularly organized the firm's Christmas concert. Another produced the firm's annual revue.

THE INTERVIEW AND SELECTION PROCESS

The recruitment process can involve one or more of the following – sometimes all of them:

- an initial screening interview with a recruitment consultant or with a HR/ recruitment specialist in the organization or firm you are applying to;
- an interview with the partner or the person who will be managing you – or a panel interview with several individuals from the organization who have an interest in your appointment;
- the completion of one or more psychometric questionnaires so that the potential employer can obtain information about your preferred ways of thinking and behaving, and traits such as leadership, creativeness and what sort of roles you are most comfortable performing when in a team environment;
- delivering a presentation on a topic of your choice or, more likely, on how you will perform your new role;
- being given a legal problem to consider and to then present how you would approach this;

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- attending an assessment day – sometimes run by an external organization – which may include several of the above as well as a group exercise with other candidates in which your contributions and behaviour will be observed and evaluated;
- meeting the new team – sometimes in an informal setting such as a drinks evening or a meal.

ASSESSMENT DAYS

For higher level roles, or ones where you may be one of several suitable candidates, you may have to attend an assessment day as part of the recruitment process – either before or as part of the interview process. This may expose you to all the different processes to which we have already referred: delivering a presentation; completing a written exercise on one or more problems – usually on a legal topic and possibly a self-management situation or on a business issue.

There are certain trends; if you want to join the Government Legal Service you are very likely to be asked to consider, and then present, your thinking on a legal problem. Don't assume this will be on the area of law you have been practising. One of our commercial property lawyers found herself facing questions on the Freedom of Information Act and Public Order legislation. This can include having to deliver a presentation – usually you are asked to prepare this in advance but not always.

We have come across more than one example where the presentation was to potential employers, and video recorded for later review. You may also be asked to take part in a group discussion or exercise – where your behaviour will be observed as well as your contributions. This can serve as additional data for the interviewers to consider alongside one or more psychometric tests which you may also be asked to complete.

A FEW WORDS ON PSYCHOMETRICS

Further information about your compatibility and personality traits can be gained by asking you to complete a psychometric questionnaire. We have come across employers who have sent potential candidates to an occupational psychologist to complete and obtain feedback on a variety of psychometric tests – to assess how you think and behave under normal conditions and when under stress.

Some psychometric questionnaires help employers to predict how you will behave in a team environment, for example the Belbin profile. Again, an understanding of this kind of psychometric tool can help you appreciate how you best contribute to a team.

There is no real way to prepare for these, but if you do have the opportunity to complete and obtain feedback on a psychometric tool whilst in your current role, then *take it*. The thing to remember is that although each of us has preferred ways of thinking and behaving, we can adapt our

behaviour and be more flexible if we become more aware of how we respond in different situations. Properly used psychometric tools will only form part of the picture – and will be considered in the light of how you come across in the interview as well as the evidence you have provided for what you have done in your career to date.

There are no right or wrong “answers” for psychometrics and our advice is that you are better off responding to the questions honestly and according to what you would naturally do, rather than trying to second-guess what the employer is looking for. In any event, the psychometric will not be considered in isolation – and if you are not going to be a good fit for the people you are working with then you are better off finding a role elsewhere where the culture and environment will suit you more.

EVIDENCE, EVIDENCE, EVIDENCE

Where do you want to get to and what do you want to be in your career? If you are clear on this, you can start to build the skills and knowledge that will help you to move in this direction. To be successful you should ensure that you stay ahead of the game by developing not just your professional skills and expertise but also your interpersonal strengths, your commercial, business management and people management experience.

Good interviewers use a process called behavioural or competency based interviewing. They will ask you questions to encourage you to give examples of specific things you have done or situations you have been in, which show whether or not you have the skills, knowledge, and personal qualities for which they are looking. They are less likely to ask you hypothetical questions – the “what would you do if...?” type of question. It is important that you build a portfolio of these examples as your career progresses by adding to your achievements and engaging in activities which develop you personally and professionally.

You should be on the look-out for, and push to get, opportunities which will stretch you and help you to grow and develop. Some of these will feel uncomfortable at the time – but will score you points in the interview simply because you have done them.

GOLDEN APPLES

Treat every interview question as an opportunity to sell what you have to offer. Imagine that you have a box of apples under the interview table each of which is an example of something you have done in your career to date. Some are a bit rotten, others a little tasteless.

Make sure each time you give evidence of what you have done that you choose one of your golden apples. This will describe a relevant example of how you have performed when you are at your best – and help the interviewer decide to offer you the job.