

# A complete guide to **job interviews**



Identifying and acquiring the best talent from **inside, and outside your sector**

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# TALENT

**Welcome to the third eBook in our new three-part series on Untapped Talent**, where we have been exploring some of the key challenges in recruitment today. In particular, we have been looking at why it is so crucial that no stone is left unturned when it comes to finding candidates with the skills your company needs.

In the first eBook of the series, which you can download by clicking [here](#) we explored the current war for talent in the UK, where skills shortages and record levels of employment are combining to make it more difficult than ever to find candidates with the right skills and attributes. In the second eBook, available [here](#), we then looked at the benefits of sourcing talent from the most diverse backgrounds possible and how to ingrain D&I into your attraction strategies.

In this third and final eBook, we turn our attention to the interview process, to ensure that you are able to properly assess candidates for roles within your business. Along with offering general best practice and tips from our expert consultants, we have also explored how to tailor your interview process if you are considering candidates from different sectors, or with diverse skill sets.

Skilled candidates are in high demand and can sometimes need a lot of convincing to change roles. When you come across a standout candidate during a recruitment process, it is not only crucial that you identify their potential, but that you know how to effectively assess them in an interview.

With over 40 years of recruitment experience and with the combined insight from our four core brands, Page Executive, Michael Page, Page Personnel and Page Outsourcing, our team of over 1,000 frontline recruiters are well-placed to advise on how to run a streamlined, effective interview process.

Our consultants are not only experts in recruitment, but they are also specialists in the business sectors and regions that they recruit within. Using this knowledge, the guide explores the importance of clearly defining the key skills needed to fill a vacancy, techniques for assessing soft skills and testing a candidate's technical abilities, and provides an overview of how an effective process should run.

To help equip your business with the right talent, our flexible team is uniquely positioned to help find the right people to drive your business objectives. On behalf of PageGroup in the UK, I hope you enjoy the read.

**Nick Kirk**

UK Managing Director,  
PageGroup

# HOW TO STRUCTURE A JOB INTERVIEW



“Top candidates like to feel as though their potential employer is equally prepared and taking the interview process seriously. In the current competitive market, it is imperative that you sell your opportunity and ensure that the candidate is bought into the process. Failure to do this could result in the loss of a strong candidate to a competitor.”

**Victoria Starr**

Senior Manager, Page Personnel Finance

In order to attract and hire the best talent in the market, you need to be well prepared.

## Introduction

A friendly and professional approach to the initial introduction is advisable. This will help a candidate to relax and make them feel more comfortable throughout the process.

## Provide an overview of the role

Highlight the key responsibilities of the position and provide some more detail about the team that they will be joining. Be sure to really sell the opportunity.

## Comprehensive questions

After a short introduction, ask the candidate what they know about the business and this will highlight their level of interest. It will also show how much they prepared for the interview and lead into a series of CV, competency, and personal questions, to assess their skills.

### • CV-based

To start, these types of questions are important to delve deeper into some of the key skills and achievements listed on a candidate's CV.

### • Competency-based

These questions provide an insight into the candidate's past experiences as they require much more comprehensive answers, including specific details about a situation where they have utilised key skills.

### • Personal based

Some simple questions about their interests, goals and hobbies, can provide a better understanding of the candidate as an individual to assess team fit.



“A thorough interview process should aim to balance the need to assess candidates' technical and soft skills with the increasing need for candidate engagement. Millennials, in particular, need to feel a high level of engagement during an interview or they will be drawn to other opportunities. In a candidate-driven market, you must compete for the best talent.”

**Rob Bales**

Operating Director Michael Page Procurement And Supply Chain

## Opportunity for the candidate to ask questions

Allow time for the candidate to ask questions about the business.

## Arrange testing and provide feedback

Where testing elements are required in the process, be upfront about when this will take place. Similarly, ensure prompt feedback to avoid losing the candidate to other processes.

# EFFECTIVE QUESTIONING

## The STAR model

One way to structure interview questions is by using the STAR method. This is used as a technique to answer interview questions which we recommend to our candidates preparing for interviews, but it can also be used to shape the meeting from an employer's perspective.



“The most common method when assessing a candidate is what is referred to as the STAR method. This is a form of questioning that asks four separate questions within one, requiring four quite detailed answers.”

**Dave Collingwood**  
 Manager, Michael Page Technology



“The STAR technique is tried and tested for both candidates and clients. The situation, task, action, result format can be used by interviewers to gather relevant information about a specific skill and the capabilities that the job requires.”

**Chris Madine**  
 Business Director, Michael Page Logistics

For example, a question used to assess a candidate's skills would be focused as such:

“Can you give me an example of a project that was behind schedule (situation) – how you decided to bring it back to fruition (task) – what you did (action) – what lessons were learnt from this and how this impacted future projects (result)?”

The STAR model focuses on behavioural and situational type questions broken into four key elements. The acronym stands for **Situation, Task, Action** and **Result**.

### Situation

As this suggests, the first element requires a candidate to outline a real-life example or situation that demonstrates a particular skill or capability.

### Task

The task that the candidate highlights should refer to the outcome that was required in response to the situation.

### Action

What the candidate did to follow through with the required tasks, highlighting the key skills used, demonstrating their behaviours and personal characteristics in the workplace.

### Results

This could be split into two parts, the first being what happened once the action was taken to rectify the problem and secondly what the candidate learnt from this situation.

This method allows you to identify the way people adapt, take charge, influence an outcome, and learn from the challenges that they are faced with.

# A COMPREHENSIVE ASSESSMENT:

## Balanced scorecard

A balanced scorecard approach to a candidate assessment offers a structured model to review your top candidates. Base your analysis on four to six of the core competencies you are searching for in an ideal candidate. Use the findings from your interview to compare the applicants.

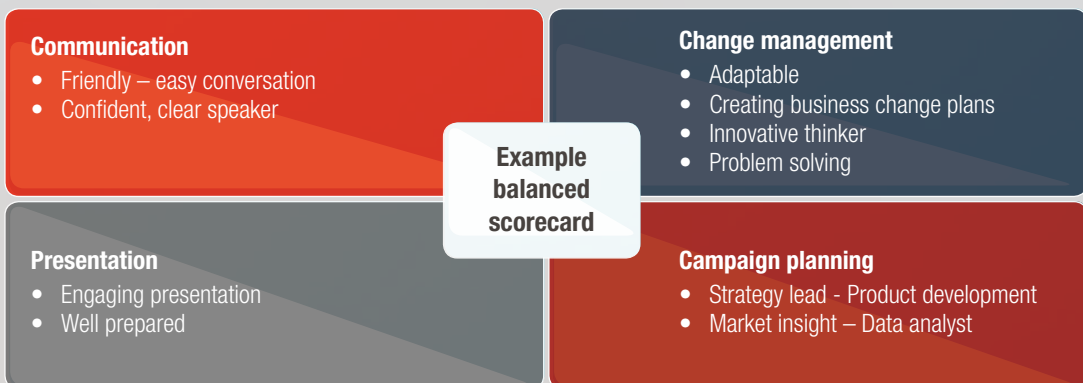


**Chris McElkerney**

Operating Director, Page Personnel Finance:

“It is important to start an interview process with a definitive list of core skills. The range of soft skills, in particular, is very broad. If you don't prepare properly, you risk entering an interview with too many in mind and without a clear priority. It can be difficult to discount a soft skill, prioritising is key.”

Once you have defined the essential skills, use these competencies as categories for your assessment. Based on a candidate's CV and interview, list the skills, experiences, working examples and personal characteristics that the candidate possesses which fall under each of those categories.



For example, if one of the key competencies listed is ‘develop a change management plan’, you might list experience such as internal and external communication, stakeholder engagement, strategic planning, adaptable, innovative and/or professional, along with relevant past roles and examples discussed in the interview.

If you adopt this method correctly, you will have a snapshot of each of your top candidates' skills and capabilities that match your defined core list of skills for the role. **This is valuable for a number of reasons:**

1. It allows you to revisit each candidate's interview at a later date and compare candidates, while maintaining accuracy.
2. Ensures you make a well-informed decision on who makes it through the interview process.
3. Enables the hiring manager or recruiter to provide the candidate with structured feedback.



**Graham Lucas**

Managing Director, Michael Page:

“The key to a successful interview is in the preparation. To avoid biases, approach an interview with a clear set of skills to assess, with a weighting of importance applied, as well as a good set of questions that allow the key skills to be demonstrated and discussed. In doing this, you are more likely to walk away with a much clearer idea of how well a candidate will perform in the role.”

# ASSESSING A CANDIDATE'S SOFT SKILLS

The soft skills, or transferable skills, that your employees possess are key to any recruitment process. These determine how well they will work with others, the level of influence they will hold when dealing with internal and external stakeholders, and their ability to overcome challenges. There are countless soft skills that an individual may possess, many of which are very difficult to assess. **So where do you start?**



**Dave Collingwood**

Manager, Michael Page Technology:

“The difficulty with soft skills is that these will change depending on the role. Every position has different requirements, for example, sales professionals will need to demonstrate an ability to influence, and for management roles, applicants will need to possess a higher level of empathy. The issue arises when deciding how to assess these.”



## Identify the skills key for success

Before you can begin, it is important to define the key soft skills that are essential for the role. What are you looking for? Is it someone who is great at communicating with and persuading others? Or someone who is fast thinking and innovative, to develop new approaches to the way your team works?



## Consider the structure of the interview

When attending an interview, candidates like to feel that the interviewer is equally prepared and conducts the interview in a professional manner. In the current competitive market, it is imperative that you sell the opportunity to the candidates to ensure that they are bought into the process.



## Read past their response

Quite often when assessing soft skills, it is less about the responses you receive and more about the way in which candidates handle the questions. Their demeanour, the way they shape and present their answers, and the way they interact with people before and after the interview has taken place, all paint a picture of an individual's character. A candidate's overall approach to an interview can tell you a lot about their personality and can also indicate their attitude towards tasks in a working environment.



## Follow up

If after an interview you want to clarify a candidate's competency in a particular skill, a character reference may be required. However, you can also seek informal feedback on the candidate from others who have met them. This could be someone who referred them to you or even the receptionist.



**Alex Hall**

Head of Customer Development, PageGroup:

“Good communication and presentation skills are incredibly important. A positive introduction, the ability to make small talk, a good handshake and manners, are simple but positive signals that demonstrate these key soft skills. Above and beyond this inquisition from the applicant highlights a sharp mind, and the ability to provide concise relevant answers shows good listening skills.”

# ASSESSING A CANDIDATE'S TECHNICAL ABILITIES

Technical skills are often much more straightforward to assess when compared to soft skills. The key, again, is to ensure that you have clearly defined the skills you need within your team. **What technical capabilities should a candidate have and at what level should they be able to demonstrate these skills?**

Competency-based questions are essential here. Shape your questions around the core technical abilities using the STAR method and focus on the key competency areas. Be sure to ask for specific details on results and for any figures supporting their examples.



**Oliver Nevel**

Operating Director, Michael Page Retail:

“For me, this is all about facts, figures and data. In order to assess a candidate’s technical ability, questions should be geared towards specific results that the candidate has delivered.”

There are **five key competencies** that can be assessed to form a complete picture of a candidate’s abilities:

- Individual competencies
- Managerial competencies
- Analytical competencies
- Interpersonal competencies
- Motivational competencies

These are important to consider when looking at hard skills as when combined with the specific technical abilities of a candidate, the above areas will demonstrate to what level a candidate will perform. Are they proactive in their approach to core responsibilities, or are they able to lead a team and therefore likely to progress within your business?

In addition to a well-structured question and answer approach to assessing technical skills, testing plays a big role. While the tasks that you set will depend on the role that you are advertising, there are some simple tests that can be set to do this.



**Simon Nolan**

Senior Partner, Page Executive:

“Ultimately this is about experience. If a candidate can demonstrate clear, specific examples of when they have fulfilled similar tasks, then that is a good starting point. The approach you take to test a candidate’s technical ability is completely role specific. However, any sort of case study where they would have to assess a similar task would be useful.”



# TESTING YOUR CANDIDATES

Often during the interview process, further testing is required to confirm the skills and level of competency that a candidate has in a particular area. There are tests that can assess both soft skills and hard skills, but ultimately this will depend on the role that is being recruited.



**Lorraine Twist**

Director, Michael Page Finance:

“The personality profiling assessments tend to be helpful and they create a list of skills that an individual holds. For example, where strong communication skills are essential for a role, but a candidate has scored low, you could shape questions around these skills in the interview. However, I don’t think personality profiling should be used in isolation – rather as a guide.”

## Testing soft skills

The tests that you can implement when looking to assess technical ability, will vary depending on the role and the skills that need to be demonstrated. Some examples of the types of test that you could incorporate include the following:

- Microsoft Excel and Word tests – Assesses the level of competency working with these programmes.
- Typing and writing tests – Determines the level of skill when written communication is vital.
- Problem-based presentations – Showcases understanding and approach to role-related technical challenges.
- Case studies – Assesses problem-solving abilities and level of understanding about the industry.
- In-tray exercises – Highlights how a candidate manages their workload.
- Mock technical tasks – Assesses the candidate’s ability to apply core skills.



**Chris McElkerney**

Operating Director, Page Personnel Finance:

“It’s important to set the agenda of an interview with the candidate from the outset so they know what to expect. Testing should happen at the first stage on-site at the interview if possible, or between first and second stage so as not to unnecessarily delay the process.”

While there is generally no right or wrong time to test a candidate, it is key to consider when it would be most suitable for your interview process. It is important that you adopt a streamlined interview process and ensure that any testing doesn’t delay the process. However, in some instances, if you ask a candidate to prepare a detailed presentation or go through an extensive testing process before they are invested in the opportunity, then they may lose interest.

# INDUSTRY-SPECIFIC INTERVIEW TIPS

## Procurement **Assessing a candidate**

ROB BALES:

“This is best done with less formal, situation-based interview questions. Within an operational environment, have the candidate engage with potential colleagues via a plant tour, for example. Observe how they interact and ask questions about what they see and how they would deal with certain situations. I would also advise on the use of a presentation. When assessing soft skills the content/subject is less relevant, it is used more to assess the candidate’s ability to engage with a panel of people who are invariably strangers.”

## Executive Search **Assessing soft skills**

SIMON NOLAN:

“Usually a broad range of meetings are required. Increased contact with a candidate is helpful when assessing soft skills and we would recommend an informal meet up over dinner or drinks for a senior hire. Personality fit becomes extremely important and if you can – within reason – increase the exposure that the candidate has to the broader team throughout the process.”

## Digital **Assessing technical skills**

ALEX HALL:

“There are a plethora of tests to check any technical skill sets as well as other tasks, such as presentation topics. An ideal process for a web developer, for example, would involve a first stage interview focused on CV-based and behavioural questions, followed by a technical task such as a coding challenge completed remotely – this would be a robust process.”

## Logistics **Testing a candidate**

CHRIS MADINE:

“Detailed questioning/testing is rarely seen in logistics as the interviewer typically has extensive industry knowledge and a deep understanding of the environment that candidate works in. What’s more important is candidate engagement, promoting the organisation and role. Understanding if there is a personality/culture fit is normally determined through open, informal conversation.”

# HOW TO INTERVIEW CANDIDATES FROM DIFFERENT SECTORS TO GET THE SKILLS YOU NEED

Employing individuals with a sector background that is directly linked to the role you are hiring for may seem logical, and there is no doubt that such professionals can be beneficial to your business. In many cases, this will be the most obvious path to take to find the talent you need; you need to hire a logistics manager so decide to look for a manager in the logistics sector. Recent research carried out by PageGroup supports this notion to a degree. 2,000 UK residents were asked whether or not technical skills should be the biggest factor when deciding if someone is suitable for a role, rather than soft skills. The results revealed that professionals in engineering and manufacturing (54%) legal (62%) marketing (70%) technology (54%) property and construction (62%) all agreed technical skills should be the biggest factor.

However, in a market where skilled candidates are in short supply, it may well be unavoidable that you will need to widen your search beyond your own sector to find the right person for the job. Even in a market where skilled talent is plentiful, this is always a useful exercise to undertake from time to time. As we explored in our previous eBooks in this series, a diversity of thinking and experience can often be very beneficial to a business in the long term.

For example, it is clear that those with diverse working backgrounds are able to offer unique insights into better ways of working. Changing the way of thinking when it comes to recruitment could uncover the benefits that someone with diverse experience and skills can bring. For example, a candidate with an additional language can use that skill as a tool to win new business, perhaps overseas, therefore strengthening global relationships. They can also call on their primary skill set directly related to the job, and their secondary skill set indirectly related, and interchange between the two as each situation demands. The recruiting organisation will receive a much more rounded individual as a result.

## How to conduct the interview process

Whilst there are clear benefits to diversifying your talent search, it is also important to note that you will have to adapt your job interview techniques if you decide to interview a candidate from a different background than the sector or specific job family you are operating in. It may well be the case that the candidate does not possess all the necessary technical skills – for example, a working knowledge of a certain software system – but possesses skills such as adaptability and communication, which will mean that they can be trained on the job. Here are some key points to consider during the interview process:

### 1. Decide which skills are truly important for the job

When hiring for a role, try to decide which skills or qualifications are absolutely essential and which ones are ‘nice to have’ – or could be superseded by other attributes. In some sectors, this can be very black and white; for example, many roles in the medical and legal professions require a minimum standard of qualification and experience – for obvious reasons of safety and compliance. However, in other sectors, this may not be as cut and dried; could a procurement manager adapt his or her skills to a role in logistics? Similarly, a marketing manager in the engineering sector could well apply their knowledge to a position in the property sector, for example.

### 2. Adapt your scorecard

In this eBook, we have explained the benefits of using a balanced scorecard to assess the skills of multiple candidates evenly and fairly. However, if you are interviewing a candidate from another sector, you may well wish to skew your scoring in certain areas to account for the fact they may not tick every box – and indeed bring a whole other scope of skills to the table. It may well be the case that an outstanding skill in one area balances out a weakness in another area. Try to consider a person’s potential as well as where they are now. An open mind is key.

### 3. Consider what else a candidate has to offer

When assessing candidates from diverse backgrounds, the key is deciding what each individual brings to the table and how this could benefit your business. Rather than focusing on every skill or competency they do not possess, consider what they do have in their favour – perhaps language skills, the ability to communicate effectively, or universally desirable attributes like budgeting, people management and stakeholder engagement. It may even be that the candidate has moved sectors before, meaning they have a track record of adapting their skills to new roles or situations.

## FURTHER READING

The first step in activating your candidate search is writing a great job description.

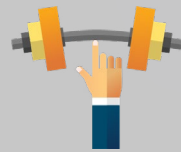
**Be sure that yours stand out.**

WE ARE  
HIRING

A key aspect of the interview is assessing a candidate's skills, but do know **which skills you need to be looking for?**



You know it's important to sell your business to top candidates during an interview. Make sure **you are presenting a strong employer proposition.**



When hiring top talent, the offer of a competitive salary is crucial. Be sure **you are well-equipped with the current market salaries** before starting your interview process.



The final stage of a successful recruitment process is making an offer to your candidate of choice.

**Make sure you impress during this crucial step.**

