



ROBERT WALTERS WHITEPAPER
OPTIMISING THE INTERVIEW PROCESS
TO SECURE THE BEST CANDIDATES

ROBERT WALTERS

FOREWORD

A job interview is primarily regarded as an opportunity for an employer to assess a candidate's suitability for a role. However, at the same time, how the interview process is managed is likely to impact an interviewee's opinion of the organisation and the vacancy concerned.

This whitepaper is designed to help employers better understand the job interview process. Through conducting separate surveys of job seekers and hiring managers, we found out how candidates approach interviews and uncovered the discrepancies between their expectations and the employers' perceptions of the process.

This topic is particularly important at present as there is a shortage of quality candidates in the market, which further heightens the importance of securing top talent quickly and efficiently.

The interview has always been at the heart of the recruitment process. Traditionally an interview gave employers the opportunity to meet, assess and select the best talent for the job and their company. However, with an increasingly talent-short market, job seekers have started to become more selective and discerning of the organisations they are looking to join. A job interview is no longer a one-way process – it is two-way and often forms a candidate's first impression of an organisation.

From an employer's point of view, the job interview represents an opportunity to promote a positive representation of the company brand, irrespective of whether a candidate is successful in the application or not.

INTRODUCTION

This Robert Walters whitepaper has been created to help employers gain more valuable insights into the interview process, and includes recommendations on how it can be optimised to secure the best candidates.

Specifically this whitepaper explores:

- The nature of the interview process, including candidate perceptions and expectations
- The importance of interviewer behaviours
- The post-interview experience and the best way to provide feedback
- The overall impact of the interview process on a candidate's impression of the organisation

METHODOLOGY

This whitepaper is based on the findings of research conducted by Robert Walters in Greater China. To compile this whitepaper, Robert Walters surveyed 1204 job seekers and 366 hiring managers across China, Hong Kong and Taiwan.

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FIRST IMPRESSIONS AND INTERVIEW CONTENT PREFERENCES

Job interviews are a crucial part of the recruitment process as it is when the employer and candidate meet each other for the first time. The interview not only gives the employer the opportunity to match the personality to the resume, but also offers the candidate a chance to assess how it is like to work for the organisation. With a good understanding of candidate expectations, you can fine tune and tailor your interview process to ensure a good first impression and a positive interview experience.

Survey results

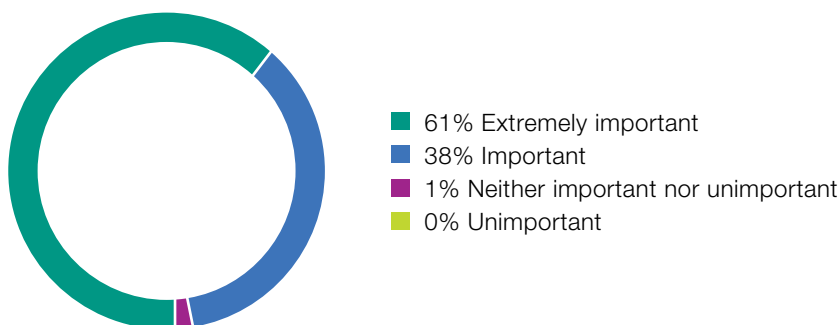
Almost every professional regarded the job interview process a key factor in shaping their perception of an employer, with 61% rating it extremely important and 35% considering it important.

When asked which were the top factors determining their first impressions of a business when attending a job interview, most job seekers cited appearance of the interviewers (65%), the office location (64%), appearance of the reception area (47%), and the meeting room where the interview takes place (41%).

Candidates considered receiving enough information about the role as the most important factor during a job interview (86%), followed by receiving information about the team that the role sits with (53%) and the remuneration package on offer (51%).

Interestingly, our survey of employers revealed a set of different results. While hiring managers also considered providing enough information about the role as the most important factor (78%), they did not regard providing information about the team (34%) and the remuneration package (26%) as highly as job seekers. Instead, they believed it was important to allow candidates the opportunity to explain work experience properly (67%) and to ask questions (63%).

Chart 1.0 – Importance of job interview process in shaping a candidate's perception of an employer



FIRST IMPRESSIONS AND INTERVIEW CONTENT PREFERENCES

Key learning #1

You the employer are being interviewed

A job interview is a two-way process, with organisations typically being assessed as much as the candidate they are interviewing. For job seekers, the interview not only gives them a chance to impress hiring managers, it also plays a major part in shaping the candidate's opinion of the company.

From an employer's perspective, job interviews present an excellent opportunity to showcase the vacancy and company to a candidate and ultimately gain their buy-in to the role. Therefore it is important for the interviewer to provide information that will appeal to job seekers.

Our research shows that apart from information about the role, job seekers would also like to know more about the team that the role sits in as well as the remuneration package. However, employers do not view them as importantly as job seekers. Addressing these factors during the job interview would enable candidates to form a more comprehensive understanding of the position, and help them make a more informed decision when it comes to the job offer stage.

61% of professionals regarded the job interview process an extremely important factor in shaping their perception of an employer

Table 1.0 – Importance of specific factors during a job interview

	Job seekers		Employers	
	Very important	Important	Very important	Important
Receiving/providing enough information about the role	86%	13%	78%	22%
Receiving/providing information about the team that the role sits with	53%	40%	34%	53%
Receiving/providing information about the remuneration package on offer	51%	40%	26%	51%
The opportunity to explain work experience properly	41%	52%	67%	32%
Receiving/providing enough information about the company culture	37%	54%	34%	51%
The opportunity to ask questions	33%	54%	63%	35%

FIRST IMPRESSIONS AND INTERVIEW CONTENT PREFERENCES

Key learning #2

Make the first impression count

First impressions are quick to form yet hard to change, hence it is important for employers to ensure potential candidates receive a positive experience at all possible touch points from the very beginning. While certain factors such as office location would be beyond the hiring manager's control to improve, organisations can consider implementing the following measures to create a more positive candidate experience:

- Ensure interviewers are punctual and do not leave candidates waiting in the meeting room for too long
- Set a dress code for interviewers to ensure they look professional
- Keep the reception area and meeting rooms clean and tidy at all times
- Ensure receptionists responsible for welcoming candidates are professional and polite at all times as they will likely be the first point of contact
- Display company literature, awards and recognitions in the interview area to reinforce the strength of the company's brand

66% of candidates rated the appearance of the interviewer as one of the top factors determining their first impression of a business

Figure 1.0 – Top three factors that determined a candidate's first impressions of a business when going to a job interview



Appearance of the interviewer



The office location



Appearance of the reception area



53%

of job seekers
considered it very
important to receive
information about the
team that the role sits
with during a job
interview

INTERVIEWER BEHAVIOURS AND PREFERENCES

The role of the interviewer is critical to the job interview process – it is their responsibility to ask the right questions to assess the suitability of the candidate for the role. For job seekers, interviewers are the main point of reference of the business. It is important that they behave in an appropriate manner and provide an accurate representation of the company brand.

Survey results

Line managers, representatives from HR and line managers' superiors all play a key role in the interview process – over 90% of organisations said these senior managers were often included in candidate interviews – which is in line with job seekers' expectations. 32% of job seekers would also like to meet their direct reports, however only very few organisations would include candidate's direct reports in the interview process (22%).

33% of professionals considered knowledge and understanding of the profession as the most important attribute they looked for in an interviewer, followed by a polite/respectful approach (30%).

A vast majority of professionals (94%) noted that a rude/disrespectful attitude from interviewers would give them a negative impression of the business. Many would also be put off by the lack of preparation from interviewers, with 77% of them stating that behaviours such as misinterpreting information from CV can be a big turn off.

Most hiring managers (88%) believed that it will be useful for them to receive interview training and guidelines. Training on best practices in interviewing candidates, e.g. how to build rapport, ask effective questions and evaluate answers (90%) is considered to be most useful, followed by what not to do during the interview (55%) and a rating scale to assess candidates (53%).

94% of professionals would be put off if the interviewer has a rude/disrespectful attitude

Table 2.0 – People involved in the interview process VS people who job seekers believed should be involved

	Job seekers' expectations	Actual
A representative from HR	89%	96%
Line manager of the role	100%	98%
Line manager's superior	79%	93%
Other relevant business heads	36%	55%
Members of the team the candidate will be working within	46%	52%
Employees who will be reporting to the candidate	32%	22%

INTERVIEWER BEHAVIOURS AND PREFERENCES

Key learning #3

Knowledge and understanding is the key in the interview process

Our survey results show that the most important attribute candidates look for in an interviewer is knowledge and understanding of their profession. Organisations can ensure they provide an interview experience in line with candidate's expectations by adopting the following measures:

- Schedule enough time for the interview to cover all areas and allow candidates to explain their experience properly
- While it is important to test candidates and put them under pressure to assess their ability to cope with a stressful situation, an over aggressive or unfriendly manner is likely to do more harm than good. It is important to ask engaging and relevant questions in a polite manner
- Candidates typically prepare for an interview extensively so they will expect the interviewer to have done the same. It is best practice to read an applicant's CV in detail and prepare specific questions based on their experience. This will also help when it comes to providing feedback
- Ensure that the interviewer has sufficient knowledge about the role under discussion and is able to answer all of the candidate's questions

If the person conducting the interview is an HR professional who might not have the requisite knowledge of the job under discussion, the interview process could be improved by building the following factors into it:

- Ensure a full, complete briefing between the interviewer and the direct line manager
- Include a member of the hiring team or manager in the interview process. Allowing a second person into the process will prevent any knowledge gaps, reduce the need for further interviews and provide a well-rounded candidate experience

33% of professionals considered knowledge and understanding of the role as the most important attribute they looked for in an interviewer

Figure 2.0 – Top three interviewer behaviours that put candidates off when going to a job interview



The interviewer has a rude/disrespectful attitude



The interviewer seems unprepared for the interview



The interviewer is late

INTERVIEWER BEHAVIOURS AND PREFERENCES

Key learning #4

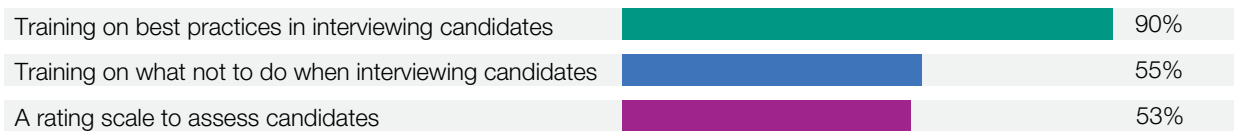
Implement interview guidelines and training to prevent negative experiences

Implementing interview guidelines and training can help to provide a basic framework for the interview, and ensure a more consistent experience for candidates in a manner that reflects the company's values. Some recommended key guidelines include:

- Ask clear and concise questions in a conversational tone
- Ask a range of open-ended questions to encourage candidates to share their experience and allow them to talk
- Prepare questions specific to the individual candidate before the interview
- Include an objective rating scale for assessing candidates to avoid snap judgements
- Never overpromise or commit to anything that you may not be able to deliver during the interview
- Provide as much details as you can about the role, the team, the company and its benefits

88% of hiring managers believed that it will be useful for their company to provide interview training and guidelines

Chart 2.0 – Top three interview training and guidelines most useful to hiring managers





90%

of hiring managers would like to receive training on best practices in interviewing candidates

POST-INTERVIEW EXPERIENCE

For organisation looking to build and maintain a strong employer brand, the post-interview experience should not be overlooked. Interview feedback should be given to both successful and unsuccessful candidates in order to create a positive overall experience to job seekers.

Survey results

Most candidates (94%) would expect to receive feedback from the employer after going to a job interview. However, almost half of employers (44%) did not provide feedback to candidates after interviewing them.

When asked how long they expect it would take to receive feedback after the job interview, over 90% of candidates believed it should be within a week, with most of them (38%) indicating five to seven days as the expected turnaround for feedback. Candidates also stated that they prefer to receive feedback by phone (52%) over email (48%).

A majority of organisations that did provide feedback after interviewing candidates typically do so within a week. The channel that organisations use to provide feedback is in line with job seekers' preference – 53% of employers indicated that they usually provide feedback by phone and 47% do so via email.

44% of organisations do not provide feedback to candidates after interviewing them

Table 3.0 – Length of time taken to provide feedback

	Job seekers' expectations	Actual
Within 24 hours	2%	7%
1-2 days	29%	21%
3-4 days	22%	19%
5-7 days	38%	31%
8-14 days	8%	18%
More than 14 days	1%	4%

POST-INTERVIEW EXPERIENCE

Key learning #5

Always give feedback to candidates after an interview

There is often an imbalance between the amount of effort and commitment candidates put into a job interview and the feedback (or the lack of it) they receive at the end of it.

As organisations become more rigorous in their selection criteria, candidates are often expected to work harder during the job search process (i.e. research more thoroughly, meet more people, perform more tasks, etc). Most candidates understand that a job interview offers no guarantee and that they may ultimately be unsuccessful. In spite of this, they are still keen to get something out of the process in exchange for the time and effort they have put in.

The reality is that a candidate will think more highly of an organisation if they provide feedback, be it negative or positive, than none at all. Job seekers tend to appreciate sincere, relevant and constructive feedback that can help them in their future job search. While giving feedback can be difficult, stating it clearly, quickly and sensitively will make difficult messages easier to deliver, and receive.

94% of professionals would expect feedback from the employer after going to a job interview

Chart 3.0 – Candidates who have been to a job interview and not subsequently received feedback



■ 91% Have not received feedback
■ 9% Have received feedback

Chart 4.0 – Employers who provided feedback to candidates after interviewing them



■ 56% Provided feedback
■ 44% Did not provide feedback

THE IMPACT OF THE INTERVIEW PROCESS

The interview process and its length can have a strong impact on a candidate's opinion of an employer and whether a candidate will accept or decline an offer. In a candidate-short market, professionals have a wide range of options available to them and as such, will be less likely to wait for organisations that have lengthy recruitment processes.

Survey results

Almost seven in 10 professionals would turn down a job offer after a poor interview experience, indicating the importance of this process in securing the best candidate.

A majority of job seekers (66%) believed that a job offer should be made after two interviews while a quarter thought three rounds would be considered a reasonable amount. This is somewhat in line with employers' current practices – 49% said they would usually conduct two rounds of interviews before extending an offer, while 42% said they would take three rounds.

Overall, 81% of job seekers felt that a full interview process (from application to offer stage) should take fewer than four weeks. In comparison, only 42% of hiring processes meet this expectation; almost half (46%) of hiring managers indicated that their recruitment process usually takes one to two months.

A lengthy interview process can have a big impact on the candidate's perception of the job and companies might risk losing out on their preferred candidates. 87% of candidates felt that a lengthy process makes them feel that they are not the first choice for the position, while 68% have withdrawn from the interview process before after receiving an offer from another company. 40% of employers also admitted that they have previously lost out on their preferred candidate due to a long drawn interview process.

Outlining the interview process at the initial stage could help manage job seekers' expectations, and 94% would prefer the company to do so. However, 21% of organisations said they do not outline the interview process in the first interview with the candidate.

Table 4.0 – Length of time full interview process takes (from application to job offer)

	Job seekers' expectations	Actual
Up to 2 weeks	31%	11%
3-4 weeks	50%	31%
1-2 months	17%	46%
3-4 months	2%	10%
More than 5 months	0%	1%
Don't know	0%	1%

68% of professionals have withdrawn from a recruitment process before due to an offer from another company

THE IMPACT OF THE INTERVIEW PROCESS

Key learning #6

Ensure the recruitment process keeps progressing

How long an interview process should take is determined by a number of factors, from the complexity of the job and technical skills required, to the nature of the employer and the available pool of potential candidates.

Employers should understand that the most in-demand professionals typically receive more than one job offer. Therefore, organisations with slow recruitment processes may invariably miss out on the best talent.

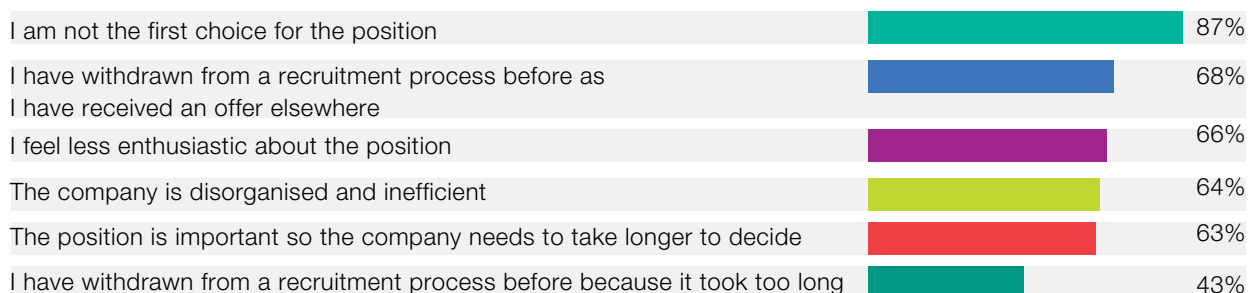
The length of the interview process should be determined by a range of factors, such as:

- Level of position – Generally, the more senior the position, the longer the recruitment process can take
- Job description – Roles that require a very specific and specialised skill set tend to take longer to fill
- Seasonal – There tends to be lulls over the festive season and New Year, and spikes in certain sectors around key periods, such as end of financial year

An organisation should be able to judge if their process is too long. If the company constantly finds their preferred candidates turning down their job offers because they have accepted another offer somewhere else, it may be time for the organisation to review their recruitment process.

40% of organisations have lost out on their preferred candidate before due to a lengthy recruitment process

Chart 5.0 – Candidates' perceptions of a lengthy recruitment process



THE IMPACT OF THE INTERVIEW PROCESS

Key learning #7

Keep candidates informed of their progress

Outlining the interview process at the initial stage, keeping candidates informed of their status throughout the process and how long each stage will take can help manage their expectations, especially if the interview process takes longer than what was originally outlined at the beginning.

If candidates are kept waiting without any explanation, they are likely to think that the employer is uninterested or disorganised and will focus on other job opportunities. This is also likely to influence their overall perception of the hiring organisation.

By the same token, candidates who are unsuccessful but feel like they have been well-informed at all stages are more likely to view the experience and the organisation more positively.

94% of professionals expect the company to outline its recruitment process at the initial stage

Chart 6.0 – Organisations that have lost out on their preferred candidate before because of a lengthy recruitment process



- 40% Yes, have lost out on preferred candidate due to a lengthy recruitment process
- 31% No, have not lost out on preferred candidate due to a lengthy recruitment process
- 29% Unsure, have lost out on preferred candidate but unsure if a lengthy recruitment process was the reason behind it



67%

of professionals would
turn down a job offer due
to poor interview
experience

CONCLUSION

Suggestions for hiring managers

The job interview is traditionally a forum where candidates try to impress the potential employer. However in a candidate-short market, it has become increasingly difficult to attract and engage top talent, as professionals are also more discerning when choosing their career paths.

Our research has shown that the interview process plays an important part in shaping job seekers' perceptions of the company. As quality professionals are always in high demand, organisations should make use of the interview process to create a good first impression and provide sufficient information to showcase the job opportunity.

The interview experience can have a direct impact on a candidate's decision to take up the job offer. Our research has shown that a lengthy interview process could result in professionals losing interest in the position and employers losing out on their preferred candidate. Therefore it is critical for organisations to ensure that their recruitment process is efficient, and that candidates are kept up to date of the progress.

Through evaluating current interview practices and implementing some simple guidelines, the interview process can be managed more effectively to ensure a smooth and positive experience, even for candidates who are eventually not shortlisted for the role.

Suggestions for candidates

It is understandable that professionals are not keen to go through a lengthy interview process as they have to invest a significant amount of time and resources for each interview. However job seekers should be realistic and understand that organisations often need to take time to make a decision; our research has shown that the full process often involves two to three rounds of interviews and could take up to one to two months to complete.

If it is a job that you are really interested in but the interview process does not seem to be progressing, it might be a good idea to follow up with the company politely to see which stage of the interview you are at and what the next step would be, before hastening to accept an offer from another organisation.

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