

How to prep like a pro

The complete guide to a successful interview



Introduction

As a financial you know that a solid planning and strong preparation is essential to be successful. Nobody is going to ask you a question about the numbers, variances or business case that you can't answer. But since you have a profession where you don't tend to talk about yourself all day, and you don't have job interviews very often, a good preparation is key.

Most people Google a company's website and may even look up the person interviewing them. But, prepping like a pro is more than just that. A good job interview prep can take up to 4 to 5 hours. So, be sure to block this time slot in your calendar and walk through our whitepaper. At the end of the day, take it easy, and we assure you that all your hard work will pay off.



Do your due diligence

If you want to ace an interview, a thorough due diligence is necessary to avoid getting stumped while put on the spot. So, let's start from square one. Look up the company website and the people you are meeting online. However, do not expect the website to give you all the information you need. The difference between a regular prep and prepping like a pro is digging deeper than the first three results on Google.

While conducting due diligence, you have to consider three points:

1. What are the numbers

Look at the company's past financial year (if the information is public and/or if you have access) and learn as much as possible about the performance, business model and the financial structure of the business. Jotting down any questions you have regarding the company performance or things that stand out may be used later on in your interview!

2. Get the whole picture!

Research the company by investigating recent and past media coverage. Are there any existing interviews online with the founders? Is there any information about the future strategy of the company? What is the ownership structure? Did they conduct external funding rounds, have M&A activities, add new business models in the past few years? Is there any market research on industry trends? Who are the top 2 competitors?

3. Check social platforms

Most businesses have multiple social media accounts, and there are also sites reviewing "informal" company performance and culture. Make sure you check out all of the content on these channels to learn about the company's values, informal activities, tone of voice, social coverage, etc. This will tell you a lot about its culture and "who" the organization wants to be to the outside world. Exploring the more informal channels would also expose you to any "negative" press you could validate during the interview.



Questions to prep for

1

Occasionally, one may come across certain “more traditional” hiring managers who want to challenge you by asking the question, “Can you tell me what we do here?” In such a situation, be prepared to deliver a short “summary” and, more importantly, prepare two or three questions that popped up during your prep that you can ask in return.

2

Similarly, make sure you also have an answer to the question, “Why do you find our company appealing” based on your research. Take two or three elements that are most appealing to you, which you can also justify. For instance, “I like the international focus and strategic expansion of your business, since I come from an international setting and could really add value in that field.”



Who are you?

It is no secret how challenging it is to answer true “HR” questions on the spot without thinking of better examples afterwards. You are not alone. So, please don’t think “I know myself, and will wing this part” and cook up something in the spur of the moment, as that would be selling yourself short. Spent some time self-reflecting and retrieving good examples of skills, competencies and/or projects.

TIP

Most Financials have the tendency to answer “tell me about yourself” by elaborating on their work experience right away; “Well, I currently work as a controller at” However, make sure to first start off by telling them about yourself, a.k.a. home situation, what you do outside of work, your passion, ambition, etc. before plunging into your career path so far.

1. Expect the most obvious questions and prep for them!

There are a few questions that always show up in an interview. Starting with the questions, “tell me about yourself” and “what is your biggest strength/weakness”. Prepare an answer to both of these and try to steer clear of cliches. Yes, “perfectionism” can actually be your biggest weakness, but even then, it may be a better idea to look at another one where you can demonstrate your willingness to work on things. Perhaps, you are not a natural at dealing with conflict, but learned how to manage and turn around situations and can elaborate by citing one or two recent examples. An answer like that shows that you have self reflection and you are capable and motivated to develop yourself!



Who are you?

2. Prep at least four situations where you displayed your strengths, influenced the bottom line, or exhibited another problem that shows you taking action.

This can be anything, right from projects you are proud of, a time in your life when you were asked to do something outside your comfort zone, or a problematic situation where you learned most of in hindsight. Use the **STARR** Storytelling method to write out these situations:

1. Situation:

Explain the situation first. What was your role, and what were the circumstances?

2. Task:

What was your responsibility? What task were you asked to fulfill? What did you decide to do to resolve the situation?

3. Action:

Which steps did you take to handle the challenge? Why did you choose to do it this way?

4. Result:

What was the outcome of your actions?

5. Reflection:

What have you learned in the process? What would you do differently the next time around?



Who are you?

3. Who are you and what are your goals in life?

Another question that always pops up is **"Where do you see yourself in X-number of years?"**. Brace yourself for this question! The trick here is not to include the company in the answer but to make it obvious that it aligns with your goals. If you aim for a managerial role in 5 to 10 years, be willing to tell them. You can casually mention your aspirations and how you would love to "grow within the organization" or "build an exceptional team", but keep the goals confined to you and not the company. Make sure it is an authentic answer that again shows that you are introspective, you know yourself and what you want.



Questions to prep for

1. Can you tell me about yourself? What is your biggest strength/weakness?
2. What are your hobbies? What do you do outside of work? What is your home situation like?
3. What is something that you always hear about yourself in performance reviews?
4. What skill would you like to develop? Are you actively working on that now? If yes, how? If no, why not?
5. What projects are you most proud of and why?
6. Can you tell me about a situation where you were forced to act out of your comfort zone in your workspace?
7. Can you tell me about a time where you had to inform or confront a stakeholder/ colleague about something difficult? What is your communication style in such a situation?
8. Can you tell me about a time where your strategic analysis directly impacted a business decision and how did you win over your stakeholders in the process?
9. Can you tell me about a time you proposed a befitting out-of-the-box solution?
10. Can you tell me about a time where you were forced to drop everything for a project with higher priority? How did you communicate with all the stakeholders?
11. Can you tell me about a time where you needed to motivate your colleagues or help a team member who was struggling? How did you handle it? What was the outcome?
12. What is your ambition for/ where do you see yourself in the next 3-5-10 years?



Why this position?

Now that we've got the company and yourself covered, it is time to prepare for the actual position. Read through the job description and write down what interests you about the position, what tasks play into your strengths, and which aspects you would have to develop. Aside from that, it is also essential to have a clear idea about your preferred company culture. Do you prefer working independently or in a team? How would you like to develop within the role or company?

TIP

Since this is your first interview of course you won't know every answer. From your side the focus of the meeting is also to really get to know the company, setting and role. However, this element is usually crucial in the second interview. They expect you to digest all information and impressions from the first meeting and translate this into a solid motivation. Of course leaving room for (critical) questions regarding topics you find important or weren't clear, consistent and/or tackled the first time around.



1. Which part of the position appeals to you the most? Which parts might feel less appealing, and why?
2. How does your experience match this position? Which competencies and responsibilities in your current role transfer to this one?
3. Which competencies and skills do you need to develop for this position? Which activities would be new for you? How do you plan on doing that?
4. What projects have you worked on that could be interesting for this setting?
5. How does this position fit in with your 5-year plan, and what about your 10-year plan?
6. Why do you think you would be a good fit for this position?

Don't tell when you can ask

A good job interview actually isn't an "interview" at all. It is a two-way conversation not only to figure out if you are a good fit for the company and this position, but also if they are a good fit for you! In other words, you are free to (and definitely should) ask a lot of questions to assess whether this setting matches with what you are looking for in your next step. Also, asking a lot of questions shows them that you are well prepared, genuinely interested and thorough.

Quote

"My biggest turn-off in an interview is when a candidate has no questions for me. Even if I just gave the best, inclusive presentation of our company and the position ever made (which will not be the case) or they did three days of prep; you cannot know everything you need to know to decide for yourself if we are the best company for you. Sharp questioning shows me they are genuinely interested and also critical towards me. That they want to assess both ways and will have a solid motivation about why they are interested and suitable for this role instead of a similar role at another company."



Questions you can ask

About the company culture & HR

1. How would you describe the company culture? What kind of people thrive here?
2. What do you like about working here? What is your favorite office tradition?
3. What is the (overall) strategy of the company? Could you tell me about new projects and/or business growth plans? How has the company transformed over the past five years?
4. What is your view on balancing onsite vs. remote working? How much freedom is there to organise and plan your own work?
5. What type of training and development is available for employees who want to improve their skills? What is your view on internal career development? How will I be onboarded/trained in the position?
6. Do colleagues hang out together outside of office hours? Are there office drinks, sports activities, peer groups, etc.?



Questions you can ask

About the team

1. Can you tell me more about the direct colleagues in the team?
2. How are the team dynamics? How do the team members work together?
3. What are the skills the current team is missing?
4. What are the skills and experiences you are looking for to complement the team?
5. Is there anything that concerns you about my background or personality being a fit for the team/this position?
6. How is the (job) rotation within the team?

About the position

1. Can you describe a typical day/week?
2. Who will be my main stakeholders?
3. What challenges do you expect me to encounter in this position?
4. Can you tell or show me examples of projects that I will be working on? What are the first projects I will have to address?
5. What will be my main targets for the first six months and first year? How will you measure the success of this position?
6. Will the core responsibilities or divide between certain activities change over time? How will the role evolve? What could be my challenge after two or three years?



Questions you can ask

More 'technical' questions Financial Control

1. What financial systems and processes do you use? How are they interfaced?
2. Can you describe the current closing & reporting process and timeline? Which areas would you like to improve?
3. What kind of accounting complexities (e.g. Intercompany / Accruals / Foreign Taxes / Revenue Recognition / Position Papers / PPA's / IFRS update or conversions) are part of this position?
4. Which recommendations did you receive in the last Audit process that you are going to address?
5. Which (ad hoc) issues can I face during the close?
6. Will there be projects that I will be a part of (i.e. implementations, process automation, integrations, regulatory projects) and what will be my role?

More 'technical' questions Business Control

1. Can you describe your current (management) reporting process? Which financial, operational, and commercial KPIs do you track?
2. How is the planning & control cycle structured? Who is involved in the budgeting process, and how is it currently built up? Will I be involved in the business reviews?
3. Which tooling, internal and external data sources are you using at the moment and how are they interfaced?
4. How would you like to develop your analytics function? Which insights does the business need that you cannot provide at the moment?
5. Can you give me examples of business cases or ad hoc analysis that I would be involved in?
6. How is the current relationship with the business?



Three golden rules

1. Be true to yourself

The best advice we can give you as you get closer and closer to your dream job is to just be yourself. An interview is like a date where both parties can see if one is a good fit for the other. However, this only works if you are willing to show off your true colors, let your personality shine through and occasionally crack a joke here and there :-). Bottom line, please do not give answers you think they want to hear; rather, provide genuine and truthful answers.

2. Be professional

Whether the interview is held in person or online, make sure you cover the basics. Since the first impression counts; be on time, match the expected dress code, and make sure you're well-rested (okay, mom). Additionally, make sure to show your enthusiasm non-verbally (smile, eye contact, intonation, active posture). Meanwhile, if the interview is virtual; do not forget to check your internet connection upfront, choose a decent background picture (no holiday pics), appropriate lighting, and a space where you will not be interrupted.

3. Have fun!

Do not forget to have fun and enjoy yourself! It is a very exciting process, not only in terms of personal growth but also in culture, peers, and stakeholders, especially if you plan to stick with the company for the next few years. Do you see yourself going to the office with a smile on your face? Whether you get the offer or not, in the end, make it a point to enjoy the whole experience of getting to know new people. You will learn from every experience, and you'll never know when you will meet again.



A word of caution what not to do

1. Not listening

If you only worry about what you will say next, you might tend to not listen actively. You might even ask a question about stuff you were just told, which is an absolute no-go. So, make sure you really listen and digest the information given to you and ask follow-up questions about their answers. That way, you get a two-way conversation going.

2. Being over-familiar

There is such a thing as being too amicable in an interview. Whatever the circumstances or culture of a company, it is still a professional meeting. Make sure the level of familiarity matches the demeanor of the person you are meeting.

3. Talking too much or not answering the question asked

In the Netherlands, it may be referred to as "wollig". It translates into somebody who is "telling it all", even if it's not relevant, and you really have to search for your answer somewhere in their story. You should avoid rambling and exaggerating. Instead be brief, stick to the point, and not stretch the facts. If asked a question, first answer it, then elaborate with (specific and relevant) examples, instead of the other way around!

4. Be arrogant

Confidence is good, but being cocky isn't. There is a delicate balance between confidence, reflection, and modesty. Thus, it would be preferable if you let your examples, skills, experience, and projects do the talking, convincing them that you are the best. Just don't brag about it yourself.



You got this!

