

# **PublicServicePrep Comprehensive Guide to Canadian Public Service Exams**

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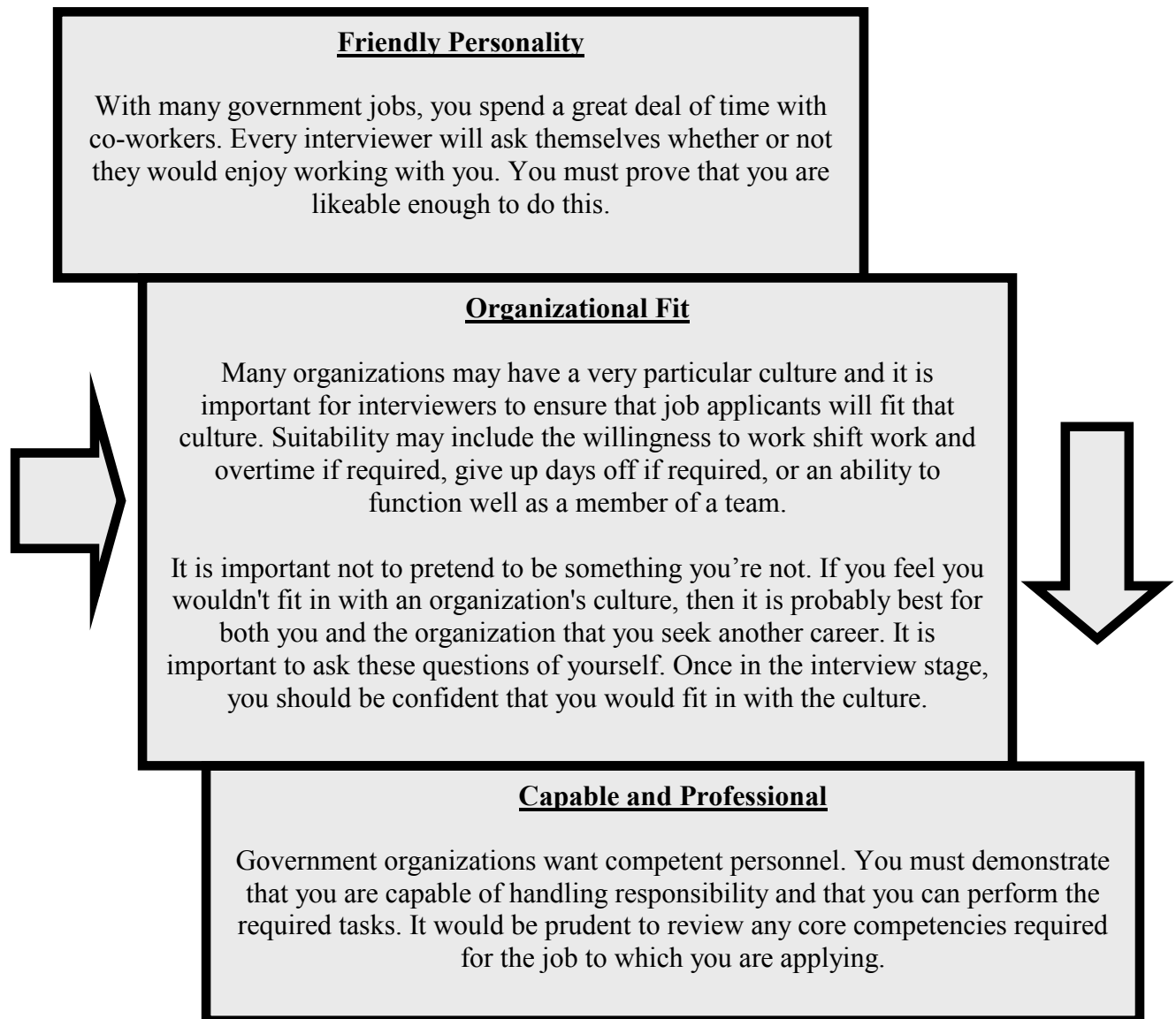
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# The Interview

It is important to recognize that government agencies are looking for the best people for the job and will not try to consciously confuse you.

At this stage it is your interpersonal and communication skills that will help you land a job. The interviewer is looking for someone who is competent, likeable and who fits in with the organization's culture, goals, beliefs and values.

## What Interviewers Tend to Look For



## **Handling Pre-Interview Stress**

Feeling nervous before an interview is perfectly normal. Politicians, entertainers and media personalities feel nervous prior to performances as well. The best way to handle the stress is to be well prepared. Once again, interviewers are not trying to trick you. They want you to succeed; it makes their job easier. Some things you should do before the interview include:

- Get a good night's sleep (this goes without saying, but bears repeating).
- Practice interviewing with friends, using the behavioural questions below.
- Wear professional clothing (suits or business dress).

You should bring all of the documents that are requested from you (transcripts, copy of your resume, portfolio) to the interview along with a pad of paper, a pen, a list of references and a list of questions you may have. Interviewers are often impressed if you have intelligent and researched questions about the job.

## **How to Influence the Hiring Decision**

### **Understand the Organization – Local Focus Interviews**

It is important to have at least a rudimentary understanding of the organization to which you are applying. This information is available on most websites, or at employment offices where you are applying. Some information you should know would include:

- Rough size of the organization or group with which you will work.
- Name of the managers or politicians in charge of departments. (example: Ralph Goodale – Minister of Finance 2005.)
- The challenge that all government services are facing (asked to do more with less, budget constraints, intense scrutiny, etc.)

Before any interview, make a habit of reading the newspaper and checking the internet for news about the department you are applying to, so that you are aware of the local issues and concerns of the area.

### **Understand the Job**

You have to understand the job to which you are applying. Gather as much information about the job as you can, including typical tasks, where your office would be, career paths, etc. To prove that you understand the job, make sure that you include the less glamorous duties that it might entail (filing reports, answering phones, dealing with the public, etc.).

### **Understand Yourself**

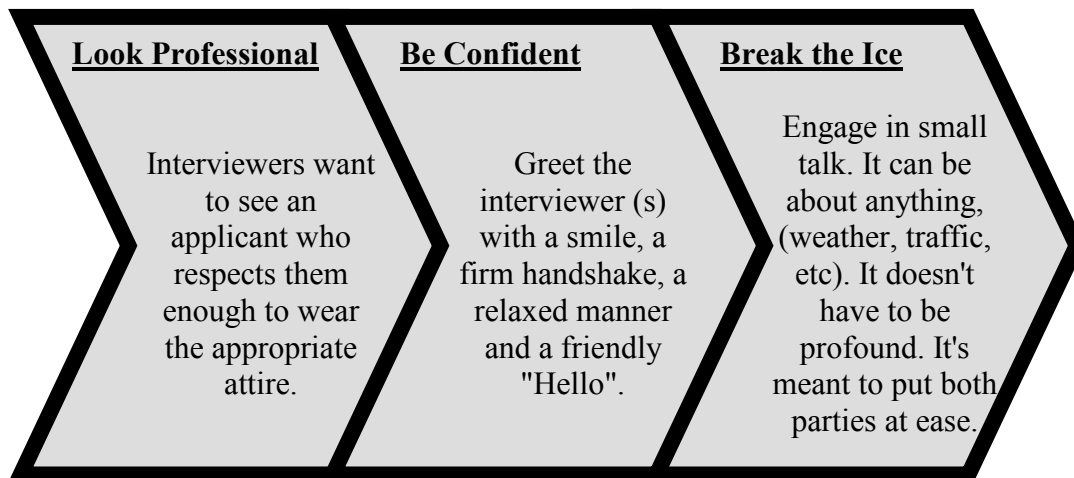
When you are involved with an interview, it is extremely important to be very familiar with your resume and past situations in your life. You will more than likely encounter

questions about your past acts, goals and emotions. The list below includes a number of questions you should be familiar with prior to any interview.

- How have you prepared for this position and what are your qualifications?
- What are your greatest strengths and weaknesses?
- How do you get along with co-workers?
- Why are you pursuing a career with this department?
- What motivates you to perform well?
- What are your three greatest accomplishments in life?
- How would you work under pressure?

### **First Impressions**

First impressions are extremely important. Many judgements are made about a person within the first 30 seconds of an encounter (fairly or unfairly). It is your job to impress the interviewer(s). Three basic steps you can take to ensure that you make a great first impression are:



## Communication and Interpersonal Effectiveness

The interview process is a situation that tests your communication skills. You should be aware of the following:

<b>Eye Contact</b>	Maintain eye contact with the person you are addressing. This means looking at the person who is speaking to you. In interviews with more than one interviewer spend an equal amount of time on each person.
<b>Body Language</b>	Be aware of your position in your seat and your breathing pattern. Attempt to relax by taking steady breaths. Make sure you sit up straight in an interview. This will exhibit self-confidence and professionalism.
<b>Gestures and Speech</b>	Be aware of any gestures you use. Nod and maintain eye contact to indicate that you understand interview questions. Smile when appropriate, and be vocally expressive by alternating your tone where necessary. Be natural and avoid filler words such as “umm” and “like”.

### During the Interview

Make an effort to read the interviewers. Ask yourself whether they appear to be straining to follow you, if you are talking too fast (breathe more deeply), or too softly (speak louder). If they are writing frantically, that is usually a good sign, but make occasional pauses so that they can keep up. If you do not understand a question, ask them to repeat or clarify it. If you do not know the answer to one of their questions, admit it. Do not lie during the interview.

### Prepare Stories Prior to the Interview

Interviewers may have some questions regarding your resume, or your past experiences. Make sure you are familiar with the content in your resume, and any tasks that you mention in it.

Many government agencies will use a behavioural-based interview method. This means that they will ask you questions about yourself and will ask you to describe events that have actually occurred in your past (usually the last two years). Some examples of questions you should be prepared to answer include:

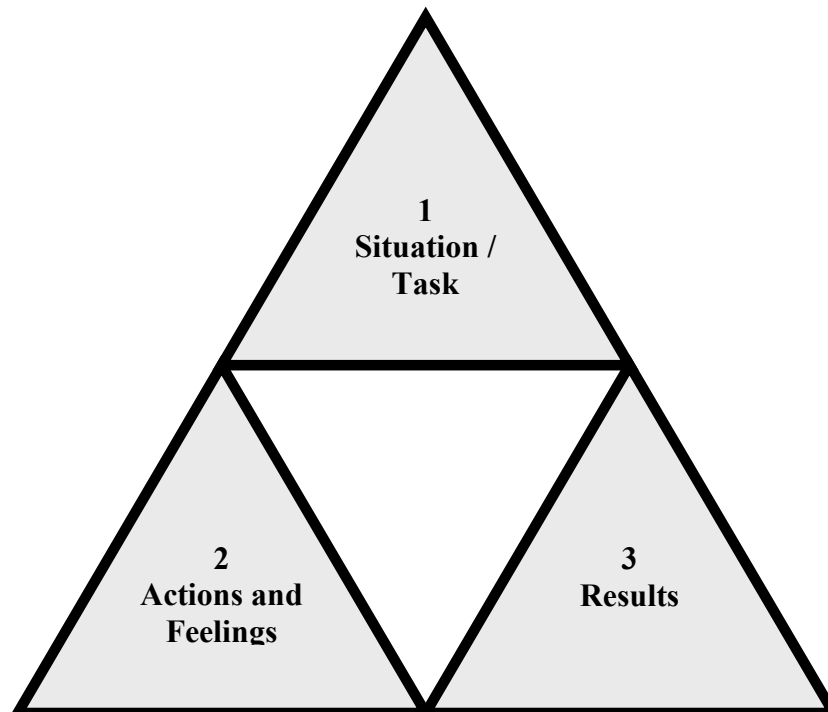
**Give an example in your life when you:**

- were involved in a stressful situation and how you dealt with it.
- were extremely angry and how you dealt with it.
- had to take the role of a leader, and how was the situation resolved.
- had to work as part of a team and explain what happened.
- had to resolve a conflict with other parties and how did you handled it.
- were up against an important deadline and how you handled the work.
- had a conflict with a supervisor and how you handled it.

There are many other behavioural questions, but these are some of the most common examples.

### **How to Answer Behavioural Based Questions**

Each behavioural question is a story about your past. Make sure that the story you tell is relevant, clear, and even interesting (interviewers are only human). Each story should have:



### Step One - Understand the Question

This is vital. If you do not understand the question or what the interviewer is asking for, ask them to repeat it or explain it. There is no point giving a very effective answer to the wrong question. For example: one interviewee, asked about Ethnicity, spoke a great deal about Ethics during an interview. The interviewers probably thought he was an idiot, but he was probably just nervous and didn't hear the question properly.

### Step Two - Brief Synopsis

Let the interviewers know what you plan to talk about with a brief outline of the situation, with little detail. This will give you some time to organize your thoughts and the interviewers will understand where you are going. This should take no longer than a couple of sentences.

#### Example:

"I am going to tell you about a conflict I had with my boss while I was working as a personal trainer. It involved a situation where I was told to bill a client at a rate I didn't feel was justified. We dealt with it away from the customer and resolved it in a manner that satisfied myself, the manager, and the client."

### Step Three - Full Story

A retelling of the story will demonstrate to the interviewers your competencies in dealing with the situation and your communication capabilities. Interviewers want a clear story, preferably in a chronological sequence. They are most concerned with your feelings during the situation, the actions you took, and the result of your actions. Always finish the story with the results of your actions. Keep these points in mind both while you are preparing for the interview, and when you are participating in it:

- Answer the question asked.
- Pause and think – don't rush in with an answer.
- Pay attention to the pronouns you are using. Interviewers want to know what "YOU" did. Use the pronoun "I" for your actions and "Us" for team actions. **DO NOT ALWAYS USE "WE"**. You will fail the interview.

#### Bad Example:

"We formed a team to solve the problem. We brainstormed an idea to solve the problem. We then decided on a course of action and began to implement it. We handled task "A" while others handled task "B". We all had individual assignments."

**Good Example:**

"I formed a team to solve a problem. We brainstormed an idea to solve the problem. I then had to decide the course of action and we began to implement. My friend John and I were responsible for task "A" while another group handled task "B". My particular assignment was to do "X".

- Ensure you effectively explain the situation, your feelings, your actions and the result.
- If necessary take pauses to collect your thoughts. There is no need to be constantly talking.
- Relax and enjoy telling the story. You should know it well, as you actually did it.
- Give focused and fluid answers.
- Avoid run-on answers.
- Give support for claims that are made, if possible.
- Show evidence of preparation work.

**Other Interviewing Methods**

You should be aware that you could be asked technical or "what if" questions or questions about your past. Some agencies may ask:

- What would you do if you caught a co-worker stealing?
- Have you ever smoked marijuana?
- Have you ever stolen anything?
- Have you ever committed an illegal act?

It is important to give these questions careful consideration and answer honestly. If you tried smoking marijuana when you were in high school, admit it and tell the interviewer why you didn't continue to use it. For example, you found it hurt the academic performance of your friends, or something along those lines.

"What if" questions are intended to challenge you, to see if you are the type of person who will immediately back down. This is not a trait agencies are looking for. Once you have made up your mind on an issue, stand by it. Interviewers may challenge you but this is part of the process. Just ensure that you give careful thought to the question to avoid defending a weak position. It is acceptable to credit the other opinion, but do not change your decision.

On top of these questions, you may receive some technical questions when applying to specific positions



## **Completing the Interview**

Just like the first impression, it is important to give a positive impression during the last few moments of an interview. If you have any questions for the interviewers, the end of the interview is when they should be asked. It is acceptable to have prepared questions written down. As you are leaving the room, smile at the interviewer(s) individually, walk up to each one, look into their eyes, shake their hands and personally thank them for their time.