

International Job Interviews

- 10 recommendations on what to expect and how to prepare for Job Interviews in International Companies -

As a global recruiting consultancy, **interpool** conducts roughly 1,000 international job interviews per year. Working with clients and candidates from all over the world, intercultural communication in these meetings is of prime importance to us. The following article summarizes some of our learnings, especially designed for candidates to help them prepare for their international job interviews.

In fact, there has been little research so far on how culture affects the dynamics of international recruiting. Talking both to our candidates and to our HR clients, we witness a high degree of uncertainty on how to adjust to cultural differences in their job interviews.

In order to fill this gap, we have recently produced a series of videos featuring international job interviews. These videos comprise a complete job interview with professional German recruiters and candidates each from China, India, Indonesia, Nigeria, Russia, and Syria, respectively. Assessing these videos, we have extracted 10 key findings on what to expect, and how to prepare for international job interviews from a candidate perspective.

Surely, each interview is different. The intercultural impact will depend largely on where exactly you - as a candidate - come from, and which cultural background your target company and its recruiters will have. But when the HR people are influenced by a Western culture, some generalizations are likely to be relevant which can help you immensely to compete for the next position you are applying for.

1) Expect fact orientation and standardized processes

First of all: Western companies tend to strive for standardized interviews. One of their goals is to reduce the influence of personal styles and preferences by the hiring managers. The ideal type interview will be in a manner where only your skills and personality should count, not those of your interview partners.

Of course this is somewhat of a myth, as nobody can escape his or her personal and cultural perspective on the world. But the idea behind it is honorable, to give a fair chance to everybody regardless of personal sympathy and liking. So don't be surprised if the interview starts off quite quickly. Do not expect extensive small talk. And the questions may appear a bit cold and unpersonal, not really like a conversation or a dialogue, but rather like an interrogation. Should this be the case, do not worry and try to make the best out of it. The following nine recommendations will help you.

2) Beware that recruiters will be looking for your competencies more than for your personality

Coming from Western recruiting standards, the targets of the interview are usually not to find out whether you are a good, loyal, personable, and reliable human being. Instead, recruiters want to find out whether you have specific technical or social competencies. So a question like "What are your greatest strengths for this job?" does not really go for hearing your greatest strengths. It wants to reveal to what extent you are aware of your skills (self-reflection), how easily you can express them (assertiveness), how smoothly you can present them (self-presentation), and how analytically you choose your skills with regard to the job profile (analysis and structuring skills). The question about your weaknesses has the same target, it is only even more challenging to answer. Try to prepare answers that display the competencies mentioned here. And, just a small trick with regard to your weaknesses: sentences like "every strength can turn into a weakness", or "some time ago I had an issue with XYZ, but I have improved this over time" may help you to find an attractive answer to this question.

So with every question, try to find out what skills and competencies the interviewers are after. And if you are not sure, don't hesitate to ask. "Please think of a question where you have been criticized in a way you perceived as being unfair." "So you probably want to know how I deal with being criticized, and how and when I myself criticize others?" Or: "What does success mean to you?" "So you want to know how ambitious I am, and what kind of success is valuable to me?"

3) Try to be "to the point": the way to think is clear, precise, and analytical

Westerners tend to prefer a linear, analytical style of reasoning. Instead of seeing the world as whole, comprehensive and interdependent, they try to understand it by separating it into sections, units, sub-arguments, and parts. And they will expect you to do the same. So as much as you can, try to structure your answers in separate lines, boxes and pyramids, not in circles and fields.

For example: How will you make the company more profitable? There are two ways of doing it, A) on the revenue side, or B) by reducing costs. On the revenue side you have four options: 1) to increase prices (without affecting sales volumes), 2) to increase sales so that overhead costs are less relevant, 3) to focus on products with strong margins, or 4) to focus on distribution channels which offer higher profitability. On the cost side you also have four options: etc., etc... If you just present your arguments with no apparent structure, Western recruiters will have difficulties to follow you. They will try to find out which one of those thoughts is your main argument, how one is derived from the others, and which structure they follow. If they do not see that, they tend to find your arguments vague, unclear, or even indecisive.

So again try to understand what skills the recruiters are looking for, and try to meet exactly these expectations. Especially in countries with a strong protestant legacy, like Germany, Switzerland, Scandinavia, or the United States, the most frequent reason for rejecting a candidate is that he or she was not "to the point".

4) Sensing the “right” time to talk

In every culture, people tend to have a non-written understanding on how much and how fast one speaks, and how appropriate it is to interrupt. In most Northern European and Anglo-Saxon countries, answering a question should usually not take more than a minute or two. Walking others through your career should not take more than 5-10 minutes in total, putting clear emphasis on the stations of your life with highest relevance to the position you are applying for. Since in these cultures it is seen as somewhat impolite to interrupt others, try to not overextend your answers by keeping things short, clear, precise, and simple. Practice this with friends beforehand.

Also try to be very sensitive to the non-verbal signals of your interview partners with regard to how long to talk. And check back, if you are not sure. “Do you want me to elaborate more on this aspect?” And if the recruiters signal that they are interested to learn more about a specific part of your career, then of course you can extend that.

Should you have the feeling that your interviewers are not fully attentive, then do not just continue. Try to change the rhythm. You can make a sketch on a paper to emphasize your point, or stand up to write something on a flip chart. Giving an example always helps, or you can make a little joke. Or simply check whether you are still on the right track: “Am I understanding your question correctly? Is my answer going into the right direction?” Western interviewers tend to appreciate it if you conduct an interview with self-confidence and ask back, if a question is not clear to you.

5) Find and display your individualistic self

Western cultures tend to be more individualistic than those in Asia, Africa, or Eastern Europe. So in a job interview people from Western cultures will believe that you have specific characteristics, social skills, and traits, which you have in any situation regardless of context. And they will try to ask you questions where those properties of yours can become visible.

So regardless if it may seem unusual, or even silly to you from your cultural perspective, try to see yourself through their eyes. What are your personal strengths? What was your personal contribution in this situation? How could you individually have done differently? How many people reported to you, and how did you lead them individually? Americans may want you to be the most self-confident and enthusiastic, French tend to like creative personalities, Germans do not want you to exaggerate, and Southern Europeans prefer lively gestures and emotionality in your speech. But they will all want to check you out with your individual strengths. So don't be shy to answer.

This does not mean that people from Western cultures wish to see ego-maniac career people who care about nothing other than themselves. The opposite is the case. You will be expected to be team-oriented, modest to some degree, respectful, showing empathy and solidarity and contributing to a strong team spirit. But you need not hide anything you are proud of about yourself.

And they will want you to express clearly and honestly your personal view, your idea to a problem, your individual position to a specific topic in a job interview. Being self-aware,

self-assured and assertive are important skills on almost every Western competency chart, much more than being socially aware, sensitive to harmony, or mindful with regard to others` face.

6) Westerners are low-context people: Be explicit and give examples

Somewhat connected to their sense of individualism and structure, recruiters from Western companies tend to prefer a very explicit and direct way of talking. Even if a question they ask may appear to be very general, they usually want you to give very straight forward, explicit answers with some personal examples.

So in a question like: "How much do you usually analyze before you feel that a decision should be taken?", or "Are you a person who tends to approach conflicts right on, or do you rather avoid them?" - there is no need to be careful about saying something wrong. Of course the answer to this question depends highly on the context, but try to compare yourself to your friends, and you are all getting the same task, or the same situation. Will you most likely analyze longer or shorter than them before you can take a decision? Are you more or less likely to address a conflict of interest or a mistake that has been made?

Recruiters from Western countries will want to hear from you a clear and explicit position where you locate yourself on this scale. And ideally you can give them an example, when taking a decision or addressing a conflict at a specific moment has brought out wonderful results.

7) "Please describe a situation where..." - some questions may be strange

Many recruiting handbooks in the Western world advise their interviewers to ask what they call "biography oriented questions". These questions approach your set of skills and personality by asking you to give an example for a specific behaviour related to this skill or trait. So for example questions like a) "Please tell me when you last convinced your teammates of an idea you had?", or b) "Please give me an example of a moment when you shared important information with people from another department?", or c) "Please describe a situation where you successfully resolved a conflict?" are not unusual.

You may find these questions difficult to answer, since their intention is not easy to understand. Also it is quite an effort to come up with a situation just like that in your own life. The logic behind those questions is that your skills become most visible when you describe situations which you actually experienced in your life. And if you have demonstrated a specific competency in the past, you are supposedly more likely to show this competency also in the future. And remember: they all target your skills and traits, like in question a) leadership skills, creativity, or assertiveness, in question b) team orientation, trust in people, or relationship building, or in question c) conflict management, assertiveness, or self reflection.

So in order to avoid having to search for suitable scenarios, try to enter the interview with some good situations already prepared in your head. Coming into the meeting you

should have situations at hand which you can present, where your skills and the strong sides of your personality show up quite convincingly. The more easily you can come up with a good example from your career, the more you will appear as a self-confident, structured, business oriented, self-aware, team-oriented, enthusiastic, creative, likeable, knowledgeable, and socially skilled person. If you can, check those situations with your friends beforehand and ask them, if they agree that you make a good impression in those scenarios.

8) Don` t be shy to ask questions yourself – hierarchy and individualism allow for it

As already mentioned, Western interviewers tend to prefer a self-aware and self-confident candidate, which in their eyes means thinking and acting with a good sense of individuality. For Westerners, this implies skills and traits like being proactive, a self-starter, independent minded, self-dependent, and responsible. Of course you can have all of those skills also with a highly group oriented, collectivist, and context aware way of thinking; but for Westerners this usually does not go together.

One way to show the interviewers that you have those skills is by talking freely about your skills, your contributions, and the moments when your individual behaviour made a difference. The other option you have is to ask questions yourself. There is no strong sense of hierarchy on the side of the interviewer which would prevent you from doing so.

For example if a question is unclear and you ask back to be sure about the exact intention of the question, this will usually be seen as a sign of detail-orientation and proactiveness. Or if you need more information in order to answer a specific question, you can always ask for it. "Can you perhaps repeat the question, I am not sure if I understood it correctly." Or, "In order to answer this question right, is it OK to increase the profitability even if we lose turnover and market position?" Or even: "I apologize for asking back, but I am not sure yet what exactly you are trying to find out with this question."

In addition, you should make sure that you ask questions yourself during the interview, which are relevant for you to know if the position is a good fit for you. Western interviewers are likely to appreciate that, as they want an independent and strong candidates which are in demand also by other companies. But don` t ask questions just for the sake of asking, maybe some technical details on the distribution channels or on the product development strategy. Ask questions that are relevant for you. Who will you be reporting to, and what does this person expect from you? How will they assess whether you have done a good job? Who held your position before, and why did he or she leave? What is the organizational culture and climate like? How profitable is the company, and what growth plans do they have?

9) Following rules & processes: So don't lie

Most Western cultures – especially those with a significant protestant background like Germany, Switzerland, Scandinavia, or the United States – have a strong rules- and process orientation. This is also reflected in the way they conduct and evaluate their job interviews.

First of all their interviews tend to be linear and monochronically structured, 1), 2), 3), 4), and so on, first I did this - then I did that; and not jumping back and forth. So they will also evaluate you in your skill to establish or follow a specific process, e.g. in a group discussion or in an example of your career. In addition they see rules as a result of historically proven best-practice, so they prefer to follow them, even if those rules do not make sense immediately. Rather than just ignoring them, they will try to change them, or to officially ask for an exception. And they will want you to have a strong rules- and process orientation as well.

One area where this often causes misunderstandings is when talking about your salary expectation. If you have committed yourself to a specific expected package, you should not change that expectation two weeks later. And if you give a figure for your current salary, this figure should be true. You can then justify your expectation for an increase with the responsibility of the new job, an increase in your skills, or with the higher prestige of the new company.

Also when you are asked about experiences with a specific software, a distribution channel, or an accounting standard, please do not lie. You can of course make it look good (like: "Our company used SAP, although my division worked on JD Edwards, so we became familiar with both formats). But you can then expect a follow up question, and you should be prepared to give examples for what you know exactly. So if you know in advance that a specific skill will be important for this job, try to prepare yourself so that you really know something about it by the time of your meeting. Study a book or attend a seminar beforehand, and then you can answer: "I did not work with it, but I have always been highly interested in it and read a number of books, also attended seminars about it." If this is checked, you will then be able to give examples.

10) And still... Relationship is everything

Finally, and definitely not the least important: As much as Westerners attempt to conduct objective and unpersonal interviews, the decision to accept a candidate or not is as emotionally influenced in Western interviews as it is everywhere else. Recruiters pay close attention to their "feeling" for a candidate everywhere. And this feeling is largely determined not by the skills you portray, but by your communicative style appealing to the comfort zone of the recruiter.

Thus personal impressions like physical distance, body language, smiling, accent, the pronunciation of your name, the tone and volume of your voice, or the use of humour are just as relevant as your skills, experiences, and qualifications. Therefore try to be highly attentive, and try to establish personal relationships with the recruiters, even if

they seem to prefer a very unpersonal atmosphere themselves. Give personal examples for what you did and why you did it, try to see the interviewers as human beings, and show them your personality in all its richness and diversity. Be authentic and do not play a role. Do not try to give them only what you believe they may want to hear.

Of course this is more easily said than done. Adjusting your communicative style to a different culture and still remaining “yourself” at the same time seems to be impossible to achieve, especially when you are nervous in such an assessment situation. But if you practice a bit with your friends, some of the recommendations given above will appear easy to follow. And most of all: by knowing that some of this may happen, you are already so much better prepared than without, and some changes will come by themselves. So go out and impress the interviewers with your energy and dedication, and try to treat them as if you had already been hired. See them as friends you want to get to know better. Then you will do great!

And again, you can never know how exactly the recruiters you will meet will conduct the interview. They may be influenced by years of Chinese, Russian, or Arabic culture, and their way of asking questions may reflect only slightly the 10 general recommendations just made. But even better, then you may not need to adjust so much. Just be sensitive to culture as one reason for very different ways of thinking and of asking questions.