

ROBERT WALTERS WHITEPAPER

HOW TO MANAGE THE INTERVIEW PROCESS EFFECTIVELY

insight
series

ROBERT WALTERS



INTRODUCTION

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

This whitepaper is designed to help employers better understand the job interview process. Through our separate surveys of job seekers and hiring managers, we highlight exactly how candidates approach interviews and the discrepancies between this and employer perceptions of the process.

In this whitepaper we explore all aspects of the job interview process in more detail. Specifically, we seek to highlight common job seeker preferences and identify how employers are falling short by comparison. This is particularly important because the surveys we conducted as part of this whitepaper clearly show that the interview process is now regarded as a two-way process, with applicants seeing a job interview as a key opportunity to assess the role and company concerned. Put simply, a poor interview experience can lead to an individual turning down a job offer.

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

We explore each part of the interview process in more detail. Specifically, we look at:

- How candidates approach job interviews, including the importance they attach to the process and preparation they put in
- How employers approach the interview process from a strategic perspective, including the people who attend and whether they provide training and/or guidance
- The factors that impact a candidate's first impression when attending a job interview and what they feel should be covered in the meeting
- Preferred interviewer behaviours and some common expectations regarding this
- The post-interview experience and how best to provide feedback
- The overall impact of the interview process on a candidate's impression of a business
- Key learnings and recommendations on how employers should approach the interview process

METHODOLOGY

This whitepaper is based on research conducted in South Africa by Robert Walters. The statistics quoted throughout are based on the survey responses of 887 job seekers and 136 hiring managers.

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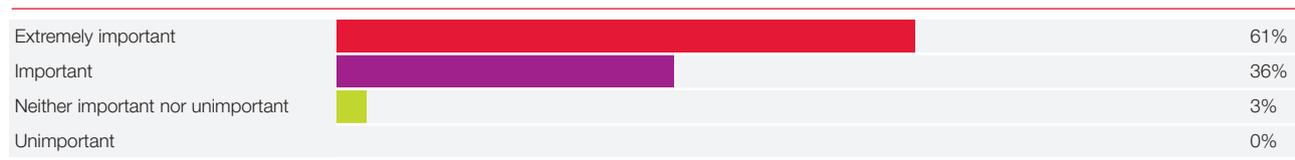
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JOB SEEKER PERSPECTIVE: APPROACHING A JOB INTERVIEW

As part of our survey, we asked job seekers how they approach the job interview process and the importance they attach to it. This section highlights why creating a good impression to interviewees is vital, along with the preparation techniques they use.

Chart 1.0

Importance of job interview process in shaping a candidate's perceptions of an employer



Importance of the job interview process

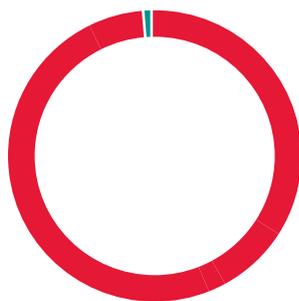
Job interviews are a crucial part of the recruitment process. They provide employers with an opportunity to assess the personality of a job seeker, their ability to articulate their CV in detail and generally how they engage with other people. For job seekers, it gives them a chance to impress hiring managers. But it also offers them an opportunity to form opinions of what it's really like to work for the business they are being assessed by.

According to our survey, 97% of job seekers rate the job interview process as either 'important' or 'extremely important' in shaping their overall perception of employers and nobody regarded it as unimportant (Chart 1.0). These results indicate that a job interview is a two-way process, with organisations typically being assessed as much as the candidate they are interviewing. From an employer's perspective, job interviews therefore represent an excellent opportunity to showcase the vacancy and company to a candidate and ultimately gain their buy-in to the role.

Various elements contribute to shaping an interviewee's perception – from the external appearance of the office building to the personality of the interviewer (as we explore on page 4).

Chart 1.1

Candidates who prepare for job interviews



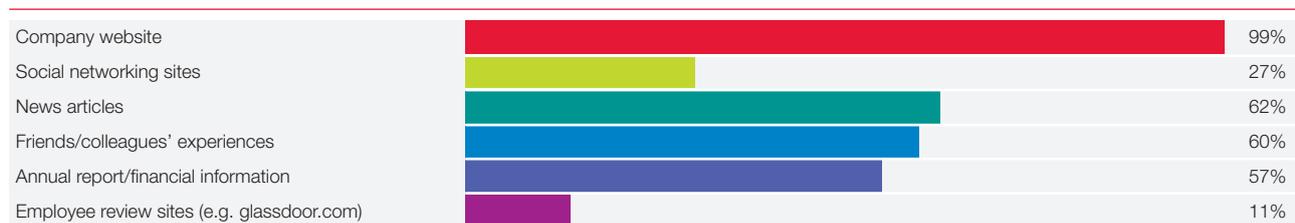
- 99% Prepare for job interviews
- 1% Do not prepare for job interviews

Job interview preparation

Very few job seekers (1%) do not prepare for job interviews – most are hungry for information about the company and role they are applying to/for and are also very keen to impress. Nearly all interviewees regard the company website (99%) as a key research source, while news articles (62%), friends and/or colleagues (60%) and annual reports and/or financial performance (57%) are seen as key points of reference. Social networking websites (i.e. LinkedIn and Facebook) are becoming more widely used as these become an increasingly important part of companies' overall marketing and branding strategy.

Chart 1.2

Sources used to prepare for job interviews



EMPLOYER PERSPECTIVE: APPROACHING THE INTERVIEW PROCESS

We asked employers about how they approach the job interview process, from how many interviews they typically conduct and who is involved to whether they provide interviewers with guidelines.

Number of interviewers

Both job seekers and employers agree that the optimum number of interviewers is two (Table 2.0). 38% of job seekers say they have a preference to be interviewed by three people, with only a minority believing one or four or more representatives from the recruiting company to be the ideal number.

Table 2.0

Optimum number of interviewers for a job interview, according to job seekers and employers

	Job Seekers	Employers
One	5%	6%
Two	51%	53%
Three	38%	36%
Four	5%	4%
Five or more	2%	2%

Who should be involved?

The results clearly show the majority of line managers play a key role in the interview process (Chart 2.1). Job seekers agree that this should be the case, with many believing that the line manager's manager should also be involved. Almost five in ten think they should meet their direct reports during the interview process but only one in ten actually do. More job seekers also think they should meet other members of the team than do in reality.

60% of job seekers believe a representative from the HR department should be involved in the process. Our survey shows that 85% of these professionals are actually involved in interviews.

Chart 2.1

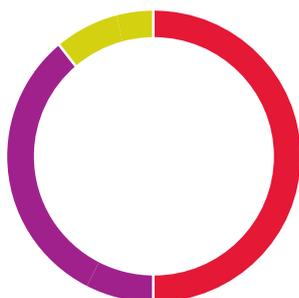
People involved in interview process Vs People who job seekers believe should be involved in the interview process

	Actual	Job Seekers' belief
A representative from HR	85%	60%
Line manager for the role	95%	98%
Line manager's manager	58%	75%
Other relevant business heads	46%	71%
Members of the team they will be working within	19%	58%
Employees who will be reporting to them	8%	45%

- People actually involved in interview process (according to employers)
- People who job seekers believe should be involved in interview process

Chart 2.2

Employers providing interview training for hiring managers



- 50% Provide training
- 39% Do not provide training
- 11% Unsure

Interview training and guidance

When asked whether they provide training for interviewers, 50% of employers say they do, 39% say they do not and 11% were unsure (Chart 2.2). Similarly, 80% of organisations say they provide guidelines for hiring managers conducting interviews. Of these, 68% say these guidelines include specific questions to ask, 57% say they include a question process to follow and 70% say they include overall key assessment criteria.

A black and white photograph of a modern office interior. In the foreground, a white, modern-style chair with a circular base is positioned on a carpeted floor. The background shows a glass-walled office space with a blurred figure of a person walking, suggesting a busy environment. The ceiling features recessed lighting and a smoke detector.

80%

Percentage of organisations that provide interview guidelines for hiring managers to follow

FIRST IMPRESSIONS AND INTERVIEW CONTENT PREFERENCES

With interviewees regarding the interview process as key to their overall assessment of an employer and job, providing an overall positive experience is crucial to attracting the best candidates available. In this section, we consider the importance of specific factors affecting job seeker perception of a role and business and explore some common job seeker preferences.

First impressions

When attending a job interview, a number of factors influence a candidate's first impressions of a business (Table 3.0). While the interviewers' appearance, office location and both atmosphere and appearance of the reception area are seen as the most important, there is a general consensus that the external appearance of the office building and meeting room where the interview takes place also have an impact. However, few job seekers consider any of these factors 'very important', indicating that their overall feeling about a role and/or a business is – as our findings below prove – determined more by their interactions with the interviewers than the first few moments they enter the building.

However, the majority of interviewees (87%) are put off if an interviewer arrives late (Chart 3.0), highlighting the importance of starting an interview promptly.

Chart 3.0
Candidates put off by a late interviewer

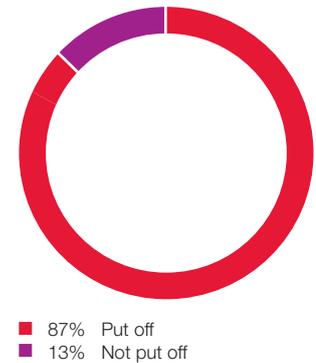


Table 3.0
Importance of specific factors in determining an interviewee's first impressions of a business

	Very Important	Important
Appearance of the interviewers	37%	48%
The office location	30%	54%
Atmosphere in the reception area	31%	52%
Appearance of the reception area	32%	53%
External appearance of the office building	21%	58%
The meeting room where the interview(s) takes place	19%	58%
Company literature on display in office	15%	34%

Job interview content - preferences of candidates

Our results show that job seekers are keen to receive as much information as possible during a job interview (Table 3.1). For candidates, it is extremely important to receive a comprehensive overview of the actual role but – possibly related to this point – they are also keen to be given the time and opportunity to ask all the questions they have about it (interestingly, employers actually feel this is even more integral to the interview process than candidates). However, interviewees also like to be provided with the chance to talk about themselves and explain how their experience is relevant to the position under discussion.

Job seekers also like to be informed about the people they will potentially be working with and get a flavour of the company culture. By comparison, job seekers consider receiving information about the benefits package attached to the role slightly less influential – but they still consider this to be more important than employers do.

Table 3.1
Importance of specific factors during a job interview

	Job Seekers		Employers	
	Very Important	Important	Very Important	Important
Receiving/providing enough information about the role	85%	15%	70%	28%
The opportunity to ask questions	62%	34%	73%	27%
The opportunity to explain experience properly	57%	38%	52%	42%
Receiving/providing information about the team that role sits with	58%	38%	37%	57%
Receiving/providing enough information about the company culture	53%	43%	51%	42%
Receiving/providing information about the benefits package on offer	40%	46%	33%	41%



86%

Percentage of professionals who consider the appearance of interviewers to be 'important' or 'very important' to their first impression of a business

INTERVIEWER BEHAVIOURS AND PREFERENCES

The role of interviewers is critical to the job interview process – it is their responsibility to ask the right questions in the most appropriate manner to ultimately assess the suitability of the candidate for the role. But – for job seekers – interviewers are also the main point of reference of the business. It is therefore key that they are not only well prepared, polite, empathetic and knowledgeable but also provide an accurate and considered representation of the company brand.

Specific interviewer qualities

Our findings show that job seekers look for certain interviewer qualities when interviewing for a role. (Table 4.0). In particular, a polite, respectful overall approach, knowledge and understanding of the profession as well as leadership and inspiration of the interviewer are generally regarded by job seekers as critical. Knowledge and enthusiasm of the company and role are all also considered key.

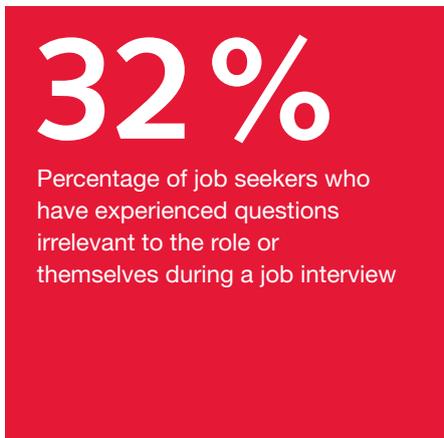


Table 4.0
Importance of specific interviewer qualities according to job seekers

	Very Important	Important
A polite, respectful approach	64%	33%
Knowledge and understanding of your profession	67%	32%
Knowledge and enthusiasm for the role	60%	38%
Knowledge and enthusiasm for the company	62%	37%
Leadership and inspiration	64%	31%

Chart 4.0
Professionals who have experienced rudeness/disrespect during a job interview

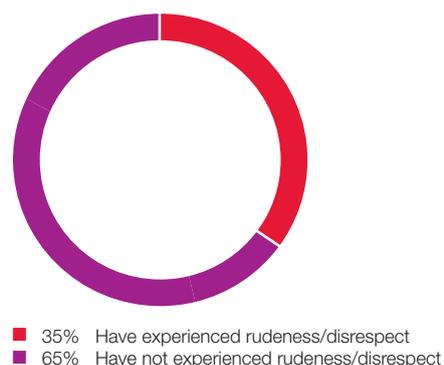
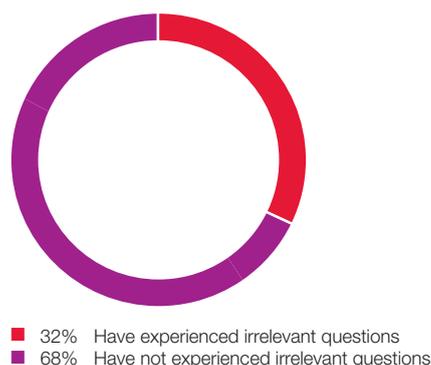


Chart 4.1
Professionals who have experienced questions irrelevant to the job or themselves



A notable proportion of professionals claim they have received poor and unnecessary treatment from interviewers. In particular, 35% say they have experienced rudeness or disrespect from an interviewer (Chart 4.0), while 32% claim they have been subject to questions either irrelevant to the job or themselves (Chart 4.1).

Importance of specific interviewee attributes to interviewers

Employers and job seekers have slightly different views regarding the importance of specific attributes to interviewers (Table 4.1). While experience is deemed by both to be the most important, job seekers consider this to be slightly more imperative than it is to hiring managers. According to employers, assessing cultural fit is almost as important as experience. While qualifications and appearance are not regarded as crucial as these other factors, both job seekers and interviewers still consider them to be relatively important.

Table 4.1**Importance of specific interviewee attributes (according to both job seekers and employers)**

	Job Seeker		Employers	
	Very Important	Important	Very Important	Important
Experience	75%	23%	74%	25%
Cultural fit	48%	44%	64%	28%
Qualifications	50%	47%	47%	49%
Appearance	39%	53%	21%	61%

As part of our survey, we also asked job seekers how they feel about being asked questions that put them under pressure. Interestingly, 93% accept these questions as a key part of the assessment process, while only 7% consider them unnecessary and do not understand the point of them.

Qualitative Feedback

As part of our surveys, we received qualitative feedback from employers regarding what they look for when conducting interviews and some specific preferences from job seekers when attending them. Comments from those surveyed can be found below.

Employer:

- “For me it’s about finding the right fit personality and experience wise. I generally won’t interview a candidate who doesn’t meet my qualification requirements.”
- “Cultural fit, attitude and leadership potential are more important than experience. A willingness to learn will always be advantageous.”
- “Team fit is really important.”

Job seeker:

- “It is very important that the interviewer knows what they are talking about and knows how to conduct an interview.”
- “I find it really frustrating when interviewers ask irrelevant questions. It’s usually because you are being interviewed by someone who doesn’t understand the role.”
- “It’s vital for an interviewer to engage in a two-way conversation instead of asking a list of questions.”
- “I am still amazed when you go for interviews and the company does not share the benefits until you are asked to attend the second or third stage in the interview process. And usually that’s when you find out the final offer was not what you had in mind. It would save a lot of time if you were told up front.”
- “I have come across a few bossy interviewees. I think this is wrong and they should make you feel more relaxed.”
- “If an interviewer isn’t punctual it will put me off the whole company.”

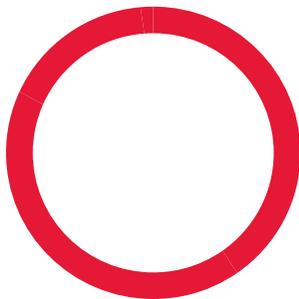
POST-INTERVIEW EXPERIENCE

Feedback and the way it is provided are critically important to the overall job seeker experience. As part of our surveys, we asked both employers and job seekers about their expectations regarding this part of the interview process.

Time taken to receive feedback

In total, 100% of candidates expect to receive feedback on their interview performance (Chart 5.0) and 60% of job seekers believe they should receive this within four days of the interview occurring (Table 5.0). By comparison, 38% of employers claim they provide interviewees with an assessment of their interview performance within this timeframe. However, 64% of job seekers claim they have attended an interview and not received any feedback whatsoever (Chart 5.1).

Chart 5.0
Proportion of job seekers who expect feedback



■ 100% Expect feedback

Table 5.0
Length of time taken to provide feedback

	Length of time job seekers believe it should take to receive feedback after a job interview	Length of time it takes on average to supply feedback according to employers
Within 24 hours	4%	3%
1 - 2 days	30%	17%
3 - 4 days	26%	18%
5 - 7 days	31%	26%
8 - 14 days	9%	23%
More than 14 days	0%	11%

Chart 5.1
Job seekers who have been for a job interview and not subsequently received feedback

Have been for job interview without receiving feedback	64%
Have not been for a job interview without receiving feedback	36%

Chart 5.2
Job seekers' preferred method to receive interview feedback



Receiving and providing feedback

74% of job seekers prefer to receive feedback by phone and only 26% would prefer to receive feedback by email (Chart 5.2), indicating that most would like an open and frank discussion about their performance during the interview rather than a short notification on whether they were successful or not. However, only 44% of employers say they always explain the reasons for their rejection to unsuccessful candidates (Chart 5.3).

Chart 5.3
Employers that explain reasons for rejection to unsuccessful interviewees

Do provide reasons	44%
Do not provide reasons	46%
Unsure	11%

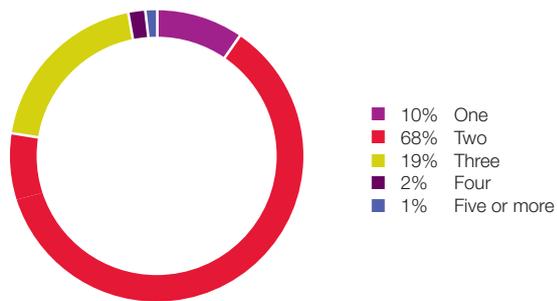
Receiving a job offer

From a candidate's perspective, the goal of the interview process is ultimately to receive a job offer. Most believe this should be forthcoming after two formal meetings (68%) with a prospective employer (Chart 5.4).

Interestingly, almost a quarter of job seekers think three interviews is a reasonable amount, indicating there is at least some understanding of the difficulty faced by employers when hiring at the moment.

Chart 5.4

Number of interviews candidates think should be required before receiving a job offer



THE IMPACT OF THE INTERVIEW PROCESS

Our survey shows that interview procedures can strongly impact a candidate's opinion of an employer. In total, almost seven in ten professionals would turn down a job due to a poor overall interview experience (Chart 6.0) and 89% would tell others about it (Chart 6.1), highlighting how important it is for organisations to get this part of their recruitment process right.

Chart 6.0
Job seekers who would turn down a job offer due to poor interview experience

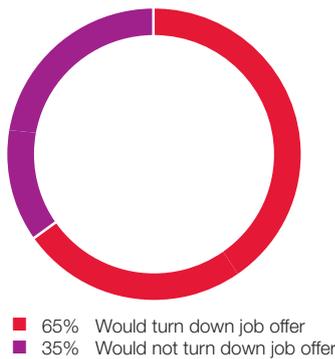
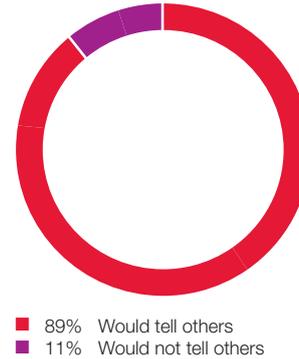


Chart 6.1
Job seekers who would tell others about a poor interview experience



Length of interview process

While the majority of candidates would turn down a job offer after a poor interview experience, 65% also say they would be put off by a lengthy process (Chart 6.0). According to our survey results, 64% of job seekers believe a full interview process (from application to offer stage) should take fewer than four weeks (Table 6.0). By comparison, only 38% of hiring processes take this short in practice. In total, 52% of job seekers are also put off by what they regard to be a lengthy recruitment process (Chart 6.2). Clearly, therefore, the length of time an interview process takes will affect a job seeker's overall experience.

Table 6.0
Length of time full interview process takes (from application to job offer)

	Length of time job seekers believe a full interview process should take	Length of time process takes on average according to employers
Up to 2 weeks	19%	12%
3 - 4 weeks	45%	26%
1 - 2 months	30%	38%
3 - 4 months	4%	18%
5+ months	0%	3%
Don't know	2%	2%

Chart 6.2
Job seekers put off by lengthy interview process





65%

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

KEY FINDINGS

Our research highlights a number of preferences among professionals attending job interviews. These provide helpful best practice information for hiring managers about how they conduct interview processes and the overall impact these can subsequently have. We have identified six key findings on the basis of our survey results.

Key Finding #1

Job seekers use the interview process to assess employers.

In many cases, the job seeker is likely to know very little about the inner workings of the business they are interviewing at. As a result, a job interview represents an excellent opportunity to gain a deeper insight. This is endorsed by our survey, which shows that 97% of professionals say that the job interview process is important in shaping their perception of an employer. At the same time, 65% would turn down a job offer due to a poor interview experience.

Key Finding #2

Interviewer behaviour has a significant impact on a candidate's impression of a business.

Hiring managers who can demonstrate certain qualities and/or behaviours during a job interview give themselves a better chance of impressing candidates. Firstly, lateness is a big turn off – 87% say it would bother them if an interviewer kept them waiting in the interview room. Secondly, the majority regard a polite and respectful approach (97%), knowledge and understanding of their profession (98%), knowledge and enthusiasm for the role (98%), knowledge and enthusiasm for the company (98%) and leadership and inspiration (95%) as important qualities they seek in an interviewer.

Key Finding #3

Interviewees expect and appreciate honest and timely feedback.

Providing frank and detailed feedback on a candidate's interview performance in a timely manner not only means they are more likely to accept a job offer but also helps to portray a positive image of your business. An overwhelming proportion of professionals (100%) think they should receive feedback but 64% of job seekers claim they have attended a job interview and not received any. Our survey reveals that 34% of candidates expect to hear back on their performance within two days and 60% expect this within four days. Seven in ten professionals prefer to receive this feedback by phone.

Key Finding #4

A lengthy interview process has an impact on a candidate's impression of an employer.

As well as receiving feedback quickly after an interview, job seekers like the entire process to progress as quickly as possible. In total, 52% say they are put off by a lengthy interview process, with 63% expecting it to take a maximum of four weeks to complete (94% think it should take two months or less). At the same time, 78% of professionals think a maximum of two interviews should be necessary before receiving a job offer.

Key Finding #5

Job seekers like to be interviewed by a maximum of two people.

Two-thirds of job seekers believe that the optimum number of interviewers for a job interview is two. Candidates faced by a panel larger than this can find it difficult to know who to address when answering questions. A significant proportion of job seekers believe they should meet the line manager for the role (98%), the line manager's manager (75%), other relevant business heads (71%), members of the team they will be working with (58%) and direct reports for the role (45%) during the interview process.

Key Finding #6

Candidates tell others about their experiences during the interview process.

Our survey reveals that 89% of professionals discuss their job interview experiences – be it with friends, colleagues, acquaintances or online. This clearly shows how employers' interactions with candidates at all stages of the interview process can ultimately impact their reputation and brand in the marketplace.



52%

Percentage of professionals
who are put off by a lengthy
recruitment process

OUR RECOMMENDATIONS

As we learn on pages 12 and 13, poor interview experiences can significantly impact a job seeker's opinion of an employer. We have outlined some key recommendations to help businesses optimise the candidate experience and promote themselves in the best possible light.

Knowledge, understanding and respect are key in the interview process

Job seekers indicated that knowledge and understanding of their profession, role and the company are among the most important attributes in an interviewer. Key recommendations to ensure you provide an interview experience in line with these preferences include:

- While it is important to test a candidate and put him or her under pressure, an over aggressive or unfriendly manner is likely to do more harm than good. Similarly, lateness is also interpreted by interviewees as rude. As a result, it is important to be punctual and ask engaging and relevant questions in a polite manner.
- Candidates typically prepare for an interview extensively so they will expect an 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 you come to provide feedback.
- Ensure that the interviewer has sufficient knowledge about the role under discussion and is able to answer all of the candidate's questions.

Our survey results show that job seekers like to meet people during the interview process who can provide them with information about the role and so company. If the person conducting the interview is an HR professional without 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 department hiring is undertaken.
- 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.

Implement interview guidelines and training to prevent negative experiences

The implementation of specific interview guidelines can help to provide a consistent interview experience for candidates in a manner that reflects the company values. These should aim to provide a basic framework but not to be too restrictive as-if they are-they may ultimately suppress the individual personality of the interviewer. Some recommended key guidelines include:

- Ask clear and concise questions in a conversational tone
- Ask a range of open-ended questions to draw the candidate out and allow them to talk
- Interview, but also sell the company and its benefits
- Prepare questions specific to the individual candidate before the interview
- Avoid snap judgements
- Never make an offer during the interview, overpromise, or commit to something undeliverable
- If a candidate turns down an offer, asking for honest feedback on the interview they experienced can shed some light on what could be improved moving forwards
- Give realistic timescales for feedback/next stage to manage job seeker expectations

Always give feedback to candidates after an interview

There is often imbalance between the amount of effort a candidate puts into a job interview and the feedback (or lack of it) they receive at the end of it. As organisations become more rigorous in their selection processes, candidates are typically expected to work harder during the process (i.e. research more thoroughly, meet more people, perform more tasks etc). Most candidates understand that a job interview offers no guarantees and know full well they may ultimately be unsuccessful. If this proves to be the case, our survey demonstrates they are still keen to get something out of the process in exchange for the time and effort they have put in.

Most look for constructive feedback that will be helpful in their future job search. As our survey demonstrates, the majority prefer this to be provided by phone so they at least have the opportunity to ask questions and enter into an open dialogue. It is unlikely that a lengthy discussion will be required – however, the majority of job seekers will be left with a far better opinion of an employer from the experience if they receive an honest explanation for their rejection rather than a one-sentence email.

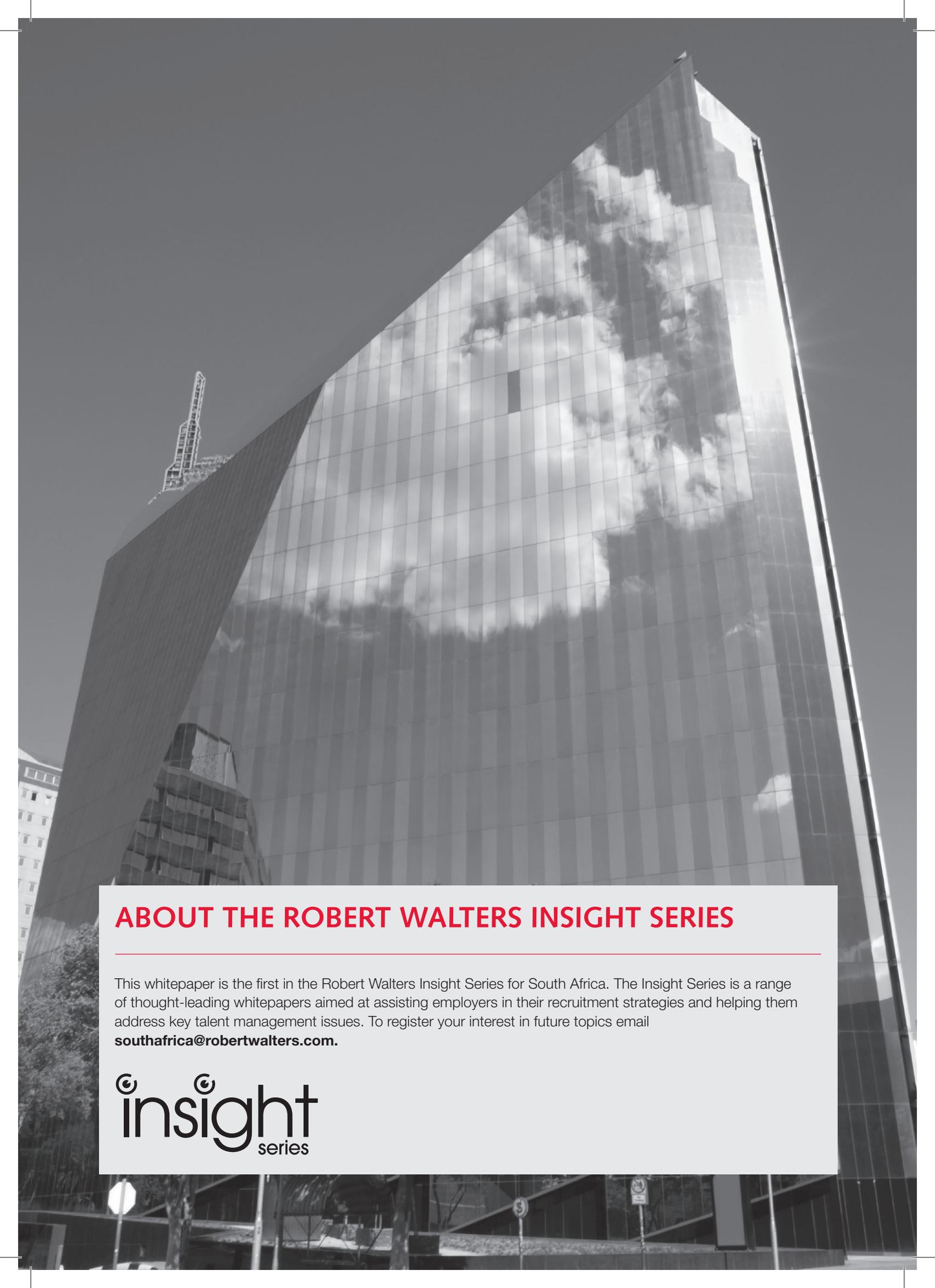
Ensure the recruitment process keeps progressing

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 individual employer and the available pool of potential candidates.

Despite the jobs market remaining competitive, employers should understand that the most in-demand professionals typically receive more than one job offer. Because of this, organisations with slow recruitment processes invariably miss out on the best talent.

The general consensus from the survey is that professionals expect two interviews to be required and for the whole process to take roughly a month. If these expectations are unrealistic, the candidate should be informed at the earliest available opportunity. If they are kept waiting without any explanation, they are likely to think that the employer is uninterested or unorganised and focus more on alternative 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 in a more positive light.





ABOUT THE ROBERT WALTERS INSIGHT SERIES

This whitepaper is the first in the Robert Walters Insight Series for South Africa. The Insight Series is a range of thought-leading whitepapers aimed at assisting employers in their recruitment strategies and helping them address key talent management issues. To register your interest in future topics email southafrica@robertwalters.com.

 
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