
Communicating Effectively in a Job Interview:

A resource for newcomers to New Zealand

Nicky Riddiford



Contents

1	Introduction
2	Making a strong start
8	Coping with challenging common questions
18	Clarifying a question
23	Self-clarification and self-correction
24	Interpreting the underlying intention of a question
26	Dealing with an unexpected question
27	Anticipating employers' concerns
33	Coping with behavioural/competency based questions
37	Finishing the interview strongly
39	Further tips for success
39	Showing engagement and building rapport
39	Being attentive to the interviewer's response
40	Turn-taking, New Zealand style
40	Keeping answers short and well structured
41	Language tips for effective communication
43	What New Zealand employers look for in an applicant
44	Suggestions from newcomers to New Zealand
44	Resources for interview skills
47	Appendix: Sample interview evaluation form
48	Acknowledgements

Published by The Language in the Workplace Project, School of Linguistics
and Applied Language Studies, Victoria University of Wellington,
PO Box 600, Wellington, New Zealand

© Nicky Riddiford 2017

ISBN 978-0-473-38354-1

Introduction

Many migrants to New Zealand find work easily and experience a relatively smooth integration into the workforce. However a number of newcomers report significant challenges in their search for employment. They lack New Zealand work experience and as a result have difficulty building professional and personal networks within New Zealand; they lack connections and opportunities to interact with fellow professionals; and they lack familiarity with the communication style used in the New Zealand professional environment. Newcomers also report being described as over-qualified when applying for lower level positions that are appropriate for their settling-in-period, and being told that their background and experience is either too specialised or not specialised enough for the New Zealand workforce. In addition, they may be unfamiliar with particular job search skills, for example, writing a cover letter and registering with recruitment agencies, and they are often unfamiliar with the style of job interviews in New Zealand and the types of questions asked. Above all, newcomers consider the job interview to be their most significant challenge. Repeated lack of success in job interviews can have an impact on confidence and on feelings of personal and professional worth.

Navigating the complex processes and routines of a job interview can be difficult for all job seekers irrespective of their cultural and language background. Many migrants to New Zealand arrive with high levels of English proficiency and have regularly used English in their professional and personal lives. Nevertheless, in a job interview, although the language used might be the same, the cultural norms that underlie the language can lead to misunderstandings on the part of both the interviewer and applicant. For example, many migrants are unfamiliar with the relatively flat hierarchy that characterises most professional workplaces in New Zealand. This feature plays out in subtle ways. In the area of language, interviewers rarely use vocabulary that emphasises hierarchy, for example, the term subordinate, and titles are not commonly used, first names being the preferred form. In terms

of behaviour, interviewers expect applicants to make eye contact with all members of a panel regardless of their seniority, gender or age; they expect an applicant to show initiative by, for example, asking questions that relate to the role and the organisation; and they expect applicants to demonstrate the value they could contribute to an organisation by providing examples from their previous experience rather than by simply stating their worth.

Who is this resource for?

This resource is for migrants who have professional qualifications and experience gained overseas and whose language background is not English. The resource could also be useful for teachers and trainers who work in the area, and for employers of migrants.

In this resource, the focus is on the challenging aspects of job interviews, rather than providing a step-by-step sequence of the whole interview process. In some parts, suggested answers to interview questions are provided as examples, but it is important to keep in mind that interviewers look for an applicant who can provide answers in their own words, rather than present memorised answers.



Making a strong start

Before the interview begins

- ✦ Find out the names and gender of your interviewers and research their backgrounds. Use LinkedIn, Facebook, Career pages, Twitter, blogs, annual reports, Google, media articles, pipl.com. Note that titles such as Mr, Mrs, Miss are rarely used in face-to-face interactions in New Zealand.
- ✦ Note that when you are researching your interviewers on LinkedIn they are able to see who has viewed their profile, so only view it once.
- ✦ Ensure your social media profile reflects the image you want to portray.
- ✦ Research the organisation and be prepared to mention what you have learned from your research at relevant points in the interview.
- ✦ Read the job description carefully and note the skills and competencies required. Think beyond the descriptions. How have I used these competencies in the past? How might they be important in the new role? Prepare examples from your previous experience that demonstrate these competencies.
- ✦ Prepare some questions you can ask at the end of the interview.
- ✦ Warm up by speaking English to a friend. If possible find someone who has had some experience conducting job interviews, give them the job description and ask them to simulate an interview. Practice is invaluable.
- ✦ Arrive no more than 10 minutes early to avoid putting pressure on the interviewers.
- ✦ Turn off your phone before you arrive. Keep it off until you have left the building.
- ✦ Greet the receptionist politely on arrival. Receptionists and support staff are often asked for their opinion of each applicant.

At the beginning of the interview

The first few minutes of a job interview are very important. In these few minutes the interviewers are forming an impression of you based on how you look, your body language, your tone of voice, how enthusiastic you sound, your English language skills and your ability to use a range of communication strategies.

Remember to:

- ✦ Smile
- ✦ Have a firm handshake
- ✦ Maintain eye contact
- ✦ Sit up with your hands on your lap or resting on the table
- ✦ Respond to small talk. A common topic is the weather.

For example:

Have you had a chance to get out into this lovely sun today?

Yes, lovely day. I hope to go for a walk this evening.

Did you find us ok?

Yes, thanks. I came yesterday to check where the building was.

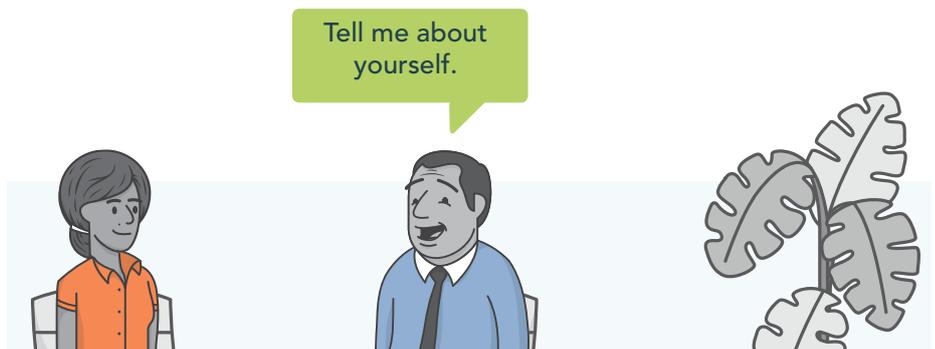


Usually the introductory questions are designed to help you relax and to give you an opportunity to tell the interviewer more about yourself.

Some common introductory questions are:

- How are you settling into New Zealand?
- How do you like New Zealand/Wellington?
- Tell me about yourself.
- What appeals to you about our company?
- What prompted you to apply for this role?

1 Read three different ways that one of these questions could be answered. Note the interviewer's thoughts.



Tell me about yourself.



Applicant 1
Thoughts

This question is a bit vague but it seems the interviewer wants to know everything about me.



Applicant 1
Answer

Well, I was born in Spain. There are six people in my family. My father and uncle are engineers. I have a master's degree in civil engineering, specialising in health and safety. I completed my master's degree over a two year period as an external student. It was really hard work studying and working at the same time... (lengthy rambling narrative about the steps in his career continues)



Interviewer's
thoughts

Oh dear, what a long, rambling story. I am not sure if this applicant can organise his thoughts clearly. What is he going to be like with our clients? I am also worried that he won't stay in New Zealand because he hasn't mentioned how committed he is to living here. I don't want to invest several months inducting him and training him, only to find that he doesn't stay here.



**Applicant 2
Thoughts**

This question is a bit vague but it seems the interviewer wants to have a brief account of my career. If I tell him about the important companies and people I have worked for overseas he might be impressed.



**Applicant 2
Answer**

Well, I come from a family of professionals some of whom are senior government officials. I am an expert in civil engineering with 10 years of experience working with important companies in Europe.



**Interviewer's
Thoughts**

Hmm, not much detail here. I don't like the use of 'expert' or 'important companies'. That is for me to judge. I am not impressed with applicants who tell me how important their families or they are. I wonder if he plans to stay in New Zealand.



**Applicant 3
Thoughts**

Great! Here is an opportunity to tell the interviewer some key aspects of my career, why I want to work with this organisation and why I want to stay in New Zealand. I need to minimise the concerns that an employer might have about employing a migrant.



**Applicant 3
Answer**

I am a civil engineer with 10 years' experience in construction and design with a multinational company in China. For the last four years I led a team of 6 engineers.

I have applied for this position at MainWorks because I am keen to use my skills and experience in a progressive organisation that uses the latest technology and equipment that I am familiar with. I see from the annual report that MainWorks is about to expand and I would love to be part of such a forward thinking organisation.

I migrated here with my husband and two children in January this year. We chose New Zealand because of its great opportunities to have a balanced life-style and we have already joined a tramping club. Our children are very happy at school here and my husband has a job at Wellington Hospital as a radiologist.



**Interviewer's
Thoughts**

Hmm, this applicant is able to organise her thoughts systematically – good. She is also keen to join us – good. She has read our annual report – that's good. She and her family are clearly well settled in New Zealand and committed to staying here, at least for several years. It might be worth putting some time and money into her training.

Coping with challenging common questions

In the next stage of the interview, interviewers will try to find out more about you and how you might fit in with the team and organisation. Questions about your skills and experience are more common than questions about your qualifications.

Below are some questions that newcomers to New Zealand have found challenging.

1 What are your weaknesses?

Look at the range of possible answers. Rank each one on a scale of 1-3 with 1 being very effective and 3 being not effective:

-  1. I don't think I have any serious weaknesses.
-  2. I used to find it difficult to juggle lots of competing tasks and I found myself having to work late as deadlines approached. However I started using a task planner that helped me prioritise tasks and plan the time I spent on each task. The planner also gave early alerts about deadlines.
-  3. I sometimes have difficulty finding a good work/life balance and I spend long hours at work to meet deadlines.



Discuss with a partner.

Discuss your ranking with your partner and the reasons for this. What are the key features of the answer that you chose as the best one?

1a What might the interviewer think of the three answers above?

Match the interviewer's possible thoughts with the applicant's answers in the table below.

 Applicant's answer	 Interviewer's possible thoughts
<p>1. I don't think I have any serious weaknesses.</p>	<p>a. Good to see how the applicant has taken steps to overcome their weakness. In this role the employee needs to be able to plan and prioritise tasks.</p>
<p>2. I used to find it difficult to juggle lots of competing tasks and I found myself having to work late as deadlines approached. However I started using a task planner that helped me prioritise tasks and plan the time I spent on each task. The planner also gave early alerts about deadlines.</p>	<p>b. I am looking for someone who is well organised and handles their workload well without having to spend long hours at work.</p>
<p>3. I sometimes have difficulty finding a good work/life balance and I spend long hours at work to meet deadlines.</p>	<p>c. Everyone has some weaknesses! This applicant is not being honest or showing self-awareness. I want employees who are aware of areas for improvement.</p>

 **Practise with a partner.**

What are your weaknesses? How would you answer this question in relation to the common competencies (skills and behaviours) required in your professional context?

 **Effective strategy:**

Choose weaknesses that you have overcome with certain strategies, or weaknesses that are not serious in relation to the context of the job, or weaknesses that are really strengths in the context of the job.

2 What are your strengths?

(This question is often asked at the same time as the weaknesses question.)



Practise with a partner.

Practise with your partner how you might answer this question.



Effective strategy:

Choose strengths that are relevant in the context of the role you are applying for. For example:

- Well, I have the reputation of being ... (provide a strength that is important in your role) and as a result ...
- My manager often mentioned that I am ... As a result ...

3 How do you handle criticism?

Look at the range of possible answers. Rank each one on a scale of 1-3 with 1 being very effective and 3 being not effective. Note the applicant's thoughts before they answer.



Applicant 1
Thoughts

I don't want to admit to receiving criticism in front of the interviewer. It will make me look like a bad employee who makes mistakes.



Applicant 1
Answer

I've never received any criticism.



Applicant 2
Thoughts

I think the interviewer wants an honest acknowledgement that I have made mistakes, received criticism and acted on the feedback.



Applicant 2
Answer

First I listen carefully to the feedback and ask for clarification if there is any aspect that I don't understand. I then ask for suggestions about what is needed. Then I work out strategies for dealing with the issue and monitoring my performance. Finally I plan a meeting with my manager to discuss my progress.



Applicant 3
Thoughts

I think the interviewer wants to know how I deal with this kind of stress.



Applicant 3
Answer

Well, in the past I have gone for a walk to recover from the embarrassment of the criticism and have contacted a friend to get support. I find talking to others helps me handle stress. I had a friend who used to work in the same department as me so she knew the environment. Sometimes the criticism was unfounded and I wasn't sure how to handle this. I wasn't sure if the person concerned would be happy to discuss any of the issues with me. Some people in the past have been open to this and others haven't.

3a How might the interviewer react?

Match the interviewer's thoughts below with each of the answers above.



a. Good strategies for handling the criticism. Clear, systematic strategies for addressing the issue. Sufficient level of detail. Good to see that the applicant talks it over with the person concerned rather than escalating the issue by talking to others instead.



b. Hmm, not a very honest answer. Everyone receives criticism at some point. I want an employee who is open to feedback and who has strategies for handling this.



c. Hmm, a rather lengthy answer. The applicant is positioning herself as powerless rather than in control of the situation. No effective strategies for addressing the criticism are suggested. She has the unfortunate habit of talking to others instead of to the person concerned. She sounds rather emotional.

4 What do you see as the key qualities of an effective manager?

Look at the range of possible answers. Rank each one on a scale of 1-3 with 1 being very effective and 3 being not effective.

- 1. Meeting deadlines and doing a good job.
- 2. Making sure that my subordinates work effectively and complete their tasks. Sometimes I need to be strict with them and set firm deadlines.
- 3. The key qualities of an effective manager are, in my experience: they know the strengths of each member of the team, they acknowledge good results, they invite comment and feedback about processes and new initiatives, they support and provide training for team members when needed, and they set up systems to manage deadlines.

4a What is the applicant thinking?

Match each answer above with the thought that the applicant might have had before they answered:

a. I think that the key role of a manager is how well he or she can organise and motivate a team to deliver their best. That is what my manager would expect of me.

b. I need to show the interviewer that I am a capable manager and that I have good control over my team. I take pride in a well-organised and well-disciplined team.

c. I think the interviewer wants to check that I am a responsible manager who carries out the tasks my manager wants.



4b What might the interviewer think of the three answers on page 12?

Match the interviewer's thoughts below with each applicant's answer



a. Nice set of points. Shows evidence of clear thinking and awareness. This manager is team focussed not self-focussed. This manager will get the best out of his/her team by being supportive of the team rather than being coercive.



b. Oh dear, alarm bells here. This applicant is clearly not used to working in New Zealand in our egalitarian working environment. I don't think team members would like this style. The use of the words 'strict' and 'subordinate' suggest an authoritarian approach that is inappropriate for New Zealand.



c. Hmm, this answer shows no awareness of the key role of a manager in managing the team who report to him/her.

5 Aren't you overqualified for this position?

Look at the range of possible answers. Rank each one on a scale of 1-3 with 1 being very effective and 3 being not effective.



1. Yes, but I am really keen to have this job.



2. I want to work quite soon at my professional level but I realise that I don't completely understand the New Zealand context so I am happy to work at this level for a time in order to gain the necessary experience.



3. Not at all. I have carried out this role in the past.



Discuss with a partner.

Discuss your ranking with your partner and the reasons for your decision. What are the key features of the answer that you chose as the best one?

How might the interviewer react to each answer? Discuss with your partner.

7 Here are further questions that newcomers to New Zealand have found challenging.



Discuss with a partner.

Discuss with your partner how you might answer the questions effectively.

1. How do you work under pressure?

Suggestion: focus on planning, organising, sharing with colleagues, getting help early.

2. What do you do when you are faced with competing deadlines?

Suggestion: check with key people to find which tasks have priority, ask for help, notify key people in advance.

3. What would be your salary expectations?

Suggestions:

- Before the interview check the Careers New Zealand website for details about the range of salaries for different positions:
<http://www.careers.govt.nz/jobs-database/whats-happening-in-the-job-market/who-earns-what/>
 - Ask about the review process.
-
-

4. How long do you expect to stay with us?

Suggestion: there is no need to state the number of years. Simply state that you are committed to staying in New Zealand and would be keen to keep developing your skills in this organisation.

5. What do you see yourself doing in five years' time?

Suggestion: talk about wanting to continue finding opportunities to develop your skills and experience and if you could continue to do so in this company you would be very happy.

6. How would you measure your success in this role?

Suggestion: demonstrate how you would use your initiative to set targets for yourself and to ask for feedback regularly.

7. How would you build a relationship with a client?

Suggestion: think about how this skill would be important for the role. Would they be new or existing clients? Respond with this in mind.

8. How do you show initiative?

Suggestion: think about how this ability would be important for the role. Respond with this in mind.

9. What are some achievements you have had in your previous roles?

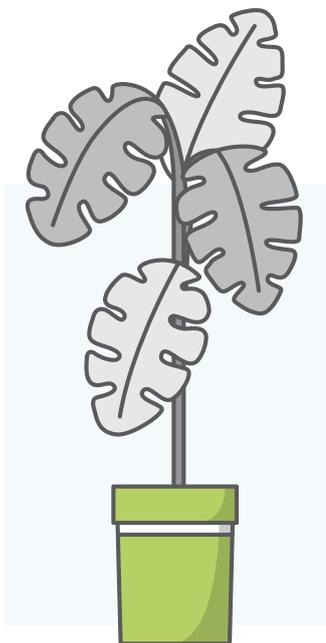
Suggestion: choose achievements that are relevant for the role you are applying for and that demonstrate a skill or competency required in the job description.

10. How do you like to be managed?

Suggestion: think about the expectations of New Zealand employers about showing initiative and working independently.

11. What does the word professionalism mean to you?

Suggestion: consider the characteristics that New Zealand employers would find attractive in an employee: integrity, respect for fellow employees, reliability, good problem-solving skills, initiative, respect for confidentiality.



Clarifying a question¹

 **Effective strategy:**

Successful applicants use active listening strategies and ask for clarification of a question they don't understand.

Rather than showing evidence of poor communication skills, asking for clarification is an effective strategy that would be useful in any role. An interviewer would find this strategy reassuring.

Here is an applicant clarifying three questions:

Question One:

	Interviewer	We need to give information to the general public but we don't do well with plain English. What are your skills in this area?
	Applicant's Thoughts	Plain English? What exactly does he mean?
	Applicant's Answer	So does that mean you need someone to help with translating technical documents into language suitable for a non-technical audience?
	Interviewer	Yes, that's right.
	Applicant's Answer	Ah well, perhaps I could mention my experience in this area. In my former role I regularly prepared press releases and web content for the reports we produced.

¹ Some activities on pages 18 - 32 are based on ideas from: O'Grady, C., & Millen, M. (1994). *Finding common ground: cross-cultural communication strategies for job seekers*. Teacher Resource Series 4. Sydney: NCELTR

Question Two:



Interviewer What attracts you about working at the museum?

Applicant's Answer I am not quite sure what you mean exactly. Are you looking for what interests me *professionally* about working at the museum?

Interviewer Yes, that's right.

Question Three:



Interviewer Tell me about a time when a team member was not pulling their weight.

Applicant's Thoughts What does he mean by *pulling their weight*?

Applicant's Answer One person was not, I'm sorry, *pulling their weight*? I am not familiar with that phrase.

1 Note the strategies the applicant uses in Question 1 (see table on page 20). Why are they effective? What is the impression he creates with the interviewer?

2 Complete the table for Question 2 and 3:

	Interviewer/ Applicant	Strategy	Language used	Impression created? Why?
Question 1	Interviewer	Asks question	<i>We need to give information to the general public but we don't do well with plain English. What are your skills in this area?</i>	
	Applicant	Uses active listening to check understanding	<i>So does that mean ...</i>	
	Interviewer	Confirms applicant's understanding	<i>That's right.</i>	
	Applicant	Answers question	<i>Ah well, perhaps I could mention my experience ...</i>	
Question 2	Interviewer	Asks question	<i>What attracts you about working at the museum?</i>	
	Applicant	Acknowledges problem	<i>I am not quite sure what you mean exactly.</i>	
	Applicant	Clarifies the question		
	Interviewer	Confirms applicant's understanding	<i>Yes, that's right.</i>	
Question 3	Interviewer	Asks question	<i>Tell me about a time when a team member was not pulling their weight.</i>	
	Applicant	Repeats question and indicates the part of the question that he is unclear about		
	Applicant	Acknowledges lack of familiarity		

3 Choose one of the strategies you have identified in the table on page 20 to clarify the interviewer's questions below:

How do you deal with ambiguities in your work?

What does she mean by ambiguities?



We use TAM here. Are you familiar with this?

What does she mean by TAM?



How are you going?

What does she mean? I am not going anywhere.



Self-clarification and self-correction

Notice how the three applicants below clarify or correct the answer they have given. List the strategies they use.



Interviewer

Tell me about one of your greatest achievements.



Applicant's
Answer

I have several examples but perhaps I could talk about a project I was involved in three, *no sorry*, two years ago.



Interviewer

How would your manager describe you?



Applicant's
Answer

Well, she might say that I was good at getting things done. *What I mean* is good at organising and completing projects.



Interviewer

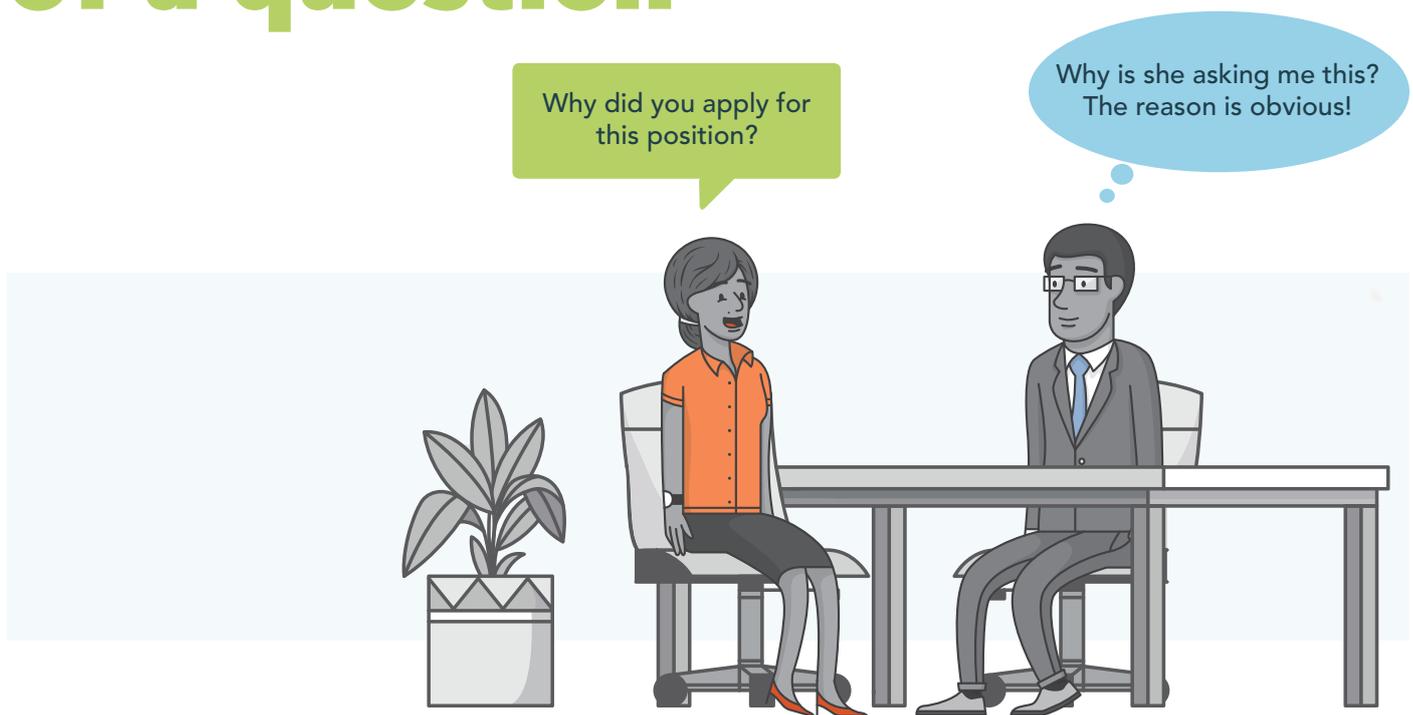
How do you handle criticism?



Applicant's
Answer

I think I handle criticism positively. *In other words*, I welcome constructive criticism and seek further clarification if necessary.

Interpreting the underlying intention of a question



Remember that in an interview the interviewer is evaluating the competence and motivation of the applicant and assessing how she/he might fit into the organisation.

- 1 Here are some common interview questions and possible answers.

Does the applicant interpret the underlying intention of the question accurately? Rank each answer on a scale of 1-3 with 1 being very effective and 3 being not effective:

1. What are the key qualities of an effective manager?

- a. Someone who makes sure the team meets deadlines.
- b. Someone who can control the team.
- c. Someone who can motivate the team to produce excellent results.

2. Did you find us ok?

- a. It was easy, thanks.
- b. No, actually I couldn't find the entrance to the building and spent a long time walking up and down the street. Finally I met someone who showed me the entrance.
- c. Yes, no trouble. I checked yesterday.

3. Why did you apply for this position?

- a. It is a good fit with my qualifications.
- b. Well, I have read about (name of organisation) and I would really like to contribute my skills and experience to an organisation that is committed to making a difference to people's lives.
- c. I am keen to join the workforce in New Zealand.

2 Match the interviewer's possible underlying intention with the questions in the table below. There may be more than one possible intention underlying each question.

Question	Possible underlying intention
1. <i>Did you have any trouble finding us?</i>	a. What motivates you?
2. <i>Why did you apply for this position?</i>	b. What are your strengths and weaknesses
3. <i>What are the key qualities of an effective manager?</i>	c. What happened in your former role?
4. <i>How would your manager describe you?</i>	d. How self-aware are you?
5. <i>I see that you haven't chosen your most recent manager as a referee.</i>	e. Are you really interested in this role?
6. <i>What do you dislike about the role of team leader?</i>	f. How keen are you about this role?
7. <i>Why do you think you are a good fit with the role?</i>	g. How well-organised are you?
8. <i>What gets you out of bed in the morning?</i>	h. Are you interested in our organisation?
9. <i>Do you have any questions for us?</i>	i. Does your management style fit the style in New Zealand?



Effective strategy:

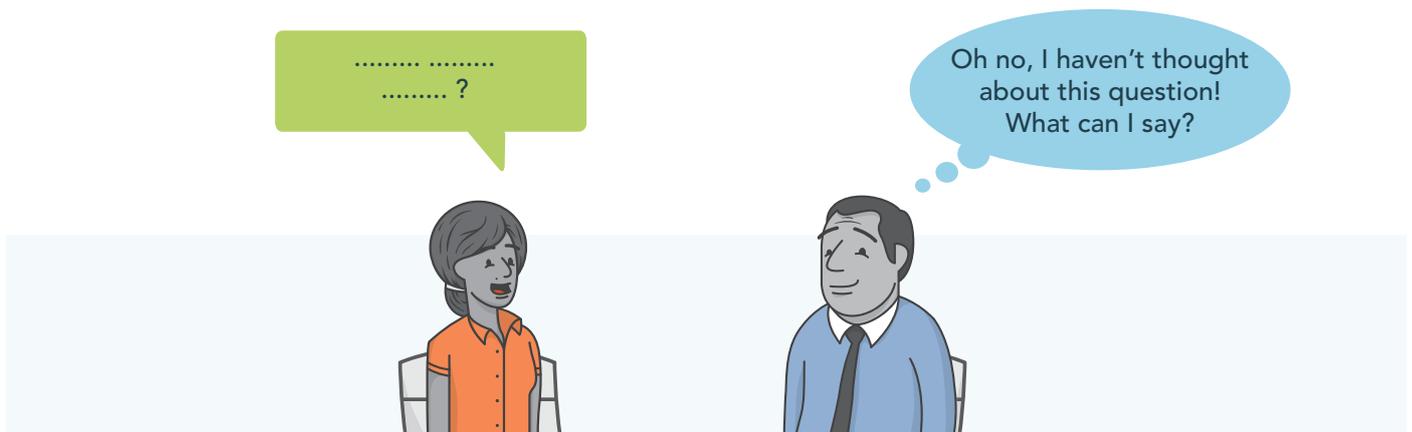
Use active listening to clarify the interviewer's intention if you are not sure.

What gets you out of bed in the morning?

So are you asking about what motivates me?



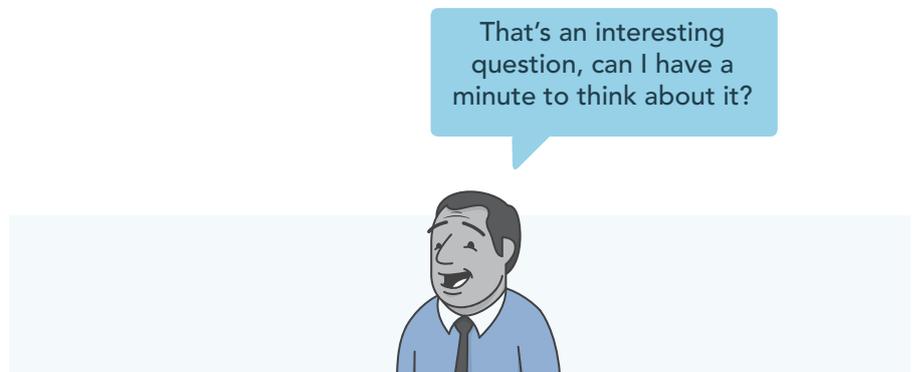
Dealing with an unexpected question



 **Effective strategy:**

Sit back in your chair to disengage while you think.

Some people like to provide some fillers while they are thinking, such as, hmm, let me see...



Alternatively, you could say:



Anticipating employers' concerns



Lack of local experience

1 What might an employer be concerned about when they make this comment? Discuss with your partner. For example:

-  Newcomers might not understand the New Zealand working environment.
-  They may have a different management style.
-  They may not fit in with the team.
-  They may not be familiar with New Zealand law and the professional standards in their area.
-  Other?

2 What might an applicant be thinking before they answer?

-  1. I always get this question. What is so important about *New Zealand* experience? I have excellent qualifications and experience from other countries.
-  2. I can see that the interviewer might be worried that I won't fit into a team in New Zealand, that I might need a lot of training. I need to anticipate the concern behind the question and reassure the interviewer that I am low risk.
-  3. He is right, but I don't know how to answer this question in an effective way.

3 Look at two answers that are unlikely to reduce the interviewer's concerns. Why?

-  1. But I have had lots of experience with very important companies in Europe and South America. My qualifications are from a very prestigious university in Spain. I don't see the relevance of your question.
-  2. That's right, I haven't had any New Zealand experience, I'm afraid.

4 Match the applicant's answers with the interviewer's possible reaction.

-  a. I am surprised that she has simply agreed with me. I am not convinced that she can manage a job in New Zealand without any experience here. How will she get on with clients or with the team? She might need a lot of training and we can't afford that.
-  b. Oh dear, she sounds a bit emotional. What would she be like to work with when we are under pressure? I am not convinced that her work experience is enough to enable her to fit in easily here. The management style is different in many countries.

5 Read the applicant's answer below and underline the strategies she uses to anticipate, acknowledge and reduce the interviewer's concerns.

	Interviewer	I see you don't have any New Zealand experience.
	Applicant's Answer	That's true and I can understand that you might be concerned that I am not familiar with the New Zealand context. However, I have worked as an engineer in several countries where the regulations are similar to those in New Zealand. I am familiar with the performance standards in the New Zealand Building Code. I have checked and my engineering qualification from Spain covers the same basic areas as the New Zealand degree. I identified the few areas where I needed to update my knowledge and I have completed two online courses in these areas.
	Interviewer	Hmm, I like this answer. I feel more relaxed now about employing someone who hasn't had the identical training and experience of a New Zealand engineer. Her experience in different countries could be very useful to us.

6 Note the strategies that the applicant uses in the table below:

Strategy	Language used
Acknowledges the truth of the statement	<i>That's true</i>
Acknowledges the concern	<i>I can understand that you might be concerned that I am not familiar with the New Zealand context.</i>
Minimizes the concern by providing evidence	<i>However, I have worked as an engineer in several countries where the regulations are similar to those in New Zealand.</i>
Shows awareness of the relevant legislation, regulations, codes in New Zealand	<i>I am familiar with the performance standards in the New Zealand Building Code.</i>
Demonstrates a proactive approach	<i>I have checked and my engineering qualification from Spain covers the same basic areas as the New Zealand degree.</i> <i>I identified the few areas where I needed to update my knowledge and I have completed two online courses in these areas.</i>

I see you don't have any New Zealand experience.



Discuss with a partner.

Discuss with a partner: How might you reduce an employer's concern about hiring you? Prepare how you might respond to the same statement. Use the strategies in the table above to help you.

English language skills



Discuss with a partner.

- 1 What might an employer be concerned about when they make this comment? Discuss with your partner.

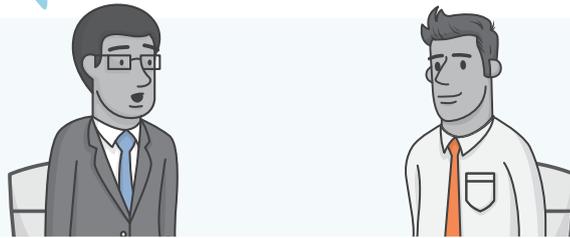
For example:

- He might misunderstand our client's instructions.
- He may make a lot of errors in his writing which their manager will have to correct.
- His telephone skills might not be good enough.

I see that English is not your first language

2 Read how an applicant responds to this comment.

That's true but I have used English in my professional life for the last ten years. Being bilingual in Mandarin and English has been extremely helpful in my career.



3 List the strategies the applicant uses:

1. Acknowledges the truth of the statement

2. _____

3. _____

4 How might you reassure the interviewer about possible concerns about your English language skills? Look at the table below. Which strategies will you use?

Strategy	What will you say?
Acknowledge the truth of the statement	
Acknowledge the concern	
Minimize the concern by providing evidence	
Point out the value of being multi-lingual	
Demonstrate a proactive approach by explaining the strategies you use, for example, when preparing to discuss a complex issue with a client on the telephone, or when writing a report	



Practise with a partner.

Practise your answer with a partner.

5 What might be the interviewer’s concerns behind the following comments?

1. You have a lot of experience and a high level of qualification in this field.
2. We have a collaborative management style here.
3. I am not sure what areas you covered in your degree.
4. The industry regulations are much tighter here than they used to be.
5. The level of computer technology is pretty high here.
6. We use the latest version of ArchiCAD here.
7. I see that you have had extensive experience, mostly in Singapore.
8. This role involves a lot of telephoning.

6 How might you reassure the interviewer about the above concerns?

Choose strategies from the table below:

Strategy	What will you say?
Acknowledge the truth of the statement	
Acknowledge the concern	
Minimize the concern by providing evidence	
Show awareness of the relevant legislation and standards in New Zealand	
Demonstrate the proactive approach you would bring to the role	



Practise with a partner.

Practise your answers with a partner.

Coping with behavioural/competency based questions

Behavioural/competency based questions are based on the assumption that examples of past performance provide information that helps predict future performance.

**Effective strategy:**

Structure your answer to a behavioural/competency based question using the STAR model:

S - Situation
T - Task
A - Action
R - Results

Situation:

Describe the situation or problem that you encountered.

Task:

Describe the task that the situation required. Focus on your role in the task, not other people's roles or what you did as a team. Use I statements.

Action:

Describe the action you took, obstacles you had to overcome.

Result:

Highlight the results achieved, the feedback you received, what you learned from the experience.

Preparing STAR answers.

1. Prepare at least 5 examples that illustrate how you handled situations in the past. Choose examples that relate to the key competencies outlined in the job description.
2. Select situations from professional level tasks.
3. Include facts and figures.
4. Be precise about your role in the team.
5. Remember to mention the results of the action you took, for example, a successful project completed on time, appreciation from your manager.
6. Make sure your answer is no longer than 2 minutes.
7. Spend most of the time describing the action you took and the result. Describe the situation and the task briefly.
8. Write the letters STAR on a piece of paper as a reminder during the interview to focus on the situation, task, action and result.

1 Look at the following examples:

Tell me about a time when you made a mistake.



Situation:

I made a mistake shortly after I joined NZPA. My role was to organise a meeting of senior government managers from Auckland, Christchurch and Wellington and their counterparts from Australia.

Task:

One of my tasks was to book the room for the meeting. Unfortunately I didn't make the booking correctly and the booking was not saved in the online system.

Action:

I noticed this problem a few hours before the meeting began. I considered the options I had to remedy the situation and fortunately I managed to book another room on the same floor. I then reported the problem and my solution to my manager. Prior to the start of the meeting I enlisted the help of a colleague to guide the managers from the lobby to the correct meeting room.

Result:

The meeting started on time and my manager commented on my quick response to solve the problem. From this experience I learned to double check all arrangements before I sent meeting invitations.

Tip from an interviewer: Always admit a mistake. This shows integrity. Avoid blaming others. Explain how you handled the relationships involved. This type of answer shows your strategies under stress.

Tell me about a time when you had to deal with a team member who wasn't working well.



2 Discuss with a partner how a New Zealand interviewer might react to the following answers.

Question	Applicant's answer	Interviewer's reaction
Tell me about a time when you had to deal with a team member who wasn't working well.	1. I went and talked to the team member. I realised he was under a lot of pressure so I took over some of his work for a period. He was able to get through this difficult period and was back on track very quickly.	
	2. I spoke to my manager and asked her to handle the problem.	
	3. I asked the team member to stay late to catch up.	

 **Discuss with a partner.**

3 With a partner brainstorm possible answers to the questions on page 36. Think about the expectations of a manager in the New Zealand context. For example, a manager is likely to expect you to work independently, prioritise your tasks and to clarify when you are unsure.

Describe an occasion when you had to deal with competing deadlines.

Tell us about a time when you worked in a successful team.

Tell us about a time you worked with a manager you didn't like.

Give me an example of a time when you had to deal with a conflict with a colleague.

Tell us about a time when you disagreed with a manager's decision.



Discuss with a partner.

4 Brainstorm with a partner the likely behavioural questions you could be asked, based on the job descriptions in your professional area.

5 Prepare a story for each major competency outlined in the job descriptions. Most stories will illustrate more than one competency. Be prepared to adjust each story to match the question asked.

Finishing the interview strongly

It is important to make a positive final impression at the end of the interview.

1. **Prepare a few questions** you can ask in response to the common question: Have you got any questions for us? For example:
 - ✦ Show your research into the organisation, for example: I've noticed in your annual report that you are planning to ... Would I have the opportunity to be involved?
 - ✦ What might a typical day in the job look like?
 - ✦ Are there any critical relationships in terms of suppliers or partner organisations that would impact directly on this role?
 - ✦ Is there anything further you would like to know about me and my suitability for this role?
 - ✦ When might I hear about the next step in the selection process?

Remember that the best questions relate to points raised in the interview.



Further tips for success

1 Showing engagement and building rapport

Think about open body language, smiling, good eye contact, a confident handshake, a friendly and engaged facial expression.

Listen actively to the interviewers and show engagement by using short responses, for example: *I see, ah yes, I understand (not I know), hmm, ah, that's interesting.* These short responses show the interviewer you are interested in what they are saying without interrupting them. In some cultures a lack of short responses shows respect for the speaker but in New Zealand it could be interpreted as a lack of interest.

Tip from interviewers:

Make eye contact with all members of the panel, not only the questioner.

2 Being attentive to the interviewer's response

The interviewer's body language is generally a good indicator of how you are doing in an interview. If they look confused or puzzled you may like to check with them.

Sorry, I am not sure if I am being very clear. Shall I rephrase my answer?



Note the key features of the applicant's response in the table below:

Feature	Language
Polite apology	<i>Sorry</i>
Ownership of any problem by using I	<i>I am not sure if I am being very clear.</i>
Makes an offer using I	<i>Shall I rephrase my answer?</i>

Other ways of checking:

- Did that answer your question?
- Was that the kind of answer you were expecting?
- Would you like me to expand on my answer?
- Shall I go on?
- Sorry, I am not sure if my answer was very clear. Shall I rephrase what I said?
- Sorry, I don't think I am being very clear. Shall I explain in a different way?

3 Turn-taking – New Zealand style

In an interview, the interviewer establishes the format and directs the question and answer sequence. Interviewers in New Zealand will expect an applicant to wait until they have finished speaking before giving a response. An interruption or overlap from the applicant will be judged as inappropriate even though the applicant might only be wanting to show how keen and attentive they are. New Zealand interviewers also expect a relatively short pause between a question and the answer. A New Zealand interviewer may interpret a pause of longer than one second as a lack of understanding. Pausing to think before answering an interview question is acceptable but the pause should be filled with minimal responses such as *hmm*, *interesting question*, *let me see*.

4 Keeping answers short and well structured

Interviewers in New Zealand prefer answers that are well organised, concise, precise and to the point. When you are giving your answers, the interviewer is forming an impression about how you might deal with a client or members of your team. A short, precise answer with supporting examples demonstrates a style of thinking that employers in New Zealand expect.



Effective strategies:

- Give a short, precise answer and then elaborate with examples.
- Use signals that indicate logical thought – so, therefore, then.
- Order ideas: first, second, finally.

5 Language tips for effective communication

1. Use indirect forms of request phrases. For example:

- a. I wonder if I could ask you to repeat the last part of the question.
- b. Would you mind asking me the question again?
- c. Could I check that I have understood the question correctly?

2. Use the pronoun I whenever possible. For example:

- a. I am not sure if I have understood the question completely.
- b. I am not sure if I am being very clear.
- c. Shall I go on?

3. Use that's right, certainly or sure in response to a yes/no question rather than of course. For example:

- ▶ Interviewer: You are from Spain I see.
- ▶ Applicant: That's right. (The use of *of course* in this situation would sound impatient and rude).

4. Use actually to politely indicate a correction. For example:

- ▶ Interviewer: I see that most of your experience was in India.
- ▶ Applicant: Actually, I have worked mostly in Sri Lanka.

5. Use a positive adjective with not rather than a negative adjective. For example:

- a. The organisation I worked for was *not very big* – (rather than very small)
- b. One of our clients was *not very polite* – (rather than very rude)
- c. The salary was *not very high* – (rather than very low)

6. Be clear about the meaning of the adverbs: quite, very and too. Be aware that quite and very do not usually have the same meaning in New Zealand English. For example:

- ▶ Interviewer: What interests you about this role?
- ▶ Applicant: I would be *quite* happy working in this *quite* exciting area. (doesn't sound very enthusiastic)
- ▶ Applicant: I would be *very* happy working in this *very* exciting area. (sounds suitably enthusiastic)

7. Avoid reversing the status difference and seeming to put yourself above the interviewer by the language you use. For example:

- ▶ Interviewer: Can you tell us about the extent of your responsibility in your previous role?
- ▶ Applicant: As I told you earlier ... (this response can seem rude and bossy. Instead use the phrase *As I mentioned ...*)

8. Avoid using the modals should and must as they imply an authoritarian attitude that does not fit well in the New Zealand skilled workplace. Modals such as could and might are more appropriate.

9. Avoid using formal language to describe a relatively informal situation. Remember that formal language can create social distance. For example:

- ▶ Interviewer: Tell us how you communicated with your team on a regular basis.
- ▶ Applicant: I would *inform* my team of the agenda prior to each weekly meeting (instead use: *let my team know* the agenda)

10. If an interviewer asks you how you feel about something, they are looking for your thoughts/opinions rather than your emotional response.

11. Make sure that you pronounce key words accurately. For example:

What are your strengths?

Well, I have well developed **analytical** skills. As an **economist** I have had to do a lot of **economic** analysis and I enjoy working as an **analyst**.



Practise with a partner.

With a partner, practise the pronunciation of the key words you are likely to use in an interview. This includes the name of the organisation you are applying to, the names of your former employers and key words in your professional area.

Note which syllable is stressed in each word: **anal**ysis, **analy**tical, **anal**yst, **econ**omic, **econ**omist.

What New Zealand employers look for in an applicant

Comments from recruiters and interviewers

Successful applicants:

- 1. Demonstrate clear thinking by providing well-organised and well-structured answers.**
 - a. Use short sentences. Give yes/no answers if appropriate and then follow up with more detail.
 - b. Keep answers brief and then check: *Is this enough or shall I go on / give more information?*
 - c. Provide specifics rather than over-generalising. Provide facts, numbers and statistics.
- 2. Avoid giving answers that seem over-rehearsed and therefore not genuine or authentic.**
- 3. Provide STAR answers that relate to the skills required in the job description when asked a behavioural question.**
- 4. Emphasise skills and experience that are relevant in terms of the role they are applying for or the organisation's mission statement.**
- 5. Can manipulate a prepared STAR example to answer an unexpected behavioural based question.**
- 6. Listen to the whole question before answering to avoid misunderstanding the question.**
- 7. Avoid saying anything negative about a former employer, colleague or organisation.**
- 8. Pay attention to the interviewer's responses and body language.**
- 9. Establish and maintain eye contact with all members of the panel.**

Suggestions from newcomers to New Zealand

Prepare STAR examples in advance. It is too hard to organise your thoughts and think of stories during the interview.

Research the organisation so that you can explain why you want the role and how you can add value to the organisation.

Sell yourself by giving examples of your skills and experience rather than telling the interviewer how great you are.

Remember to describe the result of your STAR example. Describe evidence of the result – an award, a letter of appreciation, a successful resolution, a task delivered on time.

For STAR answers choose examples from all the roles you have had not just the recent one.

Keep up the eye contact. Even if you look away while you are thinking, quickly return your gaze to the interviewers.

Online resources for interview skills for the New Zealand context

Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment (MBIE):

Succeeding in job interviews:

www.newzealandnow.govt.nz/interviews

Finding and applying for jobs:

www.newzealandnow.govt.nz/work-in-nz/finding-work/finding-applying-for-jobs

Careers New Zealand:

Job interviews in New Zealand:

www.careers.govt.nz/job-hunting/new-to-new-zealand/job-interviews-in-new-zealand

Appendix:

Sample Interview Evaluation Form

Below is a form an interviewer might use to record their impressions of an applicant during an interview.

Applicant _____

Interviewed by _____

1. Core Skills/Attitudes for the Role	Yes	No	Evidence
Technical Knowledge			
Relationship Management			
Verbal Communication & Influencing			
Analysis & Critical Thinking			
Problem Definition & Problem Solving			
Written Communication			
Initiative & Taking Ownership			
Time Management			
Adaptability & Flexibility			

2. Secondary Factors	Exceeds Requirements	Meets Requirements	Does not meet Requirements
Academic Qualifications			
Relevant Work Experience			
Maturity			
Knowledge of the Organisation & Interest			

Exceptional Strengths _____

Weaknesses _____

Interview Score

Exceeds Criteria		Meets Criteria			Fails Criteria
4	4-	3+	3	3-	

Decision

Appoint		Test		Explore Further		Unsuitable	
---------	--	------	--	-----------------	--	------------	--

Acknowledgements

In preparing this resource I am indebted to Catherine O'Grady and Mark Millen, the authors of *Finding Common Ground: cross-cultural communication strategies for job seekers* (1994). Their invaluable research and suggestions inspired me to produce a resource for the New Zealand context. Several of the activities and tasks in this resource are based on ideas from *Finding Common Ground*.

I record my heartfelt thanks to the following people for their advice and suggestions on the content of this resource:

The members of the Language in the Workplace Project team at Victoria University, especially Janet Holmes, Meredith Marra and Bernadette Vine.

Judi Altinkaya, National Manager Settlement, Settlement Unit, Immigration New Zealand, Ministry of Business, Employment and Innovation.

Anne-Marie Masgoret, Manager, Strategy and Products, Settlement Unit, Immigration New Zealand, Ministry of Business, Employment and Innovation.

Jay Woodhams, Settlement Unit, Immigration New Zealand, Ministry of Business, Employment and Innovation.

Angela Joe, Director of the English Language Institute, Victoria University of Wellington.

Helen Algar, Consultant and Board Member, Wellington.

Millie Douglas, Careers Consultant, Careers and Employment, Victoria University of Wellington.
Daniza Galinovic, Consultant, The Johnson Group, Wellington.

Adelle Kenny, Talent Manager, Wellington Regional Employment Development Agency.

Judi McCallum, Team Leader, Pathways to Employment, Refugee Programmes, New Zealand Red Cross.

In addition, my grateful thanks to: The Settlement Unit, Immigration New Zealand, Ministry of Business, Employment and Innovation, New Zealand, who supported the development of this resource.

The guest tutors and lecturers (many from the Rotary Club of Wellington) who have supported the Skilled Migrant Programme at Victoria University of Wellington since 2005, for sharing their advice and knowledge of the job interview process in New Zealand and for providing mock interview practice for participants in the programme.

The staff at Careers and Employment, Victoria University of Wellington, for their advice and training for participants in the Skilled Migrant Programme.

All the participants in the Skilled Migrant Programme who I have had the privilege to teach since 2005, for their insights and their whole-hearted focus on finding work and on making a contribution to their new country, New Zealand.

Nicky Riddiford March 2017

