

# A guide to board interviews

**Part of IoD Ireland's Director Development Toolkit**

# Introduction

If you're reading this guide to board interviews, it means you've likely reached the interview stage for a board director role — congratulations! You have met the criteria they are looking for in a new board member or chair and this guide will help you to give yourself the best possible chance to succeed at the interview stage. This guide will take you through how to best prepare, what to expect at the interview itself and how to perform at your best during the interview.

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# Preparation

## 1. Allocate sufficient time

Block time in your diary to prepare adequately for the interview. As part of your preparation you may need to speak to key people in your network so allow time for scheduling. Treat each stage of the interview process as the final interview.

## 2. Research the industry sector

Demonstrating a strategic understanding of the organisation and the sector including challenges it faces and opportunities will be an important part of the interview. Spend sufficient time researching the organisation, sector and future trends.

## 3. Understand the key stakeholders

Give consideration to the various stakeholders and how the organisation manages them. Consider challenges and opportunities for the organisation in this regard. The annual report can be a very useful source of stakeholder information.

## 4. Evidence of skills required

You are already aware of the skills the organisation seeks in a new board member, and the great news is that your invitation to interview indicates you possess some, if not all, of these qualifications. Get ready for specific questions probing for evidence of these skills in action. The best way of doing this is preparing examples and scenarios of when you used these skills. Think broadly about examples — they don't all need to be in a work context and could be in a volunteering capacity or in your personal life. Refer to the **Skills you need to succeed** and the **Interview questions workbook**.

## 5. Perfect your introduction

Interviews often begin with the question, "Can you tell us a bit about yourself and why you're interested in this role?" Creating a strong first impression is very important and now is the time to prepare an excellent introduction. Ensure you keep it succinct and engaging, it is not a good start if the interviewers have to stop you after 10 minutes while still discussing your first role.

## 6. Don't assume

Do not assume the interviewers have all read your CV and cover letter in detail. Make sure to tailor your responses to the board's needs, highlighting the key details you feel are most important for them to know about you and why you are the best person for the role.

## 7. Plan answers to questions

Think through and plan out answers to typical questions that will arise. Spend time working on 'Types of Questions' below and the accompanying worksheet **Interview questions workbook** preparing answers and evidence of how your experience matches their needs. Tailor your responses to the selection criteria and the challenges and opportunities the organisation faces.

## 8. First board role

If this is your first board opportunity prepare an answer to how you will operate in the boardroom. Convey the skills and experience you have to help you operate successfully on this board. Be confident — they won't have invited you for interview if they don't think you could be a board member. A good answer here would demonstrate your understanding of the role and relevant experience you have perhaps interacting with boards as an executive or in a voluntary capacity.

## 9. Preparatory call

Ask for an opportunity to speak with someone in advance of the interview — the lead recruiter, the Chair, the CEO, the company secretary if appropriate. Use this as an opportunity to find out more about the organisation, the strategic challenges it faces, how the board operates and what skills the board are looking for in a new director. You may not have the opportunity to speak with someone, but it doesn't hurt to ask.

## 10. Fit

A key element of the interview process is getting a feel for the candidate and the candidate getting a feel for the board. Be prepared to answer questions like 'How would you describe your boardroom style?'

# Key sources of information

**The following is a list of useful resources to gather information to help you prepare for an interview.**

- Company website — About us, Investor Information and Company Strategy sections
- Annual report and accounts (if not on their website, they will be available via the Company Registration Office (paid) or [solocheck.ie](https://www.solocheck.ie) (limited free information))
- Recent press coverage
- Social media — company social channels and LinkedIn
- "Constitutional" documents such as Memorandum and Articles, Statutes, License documents (Financial Services)
- Regulators reports on the organisation's performance
- Oireachtas discussions / questions
- Podcasts with interviews with key leaders in the business, about the industry sector.

# Types of questions

**The following is a list by category of types of questions you may be asked at interview. This list is not exhaustive and the question may be phrased differently, but if you prepare responses to these styles of questions you will be well set and can tailor your answer according to the specific question asked.**

## **Opening questions**

- Tell us about yourself and why you are interested in joining this board?
- How will you add value to the board?
- Can you bring your CV to life for us in the context of our needs?
- Why does this role appeal to you?
- How do you think your previous experience could be valuable to this board?

## **The organisation**

- What is your opinion of our organisation?
- What are the biggest challenges we face?

Or

- What do you consider to be the key challenges facing us in the next 5-10 years?
- What opportunities do you see for our organisation?
- What should we be doing differently?
- What do you know about our organisation and why do you feel you could be a suitable fit?
- Who do you consider to be our key stakeholders and how may that change in the future?

## **Strategy**

- What is the role of a board in strategy implementation and how should a board measure the success of a strategy?
- Describe the development and implementation of a successful strategy in the past and the role you played in that?

# Types of questions continued

In this section it is useful to review the essential and desirable criteria outlined in the role specification and prepare evidence of each of the skills and experiences required. You will likely have done this in preparation of your CV and cover letter, so refresh your memory and perhaps add to this. Take a look at the **Skills you need to succeed** guide.

## Evidence of experience

- Can you share an example of a time when you made a substantial impact on a business?
- Do you have any examples of re-inventing or re-orientating a business?
- Can you provide an example of a conflict you faced and how you resolved it?
- What are the three things in your career of which you are most proud?
- Can you tell us about your experience relating to financial information and oversight of financial controls?
- Can you share an example of a major business challenge you encountered and how you addressed it?

## Governance

- What would be the primary indicators of poor governance?
- How do you think the board should engage with executive management?
- What do you consider to be your role as a non-executive director?
- What would your relationship with our Chair be like? How would you support the Chair's role?
- How hands on are you as a non-executive director? How interested are you in the operational detail?
- What has been the most difficult governance challenge you have faced in your career and how did you handle it?
- Can you describe an ethical challenge you faced in a board or executive role?

## Style

- How would you describe your boardroom style?
- What mistakes have you made in previous board roles and what did you learn from them?
- How would your peers describe you? What are your strengths and weaknesses?

## Time

- How many other non-executive roles do you have?
- Can you confirm that you are able to commit to the time required to perform effectively as a board member?
- Do you have any concerns about joining this board? Any conflicts of interest?

# The interview

Find out as much as you can in advance about the interview. Board interviews vary from formal (with the Chair and other board members) to informal with one person in a relaxed informal setting to virtual (via an online platform) with one or several interviewers.

There may be a series of interviews before appointment. These will often include some, if not all, of the following:

- Recruiter / Executive search firm / HR Department
- Chair of the board
- Other non-executives directors / board members
- CEO, CFO and any other executive directors
- Family members (in the case of a family business).

Find out **where** the interview will take place and **how long** it is expected to last and allocate sufficient time to getting there early or preparing an appropriate virtual environment for a hassle free interview. Try not to schedule anything after the interview so you are not feeling pressurised.

Find out **who will interview you** from the recruiter.

Find out as much about each of the interviewers as you can — if they are a member of the board what is their role? This will give you an insight into what will be of interest to them. Understand the structure of the board including Chair, SID (Senior Independent Director), non-executive directors, executive board members, shareholder representatives, family members etc. Consider if anyone in your network knows any of the interviewers and perhaps ask them for what you can expect. LinkedIn can be a very helpful tool in this regard.

**Arrive early** to minimise stress and be clear on where you should go, for example wait in reception, announce your arrival or go to a specific meeting room. Take some time to compose yourself, breathe, relax and read over any final notes or reminders.

Use the opportunity for small talk at the start of the interview to bring your authentic self to the interview and **share some of your personal brand**. Be as warm, positive and engaging as possible. Show **genuine interest and passion** for the sector and the organisation. Leave them in no doubt that you are very interested in the role.

Create a **great first impression** with a strong and succinct introduction that you have pre-prepared. The goal here is from the outset for the interviewers to feel this is the perfect candidate — convey your suitability for the role immediately tailoring your introduction to what they need.

Answer questions in full but succinctly, use **relevant examples** from your prior experience. If you are asked a multi-part question and forget some elements of the question don't be afraid to ask them to remind you of the question or ask them if you have answered all parts of the question.

Make sure to **listen** and show interest as well as speaking. The ability to listen is a key skill required in the boardroom.

If you are asked to make a **presentation** keep to the allocated time and don't overrun. Ensure you are well prepared technically. It can be a good idea to send the slides in advance and ask them to screen share the slides. Always bring a hard copy of the presentation and have a backup plan should the technology fail you.

**Prepare a couple of questions** to ask at the end. Keep the questions strategic and not too complex. Perhaps ask about the culture of the board or the biggest challenges the board is facing.

Have a **strong closing** using the opportunity to reiterate your interest in the role. Emphasise the different perspective and value add you will bring compared to other board members. Thank the interviewers for their time and interest in you.

Finally, remember to be **confident** — you have made it to interview stage, that is a great achievement. If you don't get offered the role, it's not personal. It doesn't mean you aren't a great candidate for an non-executive director role — it means that you weren't the perfect fit for this particular role. If you are not successful on this occasion ask for **feedback** if possible to help you be even better next time.

Good luck!

## Useful Documents

- [A guide to state boards](#)
- [The non-executive director career guide](#)
- [Skills you need to succeed](#)
- [How to write a board CV](#)
- [How to write a board cover letter](#)
- [Interview questions workbook](#).





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