

# Do you pass the Kennedy test?

"WHAT are your weaknesses?" "Can you think of a situation which was meant to turn out well but turned out badly?" "If you could be any animal, what animal would you be?"

Apart from negotiating clichéd questions, it is often easy requests such as "Tell us what you can offer our company?" which, without preparation, can cost you the job. Saying too much is often the greatest problem.

"It has been proven that if you pro-actively practise your answers out loud – even in front of a mirror – a different part of your brain is activated and learning is increased," explains Diana Stephenson, career coach and partner at Graduate2Success. "There is a formula to getting you noticed – it's all about the famous Kennedy question when he asked: 'What are you going to do for America?' In this case a company is asking the question."

The career coaching market is worth around £100 million, and one of the services offered is a mock interview. Your performance is immortalised on film, and in a painful but constructive learning curve it is critiqued back with strategic improvements. Watch yourself squirm in the hot seat via the camera lens.

After visiting three such companies – Fairplace, Mendas and

JFK stirred a nation when he said: 'Ask not what your country can do for you ... ask what you can do for your country'. It is a question every candidate must answer in relation to an employer, says **Sascha Olofson**

CareerEnergy – my performance unfolded under the gaze of three cameras. Coaching taught me that interview technique has become a science, and traditional playing fields have altered beyond recognition.

Michael Moran, director of Fairplace, said: "Psychologically, we remember threes. Not twos, not fours but threes ... I don't know why. Analyse an interview with Tony Blair and you will see he uses this tactic all the time. If somebody asks you a question, give them a clear three-reason structure as the solution and they will be more likely to retain the answer – which is useful considering we only remember one third of what we hear."

"Although most interviews last on average between 30 to 45 minutes, employers will decide within the first two to three minutes if you are the right person. It is nearly impossible to rescue a

bad start – if you turn up late, look dishevelled, or fail to deliver the right answers at the start it's hard to salvage. If you start well, tail off in the middle but rescue the end they often won't remember your weakness," he says.

Occupational psychologist Simon Draycott, at Mendas, took this to another level: "The first five minutes of an interview can create what is known as the 'Halo' or the 'Horn' effect – first impressions really do count."

Kerwin Hack, the coach behind the camera at Fairplace, adds: "What people don't realise is that most interviewers are not very good at interviewing. Unless you are spoonfeeding them their exact core competency checklist, they often won't be pro-active enough to draw it out of you."

He has a five-digit rule: "If you can single out five major skills that you want communicate – salesmanship, negotiation abili-



Inspirational:  
former US  
president  
John  
F. Kennedy

ties, or a good address book etc – you can carry them as triggers on each finger. As the interview progresses, you tick them off on delivery. It is a way of helping the interviewer to make a connection about your 'range'."

David Randall, at CareerEnergy, has a guide to staying on brief: "Every interviewer will ask you to illustrate your competencies with examples – and it is easy to veer off at a tangent. I advise everyone to break all stories into

four sections: Situation; Task; Action; Result. Set up a situation, tell them the task in hand, say what action you took and highlight the positive outcome."

Jan Carrington, Fairplace's personal branding manager, said her remit touched on "visual package, behaviour and sound" (although she extended this to "smell"). She explains: "Creating your brand is about what you want your employer to get from you when you walk in. You can

suggest your personality through detail – it could be the lining of a jacket or cuff-links. Don't fidget or lose eye contact."

Bespoke career-coaching for two hours with a mock interview costs on average £250 to £500.

Michael Moran believes training on average improves candidates' skills by 35 per cent. "Keep smiling is the most important factor," he says. "No one wants to work for 10 hours a day next to a misery guts".

**Sascha Olofson** went to three interview coaching companies to help her repackage herself from being a TV producer to a PR. This is what they found:

**COMMUNICATION:** I needed to talk less about me, more about what they wanted to hear.  
**Verdict:** Not delivering succinctly.

**TRACK RECORD:** My online footprint was a disaster. One coach located an inappropriate Facebook picture and pointed out that some of my TV credits ("Natural Porn Killer", a documentary for Channel Four) wouldn't even get my CV through a firewall.  
**Verdict:** Need to clean up my profile.

**VISUAL BRAND:** One coach said wearing spectacles

on my head as an Alice band meant I "lost gravitas". My hair needed styling, I should have worn heels.  
**Verdict:** Image needs work.

**BEHAVIOUR:** Turning up two minutes late "due to trains" was suicide. I was told to control hand-waving and stop looking shiftily while thinking up answers.  
**Verdict:** Not professional enough.

**THE KENNEDY QUESTION?** "When asked 'what can you do for our company?', I spent 10 minutes focusing on one angle – my negotiating skills. By the time I was ready to promote languages, contacts, personality, they had moved on. I was advised to deliver disciplined bullet-point answers to show "my range".  
**Verdict:** A fail.

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