9. Interviews and Interviewing

Summary

Outline of the exercise

In this exercise students are involved in both sides of a recruitment process. On the one hand, they construct the advertisement for a post within their company, interview a number of candidates and from these appoint someone for the job. And on the other, they must prepare a CV and covering letter for one of the advertised posts and take part in the selection procedure. The activity requires effective team work, and students gain insight into the problems faced by an interviewer. The experience gained in the exercise will undoubtedly be of use to students when they apply for jobs and are interviewed.

Key aims

■ to produce a good CV;

■ to develop good interview techniques; and

■ to develop team working skills.

Time requirements

■ 2.5 hours tutor contact time

■ Approximately 5–6 hours private study

■ Approximately 8 hours total student time

Timetable

The following timetable is suggested, and is most effective if the sessions are spread over one week.

1 hour	Introduction to CVs and interviews
6 hours	Student work:
	Construct adverts (0.5 hour)
	Prepare applications (4–5 hours)
	Plan the interviews (and review applications) (0.5 hour)
1 hour	Each interview session with 6 students requires a little over 1 hour
30 minutes	Debriefing

S9 Interviews and interviewing

Advertisement

You work for a company, which is a subsidiary of a multinational company called ACE. As part of the development of a new product, you have been given permission by ACE to employ an additional chemist. As the research committee it is up to you to decide what that post should be – a bench chemist ('loner' or team player), or a team leader (who might concentrate on developing ideas, checking out the literature for patents and synthetic methods, and guiding the group), a liaison chemist maintaining links between bench-chemists/plant-biologists/marketing, or another chemistry-related post you might identify.

You must construct the advertisement for this job. The salary will be £11–20,000, depending on the post and the experience of the appointee. The advertisement needs to

■ give some background to the company (remember that advertisements are expensive, so it should be brief);

■ give details of the post – for example, experience or qualifications needed;

■ outline what the job will involve; and

■ be eye-catching.

The advertisement should be no more than half-a-side of A4, and should be printed out as soon as possible, and displayed on a notice-board. Applications should require a CV, and a covering letter briefly explaining why the applicant thinks that they should get the job.

It may be useful to look in a magazine, for example *Chemistry in Britain*, to see how such advertisements are structured.

Interviewees

You are also looking for a job as you are worried by rumours that your company may be "restructuring". You must respond to an advertisement from a rival company (posted on the notice-board). It is essential that you 'sell yourself' in the best possible light, emphasising how your talents and experience make you the ideal candidate for the job. In your application (CV and covering letter), you should ensure that the specific skills you have developed (eg laboratory work, report writing, presentational skills, team work, academic ability and outside interests) are clearly identified and relate to the job advertised.

Your application must be submitted (clearly labelled with your name, and the company to whom you are applying) by the deadline given, so the interviewing panel has sufficient time to prepare for your interview.

Interviewers

Before interviewing any of the candidates for the post you have advertised, it is essential that, within the group, selection criteria for the post are agreed. Forms are provided for your comments and as a record of the decisions you have made. The appointment record form should be handed to the tutor at the end of the exercise.

The interviewing panel should prepare a timetable for interviews and for the subsequent debriefing/announcement and post it on the door of the interview room. The panel must decide how they want to run the interview (for example, they may or may not want to ask questions on technical chemistry problems or on leisure interests). Every member of the interview panel should be involved in the interview process, although two or three members might ask all of the questions at each interview.

Make sure the interviewee is relaxed – hard questions are fine, but do not reduce the candidate to tears! You must keep to time (so identify who will lead the interviewing); all of the candidates must be interviewed and a feedback session held in the time allocated. Decide how long each interview will be (remember that candidates might have questions) and allow a few minutes after each interview to jot down notes on the comments form provided, and prepare for the next applicant.

At the end of the interviews, you will need to decide whom to appoint. Assemble all of the candidates (at least 15 minutes before the end of the session if possible), and summarise the points that impressed you from the interviews – perhaps select the best CV, comment on the covering letters, and pick out strong points from the interviews themselves. Announce whom you are appointing at the end of the session.

Shortly after the interviews, it is a good idea to think about the way you conducted the interviews. In particular:

■ Should you have spent more time planning the interviews?

■ What sorts of questions were most informative?

■ How might you conduct interviews better in future?

■ Was there anything that really impressed you about the interviewees?

■ Did the interviewees do anything particularly negative?

■ What did you learn as an interviewer that should improve your chances of success when you are being interviewed?

There will be a final debriefing session with everyone present, to discuss the recruitment methods of the companies.

T9 Interviews and interviewing

One of the greatest benefits of this exercise is that, by carrying out interviews themselves, the students gain a better understanding of what an interviewer is hoping to learn.

Introduction

An introduction to writing effective CVs and good interview technique will be invaluable to students. If it is possible to involve experts from the University Careers Service, students will benefit.

The simplest format for the exercise is for all of the members of one company to apply for a single post. The student handout offers total flexibility in the job description, so some discussion will be needed for groups to decide on the position that they will advertise and the selection criteria for candidates. If time is short, it may be necessary to outline the requirements for the job in advance. Three scenarios are suggested:

i) Website editor
In order to raise their profile the company has decided to launch a website and have already employed an IT expert to set up the page. They now want to recruit an editor for the website. No knowledge of the technical side of the Internet is required as this is dealt with by the IT expert. The candidates must have a solid background in chemistry, and a wider interest in communicating chemistry, often to a non-technical audience.

ii) Marketing
This role is for someone with a chemical background who will liaise with customers and chemists or other scientists working on site. The candidate must therefore be able to understand the technical nature of the company's research and development, and must be able to make this relevant to customers. They must also have the ability to translate a customer's needs into projects that the R&D department can develop. This job requires someone who is technically very able, with commercial awareness and an ability to communicate scientific principles clearly.

iii) Practical Chemist
The students must prepare/receive a technical interview; the panel might also look for good practical skills and a professional approach to laboratory work in the candidates. The job description for this role will need to be fairly specific to allow for some revision by the candidates.

The interviews

Practicalities depend on the number of students participating, and the number of interviews that can be run in parallel. Interviews should be between eight and twelve minutes long, with two to three minutes between each one. Organise the companies so that they only meet each other once – *ie* avoid them acting as both interviewers and applicants to the same company.

A tutor should be present at each set of interviews in order to make sure that the students are properly organised before they start; for example, to ensure that there is an interview timetable on the door, a chair outside for waiting

interviewees, that the room is laid out for the interviews, and roles have been allocated (*eg* who will lead the questions). The tutor should also ensure that the interviews keep to time. Although the tutor is not essential, his/her (silent) presence helps students to take the exercise more seriously.

A form is provided which is similar to one usually filled in by interviewers and can be used to help panels make their final decision, especially if two or three candidates are very close.

Debriefing
A final feedback session is useful, involving all of the students, someone from the university Careers Service and all of the tutors who have observed interviews. In open discussion, the students will probably identify several important points, and the observers/careers advisors will almost certainly have valuable feedback.

Features of this exercise
In this exercise students sit on both sides of the table and might learn more from conducting an interview than from having one. They understand why their colleagues do well or badly, realise why certain questions are effective, and develop the types of answer that might impress interviewers. Input from the University Careers Service during this exercise is particularly effective.

Adapting/extending the exercise
It is easy to modify the basic exercise, but changes may lead to more time being required, or special facilities. Suggestions include:

■ Twenty minute interviews, requiring at least five minutes of technical questions

■ Video the candidates, so they can see their own performance and discuss it afterwards

Assessment

It is simple and effective to provide informal feedback from the panel to the candidates using a comment form, and panels should be asked to identify at least one good area and one area for improvement for each candidate. A mark could be generated by assessing the following (possible maximum marks are given):

CV	20 marks
Letter of application	5 marks
Performance at interview	20 marks
Contribution to the interviewing process	10 marks
The panel's appointment record form	5 marks
Total	60 marks

Appointment Record Form

Job Title:

_____

Number of Applicants:

_____

Criteria for Shortlist:

_____

_____

Final appointment based on:

CV	Letter of application	Presentation	Informal Interview	Formal Interview	Second Interview	Other*

*If 'other', explain:

Date(s) of interview(s):

_____

Insert around six main criteria for the job (e.g. technical ability, initiative, or reliability) in the table below. At the end of each interview, insert your assessment of the candidate against the criteria (A: outstanding; B: excellent; C: very good; D: quite good; E: poor; X: unsatisfactory), and assign an overall assessment (the criteria need not carry equal weight).

Candidate's names	Criteria						Overall assessment
	1	2	3	4	5	6	
1							
2							
3							
4							
5							
6							

Decision:
1st choice

_____

2nd choice

_____

Reasons for final choice:

_____

_____

Names of interview panel:
1)   (Chairperson)   2)   3)

4)   5)   6)

Signed: _____   Date: _____

Submit this form with a copy of the advertisement attached.