



# MASTERING THE PANEL INTERVIEW: A FIRST STEP TOWARDS A PUBLIC SECTOR CAREER

You are an experienced private-sector leader with a proven record of success. And you've just been invited to interview for a top public-sector position that offers competitive remuneration and a chance to take on new and impactful challenges.

You want the job. The big question you're facing now is—how should I prepare?

There are many people who have found themselves in this position. Increasingly, private-sector leaders are looking to government and the broader public sector, or even non-governmental organizations, for their next great challenge.

For accomplished leaders who are craving to explore new career frontiers, a move to the public sector can be exhilarating and fulfilling.

However, all too often private-sector leaders overestimate their ability to navigate the public sector hiring panel, a critical step in the public sector recruitment process.

Although most professionals have been through their fair share of job interviews, a meeting with a public-sector panel offers a unique set of challenges.

If you are considering a move to the public sector, here is a checklist to help you excel and leave a lasting, positive impression during your interview.



### **Be mindful of the initial question.**

Although interview panels can take many different approaches, candidates are frequently asked some version of this question: “Please introduce yourself and tell us why you are a good fit for this job?” It’s a simple question; however many seasoned leaders struggle to come up with a concise and impactful answer. Far too often, interviewees are not prepared for this type of question. A common pitfall they make is to talk only about their experience and academic and professional credentials, assuming these details speak for themselves. In the public sector, however, interviewers and hiring managers are equally interested, if not more so, in the candidate’s personality and their potential contributions to the role beyond their list of accomplishments. Candidates must be prepared to enunciate how and why they want to serve the public or fulfill the mission of the organization.

### **The interview process is structured more like an exam than a casual conversation.**

In many private-sector organizations, job interviews are conducted in a more informal and dynamic fashion, much like a conversation. Questions are asked and candidates have the leeway to take the discussion in a number of different directions. Out of an abundance of caution about making the panels fair for all candidates, public-sector interviews tend to be more rigid, often relying on a fixed Q&A format, where each question is read in sequence. That means that candidates must prepare and carefully consider their answers. If they fail to make an important point, they may not have an opportunity to address it later in the interview.

### **Do not underestimate the importance of DEI.**

Both sides of the public-private divide recognize the critical importance of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) as a guiding principle in talent management. However, private-sector leaders can often underestimate just how top-of-mind DEI is for hiring panels. All candidates facing the panel will probably express support for these principles. The truly great candidates—the ones that are more likely to land the job—can demonstrate that support with concrete examples of how they promoted DEI in their previous roles.





### **Share anecdotes and effectively use storytelling.**

Rather than expressing their commitment to important principles valued by public-sector organizations, candidates should use storytelling to demonstrate this commitment. By recounting their professional or personal experiences to drive their message, candidates can foster a deeper connection with the panel. Instead of just reciting their responsibilities and values, a story allows candidates to describe how they executed on those responsibilities and values. Storytelling (without going on at length) is a significant skill in this context.

### **Showcase your knowledge about government and Crown entities.**

One of the quickest ways to tank an interview for a public-sector position is to demonstrate little or no understanding of how government is structured, the relationship between public servants and politicians, and the current challenges facing the organization. Conversely, comprehension of these questions will serve as table stakes, giving the candidate the opportunity to garner serious consideration by the panel.

### **Do not underestimate the differences between “shareholders” and “stakeholders.”**

In the private sector, leaders must consider the impacts of their decisions on their employees, their customers, their shareholders, and possibly a Board of Directors. In the public sector, leaders are expected to anticipate and respond to the needs and wants of a broader spectrum of “stakeholders”: unions, the broader community, special interest groups, and elected or appointed officials. The public sector has a much wider array of constituencies to manage. When prompted, candidates must be able to articulate this difference in their panel interview.

### **Do not be afraid to ask questions.**

Given the structured format of a public sector interview, questions are presented in rapid succession. In case a question is unclear, it is advisable to ask the panellists to rephrase or elaborate on the question. Avoid lengthy answers that don't address the question effectively or correctly.



## **Be prepared and present your best self.**

Private-sector leaders who advanced through promotion may have forgotten what a job interview is really like. Some may have never experienced a formal interview, or may think that the public sector is inherently more casual. The impression you make during an interview can determine whether you are offered the job or not. Some "must do's" are: dress professionally, don't read from notes, and start the interview by greeting your interviewers and thanking them for considering you for the position. The panel will evaluate all aspects of your interview—tone, knowledge, and appearance.

More and more private-sector leaders are finding that the new and different challenges offered by public-sector roles are exhilarating and help stoke new job-related passion. But to win the opportunity to make that jump, they need to do their homework on the best manner to impress a public sector hiring panel.

In the world of public-sector leadership, a measure of preparation goes a very long way.

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