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Overview

This document summarises an informal survey on interview techniques and experiences. There were about 15 respondents from the BCSWomen specialist group – some are in senior roles at large companies, some work in small software houses, some are job-seekers who have shared their recent experience. Each section includes selected quotes from these surveys, and maybe a summary. All bullet points come directly from people's responses and are largely unedited – they have, however, been anonymised.

Panel size: how many people were interviewing? Where were they from?

Most people were interviewed by 2-3 others, sometimes with human resources (HR) present.

- Three - The immediate manager to the post, and sometimes the outgoing incumbent or a peer to the manager, and occasionally the HR person
- Most of my face-to-face interviews have been with two people - usually one hands-on practitioner (test lead, senior tester), and one person at manager level (but still technical). I have had internal interviews for jobs that were with one person from HR.
- Most of the interviews I've conducted have been done with another person as co-interviewer. As an interviewer, it's good to be able to take turns with questions - when my colleague is asking questions, I'll often be watching carefully to see if there are any "gaps" that I can draw out when it's my turn. This is in order to let the candidate show what they can do, rather than to catch them out - there's little more frustrating than discussing a potentially good candidate and saying "well, we think they might be ok, but they just didn't give us enough to go on during the interview. So we'll have to say no."
- Non-commercial: NHS for example is a panel of 2 to 3 people, sometimes the 3rd is HR. Commercial: The number of people varies as there are usually multiple interviews.
- Google: 1 person (male) interviewer. Programming job.
- United Technologies (UT): 4 (all male). Research Scientist job.
- 2 -3 people (one; the hiring manager, two; the hiring manager's boss or peer, three; the HR rep) The HR person is not always there for the whole of the interview, or may be there for the second interview. The second interview is usually with the hiring manager's manager (if they weren't there at the first one!)

Did you have more than one interview?

Most positions involved more than one interview – some phone then face-to-face, some with additional interviews for short-listed candidates, or for a higher person to see candidates. Graduate schemes tend to have whole-day selection events with group elements. Some surprisingly informal experiences also led to jobs.

- There were 4 parts to the interview - a two page answer to a question posed which had to be submitted a week beforehand (I think), a timed test along the lines of a Sudoku style set of questions again taken about 1-2 weeks before the interview, a question posed 30 mins before the interview which I had to answer during the interview, and the interview itself.
- They tend to include telephone or video-conference prior to being invited to a face-to-face. Face-to-face the numbers also vary as usually are done in stages. My last one had members of different teams asking things relevant to their area, I guess trying to ascertain how one would interact

- I got my first IT job after I spotted an internal job advert I was completely unqualified for, but which was in the area I wanted to work in: I emailed the manager posting the job, and explained that I wasn't suitable for the job he'd advertised but as I was working in one of the callcentres that used the software his team created, and I was a CS student, I'd really love to see what happened "under the hood" - could I come and job shadow someone for a few days?
- While abroad, after a face-to-face interview I went to networking event and as usual started chatting to people. Unknown to me, one of the chaps I was talking to was from that company and after our discussion he offered me the contract. It was taken as part of the interview but I wasn't aware of it. I don't think that would ever happen in the non-commercial sector as all candidates must have the same question to be fair.

How long did the main interview part last?

Face-to-face interviews seem to last from 30 minutes to 2 hours. Phone interviews are shorter, although respondents also described a 1.5h phone interview with Google and a 2h phone interview with a scientific company so these sometimes go on longer. (I should add that the most scary interview experience I have heard of was with Adobe, where a friend had a full day of interviews over Skype, with a different person each hour for 7 hours. This was followed by several days of interviews in the USA. He does, however, now earn bucket loads of money.)

- Face to face interviews: anything from an hour, to two hours. Most of my interviews run over - maybe it's hard to stop me talking! Phone interviews: normally half an hour at most, though I did have one interview with a particularly lovely director of a small company where he just wanted to tell me all about his company and enthused for ages.
- About half of the time, my face to face interviews came after an initial phone interview. Occasionally this is presented as "just an informal chat about the role" - but it's definitely an interview.
- Phone usually no more than 45 mins and they are pre-booked so you can get ready for them in a quiet space etc. Having said that my last one was unplanned and I was at Barcelona airport waiting for my flight.
- 1.5 to 2 hours (less for testers, more for developers).

Were there any particular questions that stood out?

- They all seem to be really inexperienced and are reverting to "why do you want to work for us?" what are your strengths and weaknesses?" and "what makes you stand out from the rest?" and the "do you want to ask us something?"
- I can't remember the questions but there are usually some hard and some easy – the hardest ones are when they ask you what you would do in a certain situation – you never know what they are looking for. A question that I was asked (and I have asked) is where do you want to be in x years time – generally, the answer doesn't matter as long as you have thought about where you might want to be – to show that you have ambition/plans.
- I was supposed to have prepared a presentation but I hadn't been told so it didn't happen! It lasted an hour. The hardest questions there were where I was asked a point blank question – have you done X? – and I hadn't and you should never give a simple no answer. I got two of those as the first two questions!
- I've been asked questions like: what are your top 3 positives and top 3 negatives – the latter is always hard and the advice that I've had subsequently is to find things that are negatives but which you can then highlight how you are addressing eg struggle to prioritise so I list everything to do and when and if there are conflicts check with colleagues/boss.
- Phone is hard as they tend to be fairly technical but you don't have the aid of paper or body to explain. Add to that accents! Makes it harder. Doing a presentation on the spot can be hard too. You get mentally ready for a practical test and you end up having to prepare a presentation to a question in 30 mins, so you have to think on your feet.
- Google: All the questions were hard. It was an on-line programming exercise. He asked me to solve a problem and I wrote code while he watched through a shared google doc.
- Questions were about my current research and what qualifications I had that would make me a good fit for the job. The job description was a bit vague, so to answer their question I had to explain what I understood the job to be (and hope that is what they meant too), and then explain how I fit into the job I just described.
- We try to ask questions calculated to get the candidate talking – we find many developers become tongue-tied when being interviewed.

Were there any group components to the selection process?

Most of the survey responses did not mention group elements although graduate programmes do seem more likely to involve this kind of activity. Quite often the “group” part is informal and may not even appear to be part of the selection process.

- Guided tour of the building - seem to want you see how interested you are in the business, wanted to see certificates etc, so the admin/HR/secretary did the first bit.
- Have recently had a meet the team over lunch, coffee - to see if you look like a fit
- Never. The closest to this was once for the paper exam part of the interview we sat all together so, while you did the exam on your own you got to see the other candidates
- For grads going into a grad scheme it will be a one day event. Lots of team working exercises. Of a full day selection process expect 70% to be exercises. Then the rest will be a psychometric test, a short one on one interview with a hiring type manager and a short 1-1 interview with a HR person.

Were there any written components to the selection process?

Most of the respondents had experience of some kind of written element – programming tests, psychometrics, skills tests specific to the job or company, or straightforward writing tests which assess the candidate's ability to absorb, analyse and then present information in a written form.

- I do think it's extremely important to conduct test auditions - in other words, to ask candidates for testing positions to actually do some testing during the interview. This may not involve sitting down at a computer - it's more likely to involve presenting the candidate with either a dialog, or a systems diagram, and asking them to come up with test ideas. I need to see if they have that capability for systems thinking, test framing, lateral thinking, and modelling. Are they clearly trying to form a mental model of the system under test, and asking me questions around a theme to test their own understanding is correct; are they creative enough to keep coming up with new test ideas or new questions; are they canny enough to consider that I might not have given them all the information to start with, and determined enough to keep probing for more info?

I've discussed this with other testers, and test auditions are popular with them too: some people will ask you to test a pen, a coffee cup, or a light-switch - the key thing is that there aren't any right answers, it's about showing your thinking. Recruiting good testers is pretty tough - you cannot depend on certifications (in fact, I feel slightly depressed when I see people with test certifications on their CV but no evidence of personal study or reading). I've met people with reams of paper certs who couldn't test their way out of a paper bag, but who sounded really impressive - to start with.

- When applying to "hands on" posts a technical test of some sort will be introduced, as well as a written tech test and psychometrics. Latest posts have been all based on psychometrics, presentation and interview

General interview/selection related points and anecdotes...

This penultimate section details the general comments that people made on the interview process – most of these comments come from actual interviewers (rather than the interviewed) and as such should be of particular interest to those looking to get a job.

- I work as a Lead Consultant for a bespoke software house and I was subjected to a whole day assessment centre. As my role is quite senior, the day consisted of group exercises with the other candidates and one-on-one role play with pretend clients. Each candidate is observed by a member of staff (MD, Director of Consultancy, a Project Manager and another Lead Consultant) and there is a general wrap-up interview at the end of the day (30 mins).
- I have recently been on the other side of the clipboard, and it is a really great way to see someone in action, including the way they relate to other team members. In my opinion, it is a highly effective recruitment method as interpersonal skills and the ability to work under stress are so critical (and difficult to teach).
- When I used to be in charge of graduate recruitment for the division of a different company (1996-1998), there was a 3 activity full day interview. First was an aptitude test and then a team exercise with the interviewees watched and assessed. Over lunch they met with current graduates while we marked the assessment and decided who was going to be interviewed. Those that were not progressed were offered an interview for practice if they wanted it. There was then a 1 hour interview with two people on the panel. What we were looking for were graduates who could talk about what they had done at university – personally I wasn't so

interested in what they had done for their final year project etc., but how they spoke about it and what they had learnt. Graduates need to be able to talk about experiences – both technical and personal.

- When I've interviewed for programming jobs, I'm not particularly interested in the language the candidate has because I reckon that if they are any good they can pick up a new language quite quickly. I think that I'm different from a lot of recruiters in this though. I also know that there have been technical tests on the specific language used by a company, but I've never had to sit one of those.
- Hint: If I mention topics in the informal chat - e.g. I mention that we use exploratory testing, or mention that Elizabeth Hendrickson is a great person to look up (hint hint!), then I'd expect keen interviewees to look those things up before the interview - I wouldn't expect them to understand everything they've read, but it shows they're interested enough to do well in the job, and it's lovely to have candidates asking questions about stuff that they've gone out and found for themselves instead of expecting to be spoon-fed. Testing is essentially all about investigation, if you can't be bothered to do it for an interview you'll be rubbish at the job. So make sure you have a pen and paper to hand for a phone interview and don't be afraid to ask questions!
- An interview I had sometime ago, had a two part test, they gave you the gubbins to set up a connection but the building had no network available only phone sockets with non-standard dial-tone as well as a paper with technical questions. Anyway I read the paper and saw 80% questions were about definitions to acronyms (I am bad at them!) so I started with the practical, got myself access to the internet (via dial-up), logged on to "webopaedia" and copy all the definitions.. of course they offered me the job but I didn't take it. I told them what I have done, they already new (had cameras) but since they were hooked up in acronyms and definitions and I was a problem solver for everyday work we were not a match.
- Recruiting is the most difficult areas of my job. I manage development at a small software house and recruit for both developers and testers. I have been involved in IT recruitment too, but the last one of those I did was to employ an IT manager so now he does IT recruitment I really wish I had had more guidance on how to approach interviews from both sides of the fence when I was a student (I was at Aberystwyth in the early 90's).
- If practical, send out a piece of work for the candidate to develop and return before interview. This is then marked and forms part of the discussions at interview. This tells us a lot about the candidate. Interestingly, we have found that if they put in too much effort then this is almost as bad as not enough! Whether this is practical depends on the market at the time of the recruitment, at the moment with all the folk out there looking for work it would be fine, at other times when developers have been scarce we have had to drop this to avoid our candidates being employed elsewhere before we even get to interview them.
- Include a practical test during the interview. This is (obviously) tailored to the candidate's experience, if they have no javascript there is no point sitting them in front of a javascript test. How the candidate copes with discussing their answers to the test gives a clear indication to their character.
- Prepare the candidate with an interview agenda in advance – this helps them keep focussed during the interview and reduces their stress levels a bit.
- Do not underestimate the importance of team fit. Once we have established that a candidate is up to the job it is important that they fit in our team. The worst thing a candidate can do is not be honest – working in a team only works if you are happy in that team and we have had people leave soon after joining us because, despite being warned about our standards, working practises etc. at interview they just couldn't fit in.

Links to further resources:

Some of the respondents to this survey kindly passed on some links to useful interview resources – these may help people prepare more.

<http://www.kaner.com/pdfs/JobsRev6.pdf> Cem Kaner on recruiting software testers

<http://jrothman.com/blog/http/> Johanna Rothman on Hiring Technical People

<http://steve-yegge.blogspot.com/2008/03/get-that-job-at-google.html> Steve Yegge on getting that job at Google