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Preparing for an EX Interview: Study Guide

Job aid

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Preparing for an EX Interview: Study Guide

The purpose of this guide is to help federal employees who wish to obtain an EX position prepare to be interviewed, with meaningful reflection questions. It is suggested that you spend 20% of your time reading this guide and 80% reflecting on the questions in it.

- Do not wait until the last minute to prepare.
- Seek advice from a few EXs.
- If possible, use the services of a coach and try the Public Service Commission's interview simulation.

1. Do you want to become an executive?

- Why? What is your motivation?
- Think about what will change for you as a new executive versus manager.
 - What changes will you have to make to your leadership style?
 - Are you ready to take the leap?

2. Self-awareness

- Get to know yourself. Reflect on:
 - your strengths and areas for improvement
 - your character and values
 - your journey, achievements, and challenges
 - your lessons learned
- Why you?
- Find 3 words that describe you well. Answering questions with 3 keywords or 3 main ideas allows you to stay focused and to better manage your time considering that you will have a higher level of stress during the interview.

3. The environment

- What are the government's priorities and agenda?
- What are the department or agency's priorities and agenda? Refer to the mandate letter.
- What are the directorate's priorities and agenda that relate to the position?
- Be aware of new trends around the world, in Canada, in government, and in the public service.
 - Example: Having a minority versus a majority government impacts the management of human and financial resources, communications, services, risks, etc.
 - Example: COVID-19: What could be the government's and your department's new priorities related to the position?
 - Other examples of trends to think about: Technology, human resources, demography, finance, security, and mental health.
- Make connections between the position and the agenda, priorities, and trends (from micro to macro level). Make a matrix with the different levels to make the connections and see the relationships.
- If you are not part of the organization, use your network and your contacts to seek additional information and better understand the specific context of that organization.
- Read corporate documents (Annual Report to the Prime Minister on the Public Service of Canada, reports on plans and priorities, annual reports, Office of the Auditor General reports, the department or directorate's plans and priorities, etc.). The purpose of reading is to provide context only since the interview is not a knowledge assessment.

4. The position you're applying for

- Familiarize yourself with the position (summary of responsibilities).

- What are the challenges of the position in terms of the organization and its environment?
- How is the job a good fit for you? Visualize yourself in the job.
- What do you bring to the organization? Do you have innovative ideas?
- What would you do differently?
- What will you do in the first six months and why?
- If it's a dysfunctional organization, what will be your strategies and actions?

5. Key Leadership Competencies (KLC)

- Read and become familiar with [the 6 KLCs](#) and their respective behaviours.
- Read the KLCs for the supervisory level of the position to better understand the expectations for that level and make the connection with yours.
- Visualize yourself as a leader for each KLC.
- Prepare a storyline for each KLC with one example of your experience that will demonstrate your depth. Explain the context of the situation you were in, the challenges you have, how you demonstrated the KLC (your strategy), and what you learned or what the result was.

6. Questions you might be asked at the interview

- The number of questions can vary, but generally there are 4 to 6 questions (5 to 7 minutes per question).
- Types of questions:
 - Behavioural: oriented towards the past. Use personal examples and use the first person. Talk about events and experiences: who, what, where, when, and how.
 - Situational: oriented towards the future. Formulate hypotheses, set up an action plan, focus on the strategic and conceptual elements, target priorities, and have a macro vision of government challenges.

- Personal: oriented towards personal qualities, and strengths.
- Remember to talk about:
 - HR, finance, programs, services
 - Colleagues, employees, bosses, partners, clients, unions
 - Headquarters and regions
- Underlying questions: For any main question, remember that there are always underlying questions that you will need to answer, for example:
 - Who was involved?
 - What were the elements to consider?
 - What actions did you take?
 - How did you do it?
 - Why?
 - What was the result?
 - What did you learn?

Example questions

- Why are you the best candidate? You can answer with three keywords, such as past (my experience), present (my style), and future (what I bring, what I want to learn, what my interests are and what I want to do).
- Describe a conflict situation you were involved in. How did you manage it?
- What are the current challenges in the Canadian public service that you will want to pay specific attention to in your position?
- You work in an organization that provides a service to the public, and the operating budget must be reduced by 20%. How will you manage this situation?
- What are the emerging trends within Canada and around the world relating to the position?
- Tell us about an important change you have implemented.

- How do you build and sustain partnerships?
- You are coming to work in a completely dysfunctional organization. What are the issues and challenges that you will want to take up, and what will you do in the first six months?
- Tell us about a career failure.
- How do you support your employees?

7. During the interview

There are normally 30 minutes of preparation before the interview and 45 minutes for the interview itself.

Keep in mind the following:

- Visualize yourself in the job and speak as if you already have the job. This will demonstrate your passion and your interest.
- Use the first person (“I”) when you talk about how you demonstrate your leadership and how you brought your team and your organization to achieve their results.
- Talk about **how** and **why**. Board members want to understand your thinking process and what is important to you.
- Imagine that this is just a conversation to help the board members get to know you better, and imagine that these are your colleagues.
- Don’t be academic in your answers. Do not recite them but demonstrate them through your experiences.
- Manage your time. Put your watch on the table (not your cell phone) to keep track of time. The time (usually 45 minutes) begins when you enter the room. This gives you around 6 to 7 minutes for each answer. Try to finish just in time at 43 to 45 minutes.
- Manage your stress.
- Your interview also begins when you enter the building, so be courteous with the person who welcomes you.

- Take control of the meeting. Shake hands, maintain eye contact, smile, show confidence, and have good posture.
- Try to find out who the board members are to sneak in key messages that will speak to them.
- Have the board members read the questions. This will give you extra time to prepare your answer and an opportunity to connect with the board members through your body language.
- You can change the order of the questions if a question caught you by surprise.
- Make connections with the big picture.
- Make references to what can impact your DG or assistant deputy minister to demonstrate that you understand their reality and perspectives.
- Be structured in your answers. Have an introduction, development, and conclusion, or use the STAR method: situation, think, actions, results. If you explain a situation, 25% of the time should be used to explain the context and 75% of the time to explain your strategies, actions and results.
- Be clear when you are finishing up your answer to a question so that the board members know that you are almost done. Example: Talk about the results, the impacts, a lesson learned or what you would do differently.
- Be yourself. The board members want to know the real you.
- At the end of the interview, the board members may ask you one or both of the following questions:
 - Do you have any questions for us?
 - If you have questions that the human resources department can answer, this is not the right time to ask them. This type of question does not demonstrate that you are interested in the position; being at the interview stage already demonstrates it, so be strategic in using your time.
 - Do you have anything to add?

- This question is a gift for you! It is a great opportunity to talk about yourself and end the interview by addressing one of the questions discussed in the preparation and reflection section of this document: Are you ready to take the leap? Do you want to become an executive? Why? What is your motivation?
- Make a list of key messages that are important for you and that you want to communicate during your interview. Examples: Support your employees, horizontality, inclusion, diversification, talent management, improve things, respect, integrity.

8. After the interview

- Ask for feedback whether you get the job or not.
- If you do not get the job, try again. Remember, this is your leadership journey.

9. Resources – Public Service Commission of Canada (PSC)

The PSC offers the following assessment services for employees who are in a management position and wish to become an EX:

- [Simulations for the Identification of Leadership](#)
- [Identification of Middle Management Potential](#)
- [Simulation for the Identification of Senior Management Potential](#)
- [Online 360° feedback instruments and services](#)
- [Candidate Achievement Record](#)

These services are provided on a cost-recovery basis.

For more information or to register, contact the [PSC's Consultation Services](#) at:

- Telephone: 819-420-8671 or 819-420-8777
- Email: cfp.cpp-ce-ac-ppc.psc@cfp-psc.ca