

Are You Ready for It? Preparing for Your Next Technical Interview

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ABSTRACT

Whether you are interviewing for a position as an intern, programmer, statistician, standards expert, or technical manager, you are likely to come across... the technical interview.

Even if you have experience and know how to do your job inside and out, do you really need to spend time preparing for an interview? Yes!

Though you may feel it is just going to be questions about what you do every day, there are some points about preparation and presentation that should be considered. Whether you are about to graduate college and go on your first interview, you have not interviewed since before smart phones, or even if you interview every few years, it does not hurt to be a little more prepared for an interview that may determine how and where you spend your days Monday through Friday.

We will cover topics and considerations from preparing for an interview through participating in and following up after a technical interview. Though each interviewer will have different styles, preferences and opinions, we will cover topics that will get you in the interview mindset and get you thinking about ways to present yourself and your skillset to an interviewer.

INTRODUCTION

If you are about to go on your first interview or even if you have experience and know how to do your job inside and out, preparation is key. When interviewing for a position as an intern, programmer, statistician, standards expert, or technical manager, you are likely to come across... the technical interview. In addition to preparing from the perspective of job knowledge, interviews now take on a multitude of different forms, so there are some additional technological and related points for consideration. For example, interview format has changed from all in person interviews to some strictly via phone or web. There are some differences in how you may need to prepare for those different locations. We will start with preparation steps from the pre-interview stage, though the interview itself and into follow-up. The preparation points and considerations given are opinion with input compiled from working with many great interviewers on interviews over the years. The goal of this paper is to provide some topics to think about as you then decide what will work best for you. Every interviewer, company culture, and interview is different so there are no guarantees of what will work for each interview situation. However, we will walk through several aspects of the technical interview and discuss some of the things that you might take into account when preparing yourself. The main take away is, please prepare so that you are ready for it!

PRE-INTERVIEW

WHAT IS A TECHNICAL INTERVIEW?

So, what is a technical interview anyway? You may find yourself speaking with a peer or hands on manager and getting into the details of processes or very position specific skillsets instead of talking with human resources or a high-level manager. The interviewer may assess your skills such as programming, SDTM, ADaM, leadership, statistics, and/or management as applicable for the position. Additionally, this interview may be used to assess skill fit for the position, fit for the team, skill level, attention to detail and quality, work style, and ability to interact with other functions, departments and clients. This may be assessed by an interviewer in several ways. Questions may be open ended such as asking how you might handle a situation with a team member. Or questions may also be very specific with a single right answer such as what result would be obtained when using a particular function. It is also possible that there may be some level of electronic or verbal testing as part of the interview. As the term technical

interview sounds, expect to have some focus on the more technical aspects of a position and be expected to be able to talk about the details of the daily work required for the position.

CURRICULUM VITAE (CV) OR RESUME

Your CV or resume may be your first and only introduction to a recruiter or interviewer and determine if you even get to the interview stage. It is a whole topic unto itself, so we will only briefly cover some direct impacts to the interview.

To an interviewer, the content found in the CV describing skillset is extremely important, but things such as formatting, capitalization, bolding, spelling and grammar cannot be overlooked. Any issues of this type found on a CV, which is such an important written communication, may raise questions about a candidate's attention to detail and quality.

Be able to speak to any claims made in your CV. If there is a statement about being an expert on some topic or having experience in a particular area, be able to back that up. Consider phrasing and the truthfulness of your statements and if you will be able to perform at the level indicated when questioned by your interviewer. That being said, do let your strengths shine. For example, if you have SDTM experience, oncology knowledge, or other specific skills indicate them. Do not assume that it is common and the interviewer will assume you have that skillset.

DO YOUR HOMEWORK

Prior to the interview, there is a bit of homework to be done for preparation. Some information you may not be able to find on your own, so it may be best to ask the recruiter or person who you have been in contact with to set up your interview. The other part of your homework is some advance preparation on your part to get you ready for discussion.

Questions for the Recruiter or Contact Person

Your recruiter or contact person may be able to help with answers to the following questions:

- Where will the interview be conducted? Will it be a face to face interview?
Travel considerations may be needed, confirmation of location, exact address, contact person, any sign in procedures.
- Will it be a phone or web interview?
There may be hardware or software you will need to make sure to have available for the interview such as a video enabled phone or laptop or a specific application for video conferencing.
- What is the format of the interview?
You may be speaking with one person or multiple. If multiple interviewers, you might interview with each individually back to back. But it is also possible that the interview may be a panel interview where you would be speaking to multiple interviewers at the same time. They might take turns breaking the interview into segments or they might have more of a discussion format where everyone is participating jointly.
- With whom will you be speaking and what are their roles or titles?
Knowing the functional roles of the interviewer(s) will help you to present your response in the most appropriate way. There may be a different level of detail or direction that you would take on a response given to human resources vs. upper level manager vs. a peer in the technical position.
- What are the details about the position?
Understand the position for which you are being considered.
- Is there an expected response format required during the interview?
One example is the STAR format. In the STAR (Situation Task Action Result) format, responses given would be expected to describe each aspect of the Situation, Task to be done, Actions that were

taken, and the Result of the actions. (Wikipedia 2018) Even if this is not a required format, it may be a helpful outline to use unofficially and keep in mind for providing complete responses to situational or task-based questions.

Advance Preparations

Prior to having a discussion with a potential future employer, investigate the company background information to know a little something about the company for which you are hoping to work. Whether that be product(s), news, or some basic information about the company.

Write down any questions you may have such as clarifications about the company, the position, expected travel schedule, number of people who will report to you, etc. During the interview you may be too nervous to remember each of them.

Review your CV and be prepared to discuss any items you have listed. It may be beneficial to brush up on some topics that are not as clear in your memory. Some things that might be applicable for review are details on therapeutic areas from past experiences, code as needed, SDTM or ADaM models and implementation guides or other standards. Also review your CV to gather your thoughts about any special topics or initiatives that you have mentioned so that you can describe if asked. If you have listed a great macro that you developed, be able to talk about this accomplishment. For example, why was it needed, what does it do, how did you develop it, what benefit did this provide to others?

Rehearsal

If you are not comfortable with interviewing, you may also want to have a little rehearsal. One way is to consider the position and your CV and think about some possible questions that an interviewer may ask and think about how you would answer them. The focus of this rehearsal would be the content and phrasing of responses. Another way to rehearse could be to have someone ask you questions. In this way, you are practicing both content of responses and the conversational feel of the interview format by vocally responding to another person. Your rehearsal interviewer does not even need to know anything about the technical aspects of the job but can still give you the practice and give you feedback on your volume, confidence, clarity and such so that you can adjust if needed.

THE INTERVIEW

ENVIRONMENT

If your interview is to be via phone or web, your meeting environment is under your control, so something that you must also prepare. It is helpful to have a quiet space with a good connection. If you can log on a little early, test connections and software. Check that the space around and behind you looks presentable and professional. In order to give the interviewer your full attention, remove any distractions. For example, put pets in another room, silence cell phones, and close the office door.

PROFESSIONAL PRESENTATION

Dress appropriately. Presenting a professional appearance is important regardless of location of the interview. Whether you are interviewing from your kitchen or the corporate offices of your potential new employer, proper interview attire is appropriate. Even if your interview is phone only, it may benefit to dress the part. You may find that your focus and responses differ lounging on your couch with background noise vs. in business casual attire in a quiet room even if the interviewer does not see you. Be prompt. Early is better to leave time for arrival, dialing in or potential web connection issues. Show that you value your interview time and the interviewer's time and be prepared so that the interview can start promptly as scheduled.

LISTENING

In an interview, listening is quite important in several areas. Listen to the whole question before responding and do not cut off or talk over the interviewer. Answering the question that you think is going to be asked by hearing a key word at the beginning of the question may lead to a different response than if you listened to the whole question. Understand what is being asked of you. It may help to clarify a

question if needed rather than giving an answer that is not in line with the question being asked. While you may have a topic that you want to cover slightly off topic, the interviewer asked the question for a reason, so it may be best to answer that question first and then broach the subject of the offshoot information. Also, listen and take cues if the interviewer is trying to redirect if your response was not in the right direction or if it is time to move on to the next topic.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Consider confidentiality in your questions and responses. As an interviewer, if someone shares information that may be questionably confidential, it would make me concerned for their understanding of confidentiality within the new company as well. From the other direction, it may not be appropriate to ask the interviewer questions such as what clients they are working with or what drugs they are working on. If you are doing a web interview, take note of your viewable surroundings for confidential information.

VISUAL AIDS

If you are considering bringing visual aids to illustrate some of your accomplishments such as programming books, papers, or code for example, consider if there is a better way to emphasize your great contributions. You will have limited time with the interviewer in the interview session to convey your experiences and paging through and understanding content will take some time. Let us look at code as an example. Showing code to an interviewer shows off your programming talents, right? Not necessarily. Showing code does show that someone wrote code. It does not show more importantly that: you were the one that wrote the code, the code executes, and that the code does the task intended. It may be much more impactful to describe that you had a challenging situation, what process you went about to solve it, what cool new tricks you learned along the way, and what great impact this had. This may illustrate in more detail your pride in that code, why it is important to highlight and additionally illustrate your programming knowledge, experience and problem-solving abilities that may be applied to future situations.

CONFIDENCE

Consider your level of confidence projected. As an interviewer having never met a candidate, it may be difficult to detect if a candidate is being modest about a skill level or really is not comfortable in that particular area. The interview is the time to show your skillset. But finding a balance between letting your strengths shine and overselling is necessary as well.

EXPERIENCES

There is a difference between being an expert, having some experience and having only knowledge of existence and interest in a topic but having no hands-on experience. Highlight what you do know and your achievements at that level. Making statements that you have significant experience or expertise in an area where you have just begun to learn could backfire if you expect to fool an interviewer and are not able to back up that claim with further details. If it is stated on your CV, you should be able to deliver. If you really do not know an answer to a question or have not heard of a topic asked, consider how it is best to respond. Guessing or making up an answer that might be way off could make the interviewer question your decision making and ability to guide others. Answering simply, "I don't know" might make the interviewer question your initiative or problem-solving skills. However, a response describing how you would go about figuring out the answer may help to minimize the negative response. For example, "I have not come across that situation before, but to find the way to do that I would..." Additionally, this would give the interviewer some insight into your thought processes and problem solving.

RESPONSES

It is clear sometimes which questions should have short answers and which should have more detailed explanations. "Which proc would you use to..." – a short answer would likely suffice. "Could you describe the process that you would use to..." – a longer answer would be more appropriate. Other times it is not obvious, and this may differ per interviewer style. For example, "Have you ever created a custom SDTM domain?" Sure, you could simply answer "Yes", however that is likely not the answer that will be the most helpful. In that case, it may help to give a little more information and then check in asking if you could

provide some more detail. In the other direction though it may not be wise to talk too long unchecked on a given topic if the interviewer is trying to move you on to another question. For those detail driven responses, an informal walk through your response in the STAR (Situation Task Action Result) format even if not required may help to make sure you have phrased the response in such a way to cover all aspects of the issue. Let us go back to a more clearly phrased version of the custom SDTM domain question as an example. “Tell me about an instance where you had to create a custom domain.” Informally, this might be something like: “Yes, in mapping a legacy study to SDTM, we had an odd CRF page of XXXX. I was responsible to create the mapping specs, so I researched YYYY and then decided to create domain ZZZZ which was structured as... and this allowed us to capture the data on the CRF page of XXX.” With this, you have described completely the situation that arose, task that needed to be done, the actions that you took to complete that task and the result of those actions.

With any response, do speak clearly. If you tend to speak quietly, monitor your volume and make sure that the interviewer will be able to hear your thought-out answers. Also, watch the pace of your responses so that you are not speaking too quickly for your response details to be understood.

NEGATIVITY

If you are interviewing, there may be a situation going on with your current (or former) employer that you were not happy with. However, use caution with the amount of negativity used in this first meeting with a potential new employer.

Think about the above topics: confidence, listening, responses negativity. While you may not have given it much consideration, your interviewer may consider displays of negativity along with other topics of listening and confidence as quite telling. If a candidate is not listening, cutting me off, overly arrogant and negative, are those the characteristics that I want of someone on my team or someone that I would have communicate with one of my coworkers or clients?

FOLLOW-UP

Hopefully there is also a portion of the interview when the interviewer will ask if you have any questions for them. You may want to have at least one or two written down that you could ask. Whether you ask about team structure, environment, processes, some clarification about the position, or some other question that you have, it will show the interviewer that you have given some thought and shows interest. At the conclusion of the interview if you ask, “How did I do?”, the interviewer will likely not give you that direct feedback. Alternatively, you could thank the interviewer(s) for their time and ask about next steps in the process.

CONCLUSION

All interviewers have different styles, preferences and opinions, so these are opinions and considerations, not hard rules. Tailor to what works best for you and use your soft skills to read the situation and adjust. Even when interviewing at the same company with different individuals, the flow and feel of the interviews may differ. Be aware and read the room during the interview and be prepared to re-adjust your strategy. Is the interviewer interjecting and changing topic? Maybe your responses are on the long side. Are they asking many follow up questions? Maybe you should try to give more detail on the initial response. We have gone over some points to consider in the way you prepare, present yourself, and deliver information. Now it is up to you to bring the skills and be able to back up your CV. Best of luck!

REFERENCES

Wikipedia “Situation, Task, Action, Result.” Accessed February 27, 2018.
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