



Preparing for an Oral Exam



Preparing for an Oral Exam
Tips for Candidates

Table of Contents

Introduction..... 3
Purpose of the Oral Exam..... 3
Composition of the Oral Exam Panel 4
Process 4
Confidentiality 5
Exam Questions 5
How to Prepare 5
What to Expect..... 6
Tips 7
Final Thoughts 8

Preparing for an Oral Exam Tips for Candidates

Introduction

In the public sector, an important part of the testing process often takes place in a group setting. A group of three to five job experts (County and/or non-County) known as an Oral Exam Rating Panel or Oral Exam Panel or Oral Board, is assembled to assess a candidate's responses to behavior-based situational questions pertaining to the specific job. For consistency, in this document the rating panel will be referred to as the oral board raters.

An oral exam is not a hiring interview even though it is conducted in an interview format. **An oral exam is a test.** Oral board raters are asked to give candidates a numerical rating for each question.

This guide has been designed to assist you in effectively preparing for an oral exam.

Purpose of the Oral Exam

An oral exam is used to test the candidate's knowledge, skills and abilities that have been identified as necessary to successfully perform the job. By assigning a numerical rating to each response, oral board raters are able to measure a candidate's proficiency in communication, judgment, human relations, public contact skills as well as the knowledge, skills and abilities called for in the specific job.

The oral board raters are considered subject matter experts. The panel is made up of individuals who have demonstrated those personal qualities of education, experience and human interest needed to judge fairly, the knowledge, skills and abilities of individuals applying for this occupation.

Prior to the start of the oral exam, the oral board raters will have had a chance to talk with a representative of either the department(s) where the jobs are located or with an analyst in Human Resources (or both) to discuss the duties of the job and the special requirements for success on the job. Oral board raters will have also been briefed and/or trained in the use of the required oral board rating form.

Oral exams for County jobs are based on those factors which are related to success on the job. The oral board raters want to learn about the special skills and abilities you have that would enable you to perform the job for which you are being interviewed. You may be asked to tell them about your past training and experience; to discuss possible solutions to typical job problems, or your knowledge of the job's duties and responsibilities.

The oral board raters are prohibited from asking questions having to do with race, sex, age, ethnic origin, sexual orientation, religion, union membership, and disability unless they have been shown to be job related. If you are illegally asked questions in any of these areas, you have the right to refuse to answer the questions without risk of a low rating based on these questions. The oral examination is chaired by staff from Human Resources, who is responsible for ensuring that questions in these areas are not asked. In addition, you will be asked not to discuss illegal or unrelated topics should you voluntarily offer such information.

Preparing for an Oral Exam Tips for Candidates

The fact that you have been invited to the oral exam does not ensure that you have the needed qualifications for the job. The oral board raters are asked to make the final decision after having completed the examination process for all candidates.

Finally, if you do not pass the oral exam, you may have the chance to apply for the same examination the next time it is given.

Composition of the Oral Exam Panel

Oral exam panels may be composed of three to five members (standard is three, five is rare) and may represent the following areas:

1. **Departmental:** Individual(s) knowledgeable about the position and the department's work, purpose and goals. Normally this person's job classification is higher than the classification being tested and/or a supervisor from another department.
2. **Job Classification:** Individual(s) familiar with/experienced in the duties of the position to be filled. This person could come from another County department or from another jurisdiction.
3. **Community/Public:** Individual(s) from the private sector or a community-based organization who has achieved recognition in the field being tested.
4. A Chairperson from Human Resources (who does not rate) will be in charge to make sure each candidate is asked the same questions, monitors the time allotment for each candidate, and reviews the scores and notes of the oral board raters.
5. Occasionally, an Oral Board will be conducted by a member of the Board who has been trained by Human Resources to chair as well as rate.

Process

Oral board raters are selected by the Human Resources Analyst and Department(s) for their fairness, extensive knowledge, credibility, technical expertise, experience, honesty and community commitment to the County's goals. These are individuals with skills at putting applicants at ease and asking questions in a helpful manner.

Prior to the start of the oral examination, the Chairperson will conduct a training session for all oral board raters. The raters will not have access to the candidate's applications and resumes. The job announcement and guidelines for the Oral Board Examination are generally provided to them prior to this training session.

Preparing for an Oral Exam Tips for Candidates

Oral examination questions are all pre-determined and are asked of all candidates in the same manner. Oral board raters can, occasionally, ask follow-up questions for clarity or to obtain additional information for the original intent of the question.

Oral exam raters are asked to make an overall evaluation of the candidate's qualifications – skills, knowledge, and abilities needed to be successful in the position, based on the candidate's responses.

Confidentiality

All applications for County employment are considered confidential material. They are not returned to the applicants or released to anyone except to the department where a person is certified. An oral board rater must not reveal who applied for County employment, nor reveal a candidate's ratings outside of the examination room. As part of the examination, oral examination rating forms are treated in the utmost confidence and ratings or specific comments will not be released. Documentation of responses is important in the context of an appeal.

Exam Questions

The forms of the questions used are selected by the Human Resources to achieve particular objectives. The oral exam questions are scenario based (hypothetical) and tied to the knowledge and abilities on the job specification.

Hypothetical questions allow for consistency in the process, helping to mitigate the variance in candidate's experience and allow for objective rating criteria. You are asked to draw upon your experience to answer the hypothetical questions and are designed so you can reveal your knowledge, skill and ability for the job classification. The oral board raters have examples of what an excellent candidate would say to use as a baseline recommendation and the oral board panel uses their experience and knowledge to determine if you have demonstrated an understanding of the concept being tested.

How to Prepare

1. **READ** the job announcement or job specification before going to the oral exam.
2. **PRACTICE** answering possible questions beforehand. Practice will make you feel more at ease.
3. **UNDERSTAND** what the job is about and know how your skills match the job requirements.
4. Dress professionally.

Preparing for an Oral Exam Tips for Candidates

5. READ the job announcement again just before the oral exam. READ the typical tasks, knowledge and abilities twice. As you read, think about:
 - What did people say about my work in this area?
 - What have I accomplished?
 - How do I feel about my skills and work in this area?
 - What have I studied or been trained in for such duties?

What to Expect

1. The raters have been instructed not to provide verbal or non-verbal cues to the candidate.
2. Never assume the oral board raters know your employment background.
3. Questions are pre-determined and are asked of all candidates in the same manner.
4. Hypothetical questions provide a way to rate interpersonal skills and especially problem solving skills.
5. You can go back and answer a question you missed or add more information to a question you didn't complete.
6. You may shake hands with the panel but it is generally discouraged for time constraints and to reduce health concerns for you and the oral board rater.
7. If you do not understand the question, ask the oral board rater to repeat it. The oral board raters cannot explain or clarify a question.
8. You can make whatever assumptions you want when answering the questions, but tell the raters your assumption.
9. If asked about your education and experience, tell only what is important for the specific job. What you are able to do and the results you have gotten are very important to the raters.
10. The raters are often interested in how you THINK, how you APPROACH situations and your PROBLEM SOLVING techniques.
11. Oral exams have different time allowances based on the number and complexity of the questions. Fifteen to thirty minutes for the entire oral exam is about average. The Chairperson may inform you of the time remaining or give you a five minute warning.
12. The number of questions may range from three to eight. Higher level positions and technical positions may have more questions.

Preparing for an Oral Exam Tips for Candidates

13. Any notes prepared for the oral exam or taken by the candidate during the oral exam will be collected by the Chairperson to protect exam security (i.e. pre-exercise).
14. If the oral exam raters continue to ask you questions, i.e., “Fine. You’ve done that and it didn’t work. What else would you do?”, the purpose may be to see how you think through the process and if you are aware of all the variables. Situations may be put in front of you to see how you handle complexities.
15. The oral board raters and chairperson will take notes while you are talking. Don’t let this distract you. The oral board raters will use these notes when evaluating your responses.
16. Use detail when appropriate but remember the time constraints for the oral exam is very tight. Always be SUCCINCT.
17. Remember, the purpose of the oral exam is to RATE candidates for that job classification. THINK before you respond.

Tips

1. Use humor with caution.
2. DO NOT RAMBLE. The time is very structured and rambling may irritate the members of the oral board.
3. Do not chew gum.
4. Do not ask specific questions about the job; the oral board raters often do not know the answers. Feel free to contact the Analyst later.
5. Do not bring samples of your work to the oral exam. Take these with you to the hiring interview.
6. Do not bring notes with you unless you are directed to as part of the pre-exercise.
7. You may be nervous, it’s okay to take time to gather your thoughts and provide your answers.
8. Speak clearly and distinctly. Oral board raters take your verbal skills into consideration. COMMUNICATION is extremely important for almost all jobs.
9. This is your time; use it as wisely as possible.
10. LISTEN to the entire question before you start to respond. Take your time to formulate your response to the question.
11. Provide responses to the questions without bringing in unnecessary information.

Preparing for an Oral Exam
Tips for Candidates

12. Always remain POSITIVE.
13. Letters of recommendation will not be used by the oral board raters, and are more appropriate for the hiring manger during the hiring interview.
14. Answer all questions in relation to the job you are applying for: skills, knowledge and abilities.
15. Be lively, interested, and excited about the job; show that you want to contribute to the work.
16. The oral board raters wants to know what particular part(s) of your education and/or experience relate to the job for which you are applying, not your entire education and job history.
17. Use action verbs to describe results and accomplishments.
18. Concentrate on what you can do for the County, not what's in it for you!

Final Thoughts

Focus on these three areas:

- Be Prepared!
- Communicate effectively
- Show your motivation