

How to win at Panel Interviews easily

common questions answered

Have you ever lost that much needed promotion job at the last minute at the panel interview?

Have you ever felt too intimidated by panel members?

My first panel interview was also the toughest.

A high-level job was advertised on the website of the professional accountancy body, which I am a member. I checked the listed minimum requirements. I saw I had all it took. I decided to try my luck. I took time to write a custom CV for the job from the perspective of the person who wrote it – in this case was the chief executive officer of a regional association. They wanted a senior person to start a new research and advocacy unit in response to the emerging needs of the profession.

Three weeks after the CV submission deadline, I received an email from the prospective recruiter. It read “Congratulations! You have been shortlisted for interviews for the position you applied for. Interviews will be held in South Africa. You will be contacted again for travel and accommodation arrangements while in SA. See you in SA. Kind regards.”

Guess what I felt when I read that email.

Ecstatic.

The D-day arrived, and I boarded a plane to SA, Johannesburg.

I found three other people at the waiting room. I was not scared, “may be they are here for other reasons or jobs.”

My turn arrived, and my name was called “Mustapha Mugisa”; by a light skinned lady; tall lady in her mid-twenties. If you have seen the ladies that dance at the Zulu King functions, you know what I am talking about. The way she pronounced my name was nice.

I stood up and she led me into the boardroom. It was large. I found eight people (all men) seated around. They had left one chair for me at the front. As I entered they started a conversation on IFRS standards. Then the chairman looked at me and said “you are welcome to South Africa. How are you?” I replied. He then introduced himself and asked all other members to introduce themselves.

The that expected question popped up:

“Tell us about yourself and why you for this job?”

Why do many people worry and sweat at panel interviews when they have 70% chances of predicting the questions which panellists are likely to ask?

Do you worry when they invite you for panel interviews?

If yes, worry no more. I have helped over 47 executives attain top level jobs at both manager and Director level. Of these, seven wanted coaching to win at CEO level Interviews.

I have developed a cheat sheet to help you thrive.

This coaching or guidance is ideal for candidates who have been invited for panel interviews for senior jobs. At higher levels in the organisational structure, Interviewers are looking for leaders. This guide will help fine tune your minds to think and act long-term with a strategic outlook.

The ability to speak with confidence and answer questions from Interviewers perspective can be learnt.

Whether you are a consultant or an expert looking for a better job or an employee looking to climbing the corporate ladder, these tips are invaluable. Positional power or not, you need to get a promotion. The higher you go the better things become. Less legs and hands work, bigger decisions and better pay.

And to do so, at one life in your career you will be called before a group of people to decide your fate. They will give you an opportunity to talk. And that is where this article comes.

By the time you read up to the end of this article, you will discover secrets outstanding candidates use to leave Interviewers on the edge of their seats. Here we go with the common interview questions.

Background

You are before an Interview Panel. I assume you are a lady who has come for mentorship on how to win at your next panel interview for a senior job. You are married with children and want to be promoted to head an Internal Audit department as a Director from your current role as a manager. You work in a private company in the health sector. You have been with your present employer for

over three years and you have applied for a new role at senior level that has recently been advertised. You have read the job description for the new role and have already been shortlisted. You know a lot about the company, including the key people, the strategic outlook and major challenges.

Q1: Introduce yourself to us?

All interviewers will ask this question. Below are indicative notes you need to include in your personal introductions:

I am called Mustapha B Mugisa, a Finance Professional with wide experience in Internal audit and risk management. I have a lot of experience in risk management specifically in the health sector. I am a transformational leader who is highly knowledgeable in the health sector with strong background in issue of corporate governance. I have strong values backed with my profession including integrity, accountable, team work and excellence. I am committed and above all a mother.

Take note:

Focus your responses on demonstrating your background and its relevancy to the job at hand.

Now your turn:

Thank you, Chairman. Good morning Ladies and Gentlemen.

*I am called xx. I am one of those few executives who can say is a **professional accountant**, with a lot of experience in corporate governance specifically in the **health sector and mean it**. I am a wife and **mother of two**.*

I am a transformational leader who is highly knowledgeable in the health sector with strong background in issues of risk management and internal controls implementation. I am a fellow of Certified Chartered Accountants and member of ICPAU in good standing. I live by the strong values as required by my profession including integrity, accountability, team work and excellence. I have been part of the company's transformation from the beginning to where we are now. Working closely, with Top Management, I have been part of the current strategy and I am confident of the choices and the direction we have embarked on.

*My knowledge of the **health sector audit and risk management** spans over the last 20 years. As the Manager Internal Audit xx, I understand xx from all points of view as far as sustainable operations, risk, governance and the future of audit are concerned. Plus, I understand the industry, the players and our stakeholders. This gives me a deep understanding of our environment and the industry from all points of view, better than any other person.*

I know the key industry players and how we fit in.

*As **a mother**, I am married and blessed with xx children. I understand I must lead with integrity as I have to be a role*

model and a good mother to my children and to those who trust me with responsibility.

That is why I am here requesting you to promote me in this position of Director Internal Audit, Risk and Compliance. Since the new CEO joined, we adopted a risk-based approach. I developed a strategy for the IA Directorate which I have been implementing. I have prepared a short paper that I will request you later to allow me to present to you before I leave. Thank you so much for this opportunity.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Note

The above introduction may look verbose. Remember this is a senior role and you need to demonstrate your profile and how it fits in. With excellent public speaking skills, the answer flow would help demonstrate your ability to lead. The answer are in three parts to cover wider perspective of your profile relevancy.

Q2: Why are you the right person for the job?

I have been part of this company's story and I share a passion to see the organization leading in the health sector supply chain.

I have worked with xx (company name) since it had a small budget through and until now.

Having served as a Senior Manager Internal Audit, I have been involved in major decision making for development including

introduction of the [your company name] risk-based auditing approach. I have overseen the growth of the IA department to where it is now. We are now in the process of automating the department to help us deliver value to the Board as far as governance, risk and compliance are concerned.

In addition, I was part of the [*Insert your company*] strategy that set the pace for the recovery / or growth or transformation [*pick one applicable word*] of [*insert company name*].

And now we are in phase 2 of strategic plan, which is consolidating our achievements for unprecedented growth. You need a professional like me who understand our history – where we have come from and where we are heading. This is a time of consolidating growth – you need a professional who will not make ‘abstract’ recommendations that are out of touch with reality at [*company name*].

I have served [*inset company name*] with distinction and allegiance for the past [*insert years at company*]. There is no record of performance improvement or disciplinary action whatsoever on my file. At this stage of my career, I deserve this Director position to empower me to engage other peers and demonstrate that allegiance and career focus is rewarded at [*insert company name*].

As Director IA, I understand the future of this company and will provide independent governance, consulting and risk management advise that is practical. I seek your trust in me.

Q3: If you got the job, what will be your focus in first 100 days or first 3 months?

[This question gives you an opportunity to shine. Demonstrate your achievements and what you have done thus far to make an impact]

1. I will focus on developing the new Agenda for IA department in light with the new developments and choices as articulated in the strategy. I will deepen engagements with the Audit Committee to understand their new and emerging expectations from the IA department since I will report functionally directly to the Audit Committee. This understanding will help me map out the new IA strategy and focus areas aligned to the needs of the Audit Committee and other stakeholders like management that will as well be informed by the needs of the organisation and external stakeholders we work with.
2. I will then specify the systems the department needs to execute her directorate strategy including of Break down plan for ownership and emphasizing implementation of the Annual operation plan – showing clearly the audit areas as informed by risk appetite.
3. Working with my team to execute and deliver insightful reports that offer value in areas of strategy consulting, risk, compliance aimed at operational resilience and growth. I have been at the driving seat
4. I plan to focus to close gaps that can be achieved within the period such as close all implementation gap issues by aligning all staff into KPIs that are easy to monitor, strengthen the M&E department.

I have with me a departmental strategy that is aligned to the [*insert company name*] enterprise strategy. I have also documented clear scorecard and I tasked each staff in my team to document their work plan which provided for the departmental budget, which is also attached. The IA annual workplan as you can see is risk based meaning our focus shall be on those areas that are mission critical to our company but also have high risks. I request you give me this role to implement this strategy and workplan.

Q4: Any question to the Interview Panel?

[Demonstrate presence of mind and intelligence by asking questions. Never say, I don't have questions. It may show lack of interest. Research about the company and try as far as possible to formulate critical questions to ask the panel that are at the level of the job you are looking].

1. What are the expectations of the Board on the Director Internal Audit? What would the Board call a work well done?
2. Which kind of support does the Board give the Director Internal audit?
3. There has been a huge shift from pre-audit to risk-based auditing. However, this requires facilitating internal audit in terms of resources people and tools for data analytics. Which budget are you willing to commit for these areas so as to get maximum value from the Directorate under my leadership?
4. What is your philosophy? Do you believe that good leadership nurtures talent through succession planning or not? Explain.

You have been a manager internal audit at [insert company], what will you do as a Director Internal Audit, which you have not been able to do in your roles of internal audit, which is critical?

Thank you, a lot, for the question *[look at the person who asked it]*.

For long, the current structure at *[insert company name]* has not adequately aligned to support the strategy especially as far as issues of risk management and compliance are concerned.

There is limited facilitating of the Internal Audit function by the Board.

For example, whereas [*insert company name*] implements a strong ERP, we lack the right skills and tools to fully interrogate the data to provide a clear dash board of any areas of risks. Also, no budget for audit command languages as well as budget to attract quality IT auditors at [*insert company name*] to align with our automation and manufacturing agenda strategy for growth.

This issue worries me.

I am happy that [*insert company name*] leadership includes me in the strategic planning processes. I know the [*insert company name*] strategic plan is good; however, our Internal audit plan is not always fully implemented due to lack of funds.

In my role as Director IA, I will deepen engagement with the executive as well as Audit Committee Chair to get the right support to transform the [*insert name*] Internal audit to world standards.

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Success in your interviews. To win at an Internal audit interview job at a high level, there are things that must be done.

NB: remember to know the role of the board and their mandate. And the governance structure especially who Internal Audit reports to. The difference between IA and External Audit. Also know the following well:

- a) Why you need the job? Why are you the best candidate for the job?
- b) How do you expect to lead the existing team at [*insert name*] when you have been part of them?
- c) Where you want to be in the next 5 years [hint – don't say to be a private consultant] tell them what they want to hear. Being a Director I A of a very vibrant [*insert name*] with over 90% outreach in Uganda.
- d) Know how the board sets policies and procedures
- e) Understand the ISO 31000:2018 risk management; ISO 27000; and other relevant standards.
- f) Understand your mandate clearly
- g) Understand risk assessment process and risk policy and risk appetite
- h) Know IPPF
- i) Know definition of internal audit

Ends.

Need help?

Are you preparing for a panel interview at a senior executive level? Do you need a coach to help you succeed? Contact Mustapha B Mugisa today at www.mustaphamugisa.com I will review your CV; and provide you indicative answers to common questions depending on the job you have applied for. For online mentorship, send Skype to mmugisa or email mugisa1[at]gmail.com I can mentor you to get any dream job, if you have technical qualifications.