



# One-to-one discussions

One-to-one discussions and interviews are vital techniques of initial assessment. Providers frequently get lots of really valuable information from a relatively straightforward discussion. It's important to capture this and then put it to good use as part of initial assessment.

## When you might find them useful

You probably already use interviews and one-to-one discussions with potential learners as part of your recruitment processes. These are essentially screening interviews. They are valuable in helping to ensure that the right people are on the most suitable programmes. However, candidates are inevitably on edge and anxious to create the impression that they think you want to see. Because of the 'fog' that these situations introduce, they tend to be of limited value in revealing the sort of information that can be of huge value in initial assessment.

One-to-one diagnostic discussions can be more useful if they take place once the learner has been recruited on to a programme and if they are designed to build on that mini-success. At this stage the anxiety and stress of recruitment are in the past; the focus is on designing the most suitable learning plan possible for the individual, taking into account their strengths, weaknesses, experience, aspirations and the opportunities available to them.

## What you and your learners could get out of them

One-to-one discussions can be an extremely valuable means of initial assessment – put them at the top of your list to make them as effective as possible. They are a valuable opportunity to discover together areas of strength, aspirations, attitudes and barriers to learning. They will also give you some insights into possible reasons so that both trainer and learner understand and can move forward with confidence.

The process itself shows that learners are valued and it helps build a sound, collaborative learning relationship, based on openness, trust and confidence.

## Carrying out the discussion

**Give positive feedback and reassurance about areas to be developed.** Focus on the positive points of what learners have already achieved and make any credible links to what they are embarking on. Make it clear that they have a learning journey before them and that they are not alone.

**Listen actively with 100% attention.** Avoid interruptions from colleagues, other learners or (especially) phone calls. Interrupting a discussion to respond to a ring-tone is nothing short of a direct insult to the other person. If you are likely to receive a particularly important call during the discussion, it is better to reschedule the discussion than have it interrupted.

**Synthesise the information.** Summarise periodically during the discussion what you think you have explored and give the learner a chance to contribute to the summary. This shows that you are paying full attention, that you are making connections between the different things that have been said and it also gives you a chance to make notes of the synthesised points.

**Be aware of language.** Avoid jargon. Be aware that your learner is new to the organisation, probably new to work-based training and may have more of a focus on their chosen occupational area than on the jargon of training.

**Say HOW you will help them to develop and achieve their aspirations.** Be quite specific about the measures that you and the organisation will take and make sure that you both understand the implications of the proposed course of action. Also, be prepared for learners not to grasp everything fully in one go. Be prepared to revisit the proposals with the learner a little later to clarify any uncertainties. It goes without saying (so we'll say it!) that you should not make any promises that you cannot keep – a little way down that path await mistrust and disillusionment.

**Setting for interview, sitting positions, eye-levels, environment, etc.** Ensure that the setting is reasonably quiet and free from distractions. You may have to conduct the discussion in the workplace. If so, insist that it cannot be done while the learner 'gets on with their work'. A sitting position where you are not directly opposite each other is helpful to avoid impressions of conflict. Side-by-side is less hazardous but does reduce the amount of eye contact that you can maintain and the little nods that say 'I'm listening and I'm interested in what you are saying'. Try to ensure that your eye-levels are roughly the same – this will contribute to the feel of a discussion between equals rather than one where one of you is in a position of authority.

**Avoid patronising – treat the learner with respect.** This is probably the culmination of all the preceding points and it is vital to a successful discussion. Your learners are young adults but they may not have been treated as such at school, so they will be looking for a very different attitude in the workplace and in associated learning. You are there to help them achieve their aspirations, and their aspirations give you the opportunity to do so.



# Using the discussions protocol

The protocol is not a list of questions. It identifies some of the areas that could be explored and within which you will need to frame your own questions and (most importantly) supplementary questions that help ‘drill down’ to discover authentic detail about the learner – especially about specific experience and attitudes. Supplementary questions also give you a great opportunity to show that you are really listening.

**Introductions.** Here you have the chance to let the learner know who you are (and what you like to be called) as well as to establish the purpose and process of the discussion. It’s about getting to know the learner a bit better so that the best possible learning plan can be drawn up to meet their individual needs.

**Aims and aspirations.** Use the discussion to check that any aims or aspirations are genuinely ‘owned’ by the learner. It is all too common for learners to latch on to aspirations (particularly to do with possible work) which other adults have given them in careers interviews, etc. If these are not the true aspirations of the learner, progress is almost guaranteed to be slow and reluctant! By all means explore aspirations outside work, but take care not to overstep the mark by intruding into matters where you could be seen as meddling.

**Skills and qualifications.** This is an opportunity to explore not only the qualifications that the learner has achieved in school or elsewhere but also the skills that, even though they are not formally recognised, play a part in how they are able to conduct their life.

**What the learner is good at.** This area gives the learner an opportunity to identify skills that they would not necessarily associate with qualifications or even training, such as getting on with people, not being fazed by new situations, having the confidence to take charge in situations. These may well be closely related to the ‘wider’ key skills.

**What the learner enjoys doing/what they have enjoyed doing.** This presents an opportunity to identify areas and then explore with the learner the application of key skills within those activities. This area of discussion often reveals very useful aspects of the learner’s preferences and enthusiasms which can be linked to, or even incorporated into, their learning programme.

**What the learner needs to develop to fulfil aspirations.** This obviously links back to the aims and aspirations theme. By all means prompt the learner to think about what skills they need to develop and be prepared to bring your knowledge to the table in suggesting skills gaps that you can see. Don't forget that this is a two-way discussion, not an interrogation in which you ask the questions! Equally, don't be afraid to admit that you don't know everything about the skill implications of their aims and aspirations – just agree any areas where you are both uncertain and perhaps you can agree to do a bit of research together. (This might be another useful opportunity as part of initial assessment.)

**What and how the learner has enjoyed learning.** The starting point in this area might be WHAT the learner has enjoyed learning, but the important aspect is really HOW they have enjoyed learning it. Be clear that this is not a question of identifying preferred learning styles – although it will probably be just as reliable as any of the (now largely discredited) learning style inventory tests. It's about opening up their minds to an extended range of formal and informal learning processes that they can use within their programme.

**What has not worked well in the past.** Be careful not to collude with learners that 'school was a waste of time', 'I'm useless at learning from books', etc. You are simply identifying any means of learning that has been a distinctly bad experience for the learner or in which they have failed to achieve. You may want to plan to use strategies initially where the learner feels comfortable and then extend the repertoire to include as full a range as possible.

**What else might get in the way of learning.** Here you are simply looking to identify potential barriers to learning, such as poor reading skills, relationships at home or at work, lack of resources for learning in the workplace. Don't offer to solve all the problems. At this stage acknowledge and note the problems so that you can take a look later and see if any reasonable (and non-intrusive) means can be used to reduce their negative effect.

**Opportunities to talk, ask questions, express concerns.** Throughout the discussion, be prepared to wait for the learner to ask questions or make comments. They may not have the language skills that you have, so this may take a while. Periodically stop and check whether the learner has anything to ask, anything to add or any concerns about what you've been discussing.

**Opportunities for the learner to voice expectations of the provider.** All through the discussion it's important to make it clear to the learner that its purpose is to help put together a plan for their learning over the course of their programme. As such, it is an opportunity for them to make suggestions as to what they think would make the experience better for them. Be careful not to raise unrealistic expectations, but always be prepared to consider every suggestion.