



Assessing candidates' skills in job interviews:

A complete guide

Contents

- [3 Introduction](#)
- [4 How to structure an interview](#)
- [5 Effective questioning: The star model](#)
- [6 A comprehensive assessment: Balanced scorecard](#)
- [7 Assessing a candidate's soft skills](#)
- [8 Assessing a candidate's technical abilities](#)
- [9 Testing your candidates](#)
- [10 Industry-specific interview tips](#)
- [11 Further reading](#)



**KATE CAMPBELL, SENIOR MANAGER
PAGE PERSONNEL FINANCE:**

“Missing just one part of the questioning process could mean that after the interview you are still unclear about the candidate’s skills. Similarly, the candidate may leave feeling as though they did not have the opportunity to fully sell themselves or truly understand the opportunity.”

Introduction



In a market where it is increasingly difficult to attract and hire top talent across all business sectors and industries, it has never been more important to ensure that you have a strong interview and assessment process in place.

Top talent is in high demand and candidates often need a lot of convincing to change roles. When you come across a standout candidate during a recruitment process, it is not only crucial that you identify their potential, but that you know how to effectively assess them in an interview.

With over 40 years of recruitment experience and with the combined insight from our four core brands Page Executive, Michael Page, Page Personnel and Page Outsourcing, our team of over 1000 frontline recruiters are well-placed to advise on how to run a streamlined, effective interview process.

In line with the release of our Skills Checker tool, which allows professionals to assess the skills they need to progress, we have compiled this complete how-to guide for interviewing candidates.

Our consultants are not only experts in recruitment, but they are also specialists in the business sectors and regions that they recruit within. Using this knowledge, the guide explores the importance of clearly defining the key skills needed to fill a vacancy, techniques for assessing soft skills and testing a candidate's technical abilities, and provides an overview of how an effective process should run.

To help equip your business with the right talent, our flexible team is uniquely positioned to help find the right people to drive your business objectives. On behalf of PageGroup in the UK, I hope you enjoy the read.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Nick Kirk', with a horizontal line underneath.

Nicholas Kirk
UK MANAGING DIRECTOR

How to structure an interview



VICTORIA STARR, SENIOR MANAGER PAGE PERSONNEL FINANCE:

“Top candidates like to feel as though their potential employer is equally prepared and taking the interview process seriously. In the current competitive market, it is imperative that you sell your opportunity and ensure that the candidate is bought into the process. Failure to do this could result in the loss of a strong candidate to a competitor.”

In order to attract and hire the best talent in the market, you need to be well prepared.

1 Introduction

A friendly and professional approach to the initial introduction is advisable. This will help a candidate to relax and make them feel more comfortable throughout the process.

2 Provide an overview of the role

Highlight the key responsibilities of the position and provide some more detail about the team that they will be joining. Be sure to really sell the opportunity.

3 Comprehensive questions

After a short introduction, ask the candidate what they know about the business and this will highlight their level of interest. It will also show how much they prepared for the interview and lead into a series of CV, competency, and personal questions to assess their skills.

● CV-based

To start, these types of questions are important to delve deeper into some of the key skills and achievements listed on a candidate's CV.

● Competency-based

These questions provide an insight into the candidate's past experiences as they require much more comprehensive answers, including specific details about a situation where they have utilised key skills.

● Personal based

Some simple questions about their interests, goals and hobbies can provide a better understanding of the candidate as an individual to assess team fit.



ROB BALES, OPERATING DIRECTOR MICHAEL PAGE PROCUREMENT AND SUPPLY CHAIN:

“A thorough interview process should aim to balance the need to assess candidates' technical and soft skills with the increasing need for candidate engagement. Millennials, in particular, need to feel a high level of engagement during an interview or they will be drawn to other opportunities. In a candidate-driven market, you must compete for the best talent.”

4 Opportunity for the candidate to ask questions

Allow time for the candidate to ask questions about the business.

5 Arrange testing and provide feedback

Where testing elements are required in the process, be upfront about when this will take place. Similarly, ensure prompt feedback to avoid losing the candidate to other processes.

Effective questioning:

The star model

One way to structure interview questions is by using the STAR method. This is used as a technique to answer interview questions which we recommend to our candidates preparing for interviews, but it can also be used to shape the meeting from an employer's perspective.



**DAVE COLLINGWOOD,
MANAGER MICHAEL PAGE TECHNOLOGY:**

“The most common method when assessing a candidate is what is referred to as the STAR method. This is a form of questioning that asks four separate questions within one, requiring four quite detailed answers.”



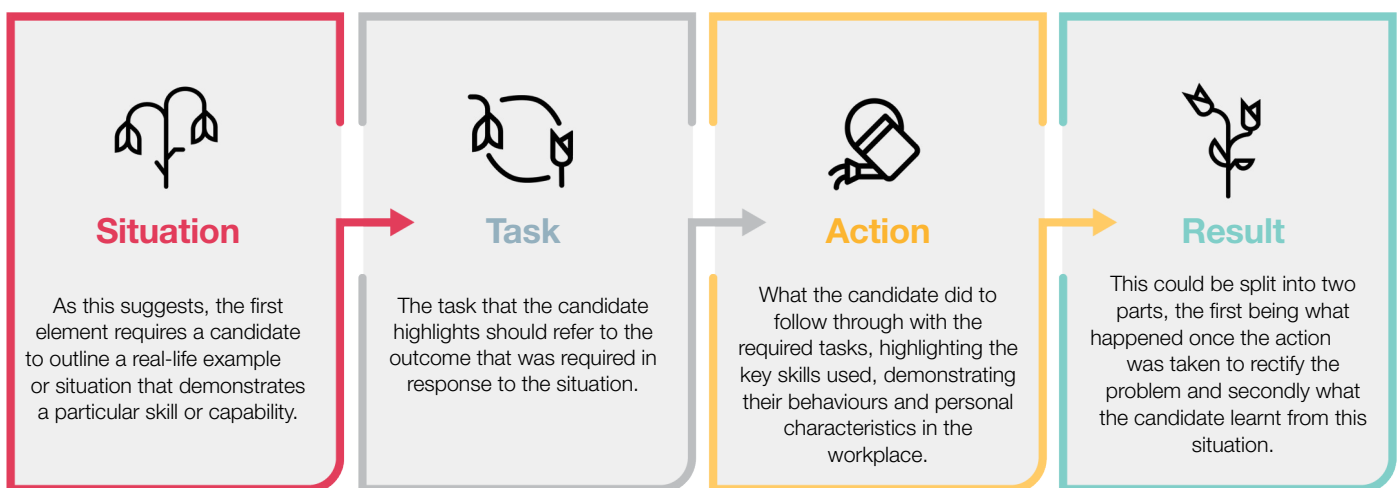
**CHRIS MADINE,
BUSINESS DIRECTOR MICHAEL PAGE LOGISTICS:**

“The STAR technique is tried and tested for both candidates and clients. The situation, task, action, result format can be used by interviewers to gather relevant information about a specific skill and the capabilities that the job requires.”

For example, a question used to assess a candidate's skills would be focused as such:

“Can you give me an example of a project that was behind schedule (situation) - how you decided to bring it back to fruition (task) - what you did (action) - what lessons were learnt from this and how this impacted future projects (result)?”

The STAR model focuses on behavioral and situational type questions broken into four key elements. The acronym stands for Situation, Task, Action and Result.



This method allows you to identify the way people adapt, take charge, influence an outcome, and learn from the challenges that they are faced with.

A comprehensive assessment:

Balanced scorecard

A balanced scorecard approach to a candidate assessment offers a structured model to review your top candidates. Base your analysis on four to six of the core competencies you are searching for in an ideal candidate. Use the findings from your interview to compare the applicants.

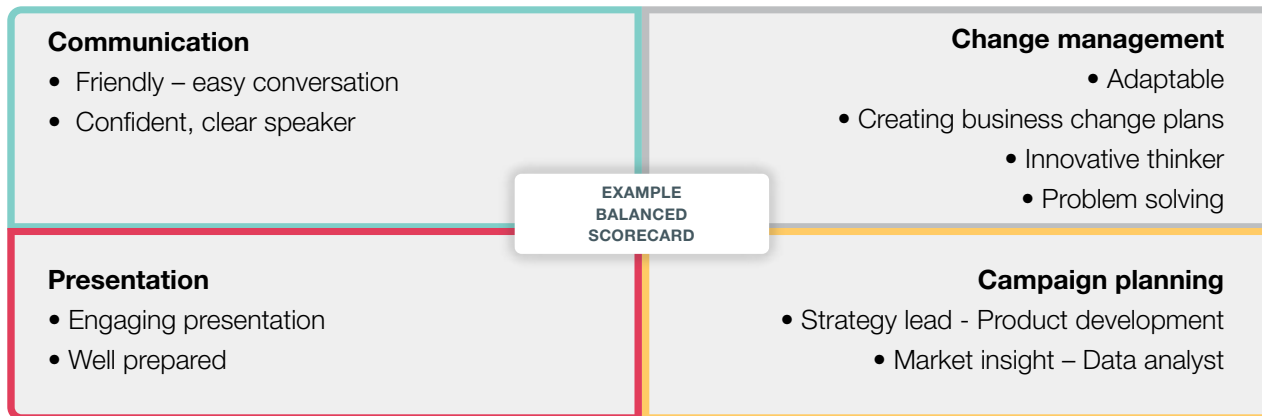


MARK BEACOM, OPERATING DIRECTOR MICHAEL PAGE:

“It is important to start an interview process with a definitive list of core skills. The range of soft skills, in particular, is very broad. If you don’t prepare properly, you risk entering an interview with too many in mind and without a clear priority. It can be difficult to discount a soft skill, prioritising is key.”

Once you have defined the essential skills, use these competencies as categories for your assessment. Based on a candidate’s CV and interview, list the skills, experiences, working examples and personal characteristics that the candidate possesses which fall under each of those categories.

For example, if one of the key competencies listed is ‘develop a change management plan’, you might list experience such as internal and external communication, stakeholder engagement, strategic planning, adaptable, innovative and/or professional along with relevant past roles and examples discussed in the interview.



If you adopt this method correctly, you will have a snapshot of each of your top candidate’s skills and capabilities that match your defined core list of skills for the role. This is valuable for a number of reasons:

1. It allows you to revisit each candidate’s interview at a later date and compare candidates while maintaining accuracy.
2. Ensures you make a well-informed decision on who makes it through the interview process.
3. Enables the hiring manager or recruiter to provide the candidate with structured feedback.



GRAHAM LUCAS, MANAGING DIRECTOR MICHAEL PAGE:

“The key to a successful interview is in the preparation. To avoid biases, approach an interview with a clear set of skills to assess, with a weighting of importance applied, as well as a good set of questions that allow the keys skills to be demonstrated and discussed. In doing this, you are more likely to walk away with a much clearer idea of how well a candidate will perform in the role.”

Assessing a candidate's soft skills

The soft skills, or transferable skills, that your employees possess are key to any recruitment process. These determine how well they will work with others, the level of influence they will hold when dealing with internal and external stakeholders, and their ability to overcome challenges. There are countless soft skills that an individual may possess, many of which are very difficult to assess. So where do you start?



DAVE COLLINGWOOD, MANAGER MICHAEL PAGE TECHNOLOGY

“The difficulty with soft skills is that these will change depending on the role. Every position has different requirements, for example, sales professionals will need to demonstrate an ability to influence, and for management roles, applicants will need to possess a higher level of empathy. The issue arises when deciding how to assess these.”

Identify the skills key for success

Before you can begin, it is important to define the key soft skills that are essential for the role. What are you looking for? Is it someone who is great at communicating with and persuading others? Or someone who is fast thinking and innovative, to develop new approaches to the way your team works?

Consider the structure of the interview

When attending an interview, candidates like to feel that the interviewer is equally prepared and conducts the interview in a professional manner. In the current competitive market, it is imperative that you sell the opportunity to the candidates to ensure that they are bought into the process.

Read past their response

Quite often when assessing soft skills, it is less about the responses you receive and more about the way in which candidates handle the questions. Their demeanour, the way they shape and present their answers, and the way they interact with people before and after the interview has taken place, all paint a picture of an individual's character. A candidate's overall approach to an interview can tell you a lot about their personality and can also indicate their attitude towards tasks in a working environment.

Follow up

If after an interview, you want to clarify a candidate's competency in a particular skill, a character reference may be required. However, you can also seek informal feedback on the candidate from others who have met them. This could be someone who referred them to you or even the receptionist.



ALEX HALL, DIRECTOR OF CUSTOMER ENGAGEMENT

“Good communication and presentation skills are incredibly important. A positive introduction, the ability to make small talk, a good handshake and manners, are simple but positive signals that demonstrate these

key soft skills. Above and beyond this inquisition from the applicant highlights a sharp mind and the ability to provide concise relevant answers shows good listening skills.”



Assessing a candidate's technical abilities

Technical skills are often much more straightforward to assess when compared to soft skills. The key, again, is to ensure that you have clearly defined the skills you need within your team. What technical capabilities should a candidate have and at what level should they be able to demonstrate these skills?

Competency-based questions are essential here. Shape your questions around the core technical abilities using the STAR method and focus on the key competency areas. Be sure to ask for specific details on results and for any figures supporting their examples.



OLIVER NEVEL, OPERATING DIRECTOR MICHAEL PAGE RETAIL:

“For me, this is all about facts, figures and data. In order to assess a candidate’s technical ability, questions should be geared towards specific results that the candidate has delivered.”

There are five key competencies that can be assessed to form a complete picture of a candidate’s abilities:

- Individual competencies
- Managerial competencies
- Analytical competencies
- Interpersonal competencies
- Motivational competencies

These are important to consider when looking at hard skills as when combined with the specific technical abilities of a candidate, the above areas will demonstrate to what level a candidate will perform. Are they proactive in their approach to core responsibilities, or are they able to lead a team and therefore likely to progress within your business?

In addition to a well-structured question and answer approach to assessing technical skills, testing plays a big role. While the tasks that you set will depend on the role that you are advertising, there are some simple tests that can be set to do this.



SIMON NOLAN, PAGE EXECUTIVE SENIOR PARTNER:

“Ultimately this is about experience. If a candidate can demonstrate clear, specific examples of when they have fulfilled similar tasks, then that is a good starting point. The approach you take to test a candidate’s technical ability is completely role specific. However, any sort of case study where they would have to assess a similar task would be useful.”



Testing your candidates

Often during the interview process, further testing is required to confirm the skills and level of competency that a candidate has in a particular area. There are tests that can assess both soft skills and hard skills, but ultimately this will depend on the role that is being recruited.



LORRAINE TWIST, DIRECTOR MICHAEL PAGE FINANCE:

“The personality profiling assessments tend to be helpful and they create a list of skills that an individual holds. For example, where strong communication skills are essential for a role, but a candidate has scored low, you could shape questions around these skills in the interview. However, I don’t think personality profiling should be used in isolation - rather as a guide.”

Testing soft skills

- Personality and aptitude testing - Identify core skills and competencies.
- Group exercises - Assess how candidates operate as part of a team.
- Meet the team - How well do the candidates get on with the existing team?
- Presentations - How well can a candidate communicate with and present to an audience?
- Trial half day – Does the candidate integrate well? How do they adapt to a new environment?

Testing hard skills

The tests that you can implement when looking to assess technical ability, will vary depending on the role and the skills that need to be demonstrated. Some examples of the types of test that you could incorporate include the following.

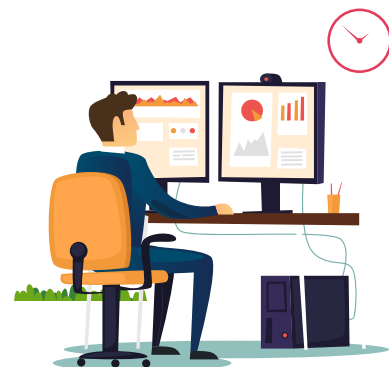
- Microsoft Excel and Word tests - Assess the level of competency working with these programmes.
- Typing and writing tests - Determines the level of skill when written communication is vital.
- Problem-based presentations - Showcases understanding and approach to role-related technical challenges.
- Case studies - Assesses problem-solving abilities and level of understanding about the industry.
- In-tray exercises - Highlights how a candidate manages their workload.
- Mock technical tasks – Assesses the candidate’s ability to apply core skills.



CHRIS MCELKERNEY, ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR PAGE PERSONNEL FINANCE:

“It’s important to set the agenda of an interview with the candidate from the outset so they know what to expect. Testing should happen at the first stage on-site at the interview if possible or between first and second stage so as not to unnecessarily delay the process.”

While there is generally no right or wrong time to test a candidate, it is key to consider when it would be most suitable for your interview process. It is important that you adopt a streamlined interview process and ensure that any testing doesn’t delay the process. However, in some instances, if you ask a candidate to prepare a detailed presentation or go through an extensive testing process before they are invested in the opportunity, then they may lose interest.



Industry-specific

interview tips



Procurement – Assessing a candidate

ROB BALES:

“This is best done with less formal, situation-based interview questions. Within an operational environment, have the candidate engage with potential colleagues via a plant tour, for example. Observe how they interact and ask questions about what they see and how they would deal with certain situations. I would also advise on the use of a presentation. When assessing soft skills the content/subject is less relevant, it is used more to assess the candidate’s ability to engage with a panel of people who are invariably strangers.”



Executive Search – Assessing soft skills

SIMON NOLAN:

“Usually a broad range of meetings are required. Increased contact with a candidate is helpful when assessing soft skills and we would recommend an informal meet up over dinner or drinks for a senior hire. Personality fit becomes extremely important and if you can - within reason - increase the exposure that the candidate has to the broader team throughout the process.”



Digital - Assessing technical skills

ALEX HALL:

“There are a plethora of tests to check any technical skill sets as well as other tasks such as presentation topics. An ideal process for a web developer, for example, would involve a first stage interview focused on CV-based and behavioural questions followed by a technical task such as a coding challenge completed remotely - this would be a robust process.”



Logistics – Testing a candidate

CHRIS MADINE:

“Detailed questioning/testing is rarely seen in logistics as the interviewer typically has extensive industry knowledge and a deep understanding of the environment that candidate works in. What’s more important is candidate engagement, promoting the organisation and role. Understanding if there is a personality/culture fit is normally determined through open, informal conversation.”

Further reading

The first step in activating your candidate search is writing a great job description.

Be sure that yours stand out.



A key aspect of the interview is assessing a candidate's skills, but do know **which skills you need to be looking for?**



You know it's important to sell your business to top candidates during an interview.

Make sure you are **presenting a strong employer proposition.**



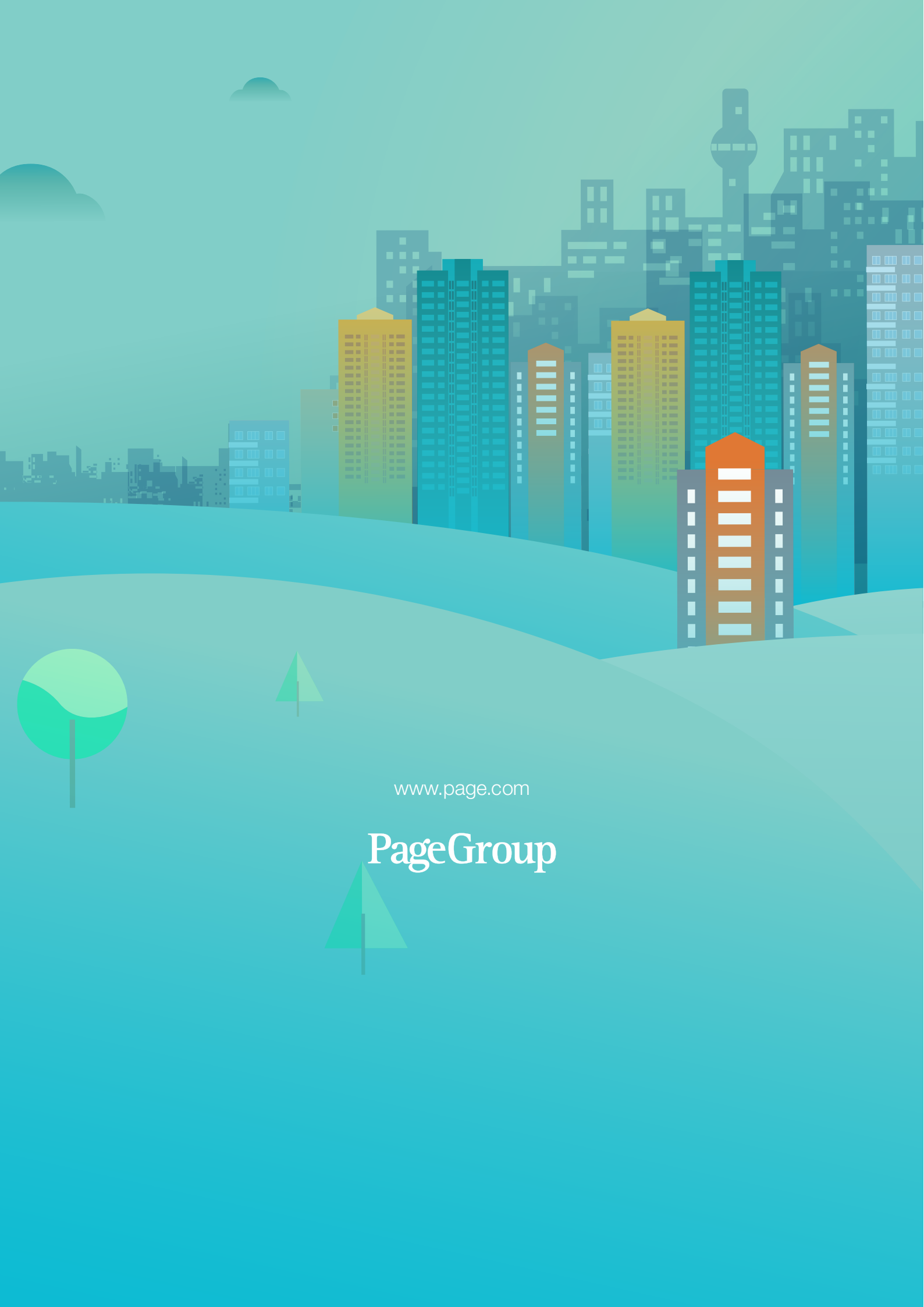
When hiring top talent, the offer of a competitive salary is crucial. Be sure you are well-equipped with the **current market salaries** before starting your interview process.



The final stage of a successful recruitment process is making an offer to your candidate of choice.

Make sure you impress during this crucial step.





www.page.com

PageGroup