

# Mealtime Interviews

How to create and implement neuro-inclusive Mealtime Interviews.



## About Mealtime Interviews

Mealtime Interviews focus on assessing a candidate's interpersonal and social skills in a social setting, typically over a meal at a restaurant or a corporate dining area. This type of interview is designed to assess how candidates manage themselves in informal, interactive scenarios that mimic real-life social interactions required for the role.

### Benefits

The benefits may include:

- Assess candidates social interaction skills, valuable for roles requiring social engagement with clients or teams.
- Provides the ability to assess communication, adaptability, and emotional intelligence in a casual, environment.
- Creates a less intimidating environment allowing their true personality and social competency to shine.
- Works well for roles where relationship-building and social interaction are essential.



#### Ideal for:

Client facing roles such as sales representatives, and executives.

#### Applicable for:

Hospitality, marketing, business consulting industries.

## Considerations and solutions

There are considerations to address to ensure the assessment is neuro-inclusive. These include:

### Considerations

#### Sensory overload:

A busy restaurant can be overwhelming for neurodivergent candidates sensitive to noise, smells, or bright lighting.

#### Uncertainty:

Candidates may become overwhelmed by the interview format, in addition to the highly social assessment method.

#### Dietary restrictions:

Some individuals may have dietary preferences or restrictions that impact their comfort and focus.

### Solutions

Choose quieter venues or offer a more controlled environment, like a private dining room.

Clearly communicate expectations and structure of the mealtime interview beforehand to help candidates prepare.

Ensure the setting offers a variety of meal options to accommodate different needs or consider non-dining alternatives.

## Create and implement neuro-inclusive Mealtime Interviews

### Example: Recruiting business development leads

A construction firm recruiting business development leads uses mealtime interviews to evaluate candidates' communication and client-facing skills. Over tea at a quiet restaurant, they observe how candidates discuss sale strategies, adapt to casual conversations, and interact with potential clients.



Mealtime Interviews focus on assessing a candidate's interpersonal and social skills in a real life setting, typically over a meal at a restaurant or corporate dining area. While informal in nature, they still require careful planning to ensure inclusivity, to ensure all candidates can show their potential. Employers can implement neuro-inclusive practices to create a fair and accessible process.

### Pre-interview preparation

Unstructured interactions and high sensory spaces can be overwhelming in a dining environment.

#### Neuro-inclusive strategies

##### Neurodivergent awareness training

Ensure interviewers understand neurodivergent characteristics and how they might present in social settings.

A neurodivergent employee shared,

“Social situations are exhausting for me. Knowing exactly what's expected helps me manage my energy and focus on the task.”

##### Detailed interview information

Provide comprehensive details, including visuals about the interview process well in advance.

This should include:

- Venue details (location, parking, public transport)
- Sensory details such as expected noise level, lighting, and seating options
- Dietary accommodations and available menu options
- Names, roles, and photographs of interviewer (as relevant)
- Schedule, including start and end times
- Expected format of the conversation. **For example, casual chat, structured questions.**
- Contact details of a support person from the organisation to answer any questions.

##### Accommodations and adjustments

Encourage candidates to request accommodations, such as what time of day the interview takes place, a quieter dining area or specific seating arrangements.

## Create and implement neuro-inclusive Mealtime Interviews

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### Preparing the dining environment

Dining environments can create sensory overload due to noise, smells, or lighting. These distractions may hinder a candidate's ability to focus and present themselves effectively.

#### **Neuro-inclusive strategies**

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##### **Venue selection**

Choose a quieter, accessible restaurant or private dining space to minimise sensory distractions.

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##### **Communicate setting details**

Share information about the venue, including noise levels, seating arrangements, and lighting, so candidates know what to expect.

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##### **Menu options**

Provide menu options in advance to accommodate dietary restrictions or preferences.

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##### **Break spaces**

Identify a quiet area nearby where candidates can step away if they need a sensory break.

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## Create and implement neuro-inclusive Mealtime Interviews

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### During the interview

The Mealtime Interview method relies significantly on unstructured social interactions and interpreting conversational cues in an informal setting. By providing as much structure and support as possible during the interview process, employers can help candidates demonstrate their true potential.

#### **Neuro-inclusive strategies**

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##### **Welcome and orientation**

Meet candidates upon arrival and explain how the interview will proceed.

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##### **Room acclimatisation**

Allow candidates time to get comfortable in the setting and address any potential distractions or causes of anxiety before starting.

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##### **Structured yet flexible approach**

While maintaining a casual tone, guide the conversation to cover key topics relevant to the role.

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##### **Interview questions**

###### **Direct and clear questions**

Avoid abstract or ambiguous queries, opting for straightforward questions.

For example, ask, "What professional skills do you excel at in the workplace?"

###### **Concrete vs. open-ended questions**

For example, ask, "In your last job, how did you handle challenging customers?"

###### **Focus on past experiences rather than speculative scenarios**

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##### **Direct and clear information**

###### **Use straight-forward language**

Be mindful of literal interpretations; avoid idiomatic language and jargon.

###### **Avoid double-barrelled questions**

When multiple questions with different responses are asked at the same time it can be confusing.

###### **Use specific prompts to guide detailed responses**

For example, "What steps did you take to mediate the situation?"

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##### **Additional support**

Allow candidates to bring notes or use prompts during the interview. Offer clarification or rephrase questions if needed.

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##### **Contingency planning**

Be prepared to adjust the interview approach if unexpected needs or situations arise.

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## Create and implement neuro-inclusive Mealttime Interviews

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### After the interview

The informal nature of Mealttime Interviews can leave candidates unclear about their performance or next steps.

#### **Neuro-inclusive strategies**

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##### **Clear time frames**

Provide explicit timelines and expectations for when or if outcomes will be communicated.

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##### **Transparent feedback**

Provide specific, constructive feedback about the candidate's strengths and areas for improvement.

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##### **Process evaluation**

Regularly collect feedback from candidates on their experience to refine and improve the process.

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## Example of a neuro-inclusive Mealtime Interview

### Scenario

A law firm recruiting a client-facing paralegal uses a Mealtime Interview to assess communication and relationship-building skills.



Guide the questions to ensure that all key topics are covered.

### Actions taken

- The candidate is provided with detailed information about the venue, menu, and interview structure beforehand.
- The interview is conducted at a time of day that the candidate has identified.
- The restaurant is quiet, with adjustable lighting and private seating.
- The candidate receives sample questions in advance, such as, **“How do you build rapport with new clients?”** and **“Can you describe your approach to handling sensitive client matters?”**
- The interviewer guides the conversation, ensuring all key topics are covered while maintaining a relaxed tone.
- Breaks are offered as needed, and dietary preferences are fully accommodated.



### Outcome

These accommodations allow the candidate to focus on demonstrating their interpersonal skills and professionalism without unnecessary stress or sensory challenges. The employer gains valuable insights into how the candidate interacts in a client-facing role.

By implementing neuro-inclusive strategies, Mealtime Interviews can become a fair and effective way to assess candidates' interpersonal and social skills. These adjustments foster an neuro-inclusive recruitment process that values diversity and ensures every candidate has an opportunity to succeed.

### Learn more and access resources

To learn more about Neuro-inclusive Recruiting and how to create and maintain neuro-inclusive workplaces, scan the QR code or visit [neuroinclusiverecruiting.org.au](https://neuroinclusiverecruiting.org.au).

