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The sponsorship conversation: what the employer has to satisfy, and how to answer

Anybody applying for a Skilled Worker role in any sector: IT, engineering, hospitality, construction, logistics, education, healthcare.

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The thing nobody explains

When you need sponsorship, you are not in one interview. You are in two. The first is the ordinary one about whether you can do the job. The second is silent, and it runs in the manager's head while you talk: is this person going to cost me money, time and risk, and is it worth it.

You cannot win the second one by being grateful. You win it by removing their fear. This guide is about the second interview.

A licensed employer has a lot to lose. If they get sponsorship wrong the Home Office can downgrade or revoke their licence, and every sponsored worker they have becomes a problem. That is why a compliance minded employer sounds cautious. They are not being unkind to you. They are protecting thirty other people's jobs.

What they have to be able to prove

It helps enormously to know the four things the employer must be able to show if the Home Office ever asks. Every sponsorship question they put to you is one of these four in disguise.

1. The vacancy is genuine. A real job, with real work, that would exist whether or not you needed a visa.
2. The role is at the right skill level for the route, and the occupation code they pick matches what you will actually do all day.
3. The salary meets both the general threshold and the going rate for that occupation code, and it is the rate they really pay.
4. You can do the job, and you meet the English and any qualification requirement.

The questions that decide it

Do you currently have the right to work in the UK?

One accurate line. Name your visa and its expiry date if you have one, or say plainly that you would need sponsorship. Do not soften it, do not say it is complicated, and never imply you have status you do not have. Every employer runs a right to work check before your first day, so a hidden answer only delays the ending.

What they are listening for: Whether they have to involve their compliance manager, and whether you are straight with them.

When would you be able to start?

Give a real answer with the visa built in. If you are switching in country, say roughly how long the process takes and say that you can start once the decision comes. If you are outside the UK, say so. Never say immediately if that is not true; a start date that slips twice is the thing employers remember.

What they are listening for: Whether they can fill the rota, and whether you understand your own timeline.

Have you been sponsored before?

If yes, say by whom and what happened, briefly and without bitterness even if it ended badly. If you left a bad sponsor, say the fact and not the feeling. If no, say no, and follow it with what you do know about how it works. Never invent a sponsorship history. It is the easiest thing in this whole process for them to check.

What they are listening for: Whether there is anything in your history that will surface later.

Do you understand what we would have to do to sponsor you?

Say it back to them in their language: you hold the licence, you assign a certificate of sponsorship, you pay the immigration skills charge and the sponsorship fees, and the role has to meet the salary and skill rules for its occupation code. Then say the sentence that separates you from most candidates: I am not asking anyone to bend anything, and I know nobody may charge me for a certificate.

What they are listening for: That you are not going to ask them to do something unlawful, and that you will not be surprised by the cost or the timing.

The salary for this role is X. Is that acceptable?

Know the number before you walk in, and know it has to clear both the general threshold and the going rate for the occupation code. If the offer is below what the route needs, say so calmly and factually; you are not negotiating, you are pointing at arithmetic that will refuse the visa and waste their fee too. If it clears, say yes and move on. Do not accept a figure you know cannot work in the hope it gets fixed later. It does not get fixed later.

What they are listening for: Whether you will accept something that gets refused and costs them the fee.

Why should we sponsor you rather than hire someone who does not need it?

The honest answer is the strong one, and it is about the job, not about you needing help. What you can do that is hard to replace, what you have already done here, how long you intend to stay, and what it costs them to keep rehiring for this post. Never argue that they should sponsor you because you are in a difficult position. Sympathy does not survive a budget meeting; value does.

What they are listening for: Whether sponsoring you is a business decision they can defend.

Do you have any dependants, and where will you live?

Answer briefly and factually. This is usually a practical question about relocation and start dates rather than anything else. You are not obliged to discuss your family in detail, and a reasonable employer will not push it.

What they are listening for: Logistics, not your private life.

What is your English level, and do you have a test?

Say what you hold: an approved English test, a degree taught in English with the right confirmation, or nationality from a country where English is the main language. If you are not sure which applies to you, say you will confirm it rather than guessing. This is one of the few points where a wrong answer actually breaks the application.

What they are listening for: Whether the application will clear the English requirement.

Three sentences that lose you the job

1. I can pay for the certificate of sponsorship myself. Never say this. Selling a certificate of sponsorship is a criminal offence in the UK, and offering to buy one tells a compliant employer you are a risk. It also tells a dishonest one that you can be exploited.
2. I will take anything, any salary. It tells them the role is not genuine at the rate they published, which is exactly the thing the Home Office looks for.
3. I only need the visa, I will move on after. Say it and the conversation is over, whether or not it is true.

Questions to ask them, and what the answers mean

Does your licence cover the Skilled Worker route, and is it A rated?

A fair, professional question. An A rating is the normal one. A B rating means they are on an action plan with the Home Office. If they do not know the answer, the person you are talking to is not the person who handles sponsorship, and you should ask who is. You can check the register yourself, free, before you ask.

Have you sponsored anyone for this role before?

If yes, the process is known and the timeline will be realistic. If no, expect it to be slower and expect more questions, and make sure someone senior is actually committed before you decline other offers.

Which occupation code would this role sit under?

Very few candidates ask this and it is the single most useful question in the conversation. The code sets the going rate and the skill level. An employer who can answer it has done this properly.

What is the timeline from offer to certificate of sponsorship?

You need this to plan, and to know whether to keep applying elsewhere in the meantime. Keep applying anyway until something is signed.

If they ask you for money

At any point, if anybody asks you to pay for a certificate of sponsorship, for a job, or for being put forward, that is not a fee. In the UK it is a crime, and the person asking is relying on you not knowing that.

You do not have to argue with them. Stop, do not pay, and report it. The Home Office has a sponsorship fraud reporting route, and Action Fraud takes reports of this every day. If you have already paid, report it anyway; you are the victim of an offence and reporting it does not put your own status at risk.

This is interview practice, not legal or immigration advice. For your own case speak to a regulated adviser or a support organisation. We are a job alert service and we do not charge for any of this.