

Freight Forwarder interview questions

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What to expect

Freight forwarder interviews tend to mix practical process questions about documentation and customs with scenario questions that test how you handle a shipment going wrong under time pressure. Expect the interviewer to probe your comfort with carrier negotiation and client communication as much as your paperwork accuracy.

- **Process:** Questions about how you actually complete core tasks like lodging customs declarations or booking cargo space, checked step by step.
- **Scenario:** A live problem such as a missed sailing or missing paperwork, testing judgement and prioritisation under time pressure.
- **Behavioural:** Past examples of resolving delays, damage claims or difficult carrier or client interactions, usually structured as STAR.
- **Technical:** Questions about specific systems used in freight forwarding, such as CargoWise One, TradeGate or Excel-based tracking.
- **Client-facing:** How you manage client expectations and communication across a multi-leg shipment.

Most interviews open with a walkthrough of your current or most recent role, move into one or two process questions to confirm hands-on knowledge, then shift into a scenario or behavioural question to see how you handle pressure, and close with questions about the systems you've used and your availability.

1. Walk me through how you'd prepare and lodge an export customs declaration for a new client.

Why they ask

This checks whether you actually understand the documentation chain, not just that you've heard the terms.

How to structure your answer

Answer as a step-by-step walkthrough: what information you'd gather from the client first, which systems or forms you'd use, what compliance checks you'd run, and how you'd confirm lodgement before the cargo moves.

Example answer

"First I'd get the commercial invoice, packing list and any permits from the client and check the tariff classification is right, because that affects duty and any permit requirements. I'd enter the shipment details into the Integrated Cargo System, checking the Incoterms match what's on the commercial documents so there's no dispute later about who's responsible for freight and insurance. Before lodging I'd run through the biosecurity conditions in BICON if the goods need it, then lodge the declaration and hold onto the confirmation until the cargo is actually loaded, in case customs raises a query."

2. Tell me about a time you resolved a shipping delay or damage claim for a client.

Why they ask

Delays and damage claims are routine in this job, so the interviewer wants evidence you can manage them without the client losing confidence.

How to structure your answer

Use STAR: describe the situation and what caused the delay or damage, your specific task, the actions you took with carriers or insurers, and the result for the client relationship.

Example answer

"A client's container arrived with visible water damage to part of the load. My task was to get the claim moving and keep the client's operations running in the meantime. I photographed the damage with the delivery driver, lodged the claim with the carrier's insurer within their notification window, and arranged a partial replacement shipment so the client wasn't left short. The claim was eventually settled and the client kept using us for that route because they'd seen how quickly we responded rather than leaving them to chase it themselves."

3. A client's container is stuck at the border because of missing documentation and the vessel sails in a few hours. What do you do?

Why they ask

This tests judgement under real time pressure, which is a constant in freight forwarding.

How to structure your answer

Answer as a judgement-under-pressure structure: assess what's actually missing and how fast it can be fixed, decide whether to chase the fix or negotiate a delay, communicate with the client early, and explain your fallback if the deadline can't be met.

Example answer

"I'd first find out exactly what document is missing and whether it's something the client can supply quickly or something that needs a broker or authority to issue. I'd call the shipping line straight away to ask whether there's any flexibility on the cut-off, because sometimes a short extension is possible if you ask early rather than at the last minute. I'd tell the client immediately what's happening and what the realistic options are, rather than waiting until it's too late to act. If the vessel can't wait, I'd start looking at the next available sailing and get that booked as a backup while still trying to resolve the original booking."

4. How do you approach negotiating freight rates with a carrier when shipping volumes are down?

Why they ask

Rate negotiation is a core part of the role and the interviewer wants to know you can hold your ground without damaging the carrier relationship.

How to structure your answer

Structure this as preparation, approach and outcome: what information you'd bring into the negotiation, how you'd frame the conversation, and how you'd handle a carrier that won't move.

Example answer

"I'd go in with a clear picture of our shipping history with that carrier and what comparable rates look like elsewhere, so I'm not negotiating blind. I'd frame it as wanting a rate that keeps the relationship worthwhile for both sides long term, not just squeezing them on one shipment. If they won't move on price, I'd ask about other levers, like better transit times or priority space during peak periods, because sometimes there's value there even if the headline rate doesn't change."

5. What experience do you have with CargoWise One or similar freight management systems?

Why they ask

Software proficiency directly affects how quickly you can be productive in the role.

How to structure your answer

Answer with specific systems, the tasks you used them for, and your actual proficiency level, rather than a general claim of being 'comfortable with technology'.

Example answer

"I've used CargoWise One for shipment tracking, generating customs documentation and managing client records, and I've used Fourkites for real-time visibility on ocean freight. I'm also comfortable building tracking and cost reports in Excel when a client wants something outside the standard system reports."

6. How do you keep a client informed during a multi-leg international shipment?

Why they ask

Clients judge freight forwarders heavily on communication, especially when something goes slightly wrong.

How to structure your answer

Structure your answer around communication approach: what you tell clients upfront, how often you update them, which tools you use, and when you escalate to a phone call instead of an email.

Example answer

"At booking I set expectations on transit time and the key milestones the client will hear about, like departure, any transshipment, and arrival at the destination port. I send status updates at each of those milestones through whatever channel the client prefers, whether that's email or a portal. If something changes unexpectedly, like a delay at a transshipment port, I call rather than email, because clients want to hear that someone's actually on top of it, not just get a system-generated notice."