Importer and Exporter interview questions

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What to expect

Interviews for importer and exporter roles test two things at once: whether you understand the mechanics of moving goods across a border, and whether you can make a commercial call when the two pull against each other. Expect the conversation to move between practical detail and judgement.

- **Process and workflow:** Questions that ask you to walk through a shipment end to end. Interviewers are checking whether you understand Incoterms, documentation, clearance and delivery as one connected sequence rather than separate tasks.
- **Technical and compliance:** Questions on tariff classification, free trade agreement rules, biosecurity import conditions and the documentation that supports each shipment. You do not need to be a licensed customs broker, but you need to know when to bring one in.
- **Behavioural:** Tell me about a time questions on delays, supplier problems and negotiations. These are answered with a real example and a clear account of what you changed afterwards.
- **Scenario and judgement:** Hypotheticals where cost, timing and risk point in different directions. The interviewer is watching how you reason through the trade-off, not whether you land on their preferred answer.
- **Client and buyer facing:** Questions about managing a buyer's expectations on dates, price changes or a short shipment. Common where the role includes direct selling or account management.

A first interview is usually with the hiring manager, or the owner in a smaller trading business, and covers your background, a walk-through of how you run a shipment, and a few behavioural examples. If the business is larger, a second conversation with the customs broker, freight forwarder or finance side is common, focused on compliance and landed cost. A short practical task is not unusual, such as costing a shipment from a supplier quote or reviewing a set of documents for errors.

1. Walk me through how you take a shipment from a supplier quote through to goods arriving in your warehouse.

Why they ask

This is the core competency question for the role. It shows whether you understand the sequence, where cost is incurred, and where shipments typically go wrong.

How to structure your answer

Answer it as a sequence with checkpoints, not a list of tasks. Cover the quote and Incoterms, the purchase order, freight booking, documentation, biosecurity checks, clearance, delivery, and the landed cost reconciliation at the end. Name one or two points where problems commonly surface so the interviewer can see you have run this before.

Example answer

“It starts with the supplier quote and the Incoterm. I confirm what is included, because FOB and DDP change who carries the freight, insurance and clearance, and that flows straight into landed cost. Once price and terms are agreed I raise the purchase order and give the supplier a shipping window. I book freight through our forwarder, confirm the port pair and transit time, and make sure the commercial invoice, packing list and any certificate of origin are issued correctly before the goods leave origin. Before the vessel sails I check the biosecurity import conditions for that product, so there is no surprise at this end. When the booking is confirmed I lodge the documents with our customs broker, arrange duty and GST, and book delivery from the port. The last step is reconciling the actual landed cost against my estimate and adjusting the price or the reorder point if it has moved.”

2. Tell me about a time a consignment was held or delayed and what you did about it.

Why they ask

Delays are routine in trade. The interviewer wants to see how you communicate, who you escalate to, and whether you fix the cause or just the symptom.

How to structure your answer

Use STAR, but keep the action section long and specific: what you found out, who you contacted and in what order, what you told the buyer, and what you changed afterwards. Finish on the process fix, because that is what separates a good answer from a war story.

Example answer

“A container of ceramics I had ordered was flagged for inspection because the packing declaration did not match what was on the pallet, and the goods were timber packed, so biosecurity wanted the treatment certificate. I got the supplier on the phone that morning, had them send the fumigation certificate and a corrected packing declaration, and passed both straight to our customs broker. While it was held I rebooked the delivery slot with our transport company so we were not paying for a truck to sit at the port, and I told our two biggest customers the revised date the same day rather than waiting until it was confirmed. It cleared on the next inspection round and went out two days later than planned. What I changed afterwards was putting the packing declaration on the pre-shipment checklist so origin sends it before the container is sealed.”

3. A supplier offers a lower unit price but wants to ship on FOB terms rather than DDP. How do you decide?

Why they ask

This is a test of commercial judgement. A cheaper unit price is meaningless if the total landed cost is higher, and the interviewer wants to hear you think in those terms.

How to structure your answer

Work through it as a trade-off. Restate what the term change actually shifts, cost both options on the same shipment, weigh control of the booking against the administrative burden, consider who carries risk in transit, then decide and document the reasoning.

Example answer

“A lower unit price only matters if the total landed cost is lower, so the first thing I would do is ask for the price on the same terms so I am comparing like with like. Then I would cost the freight, insurance, duty and clearance that shift to us under FOB. If we already ship that lane regularly and have good forwarder rates, FOB usually wins because we control the booking and can consolidate with other orders. If it is a lane we rarely use, or a product with tricky biosecurity requirements, I would rather pay a little more for DDP and let the supplier carry the clearance risk. I would also weigh the payment terms and who holds the risk if the goods are damaged in transit. Once I decided, I would record the reasoning so the next person buying that line understands why.”

4. How do you keep across tariff changes, free trade agreement rules and currency movements, and what do you actually do with that information?

Why they ask

Importers and exporters are expected to protect margin rather than just pass on increases. This question checks whether your monitoring turns into action.

How to structure your answer

Separate the three sources of change and give a concrete response for each. For tariffs and agreements, focus on classification and certificates of origin. For currency, focus on a visible assumption you review, not a prediction.

Example answer

“I check the tariff classification of anything new before I order it, because a wrong HS code is the most expensive mistake in this job and it can be fixed far more easily before the goods ship than after. For products we buy regularly I watch the free trade agreement rules and check whether a certificate of origin would reduce the duty, then weigh that against what the supplier charges to issue one. On currency I do not try to predict where the rate is going. I keep a rate assumption in my costing model, review it weekly against the actual, and if the movement is meaningful I either bring a purchase forward or reprice the line rather than absorb it quietly.”

5. A buyer wants a delivery date you are not confident you can meet. What do you do?

Why they ask

This role sits between the supplier, the border and the buyer, and those three rarely line up. It tests whether you manage expectations early or promise and apologise later.

How to structure your answer

Answer as a judgement call under pressure: acknowledge the request, state the real constraint without hiding behind jargon, offer genuine alternatives, and confirm the revised position in writing.

Example answer

“I would rather give a date I can hold than one that sounds good in the meeting. So I would tell them what I actually know: the vessel is due on the fourteenth, clearance usually takes a couple of days, and I will not promise delivery before the eighteenth until the container is released. Then I would give them options rather than just the bad news, such as a partial delivery from local stock, air freight on the urgent lines if the margin can carry it, or splitting the order across two shipments. If they need to plan their own end around it, I would send the revised date in writing that afternoon and check in if anything moves. Most buyers would rather hear a firm, slightly later date than a promise that keeps slipping.”

6. Give me an example of a supplier negotiation where you improved the terms.

Why they ask

Sourcing and negotiation sit at the centre of the role. The interviewer is looking for evidence you can hold a relationship and move the commercial position at the same time.

How to structure your answer

Use STAR, but make the middle clear: what you asked for, what the supplier's real constraint was, and what you traded to get there. Close with what held after the negotiation.

Example answer

“A supplier I had used for a couple of years put their price up, and rather than just accept it I asked what was driving the increase. It came down to packaging. I suggested we move to a plain export carton with our own label applied at this end, which cut their cost and let them hold the old unit price. In exchange we agreed to order in larger runs less often, which gave them a more predictable production schedule and suited how we store stock. The relationship held, the margin on that line stayed where it was, and the packaging change actually made the goods faster to unpack when they arrived.”