

Research and Development Manager interview questions

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What to expect

Interviews for Research and Development Manager roles typically assess your ability to lead technical teams, manage projects and budgets, and make commercially sound decisions. You'll need to demonstrate both scientific credibility and business acumen.

- **Process and compliance:** Questions about how you ensure research meets safety, ethical and regulatory requirements.
- **Behavioural:** Questions asking for examples of past leadership, project delivery or conflict resolution.
- **Scenario:** Hypothetical situations that test your judgement under pressure, such as project delays or budget cuts.
- **Technical and tool-based:** Questions about your familiarity with R&D; tools like Jira, Microsoft Project, Benchling or Python.
- **Strategic and commercial:** Questions on assessing feasibility, commercial potential and aligning R&D; with business goals.

The process often begins with a phone screen with HR, followed by a panel interview with the hiring manager and cross-functional stakeholders (e.g., finance, operations). You may be asked to give a presentation on a past project or a case study. Some employers include a separate technical assessment or a meeting with the executive team. Expect a mix of behavioural and scenario questions, with time for your own questions at the end.

1. Tell us about a time you had to balance a promising research project against a tight budget. How did you decide what to prioritise?

Why they ask

This question tests your ability to make tough resource allocation decisions and to justify them with commercial reasoning.

How to structure your answer

Use the STAR method: describe the Situation (project and budget constraints), the Task (decide what to prioritise), the Action (how you assessed feasibility, cost and strategic fit), and the Result (outcome for the project and the business).

Example answer

"In a previous role, we had three promising R&D; projects but only enough budget to fully fund two. I led a review of each project's technical feasibility, potential market size and alignment with our three-year strategy. I also consulted with sales and finance to validate commercial assumptions. We decided to pause the project with the longest development timeline and highest regulatory uncertainty, and reallocated those funds to the other two. The two funded projects both launched within 18 months, and the paused project was later revived with a new partner."

2. How do you ensure your team's research activities meet safety, ethical and regulatory requirements?

Why they ask

R&D; managers are accountable for compliance. This question checks your knowledge of Australian frameworks and your approach to embedding them in daily work.

How to structure your answer

Walk through your system: start with how you identify relevant requirements (e.g., WHS legislation, ethics committees, TGA, ISO standards), then describe how you communicate and train your team, how you monitor compliance, and how you handle incidents or audits.

Example answer

"I start by mapping all applicable regulations and standards for each project, such as WHS legislation, ethics approval requirements, and any industry-specific rules like TGA or GLP. I then build compliance checkpoints into our stage-gate process. Every team member receives induction and refresher training, and we conduct regular internal audits. If an issue arises, we document it, investigate root causes and implement corrective actions. In my last role, this approach helped us pass a regulatory audit with no major findings."

3. Imagine a key R&D; project is falling behind schedule due to unexpected technical hurdles. What do you do?

Why they ask

This scenario tests your problem-solving and leadership under pressure. Employers want to see how you recover a project without losing sight of the bigger picture.

How to structure your answer

A good answer follows a clear sequence: assess the situation, communicate with stakeholders, develop options, decide and act, then review. Show that you stay calm and focus on solutions.

Example answer

"First, I would meet with the project lead to understand the technical hurdle and its impact on the timeline. I would then convene a cross-functional team to brainstorm solutions, such as reallocating resources, bringing in external expertise, or adjusting scope. I would communicate transparently with senior stakeholders, presenting options with risks and benefits. Depending on the decision, I would either fast-track a fix or renegotiate deadlines. Afterward, I would hold a lessons-learned session to prevent similar delays. In one case, this approach helped us recover a two-month delay in six weeks."

4. Describe how you've used tools like Jira, Microsoft Project, or Benchling to manage an R&D; portfolio.

Why they ask

This question probes your technical tool skills and how you apply them to real R&D; management. It shows whether you can bring structure and visibility to complex projects.

How to structure your answer

Explain your overall approach to tool selection, then give a specific example of how you used one or more tools to improve project delivery. Focus on the outcome.

Example answer

"I have used Jira for agile research sprints, Microsoft Project for long-term resource planning, and Benchling for lab data management. In my last role, I set up a Jira board to track R&D; tasks and dependencies across three teams. I also integrated Microsoft Project to forecast resource needs for the next quarter. This gave us real-time visibility and helped us identify a bottleneck in the testing phase. As a result, we reduced average project turnaround from 16 weeks to 12 weeks."

5. Tell me about a time you had to influence senior executives to support a research initiative.

Why they ask

R&D; managers often need to secure funding or buy-in from the C-suite. This question assesses your stakeholder management and communication skills.

How to structure your answer

Use STAR: describe the initiative, the resistance or competing priorities, how you built a case, and the outcome. Highlight your ability to translate technical benefits into business language.

Example answer

"I wanted to launch a new research program on sustainable materials, but the executive team was focused on short-term cost savings. I prepared a business case that linked the program to long-term regulatory trends and customer demand. I also proposed a small pilot to demonstrate feasibility with minimal upfront investment. After presenting the pilot results, I secured full funding for the program, which later became a key differentiator for the company."

6. How do you assess the commercial potential of a new product or process?

Why they ask

This question tests your business acumen and your ability to separate promising science from viable products. Employers want to know you can make informed go/no-go decisions.

How to structure your answer

Describe your framework: start with market need, then technical feasibility, cost to develop, regulatory pathway, competitive landscape, and return on investment. Give a brief example of a time you applied it.

Example answer

"I use a stage-gate framework with clear criteria: market size and growth, customer pain points, technical readiness, estimated development cost, time to market, and regulatory hurdles. I also consult with sales, finance and operations to validate assumptions. For example, we once had a promising lab breakthrough, but when I ran the assessment, the manufacturing scale-up costs were prohibitive and the market was niche. We decided not to proceed, saving the company significant resources. Conversely, another project passed all gates and became a top-selling product."