

Secretary interview questions

careertips.com.au: common questions and what they're really testing

What to expect

Interviews for secretary roles focus on your ability to organise, communicate and handle confidential information. Employers want to see that you can keep a manager's day running smoothly and that you are comfortable with common office software.

- **Administrative process questions:** These explore how you manage calendars, paperwork and filing systems in practice.
- **Behavioural questions:** These ask for examples of how you have handled confidentiality, competing priorities or difficult stakeholders.
- **Scenario-based questions:** These present a workplace situation and ask how you would respond, testing your judgement under pressure.
- **Technical questions:** These check your familiarity with Microsoft Office, email platforms, calendar tools and document management systems.
- **Client-facing questions:** These assess how you handle calls and emails from clients or colleagues when your manager is unavailable.

A typical interview is a single conversation with the hiring manager, sometimes with an HR representative. It usually starts with a general discussion about your background, then moves to specific questions about your organisational skills and software experience. You might be asked to complete a short practical task, such as drafting a letter or prioritising a list of tasks. The interview often ends with a chance for you to ask questions.

1. Walk me through how you manage a manager's calendar when several meetings need to be rescheduled at short notice.

Why they ask

This is a process question that reveals how you prioritise, communicate and use calendar software.

How to structure your answer

Walk through your steps in order: gather the new constraints, check the manager's priorities, reschedule the least critical items first, notify attendees, and update the calendar. Mention how you confirm changes and keep everyone informed.

Example answer

"First, I check which meetings are fixed and which can move. I look at the manager's priorities and any deadlines attached to each meeting. Then I contact the attendees for the meetings that need to change, offering alternative times. I use the calendar software to send updated invites and I follow up with a short email to confirm. Throughout, I keep the manager informed of what has changed and why."

2. Tell me about a time you had to handle confidential information. How did you ensure it stayed secure?

Why they ask

Secretaries often deal with contracts, invoices and client files, so employers want evidence of discretion.

How to structure your answer

Use STAR: describe the situation, the task you had, the action you took to protect the information, and the result. Focus on specific steps like secure filing, limited access or careful disposal.

Example answer

"In a previous role, I was asked to prepare a tender document that included pricing and client details. I kept the file in a restricted folder on the document management system and only shared it with the two people who needed to review it. I used password protection for email attachments and shredded printed drafts. The tender was submitted on time and no information was leaked. My manager later trusted me with other sensitive projects."

3. You receive an urgent email from a client while your manager is in a meeting and cannot be reached. What do you do?

Why they ask

This scenario tests your judgement, problem solving and ability to stay calm under pressure.

How to structure your answer

Describe how you would assess the urgency, what you would do first, and how you would escalate if needed. Show that you can act within your authority and know when to wait.

Example answer

"I would read the email carefully to understand what the client needs. If it is genuinely urgent and I can handle it with information I already have, I would reply to acknowledge it and give a timeframe. If it needs my manager's decision, I would check if anyone else can help or if there is a protocol for urgent matters. I would leave a clear message for my manager and document the email so they can follow up as soon as they are free."

4. What is your experience with document management systems and how do you ensure documents are filed correctly?

Why they ask

This technical question checks your familiarity with tools and your attention to detail.

How to structure your answer

Explain which systems you have used, how you name and categorise files, and how you check for accuracy. Mention any version control or access permissions you manage.

Example answer

"I have used SharePoint and a records management system in my last two roles. I follow a clear naming convention that includes the date, client name and document type. I save files in the correct folder and set permissions so only relevant team members can access them. I also do a quick check at the end of each week to make sure nothing is misfiled and that older versions are archived."

5. How would you handle a difficult caller who insists on speaking to your manager immediately?

Why they ask

This client-facing question assesses your communication skills and professionalism.

How to structure your answer

Describe how you would listen, acknowledge the caller's concern, explain the situation, and offer alternatives. Show empathy and firmness.

Example answer

"I would listen to the caller without interrupting, then acknowledge their frustration. I would explain that my manager is unavailable but that I can help or take a message. If they insist, I would offer to have my manager call back at a specific time, or transfer them to someone else who can assist. I would stay calm and professional, and I would make sure the message is passed on accurately."

6. How do you prioritise your tasks when you have multiple deadlines and interruptions?

Why they ask

This process question looks at your time management and problem solving.

How to structure your answer

Walk through your method: list tasks, rank by urgency and importance, block time, and handle interruptions. Mention how you communicate with your manager about priorities.

Example answer

"I start each day by listing my tasks and marking which ones have hard deadlines. I do the most urgent and important work first, and I group similar tasks together to save time. If an interruption comes in, I assess whether it needs immediate attention or can wait. I keep my manager informed if I need to shift priorities. At the end of the day, I review what is left and plan for the next day."