IT Operations Manager interview questions

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What to expect

IT Operations Manager interviews test whether you can run a service, lead people and make calm decisions when systems fail. Expect a mix of service management process, technical depth, people leadership, commercial judgement and scenario questions.

- **Service management process:** Questions about incident, problem, change and service continuity practice, often framed around ITIL.
- **Technical operations:** Questions on cloud infrastructure, networks, monitoring, endpoint management and cyber security controls.
- **People leadership:** Questions about leading engineers and service desk staff, rosters, performance and after-hours culture.
- **Scenario and judgement:** Pressure-testing how you triage a live outage, rising cloud costs or a security risk with no downtime window.
- **Commercial and vendor:** Questions on contracts, licensing, budgeting and trade-offs between capability and cost.
- **Stakeholder and client-facing:** Questions on communicating with executives, business units and external vendors during disruption.

A typical process starts with a recruiter or hiring manager screen, then a panel interview with the operations lead and a senior technology stakeholder. Some employers add a technical deep dive, a scenario exercise or a short presentation on service improvement. Reference checks usually focus on incident handling, team leadership and vendor management.

1. Walk me through how you would manage a major incident from the first report to the post-incident review.

Why they ask

This tests incident command, communication discipline and whether you understand ITIL service management in practice.

How to structure your answer

Walk-through structure: detection, severity and triage, roles and communication, containment and restoration, then problem review with actions.

Example answer

“Once a major incident is reported, I confirm severity against our impact matrix and declare it if the threshold is met. I assign an incident manager, open a single bridge in ServiceNow, and make sure one person owns communication to the business. My focus is restoration first, root cause second. I keep the bridge structured, with regular updates even when there is no news, because silence creates more escalation. If a vendor is involved, I hold them to the agreed response times and ask for a technical lead on the call. Once service is restored, I close the bridge and schedule a problem review within a few days. That review produces owned actions with dates, and I report back to the business on what changed. I also check whether monitoring in Splunk or another tool should have caught the issue earlier.”

2. Tell me about a time you had to introduce a significant infrastructure change without disrupting the business.

Why they ask

This probes change management, planning and stakeholder handling when the business cannot absorb downtime.

How to structure your answer
STAR structure: situation, task, action, result, with emphasis on how you protected service during the change.

Example answer

“In a previous role we were running several ageing server clusters that were becoming a reliability risk. The business could not accept daytime downtime, so I split the work into stages. I mapped dependencies with application owners, tested the migration in a pre-production environment, and scheduled cutovers for low-traffic windows. I set up rollback plans and had a bridge open for each window. We migrated the clusters over three weekends. There were two minor issues, both caught by monitoring and fixed inside the window. The result was a simpler environment, faster backups and no unplanned downtime for users.”

3. You notice cloud costs are rising while performance is flat. How do you investigate and what do you do?

Why they ask
This tests commercial judgement, cloud literacy and whether you can act on cost without damaging service.

How to structure your answer
Judgement structure: gather data, find the cause, separate quick wins from structural change, bring stakeholders, implement and monitor.

Example answer

“I would start in the AWS cost and usage reports and compare spend against the architecture and tagging. I would look for idle resources, oversized instances, unattached storage and data transfer patterns. I would also check whether any recent change introduced duplication. Then I would separate quick wins, such as shutting down non-production environments outside hours, from structural changes like right-sizing or moving workloads to more suitable services. I would bring the application owners into the conversation because they know the performance requirements. I would implement the changes in stages, monitor performance closely, and report back to finance and the business on what was saved without hurting service. If performance stayed flat while cost dropped, I would document the new baseline and keep reviewing monthly.”

4. How do you approach cyber security uplift in an environment with legacy systems and limited tolerance for downtime?

Why they ask
This probes risk-based security thinking, framework knowledge and practical delivery in a live operations setting.

How to structure your answer
Framework-led structure: assess against a recognised standard, prioritise by risk, pilot, communicate, implement and measure.

Example answer

“I start with the Essential Eight and any relevant regulatory obligations, then assess our current maturity rather than assuming. Legacy systems often cannot be patched quickly, so I look at compensating controls such as network segmentation, application control and restricted administrative access. I prioritise the changes that reduce the most risk for the least disruption, and I pilot them on a small group before wide rollout. Communication matters because staff see security as friction. I explain what is changing and why, provide clear support channels, and measure progress through patch compliance and incident trends rather than a one-off audit. If a system genuinely

cannot be lifted, I document the risk, set a review date and plan its replacement.”

5. Describe how you lead an operations team through a period of high workload or repeated after-hours incidents.

Why they ask

This examines people leadership, on-call culture and whether you fix systemic causes rather than pushing people harder.

How to structure your answer

STAR structure: situation, task, action, result, with specific attention to rosters, escalation rules and preventative work.

Example answer

“We had a period where after-hours callouts were climbing and the team was tired. I started by looking at the incident data with the team rather than blaming individuals. We found that a handful of recurring issues were driving most of the callouts. I split the response into two tracks. One track was immediate: we changed the on-call roster to give people longer breaks and made sure escalations had clear criteria. The other track was preventative: we assigned owners to the recurring problems and tracked them in Jira Service Management. I also made a point of recognising the team publicly and protecting their recovery time. Over the next quarter, callouts dropped, repeat incidents fell, and the team stayed intact. The bigger lesson was that workload problems are usually system problems, not effort problems.”

6. How do you manage vendor contracts, licensing and budget when the business wants new capability but the renewal is already tight?

Why they ask

This tests commercial negotiation, licensing awareness and how you balance business demand against budget discipline.

How to structure your answer

Trade-off structure: clarify the business need, review the contract and usage, compare options, negotiate, align stakeholders and document the decision.

Example answer

“I would first clarify what capability the business actually needs and by when. Sometimes the request is for a new tool when an existing platform already covers most of the need. I would review the current contract, licence usage and renewal terms, then look at whether we can renegotiate, consolidate or phase the new capability. I would bring finance and the business owner into the conversation early so the trade-offs are transparent. If we need to spend more, I would show what we would stop or defer to keep the overall budget within bounds. I would also check exit and data portability clauses before signing anything new. The decision would be documented, with a review date, so we are not locked into a poor fit.”