

Laboratory Manager interview questions

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What to expect

Laboratory Manager interviews blend technical credibility with operational judgement. Employers want evidence you can run a compliant, efficient lab while leading people and handling the unexpected. Expect questions that test how you think about accreditation, safety, staffing and client pressure.

- **Quality and accreditation:** Questions about NATA, ISO/IEC 17025 or ISO 15189, audit preparation, corrective actions and maintaining a quality management system.
- **People leadership:** Behavioural questions about supervising scientists and technicians, handling underperformance, rostering and building a safe team culture.
- **Operational and financial:** Questions about budgets, equipment breakdowns, purchasing decisions and keeping turnaround times on track.
- **Scenario and client-facing:** Hypotheticals about urgent client requests, result disputes, safety incidents or conflicting priorities.
- **Technical currency:** Questions that check you stay close enough to the bench to make sound scientific judgements.

Most processes start with a phone or video screen with a recruiter or HR, then move to a panel interview with the laboratory director, a senior scientist and sometimes a quality or operations manager. The panel often combines behavioural questions with a technical walkthrough, and you may be asked to talk through a real scenario or review a sample quality report. Some employers include a laboratory tour and a short meeting with the team. Reference checks and verification of qualifications and accreditations usually follow a successful panel.

1. Walk me through how you would prepare a laboratory for a NATA surveillance audit.

Why they ask

This tests whether you understand accreditation as an ongoing system, not a last-minute scramble. Employers want to see a repeatable process.

How to structure your answer

Use a step-by-step walk-through. Start with the pre-audit review, then the evidence gathering, then staff preparation, then the audit itself, then corrective actions and close-out. Finish with how you keep the system ready between audits.

Example answer

"I start by pulling the previous audit report and any open corrective actions, so nothing is left hanging. Then I work through the quality management system against the relevant standard, checking that procedures match what actually happens on the bench. I ask each section leader to review their own records, because ownership matters more than me checking everything alone. About a month out, I run a mock audit with someone from another department so we get fresh eyes. During the audit I make sure the right people are available and that we answer questions directly rather than guessing. Afterward I log any findings, assign owners and dates, and track them to close-out. Between audits I keep a rolling internal review schedule so preparation is just part of normal work."

2. Tell me about a time you had to manage an underperforming staff member in the laboratory.

Why they ask

People leadership is central to the role. This question probes whether you can have a difficult conversation while protecting quality and morale.

How to structure your answer

Use STAR: situation, task, action, result. Keep the focus on your specific actions and what changed.

Example answer

"I had a technician who was making repeated data entry errors in the LIMS, which was causing rework and frustrating the rest of the team. The task was to fix the errors without losing a trained person. I sat down with them privately, showed the specific records rather than making it personal, and asked what was getting in the way. It turned out they had never been formally trained on a recent LIMS upgrade and were embarrassed to ask. I arranged focused retraining over two sessions and paired them with a buddy for a fortnight. I also set up a simple double-check step for their batch releases for a month. The errors stopped, the rework disappeared, and they later became one of the people I asked to help train new starters on the system."

3. A senior client rings to say a critical result is late and they need it within the hour. What do you do?

Why they ask

This tests judgement under pressure, client communication and your ability to prioritise without cutting corners on quality or safety.

How to structure your answer

Use a judgement-under-pressure structure: acknowledge and gather facts, assess what is actually possible, decide and communicate, then follow up and prevent recurrence.

Example answer

"First I would stay calm and get the facts: which sample, which test, where it is in the workflow, and whether the delay is a queue issue or a technical problem. I would tell the client I am checking and give them a realistic time to expect a call back, rather than promising something I cannot deliver. Then I would look at the run and see if the sample can be prioritised without compromising other urgent work or the validity of the test. If it can, I would move it forward and supervise the release myself. If it cannot be done in an hour, I would say so clearly, explain why, and give the earliest accurate time. Afterward I would log the delay, talk to the team about what caused it, and adjust scheduling or communication so the same client is not caught out again."

4. How do you keep your technical knowledge current while carrying a full operational load?

Why they ask

Laboratory Managers need enough scientific credibility to make sound calls. Employers want to know you have not drifted entirely away from the bench.

How to structure your answer

Use a present-tense approach structure: describe your habits, then give one concrete example of how that has paid off.

Example answer

"I keep a small technical workload so I stay familiar with the methods, and I block time each month to review new publications, supplier updates and method changes relevant to our testing. I am a member of my professional body and I attend local branch meetings or webinars where I can. I also make sure I am the one who reviews and signs off method validation reports, which forces me to stay across the detail. Last year that habit helped when a reagent supplier changed a formulation: because I was across the validation data, I picked up a subtle shift in results and we revalidated before it affected client reporting."

5. Describe your approach to managing a laboratory budget when equipment failure forces an unplanned spend.

Why they ask

This probes financial control and prioritisation. The role holds budget responsibility, and unplanned equipment costs are a common pressure.

How to structure your answer

Use a structure of situation, options, decision, communication. Be clear about who you consult and how you protect essential testing.

Example answer

"If a key instrument fails, my first step is to understand the impact on testing: what work stops, what can be redirected, and how long we have before clients are affected. Then I get a clear cost and timeline from the supplier or engineer. I look at the budget for any contingency, and if there is not enough, I work up options such as repairing versus replacing, leasing a temporary unit, or sending urgent work to an accredited partner laboratory. I would take the options to my manager with a recommendation and the service impact spelled out. Once a decision is made I communicate it to the team and to affected clients quickly. Afterward I review the maintenance schedule and warranty position so we are not caught the same way again."

6. Give an example of how you have used LIMS data to improve laboratory performance.

Why they ask

LIMS is central to this role. Employers want to see you use it as a management tool, not just a data entry system.

How to structure your answer

Use a context, data, action, outcome structure. Keep the numbers to counts and time, not percentages or dollars.

Example answer

"We had a persistent backlog in one testing section, but no one could agree on the cause. I pulled six months of LIMS data on sample receipt times, queue lengths and result release times. The data showed that the bottleneck was not the analysis itself but the review and sign-off step, which was concentrated in one or two people at the end of each day. I changed the roster so two additional senior staff were trained and authorised to review, and we moved to a rolling review during the day instead of one end-of-day batch. Within a month the backlog cleared and average turnaround for that section dropped from three days to under two. I now review that LIMS report monthly so we pick up any drift early."