

Vessel Traffic Service Operator interview questions

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What to expect

Vessel Traffic Service Operator interviews combine technical checks on radar, AIS and radio procedure with scenario-based judgement and behavioural questions about shift work and stakeholder communication. Employers want to see you can stay calm, follow marine safety rules, and communicate clearly under pressure.

- **Process:** Walk-through questions on standard traffic clearances, watch handovers, and communication flows.
- **Technical:** Questions on radar, AIS, VHF radio, COLREGs, and port management systems.
- **Scenario:** Simulated emergencies, close-quarters situations, or equipment failures requiring judgement under pressure.
- **Behavioural:** Past examples of teamwork, conflict resolution, and managing rotating shift work.
- **Safety:** How you apply marine safety regulations, AMSA requirements, and port procedures.
- **Stakeholder:** Communicating with pilots, ship masters, and port authorities in routine and tense situations.

Typically a panel interview with a VTS supervisor, a port operations manager, and sometimes an HR representative. It may include a practical simulation on a radar or VTS console, followed by behavioural questions. Some employers run a two-stage process with a phone screen first.

1. Can you walk me through how you issue a traffic clearance to a vessel entering a busy harbour?

Why they ask

This tests your process knowledge and ability to follow standard radio procedure under routine pressure.

How to structure your answer

A step-by-step walk-through: identify the vessel, check traffic and weather, confirm pilot and berth, issue clearance with standard phraseology, and log the exchange.

Example answer

"On a typical watch, I would first confirm the vessel's identity and position using AIS and radar. I check traffic density, weather, and any special conditions like a cruise ship departure. Then I confirm the pilot's boarding time and the berth allocation through the port management system. I issue the clearance using standard phraseology, for example 'Clear to proceed to berth number four via the main channel, maintain a safe speed and report at the next waypoint.' I listen for read-back and correct any misunderstanding. Finally, I log the time, vessel name, and clearance details in the traffic log."

2. What checks do you make on your radar and AIS display at the start of a watch?

Why they ask

This probes your technical routines and attention to detail before taking over a watch.

How to structure your answer

A checklist-style answer: power and standby, radar tuning, AIS target list, VHF radio check, CCTV coverage, and logbook setup.

Example answer

"I start by confirming the radar is on and tuned, with gain and sea clutter set for the current conditions. I check the AIS target list to see all active vessels in the area and note any that are not transmitting correctly. I do a radio check on the VHF working channels and confirm the CCTV feeds show all critical berths and channel approaches. I also review the previous watch log to see any outstanding issues, then set up my own log with the time and my name. I test the emergency alarm and confirm the contact numbers for the harbour master and pilot station."

3. A vessel reports a steering failure near the channel entrance. What do you do?

Why they ask

This assesses your judgement under pressure and your ability to coordinate a response.

How to structure your answer

Judgement under pressure: acknowledge, assess risk, broadcast warning, advise master, coordinate tugs or pilot, log actions, and escalate to harbour master.

Example answer

"I would immediately acknowledge the report and ask for the vessel's position, speed, and number of persons on board. I assess the risk to other traffic and broadcast a safety warning on VHF to all vessels in the area. I advise the master to anchor if possible and to keep clear of the main channel. I coordinate with the pilot station and tug operators to provide assistance, and I inform the harbour master. I keep a detailed log of all communications and actions, and I continue to monitor the vessel's drift until it is safe or a tow is attached."

4. Tell me about a time you had to manage a conflict or misunderstanding over VHF radio.

Why they ask

This checks your behavioural skills in stakeholder management and de-escalation.

How to structure your answer

STAR: Situation, Task, Action, Result.

Example answer

"Situation: A ship master insisted on proceeding without a pilot, which was against port rules. Task: I needed to stop the movement without escalating the situation. Action: I calmly repeated the requirement, explained the safety reasons, and offered to connect him with the harbour master for clarification. I also suggested a short delay while we arranged a pilot. Result: The master agreed to wait, and the pilot boarded safely. The port avoided a serious incident, and the master later thanked me for the clear explanation."

5. How do you ensure compliance with AMSA marine orders and port procedures during your watch?

Why they ask

This tests your safety and compliance awareness, which is critical for this role.

How to structure your answer

Policy-to-practice: name the regulations, describe your routine checks, and give an example of when you stopped a non-compliant movement.

Example answer

"I keep a current copy of the relevant marine orders and port procedures at my console. Before each watch, I review any new notices or temporary restrictions. During the watch, I check that every vessel has the required pilot, clearance, and radio contact. For example, I once noticed a small craft entering a restricted zone without a clearance. I immediately radioed the operator, advised them of the

restriction, and directed them to the correct channel. I logged the incident and reported it to the harbour master. Staying compliant protects everyone on the water."

6. How do you handle a ship master who questions your navigational advice?

Why they ask

This assesses your stakeholder communication and ability to stay calm under challenge.

How to structure your answer

De-escalation and evidence: listen, restate safety concern, cite COLREGs or port rules, offer alternative, and involve pilot if needed.

Example answer

"I listen carefully to their concern and repeat it back to show I understand. I then restate the safety reason for my advice, referencing the relevant COLREGs or port rule. For example, I might say 'The channel is narrow, and your draft requires a specific speed to avoid squat.' I offer an alternative that meets both the safety requirement and their operational needs, such as a different timing or route. If the disagreement continues, I suggest the pilot or harbour master join the conversation. My goal is to keep the vessel and everyone else safe while maintaining a professional working relationship."