

CANDIDATES GUIDE TO COMPETENCY BASED INTERVIEWS

Introduction

Competency-based interviews have become an ever increasing method in assessing applicants. This guide aims to provide an introduction to competency-based interviews, why they are used more frequently and how best to prepare for them.

What are competency-based interviews?

One of the most consistent definitions describes competencies as; ‘... the behaviours that employees must have, or must acquire, to input into a situation in order to achieve high levels of performance’. A competency-based framework will be employed to ensure that the competencies investigated in the interview are appropriate and relevant to the role being recruited. The framework contains a selection of questions for each competency; one is selected and put to the applicant for each specific competency. The questions are formed so to generate a response that will outline a real experience the applicant has had in the past.

This is the main point of contention for many candidates that find competency-based interviews complicated and frustrating. This highlights one easily overcome issue; most candidates are unsure how to prepare for competency-based interviews and specifically what the questions demand of them.

Why are competency-based interviews so useful?

The main reason for their popularity is, that like most things that are more scientifically advanced than their previous applications, competency-based interviews are; more accurate, offer more detail and get better results for both applicants and employers.

The process, if followed correctly, is objective and ensures that the interviewer is focused upon relevant evidence in judging a person’s suitability for a given role. This in turn can prevent unfair, unfounded and emotive value judgements from entering the interview process. This allows interviews to be naturally meritocratic and effective.

Competencies and Questions

There are five main competencies that are likely to be assessed;

- Individual Competencies
- Managerial Competencies
- Analytical Competencies
- Interpersonal Competencies
- Motivational Competencies

Below we have listed a select set of questions that would usually be covered in a competency-based interview, although most frameworks will phrase their questions in a unique manner.

Teamwork

Employers require co-operative and socially competent people within their business. Even if the role they are recruiting is 'stand-alone' there will almost always be project-based or cross functional activities expected. Building internal relationships are critical to the overall success of any business.

- 1 Give an example of a time when you have been asked to work in a group to complete a project. How did the group organise priorities and delegation of tasks. What was the overall outcome of the project?
- 2 Describe a situation when working in a team environment you have experience conflict, either with a colleague or manager. What was the nature of the conflict and how did you try to resolve it. What was the conclusion to this issue?

Analytical Thinking

The ability to plan, organise and action our workload logically is an essential part of work today. Employers are looking for individuals that are autonomous and that can get their job done efficiently. A strong analytical aptitude will improve the accuracy and validity of ideas, information management and processes.

- 1 Describe a situation when a project or piece of work was going to miss a set deadline, how did you prioritise which parts of the work to complete first and how did you go about completing the existing work?
- 2 Give an example of an experience of dealing with a query or complaint. Who made the query/complaint, what information did you obtain and how did you go about resolving this situation?

Problem Solving and Decision Making

How do you go about solving problems in the workplace? How effectively do you prioritise your workload? How do you react in pressurised situations? These are key topics for all employers.

- 1 Describe a situation when you had to make a quick decision, why was the situation so urgent, what were the circumstances and what did you do?
- 2 Describe a significant problem that you have encountered recently, how did you approach this problem, who was involved and how did you go about resolving it?

Personal and Career Objectives

A strong sign of compatibility between employer and applicant is when both parties have similar goals. If this is present, greater engagement, performance and retention can be achieved. Are your goals in line with those of the employer?

- 1 What are your short, medium and long term goals, how have you gone about identifying and developing these goals and how do you intend to achieve them?
- 2 What are the three most important things that you are looking for in your next role. How have you established these key ideals and how do they fit into your long term career plan?

Motivation

What motivates you? Are you easily distracted? What incentives are key to you achieving your goals? Realistic self assessment and self targeting to achieve your goals are key to succeeding in your new role.

- 1 Can you tell me about a time when you have performed over and above the expectations of your role?
- 2 How would you describe yourself, what are your strongest attributes and where do you feel you need to improve most?

Communication

How do you prefer to communicate? What types of communication tools are you confident in using, e.g. email, presentations, meetings? It is not just what you communicate, it is also about what tools you might use and how you would go about using them that highlights your aptitude for communication.

- 1 Give an example of a time when you have had to communicate with individuals and groups, both internally and externally. What methods of communication did you use and what problems did you face?
- 2 Describe a time when you have had to take on board in-depth and complex information and then use this information in your role.

Influencing and Persuading Others

How do you get people to change their way of thinking or to take a different course of action? As a manager are you able to persuade rather than coerce? The way we persuade and influence are open to questions of best practice and ethics. Done the right way, they ensure a healthy and successful working environment.

- 1 Give an example of a time when you were asked to do something that you disagreed with. How did you go about your task and what was the outcome?
- 2 Describe a situation when you have had to deal with an objection and you have been able to influence the person raising this. What was the objection and what did you do to influence them?

Competency-Based Interview Preparation

You can never predict the exact questions you will be asked at interview. However, like examinations, competency-based interviews are structured by a framework; therefore there are strong indications as to what the employer is likely to cover.

First ensure that you have read, understood and feel comfortable with all elements of the job specification. Do the same with your CV, ensuring that you are able to discuss it at interview, providing more detailed content as to what you have done in each of your positions.

The job specification should highlight the key behaviours expected of the successful applicant. Considering these behaviours from a competency-based perspective, look back at your career history and identify experiences and situations that can be used to demonstrate these behaviours. If you are struggling for an example from your career, use experiences from hobbies and social situations, but remember this is an interview, you are looking for examples of a professional nature. Competency-based answers provide concrete evidence of your suitability and likely success in a given role, in turn increasing the likelihood of your success at interview.

STAR

The STAR model provides a memorable and structured method to frame your answers:

Situation – describe the situation or problem encountered

Task – describe the task that the situation required of you

Action – describe the action that you took to overcome the obstacle presented

Result – describe outcomes including achievements, what was learned from any negative outcomes, and what you would do differently next time.

Competency-based answers are focused around real life examples, to validate these examples it is important to include as much specific detail as possible. For example, company names, colleagues and managers names and job titles, and dates (month and year). Once you have prepared a couple of answers, ask the following;

Have I described?

Who – was involved, manager, customer, colleague? **What** – was the situation, the issue, the outcome? **When** – did this happen, in the process? **Where** – were you working, were you in the process? **Why** – did you choose this course of action, was this objection raised? **How** – did you prioritise your tasks, action your plan, resolve the situation?

If you are struggling to demonstrate a particular competency from your work experience, look at your involvement in societies, clubs, charities, further education or event organisation for example.

Note: Once prepared, the biggest problem applicants face in competency-based interviews is the desire to repeat the same examples for different competencies. Some of the practice questions included in this pack demonstrate clear similarities between certain competencies. The trap is that by giving a good answer to one question, this answer seems more suited to a question asked later in the interview.

Do not simply refer to this earlier answer or repeat it with relevance to the new question. Use a new example as this will illustrate a good breadth of experience and will provide further evidence of your relevance for the position.