



Barclay Simpson  
corporate governance recruitment

# Guide to competency based interviews



## Competency-based Interviews

As competency-based interviews are becoming an ever more frequent part of candidate selection, here is a brief guide to what such interviews involve, along with some advice on how best to approach them.

### Introduction

Competency-based interviews are based on the idea that past behaviour is the best predictor of future behaviour. Accordingly, the interviewer's goal is to obtain specific examples of when and how you demonstrated particular behaviours. Interview questions are carefully designed to probe specific skills, competencies and characteristics which are relevant to job success for the position in question. All candidates are asked the same questions and notes are taken in order to evaluate candidates.

The word competency is widely used in business and personnel psychology and refers to the behaviours that are necessary to achieve organisational goals. A competency is also something you can measure and lists of competencies form a common language for describing how people perform in different situations. Every job can be described in terms of key competencies. This means that competencies can be used for all forms of assessment, including appraisals, training needs analysis and, of course, selection.

Whilst each interview may vary in terms of the questions asked / competencies reviewed, there are general themes that are usually covered. It is well worth preparing for this type of interview by, for example, being familiar with some of the possible questions and how you would answer them.

### *Types of competencies likely to be assessed*

**Individual competencies** - your personal attributes: flexibility, decisiveness, tenacity, independence, risk taking, personal integrity

**Managerial competencies** - taking charge of other people: leadership, empowerment, strategic planning, corporate sensitivity, project management, management control

**Analytical competencies** - the elements of decision making: innovation, analytical skills, numerical problem solving, problem solving, practical learning, detail consciousness

**Interpersonal competencies** - dealing with other people: communication, impact, persuasiveness, personal awareness, teamwork, openness

**Motivational competencies** - the things that drive you: resilience, energy, motivation, achievement orientation, initiative, focus on quality

### Examples of competency questions

#### **Problem solving and judgment**

1. Tell me about a time when you had to identify the underlying causes to a problem.
2. Describe a time when you had to analyse a problem and generate a solution.
3. Tell me about a situation where you had to solve a problem or make a decision that required careful thought. What did you do?

### **Self-management, self-motivation and self-knowledge**

Do you always strive to achieve a standard of excellence, use initiative at the appropriate time and show persistence in pursuing goals? Accurate self-assessment skills will allow you to be objective and critical in evaluating your strengths and weaknesses.

1. Tell me about a time when you acted over and above the expectations of your role.
2. How would you describe yourself?
3. How do you think a close friend who knows you well would describe you?

### **Ability, competence and achievement**

Designed to discover what inspires you and motivates you to achieve and whether you are a loner or a team person.

1. What two or three accomplishments have given you the most satisfaction? Why?
2. Describe a time when you led or motivated others.
3. What do you feel qualifies you for this position?
4. Tell me about a time when you recognised a problem in your organisation, what did you do?

### **Conflict management and ethics**

How do you behave in a crisis? What does it take to shake your poise or self-confidence? What approach do you take to problem solving?

1. Tell me about a significant crisis you have faced.
2. Tell me about a difficult customer or a customer complaint that you have dealt with.
3. How do you resolve conflict in the groups or teams that you are a part of?

### **Personal and career objectives**

Employers are likely to invest money in your training and development and will want to ensure that your objectives don't conflict with theirs.

1. What are your short and long-term goals?
2. When and why did you establish these goals and how are you preparing yourself to achieve them?
3. What are the most important things you are seeking in a career?

### **Adaptability**

How quickly and how positively will you adapt to changes in work practices, work roles and work environments and the general flux of the modern workplace? How do you manage or avoid stress?

1. Tell me about a time when you changed your priorities to meet others' expectations.
2. Describe a time when you altered your own behaviour to fit the situation.
3. Tell me about a time when you had to change your point of view or your plans to take into account new information or changing priorities.

### **Administrative skills**

These are generally checking that you have effective work habits, and the knowledge of workplace routines and some experience of common office administration systems.

1. Tell me how you organise your work and schedule your time.
2. Tell me about computer software packages you are familiar with and your experience in using them.
3. Tell me about your experience of managing a budget.

### **Problem solving and decision making**

What's your problem-solving style? Do you manage your activities to minimise or avoid them? How do you behave in a crisis?

1. Tell me about a difficult decision that you have made.
2. What significant problems have you faced in the last year?
3. How do you work under pressure?
4. Tell me about a time when you had to make a quick decision. What were the circumstances and what did you do?

### **Communication**

Are you an active listener, do you really listen and do you hear what is actually said. Are you able to read the non-verbal messages that others communicate? Do you communicate in an engaging and convincing way?

1. Describe a situation you were involved in that required a multi-dimensional communication strategy.
2. Give an example of a difficult or sensitive situation that required extensive communication?
3. Tell me about a time when you really had to pay attention to what someone else was saying, actively seeking to understand their message.

### **Organisational awareness**

1. Describe the culture of your organisation and give an example of how you work within this culture to achieve a goal.
2. Describe the things you consider and the steps you take in assessing the viability of a new idea or initiative.
3. Tell me about a time when you used your knowledge of the organisation to get what you needed.

### **Client focus**

1. Give an example of how you provided service to a client/stakeholder beyond their expectations. How did you identify the need? How did you respond?
2. Tell me about a time when you had to deal with a client/stakeholder service issue.
3. Describe a situation in which you acted as an advocate within your organization for stakeholders' needs where there was some organizational resistance to be overcome.

### **Teamwork**

Employers need people who are socially competent. The desire to build and maintain relationships in and beyond the workplace is critical. Many workplaces function on the basis of project teams.

1. Tell me about a time when you worked successfully as a member of a team.
2. Describe a situation where you were successful in getting people to work together effectively.
3. Describe a situation in which you were a member (not a leader) of a team, and a conflict arose within the team. What did you do?

### **Results orientation**

1. Tell me about a time when you set and achieved a goal.
2. Tell me about a time when you improved the way things were typically done on the job.
3. Describe something you have done to improve the performance of your work unit.

## Influencing or persuading others

You may have strong verbal skills but can you influence another person to change their thinking or take some action – perhaps a colleague follows your advice or a client decides to buy a service or product. At management level have you the skills to persuade and involve rather than coerce and punish? Are you ethical in your dealings with people?

1. Tell me about a time when you were able to change someone's viewpoint significantly.
2. Tell me about a time when you were asked to do something that you disagreed with.
3. Tell me about a person or event that has been influential in your personal development.

### **Preparing for competency-based Interviews**

To prepare for competency-based interviews, first review the job description carefully and identify the skills and traits likely to be assessed. Next, identify the situations and experiences that you will refer to in the interview to demonstrate these skills and traits. Competency-focused, well-structured answers are extremely powerful and will impress the interviewer.

The **STAR** model will provide a structure to your answers:

**Situation** - describe a situation or problem that you have encountered

**Task** - describe the task that the situation required or your ideas for resolving the problem

**Action** - describe the action you took, obstacles that you had to overcome

**Results** - highlight outcomes achieved

## **Example interview question**

Can you give us an example of when you have dealt with a difficult situation on your team? What was the situation? Why had it happened? What did you do? How was the situation resolved?

Describe the **Situation** and the **Task** briefly. Most of your answers should focus on **Action** and **Results**; applying the who (you), what, when, where, why and how model often used in journalism to answer all the relevant questions that will keep you focused and make your description more interesting.

### **Possible good answer**

I was working on an audit with a more junior team member who had a reputation for not pulling his weight. I was finding it difficult to get the most out of him and found myself thinking back to what my colleagues had said about this person. I decided to speak to him in private and give him some feedback on what the general opinion in the team was. I did this in a diplomatic way, asking him if he needed more guidance or if he was having trouble at all. He opened up to me saying that he was not aware of how he was seen by the team and that he sometimes did not understand what he was meant to be doing and that the more senior team members had taken over the assignments without involving or coaching him. He found it quite hard to speak up. I took this on board and dedicated extra time to assisting him with our assignment as well as giving him more (guided) responsibility. I spoke to my senior colleagues and asked them to be aware of more junior staff concerns. His work improved and he felt much happier within the team.

**If you would like further information on competency-based interviews, please contact Barclay Simpson's Occupational Psychologist, Daniela Senior**  
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