

Competency Interviews

INFORMATION LEAFLET

A competency based interview (also referred to as a situational, behavioural or competency interview) is a style of interviewing that is increasingly used by employers – especially larger organisations. The competency based interview is one where the focus is on evaluating a candidate's ability. It is an interview style that is particularly useful when it is hard to select on the basis of technical merit: for example, for a graduate job where relevant experience is less important or not required.

Increasingly, however, companies are also using competency based interviews as part of the selection process for experienced recruitment. This is because this interview type can give valuable insights into an individual's preferred style of working and help predict behaviours in future situations.

Conventional job interviews may focus on questions relating to an applicant's past or previous industry experience, but this is an ineffective tool for graduate level candidates who are not expected to have any former experience in the industry they wish to work in.

Questions about industry experience do not tend to feature in a competency interview. Instead interviewers pose questions that ask candidates to demonstrate that they have a particular skill or a 'competency' the firm is looking for. Candidates will be asked to do this using situational examples from their life experiences - to illustrate their personality, skill set and individual competencies to the interviewer.

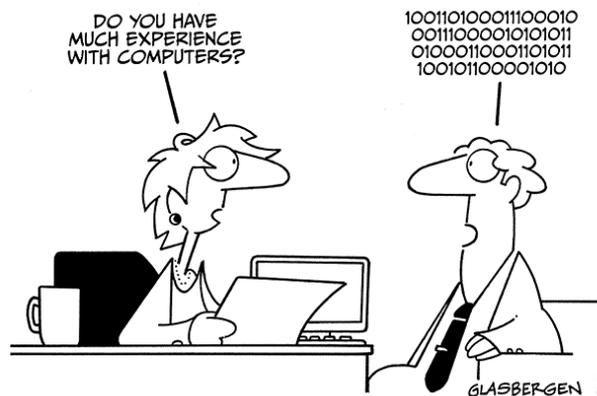
Competency interviews may also feature questions that probe candidates on their knowledge of the company and industry they have applied to. Finally, in these interviews, there are usually questions too that explore candidates' motivation and commitment to career development and success.

Who Uses Competency Interviews?

A third of all employers are estimated to use competency interviews - though not across all levels of appointments. Large graduate employers use this style of interview especially within graduate recruitment. However, because competency interviews are believed to facilitate fair selection, they are increasingly becoming standard within large employer organisations.

Will I Be Given a Competency Interview?

It is hard to tell if a competency interview will feature as part of your assessment process before making your application to a firm, although the application form itself may help to give you a clue. Many employers who do use competency interviews design their application forms to include a number of competency questions. Take note if you find any questions on your application that ask you to give situational examples. These may be a strong indicator of what is in store at interview!



What are Competencies?

A competency is a particular quality that a company's recruiters have decided is desirable for employees to possess. During interviews and assessment processes competencies are used as benchmarks that assessors use to rate and evaluate candidates.

In interviews recruiters look for evidence of competencies by asking candidates competency based questions. This style of question forces candidates to give situational examples of times in the past when they have performed particular tasks or achieved particular outcomes using certain skills.

Key Competencies

A firm will usually isolate several key skills or "key competencies" to look for in candidates at interview. You will be graded in terms of each competency based upon your answers to competency based questions.

Employers typically use some of the following as their key competencies:

- Teamwork
- Responsibility
- Commitment to career
- Commercial awareness
- Career motivation
- Decision making
- Communication
- Leadership
- Trustworthiness & Ethics
- Results orientation
- Problem solving
- Organisational ability

Typical Competency Interview Structure

Questions in competency interviews will usually refer to activities a candidate has participated in at school, college or university, or any other activities that can be used to effectively display evidence of particular competencies.

A typical competency question could be: "Describe two situations where you have had to work as part of a team." When asked a question like this, you should be able to talk for several minutes about your participation in a particularly strong team you have been part of in the past and how your sense of teamwork helped lead a task or project to successful completion.

You should have a plan, organised before the interview, of the experiences from your life that you can use as examples to demonstrate the competencies that the firm to which you are applying is interested in. You should have at least two examples relevant to each competency you expect to be asked about.

Questions about Motivation

It is likely you will be asked why you wish to work for the firm and what distinguishes them, as you see it, from their competitors. This question requires you to discuss your knowledge of the firm in detail and to prove to your interviewer that you have real desire for a job with them.

To answer this question you should describe:

- The key strengths this firm has over its competitors in the industry (e.g. more specialised in certain niche areas, more international scope, more respected).
- What appeals to you personally about the firm (e.g. your interests in the firm's niche areas, your relevant study at university). Other relevant factors you find interesting (e.g. the impression you have of the working style at the firm, the social side of the company, the type of charitable work that the company is involved in).
- You may also be asked what you believe you will be doing during your first year on the graduate scheme. You should be particularly clear about exactly what it is you will be doing. If you cannot answer this question, you are unlikely to be successful. If you are currently unsure, it is perfectly acceptable to contact the firm's graduate recruitment department before applying to discuss anything you do not already know about the job.



“Nothing motivates me like a cup of coffee and a dozen donuts and a nap and a couple of hours off and going home early. So, if that’s what you have in mind for me today, I’m on board.”

PERFORMING WELL AT COMPETENCY INTERVIEWS

If you expect a competency based interview and you have not been advised of the competencies required for the job you are applying for, you should ask to be provided with them. Knowing the competencies that will be focused on puts you into a better position to succeed.

Read also through all the information you have about the job. The job description in particular should tell you what skills and abilities are sought.

Know How Questions Will Be Structured

In competency based interviews the interviewer phrases questions as follows: ‘In this job, the ability to, [*insert each competency, one by one*] is an important competency... Can you outline for us some situation where you were required to use [*the competency being asked about*]?’

Get Your Stories Ready

At competency based interviews you will be asked to provide specific examples of what you have done to date. Use your preparation time to think through your experiences to date and prepare 'stories' which you can use in the actual interview. These stories should be real experiences and achievements that you have been a part of.

Having identified key parts of the job, think about when you have displayed relevant skills or behaviours in your life. Then seek to identify a specific instance where you used a particular skill or ability. Your examples can also be from your work or home life.

Structure Your Answers

A very useful technique for answering competency based questions is to use the ‘STAR’ method – with STAR an acronym for:

- Situation
- Task
- Action
- Result

To use the technique, you describe the Situation you were in, the Task you were asked to accomplish, the Action you took and why, and the Results of your actions. You summarise what you have to say to cover these four points concisely. This facilitates the interviewer understanding and, hopefully, remembering your story.

Here's how the method can be used to answer an employer's question:

Situation: I didn't initially do well in university and I failed my first year exams.

Task: I knew I had to develop better study habits and manage time better.

Action: I created a calendar with the dates for all of my assignments and tests. Then I set aside certain hours each day for studying and project work.

Result: My essays were in on time. And because I separated study time from social time, I worked hard and then relaxed successfully.

During the Interview

Use your examples to make circa three key points about what you've been asked. Make them relevant and to the point. Not too long or too short.

- Then provide an opportunity for the interviewer to ask about what you have raised.
- Use 'I' a lot when answering. The interviewer wants to know what your personal involvement and experience was - not about 'the team' or 'us'.
- Enjoy the interview - smile and show your true personality. Interviewers are interested in happy, as well as capable, people.
- Do not say that you cannot answer a question. There is always a story that you can tell. Marks are awarded for every individual question answered in a competency based interview and in these circumstances you should not reply that you can't answer a question asked.

Before You Leave

- Ask relevant questions - about company culture, plans for the future etc.
- Enquire about issues they may be facing. By researching beforehand you should be up to date on what is current within their business.
- Assure the interviewer that you would like to work for the company and be given the opportunity to use your skills.
- Thank the interviewer and enquire about the next steps.
- Finish with a light comment if you feel comfortable doing this – avoid flippancy.

COMMON ERRORS IN COMPETENCY INTERVIEWS

The candidate doesn't use a specific story to demonstrate their skill or ability.

For example, if you commonly deal with difficult clients, you might be tempted to say 'whenever I get a difficult client, this is what I do...' However, at a competency interview you are better to identify one event - 'last week, I spoke to a customer who was angry...!'

The candidate says 'we', not 'I'.

Sometimes, if you are using examples where many people were involved in making something happen, you may be tempted to say 'we decided that... we did this...' The interviewer can only give you points for things that you personally did.

The candidate does not give enough detail in their answer

Competency based questions want to explore what you understand about a skill or ability. For example, if you start to describe a situation where you planned an event you need to demonstrate that you understood the need to:

- Plan your time to achieve a goal.
- Build in extra time for unexpected eventualities.
- Prioritise tasks according to importance.
- Plan your resources (in this case, friends who could be asked to help).

Try to demonstrate in your answers that you understand the principles underlying the skill or ability you are discussing.

The candidate states that she/he has no experience to talk about in areas she/he has been asked to talk about

Sometimes, people feel that examples have to be taken from their experiences in work. It is perfectly acceptable to use examples from any area of your life.



"I'm a doer! I get results! I make things happen! I'm intentionally vague!"