

COMPETENCY-BASED INTERVIEWS

Competency-based interviews (also called structured interviews) are interviews where each question is designed to test one or more specific skills. The answer is then matched against pre-decided criteria and marked accordingly. For example, the interviewers may want to test the candidate's ability to deal with stress by asking first how the candidate generally handles stress and then asking the candidate to provide an example of a situation where he worked under pressure.

How do competency-based interviews differ from normal interviews?

Normal interviews (also called unstructured interviews) are essentially a conversation where the interviewers ask a few questions that are relevant to what they are looking for but without any specific aim in mind other than getting an overall impression of you as an individual. Questions are fairly random and can sometimes be quite open. For example, a question such as "What can you offer our company?" is meant to gather general information about you but does not test any specific skill or competency. In an unstructured interview, the candidate is judged on the general impression that he/she leaves; the process is therefore likely to be more subjective.

Competency-based interviews (also called structured or behavioural interviews) are more systematic, with each question targeting a specific skill or competency. Candidates are asked questions relating to their behaviour in specific circumstances, which they then need to back up with concrete examples. The interviewers will then dig further into the examples by asking for specific explanations about the candidate's behaviour or skills.

Which skills and competencies do competency-based interviews test?

The list of skills and competencies that can be tested varies depending on the post that you are applying for. For example, for a Personal Assistant post, skills and competencies would include communication skills; ability to organise and prioritise; and ability to work under pressure. For a senior manager, skills and competencies may include an ability to influence and negotiate; an ability to cope with stress and pressure; an ability to lead; and the capacity to take calculated risks.

Here is a non-exhaustive list of the more common skills and competencies that you may be asked to demonstrate:

Skills and competencies for competency-based interviews

- Adaptability
- Compliance
- Communication
- Conflict management
- Creativity and Innovation
- Decisiveness
- Delegation
- External awareness
- Flexibility
- Independence
- Influencing
- Integrity
- Leadership
- Leveraging diversity
- Organisational awareness
- Resilience and tenacity
- Risk taking
- Sensitivity to others
- Team work

What kind of competency-based interview questions can you be asked?

Although most questions tend to ask for examples of situations where you have demonstrated specific skills, they can appear in different formats. Examples include:

- How do you ensure that you maintain good working relationships with your senior colleagues?
- Give us an example of a situation where you had to deal with a conflict with an internal or external client.
- How do you influence people in situations where there are conflicting agendas?
- Tell us about a situation where you made a decision and then changed your mind.

In many cases, the interviewers will start with a general questions, which they will then follow up with a more specific example-based questions. So, for example:

- How do you manage upwards?
- Give us an example of a situation where you had a fundamental disagreement with one of your superiors.

The key in answering all questions is that you are required to "demonstrate" that you have the right skills by using examples based on your prior experience, and not just talk about the topic in a theoretical and impersonal manner.

How competency-based interview questions are marked

Before the interview, the interviewers will have determined which type of answers would score positive points and which types of answers would count against the candidates. For example, for questions such as "Describe a time when you had to deal with pressure", the positive and negative indicators may be as follows:

Positive indicators	Negative indicators
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demonstrates a positive approach towards the problem. • Considers the wider need of the situation • Recognises his own limitations • Is able to compromise • Is willing to seek help when necessary • Uses effective strategies to deal with pressure/stress 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Perceives challenges as problems • Attempts unsuccessfully to deal with the situation alone • Used inappropriate strategies to deal with pressure/stress

In some cases, negative indicators are divided into two further sections: *minor negative indicators*, i.e. those which are negative but which don't matter so much; and *decisive negative indicators* i.e. those for which they won't forgive you e.g. not asking for help when needed.

Marks are then allocated depending on the extent to which the candidate's answer matches those negative and positive indicators. Here is an example of a marking schedule for the table above:

0	No evidence	No evidence reported
1	Poor	Little evidence of positive indicators. Mostly negative indicators, many decisive
2	Areas for concern	Limited number of positive indicators. Many negative indicators, one or more decisive.
3	Satisfactory	Satisfactory display of positive indicators. Some negative indicators but none decisive.
4	Good to excellent	Strong display of positive indicators

If the interviewers feel that there are areas that you have failed to address, they may help you along by probing appropriately. For example, in answering the question above "Describe an example of a time when you had to deal with pressure", if you focussed on how you dealt with the practical angle of the problem but you forgot to discuss how you managed your stress during and after the event, the interviewers may prompt you with a further question such as "How did you handle the stress at the time?". This would give you an opportunity to present a full picture of your behaviour. This is where the marking can become subjective. Indeed, if an interviewer likes you, he may be more tempted to prompt you and push you along than if he has bad vibes about you.

Preparing for a competency-based interview

Preparation is key if you want to be able to answer all questions thrown at you without having to think too much on the spot on the day of the interview; it requires several steps:

1. Make sure that you understand which skills and competencies will be tested. It sounds obvious, but some person specifications can be a little vague and you will need to do some thinking in order to ensure that the examples that you will be using hit the spot. For example, your person specification may say that you need to have "good communication skills in dealing with third parties". For someone who works in customer service and is expected to handle complaints all day long, this will most likely involve a mix of empathy/understanding as well as an ability to be assertive in a nice way whenever required; however for someone applying for a commercial law post, this will most likely involve an ability to explain complex matters in a simple way, and not so much empathy. Understanding the requirements for the post, whether they are stated explicitly or not in the person specification is therefore crucial.
2. Identify examples from your past experience which you can use to demonstrate that you possess the skills and competencies that you are being asked to demonstrate. You do not have to find hypercomplicated examples; in particular the outcome of the story does not have to be extraordinary; what matters most is that the role you played in reaching the outcome was substantial.
3. Learn to narrate the story using the STAR method. This means setting the scene, explaining how you handled the situation by placing the emphasis on your role, and detailing the outcome/result.