

Competency Based Interviews

Introduction

This guide to competency based interviews has been developed to provide you with a better understanding of what competency-based interviews are and to help you prepare for them.

It may be some time since you last had an interview, or you may never have experienced an interview using competencies before. This guide includes some tips and advice that will help you structure your responses in a

What is the difference between traditional and competency-based interviews?

Traditional hiring methods focus on education, qualifications and experience. These traditional methods elicit responses that address credentials, opinions and feelings, but do not prompt the candidate to tell the interviewer about actual performance on the job, or about job experiences and accomplishments in specific situations.

Using traditional methods, the candidate does not have the opportunity to focus on what they actually did in a specific situation or in a previous job, how they did it and in what circumstances they were delivering.

This means that traditional interviews don't do a good job in helping to predict how a candidate will behave in specific situations.

Research has shown that competency based interviews represent the highest accuracy found in contemporary interviewing methods. As a result, most recruitment interviews held today are competency based.

What is a competency?

In simple terms, a competency is about the way we do things or the behaviours we use. If you are successful at 'communication' for example, you will do things in a certain way. Competencies describe these behaviours and are the result of a mixture of skills, abilities and knowledge.

Once you understand what a competency is, the approach used during a competency based interview becomes clearer. It's a structured way for the interviewer(s) to find examples and evidence of when you demonstrated the range of behaviours that make up a competency.

Why are we using a competency-based selection process?

The basic principle underlying a competency based selection process is that the best predictor of future performance is past performance in similar circumstances.

More specifically:

- The more recent the past behaviour, the greater its predictive power
- The more longstanding the behaviour, the greater its predictive power.

This type of interview focuses on past performance: skills, experience and achievements in order to greatly increase the organisation's ability to predict whether a person will be a strong performer in the role(s) they are applying for.

What will be included in the competency interview?

You will be asked questions to assess how well your experience meets the core competencies for the job. You will be asked to provide examples of what you have done, what you have said and what you have thought and felt in different situations. You may be asked for more than one example.

As an example, instead of being asked 'what is good customer service?', you may be asked 'describe a situation when you have provided superior customer service; what were the circumstances? What were your specific actions? What was the result?'

The interviewer(s) will take notes during the interviews and probe for further details when required.

What is the interviewer looking for?

You will be assessed against each essential criteria or competency, and asked questions about:

- past behaviours and performance
- learning from past behaviours
- future adaptability to the new post
- knowledge and understanding of issues in relation to the post.

The interview panel will make two important key comparisons:

- How do you compare against the requirements of the job?
- How do you compare against the other candidates?

How do I prepare for the interview?

You should have at least two good examples that best demonstrate your skills, experience and achievements for each of the core St John Ambulance competencies. These are *Communication, Planning & Organising, Teamwork, Achieving Results, Service Improvement* and *Expertise* (plus *Managing People, Decision-making, Influencing* and *Driving Change* for those in managerial positions). One way of approaching this is to review your current CV, details of your objectives, performance and development reviews and any other relevant information.

Brainstorm your roles and key responsibilities over the past few years. You could list them or use a mind mapping technique. For each area of your responsibilities, think about your achievements. What did you achieve, what happened as a result of your actions, what were your successes? Finally, look through your roles, responsibilities and achievements and pick those that are good examples of you demonstrating the key competencies required for the role(s) you are applying for.

Your preparation means that you will have a range of scenarios to use. When you are asked a question, stop and think about which of your examples is most appropriate. Think about how you will use it to answer the question that you have been asked.

For each example that you will be describing to the interviewer(s), it is helpful to consider the following STAR method:

Situation – What was the situation? What was the background and context?

Task – What specific task did you need to accomplish?

Action – What specifically did you say and do? What were the actions you took?

Result – What were the results of your actions? What was the impact? What did you learn?

Using the STAR method makes it easier for the interviewer(s) to understand your answer. It also helps you remain focused.

How should I structure my answers and what should I avoid?

You now need to think about the difference between an answer that is okay and an answer that really hits the mark. Think about these general rules which will help you:

DO	AVOID
Always speak in the first person singular 'I thought/felt/did'	Using we instead of I 'we thought/felt/did'
Discuss events that have occurred and speak in the past tense: 'The way I handled the situation with the customer was I first established the history...'	Using hypothetical or future tense: "What I usually do is..." "What I would do is..."
Focus on what actually happened: "At that time, I responded by..."	Being vague.....'in general, I always....'
Be time specific..... 'in August ...'	Humour – it can go badly wrong!
Focus on what YOU did	Talking about your colleagues and not what you did ...'we, the team'
Focus on what actually happened not on what might have happened	Opinions which are not relevant

What questions might I be asked?

1. Describe a time when you were working in a team and went out of your way to help a colleague
2. Describe a time when you had to take a risk
3. Give an example in your career where you have managed significant change
4. How do you measure your own success?
5. Give me an example of a time when you had to meet a difficult deadline. What did you do and what was the outcome?
6. Describe a difficult situation involving a customer
7. Describe a time when you had to resolve a difficult problem. How did you resolve it?
8. Tell us about a time when you had to organise yourself and your work to meet challenging deadlines
9. Can you give an example of a situation where you had to adapt your communication style to different audiences?
10. Give an example of a time when you have worked as part of a successful team
11. Give an example that illustrates your ability to communicate effectively to a geographically dispersed group of people
12. Give an example of a business plan that you have produced that covers a range of options and contingencies
13. Describe how you have linked plans and priorities to higher level business objectives

14. Give an example of how you have proactively worked with other functions/ departments to achieve objectives
15. Describe how you have held team members accountable for achieving results
16. Describe how you have established clear, quantifiable criteria to evaluate performance in a business area and improve the service
17. Describe a situation when you instigated an improvement to a process and describe what prompted you to take that action
18. Give an example that demonstrates your experience of building an effective team.

Will the final recruitment decision be based entirely on my performance at the interview?

No. While the competency based interview is an important method of gathering information, it is only part of the selection process. Other sources of information may also be used in order to determine the most suitable candidate to fill the role.

These sources may include some or all of the following:

- Data obtained from your application and/or CV
- Current performance data
- Data relating to your skills, competencies and behaviours
- Performance at an assessment centre
- Results of aptitude and/or personality tests.