



## Competency Based Interviews

### Introduction

Successfully finding another role will normally involve at least one interview. It may be some time since you last had an interview. Indeed, you may never have experienced an interview using competences before. This means that for many people, interviews can be a difficult and stressful experience.

### What is an Interview?

The word “interview” is common in every day language. There are all sorts of interviews ranging from television to job applications. They all have some things in common:

- involve a conversation between people
- two way exchange of information
- structure e.g. opening, middle and an end
- unwritten “rules” or accepted ways of doing things e.g. the use of specialised techniques such as competences
- each person has their own requirements from the interview

Take time to think about these a little more. For example:

- It’s a two way conversation – it’s not just about you responding to the interviewers questions, it’s also the questions that you ask
- You need to accept the ways things are done - e.g. the use of competences

### What is Special About a Competency Based Interview?

In major UK organisations, most interviews held nowadays use competences. Whilst competences are widely used within the company, for many of us interviews can be our first real experience of using them.

In simple terms, a competence is about the way we do things or “behaviours” we use. If you are successful at “Team Working” for example, you will do things in a certain way. Competences describe these behaviours and are the result of a mixture of skills, abilities and knowledge. A competence brings all these things together under one heading.

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

Remember, whilst a competence based interview will focus mainly on competences, other areas may also be covered in a more conventional way.



## What is the Interviewer Looking for?

You will now understand that a competence based interview focuses on finding examples of when you used certain behaviours.

It is also useful to look at the findings of some external research into selection decisions made by interviewers. This research shows that there are 3 key factors:

- Ability e.g. do you have the right competences?
- Want e.g. how much do you want this job? How will you show this?
- Fit e.g. how well will your skills fit within the team?

Remember to think about all three of these factors when preparing for your interview.

## What Will I Be Compared With?

The interviewer will make two key comparisons in deciding whether you are the right person for the job:

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

This is important. You may not have the level of experience suggested in the advertisement. However, whether this means you are successful at getting an interview can depend on the other candidates as well.

## What is the Format?

The line manager who is recruiting will normally run the interview. A human resources consultant may also take part.

Interviews normally last between 1 hour - 1 ½ hours, but can take longer or shorter depending on the nature of the job.

The interview will normally cover 3-4 competences which are key to the job.

Sometimes, in addition to the interview, you may be asked to complete other tests. For example - a work based exercise, a computer simulation or psychometric test. If these are to be used, you can expect to be advised beforehand.

## How Do I Prepare?

Focus on those competences which have been identified as key for the job your are applying for.

Familiarise yourself with the "breadth and depth" of each competence. For example, "Team Working" as a competence may involve more things than you might first think of!

You now need to put together examples, or "scenarios", about when you demonstrated these competences. One way of approaching this is shown here:

Gather together your current CV along with details of your objectives, performance development reviews and any other relevant information.

Take one or more blank sheets of paper and brainstorm your roles and key responsibilities over the past few years. You might list them or use a mind-mapping technique.

Now, 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. For each of the key competences you should have at least two good examples.

## Turning Preparation into Good Answers

The next step is to be able to get this information about your skills and abilities in an interview. Think about the illustration shown here:

Jo has 15 years experience and has worked in his current job for the last 3 years. Jo has now applied for a job in another department. In the interview, the first question is “Tell me about a time when you have needed to justify to others a difficult decision?”

### Interview 1

Jo felt that with all his experience he did not need to prepare for the interview. When he is asked the question he tries to think about an example. He stops to think. Finally, he remembers something that happened about 3 years ago. Jo starts to answer the question and starts a lengthy general description of the situation.

### Or Interview 2

Jo feels that with all the experience he has a good chance of getting the role. When he is asked the question he thinks through the scenarios he has prepared. He stops to think. Of the two good examples he has, one is better for this question. He spends the next few moments thinking how to relate the example to the question that he has been asked.

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

When you are ready to answer, a useful technique to use is “STAR”:

**S** Situation e.g. where were **you** working? when?

**T** Task e.g. what was the objective?

**A** Activity e.g. what actions did **you** take to achieve this

**R** Result e.g. what happened as a result of **your** actions?

STAR makes it easier for the interviewer to understand your answer. It also helps you remain focused.

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:

General Rules	
Do	Avoid
Be time specific ... in January ...	Being vague ... in general, I always ...
Focus on what you did ... my role, I ...	Opinions which are not relevant ... I don't like my boss ...
Focus on what actually happened not on what might have happened	Talking about your colleagues and not what you did ...we, the team .... Name dropping Personal matters, unless you are asked Humour – it can go badly wrong!

Remember these are only general rules and sometimes it is appropriate to break them!

## Countdown to Your Interview

<b>Before the Interview</b>	confirm your attendance
	research the job, the department
	where possible, speak to the line manager to find out more about the job
	discuss the opportunity with friends, colleagues and family
	think about the sort of questions you will be asked
	think about the questions you will ask, you may want to take a note of them to the interview
	practice - get a friend or colleague to help with a dummy interview
	Organise yourself - e.g. travel arrangements
	Think about what you are going to wear
	Have an early night!
<b>Immediately Before</b>	Don't eat strong food or smoke
	Arrive in good time
	Prepare yourself, relax as much as possible
	Check your clothing and appearance in a mirror
	Remember, first impressions count – that includes while you are waiting
<b>At the Interview</b>	Be yourself, act naturally and relaxed
	Get across your abilities
	Ask questions – remember it's a two way conversation
	Think about your body language
	Be prepared to “take control” and get your message across about your abilities even if the interview does not seem to be asking you many questions

## Advanced Techniques

The following techniques can help you in an interview. However, they will only help you if you are well prepared and confident.

- If you remember something later on in the interview:  
“perhaps I should have highlighted earlier on ...”
- If you're not sure whether you have answered the question:  
“are there any areas you would like me to go into more detail?”
- If asked about your weaknesses and failures:  
use one which you have overcome and learnt from  
if you can, use a weakness that is also considered a strength  
For example, having a high attention to detail can be both a strength and a weakness

## COMPETENCY / CRITERIA BASED INTERVIEWING

Below are 8 areas that you may be tested on in your forthcoming interview and examples of some of the questions you can reasonably expect in each section. It is advisable to have answers ready for each and it will also help you to anticipate what is required in the other questions that will be asked.

Remember STAR - think of the following points when answering:

<b>Situation:</b>	Describe the situation you were in
<b>Task:</b>	Tell them what you decided to do
<b>Action:</b>	Describe what you actually did
<b>Result:</b>	Describe how this improved the situation as a result of your actions

I suggest you practice the answers but don't bring out the sheet at the interview!!

---

### 1 Achieving Excellence

Describe a piece of work or project that you were given complete responsibility for and how did you manage it?  
Describe a time when you instigated an improvement to a process and what prompted you to take that action?  
What are your personal goals? Describe a time when you failed to reach a goal

### 2 Influencing

Describe a difficult situation involving customers where it was important for you to gain support and state your approach  
Describe a time when you were in conflict with others  
What did you do about it and what was the outcome?

### 3 Inspiring

Describe a time when you have had to encourage other people to achieve goals and describe your approach  
Describe a time when working in a team you were able to influence the outcome and what was your approach?  
Describe a time when the going got tough and what you did about it?

### 4 Communicating

What three things are you hoping will be better at this employer than where you are at present?  
What is the hardest part of your present job and what is the easiest?

### 5 Gathering Information/ Building Trust and Understanding

Describe a situation where you had to get information by asking a lot of questions of several people and what was your approach?  
How did you know when you had enough information?  
Describe a problem that you have needed to solve where it was important to give careful thought to the outcome  
How did you approach this issue?

## 6 Understanding Issues/ Finding Solutions/Change

Describe a time when you had to resolve a difficult problem

How did you resolve it?

Was this the only solution?

Describe a time when you had to take a risk.

How did you weigh up the options and in hindsight what would you have done differently?

How do you react to change? Is all change for the better? Give an example in your career where you dealt with significant change.

## 7 Developing Self/ People

How do you measure your own success?

What do you do if you identify a personal skills gap?

Give an example of you undertaking new learning using your own initiative?

What skills would you like to develop further and how do you intend to achieve this

## 8 Collaborating for Success

Give an example when you have encouraged a team approach to a task or project. And your approach.

How did those involved react and what was the result?

Describe a time when you had a problem requiring the help of someone in another department or office.

What was the problem?

What action did you take and what was the end result?

### Finally

This guide is aimed at helping you, using our experience and covering many of the questions we are often asked. It will help you prepare for interviews and make sure that you get across to the interviewer your abilities.

What it can't do is change you – and it's your abilities that ultimately decide whether you are successful.

Good luck!

web: [www.fs-recruitment.co.uk](http://www.fs-recruitment.co.uk)  
email: [info@fs-recruitment.co.uk](mailto:info@fs-recruitment.co.uk)

