

# Competency Based Interviews

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# How to prepare for a competency based interview

## Introduction

You may be used to a traditional interview format, where previous experience and qualifications are discussed, as the interviewer goes through your resume. A competency-based interview is much different, focused on testing for specific skills and traits that might predict your ability to be successful within the position.

The areas we'll cover in this guide include:

1. What is a competency based interview?
2. How to prepare for competency based interviews
3. Top competency based interview questions
4. How to answer competency based interview questions
5. How long should an answer be?
6. How do I pass a competency based interview?

## What is a competency based interview?

A competency based interview is a type of interview method that focuses on whether a candidate has the specific skills or competencies needed for the role. Interviewers will ask questions that are designed to test one or more skills, such as communication, problem-solving, teamwork etc. The questions will require the candidate to provide specific examples of how they used those skills in their current or previous roles.

## How to Prepare for Competency-Based Interviews

If you've never participated in a competency-based interview, here are five ways to prepare yourself ahead of time.

## 1. Expect Common Competency-Based Interview Questions

First and foremost, competency-based interview questions are usually open-ended with the goal of having the interviewee describe a relevant situation or experience. Questions will typically start with prompts like, *'Tell me about a time when...'*

As an applicant, you're expected to elaborate on a specific scenario and ultimately relate your answers to why you're a valuable and relevant candidate for the position. Here are a few examples of typical competency based interview questions:

- Tell me how you've taken on leading a project.
- Describe a difficult situation you've encountered and how you solved it.
- Can you give an example of a time when you led a team?
- Describe a time you've had to deal with conflict and how you resolved it.

Questions about hypothetical scenarios may also arise where you have to demonstrate creativity and the ability to solve problems on the fly.

## 2. Do Your Research

While it may go without saying, once you've scheduled the interview, make sure you read and understand the entire job posting. "Ideally, the recruiter will stipulate in the job advertisement exactly what competencies they are looking for. However, this might not always be the case. If you are unsure then read through the job specification, the advert and any information and highlight keywords which relate to skills." These are the skills that you want to prepare specific interview responses for.

Finally, research the company itself to get a sense of their culture, and any skills or traits that their organisation values. You want to market yourself as someone who has (and can continue to) demonstrate a skill set and demeanour to match the role and the company.

## 3. Brainstorm Anecdotes

After you have a comprehensive understanding of the company, the role and the skills needed to succeed, it's time for preparation. Reflect on your experience in the workplace and where you have demonstrated these skills and competencies to come up with anecdotes based on your lived

experience that you can pull from during the interview. Prepare 5 to 10 short stories on the key types of questions you expect to be asked. Make sure they really get across the positive impact you've had in all situations, with positive business outcomes.

Work with what experience you have, you have and don't exaggerate your answers. Even if you give examples from college or university, voluntary work and hobbies, it's important that you're truthful; as with all competency-based interviews, they will ask you to expand on your examples and probe for more detail.

#### **4. Use the STAR Technique**

If you want to practice, whether it be a mock interview with a friend or mentally running through potential answers yourself, use the STAR interview technique.

- **Situation:** Set the scene and context for the interviewer.
- **Task:** What was your challenge?
- **Action:** What did you do to overcome said challenge?
- **Result:** Highlight a positive outcome, drawing on how your action impacted it.

#### **5. Ask Your Own Questions**

The interviewer will ask if you have any questions for them, and the answer should always be a solid 'Yes'—ask about the working day, the team, development opportunities, company progression, new industry technology, ask anything!"

Not only do you want to uncover as much information as possible about the company itself, but this is another opportunity to show that you've done your research and that you'd like to learn more. Look at not only the company itself, but the market it operates in. Who are its suppliers and customers? What are its strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats? If you have an understanding of these aspects, it will position you to ask well informed questions and demonstrates your commitment.

Any interview can be nerve-wracking, no matter the style. If you know that an interview will be competency-based, preparation is crucial for success; you can't merely re-iterate your resume. Instead, research the role and the company to understand their ideal candidate. Prepare stories about yourself

that demonstrate your unique selling points. With a little preparation and practice, you'll nail the interview and maybe even land the job.

### **Top Competency-Based Interview Questions**

Here are a few likely competency based questions and example answers. The questions you are asked might not be worded exactly the same, but it's very likely you will be asked questions that fall into similar areas as these.

Common competency-based interview questions include:

#### **Give an example of a time when your communication skills changed the outcome of a situation.**

"I was brought into a team halfway through a project. Communication was poor and they had reached an impasse. I acted as mediator to identify common challenges and bring the team together again. Work progressed on schedule and we completed the project within budget."

#### **Give an example of when you were asked to take on a task you had never faced before.**

"Due to company restructuring, I was allocated new duties, including ... which I had not been asked to do before. I spoke to colleagues with similar responsibilities and looked at the work done by my predecessor, and was able to quickly get to grips with the task and produce what was needed on time."

#### **Tell me about a time when you had to make a quick decision without all of the facts.**

"I was an account manager in a customer-facing role. A high-value client complained about poor service [give specific example if appropriate]. Although I only had one side of the story, I was able to offer a small gesture of goodwill to retain their business, which was permitted as part of my role and prevented the situation from escalating to a bigger loss."

#### **How do you ensure all members of a team make a fair, equal and positive contribution?**

"As team leader, I operate an open-door policy for suggestions and constructive criticism, with no blame or shame for coming forward with concerns. As a team member, I listen carefully to my colleagues and try to build on their suggestions, as well as working with quieter co-workers to make sure their voice is heard too."

**Tell us about a time when you had to delegate a large amount of work to a team under pressure.**

"Due to sickness absence and staff shortages, my usual team of 10 was down to only 6 members. I called a meeting and asked my team to pitch in despite the extra workload. We allocated the additional work based on who was the best fit for each task, and I was able to take the whole team out to lunch once we completed the project on-deadline."

**How to Answer Competency-Based Questions**

You might find it easier to think of competency-based questions as skills-based questions. This is essentially what they are: a chance for the interviewer to ask you about your abilities and soft skills that can't be quantified or written on a certificate.

By planning ahead, you can prepare some example answers for competency-based interview questions, covering areas like communication, leadership, problem-solving and teamwork. A lot of competency-based questions are ultimately about how you perform under stress.

**Remember the STAR Technique**

Use the STAR technique mentioned above as a way to structure your answer. It will help you to include all the information you need, while also being as concise as possible. The interviewer may want to ask multiple questions, so give them the chance to do so, or ask if they would like more detail about your current answer.

**Be Positive and Specific**

Be positive and self-aware. Avoid minimising language like 'just' and 'only'. If possible, give examples of measurable impact your actions had, such as improving productivity, bringing a project in on time despite a challenging schedule, or reducing employee absence or financial loss.

Remember, the interviewer wants to know what you are good at. By preparing some common answers to skills-based questions, you can make sure you have a relevant answer to pull out of your mental library, or at least a good basis to come up with something specific on the spot.

### **How Long Should an Answer Be?**

The perfect answer to a competency-based question should be just long enough to cover all of the relevant information, but no longer. Keep it concise and invite the interviewer to ask for more details, rather than going on for too long in your initial response.

Again, the STAR technique can help you with this. Try to give enough detail on each of the four points of STAR so that each element is concisely but comprehensively covered. As you work through all four, this will naturally build up to a good, reasonably detailed but still succinct answer, helping you to keep to the point.

### **Any Questions?**

Do invite questions at the end of your answer. A good interviewer will probe for any extra detail they want, but by inviting them to ask, you establish rapport and a more conversational tone for your interview, without it becoming too informal.

Remember also that a shorter answer with 1-2 follow-up questions is more likely to give the interviewer what they are looking for, compared with a long uninterrupted prepared monologue by yourself, so relatively brief answers can ultimately have more of a positive effect on your overall perception.

### **How do I Pass a Competency-Based Interview?**

Despite the open-ended nature of skills-based interview questions, many interviewers will have a fairly rigid marking scheme already in place. Before the interview starts, they will list the positive and negative indicators they expect to hear for their reference, and will award you a score for each question based on your response.

### **Positive Attributes for Competency-Based Questions**

Some examples of likely positive attributes the interviewer might be looking for include:

- A positive, proactive approach to problem-solving
- Ability to compromise to achieve the best result
- Ability to see a situation in a wider context

- Ability to recognise and work around your limitations

It might seem strange acknowledging your limitations in an interview response, but it's an important part of letting the hiring manager know that when you genuinely need help with a situation, you will look to your team members or manager, in order to get the best outcome. Rarely in life does everything go swimmingly so it is fine to be authentic and share your challenges and what you might do differently next time.

### **Negative Attributes for Competency-Based Questions**

The likely negative attributes for competency-based questions are often the direct opposite of the positive attributes, along with aspects of your personality:

- Attempts to solve a problem alone and fails
- Views a situation as a 'problem' and not as a 'challenge'
- Resorts to inappropriate methods under stress

You want to come across as a capable individual, but also as a team player. Employers are likely to see you as a risk if you sound like a loose cannon.

### **Be Confident and Competent**

Any interview can be nerve-racking, no matter the style. If you know that an interview will be competency-based, preparation is crucial for success; you can't merely reiterate your CV. Instead, research the role and the company to understand their ideal candidate.

Prepare stories about yourself that demonstrate your unique selling points. With a little preparation and practice, you'll nail the interview and maybe even land the job.



