

THE ESKILL GUIDE TO implementing structured interviews

We've combined [insights from Google](#), Laszlo Bock's book [Work Rules!](#), [the OPM](#), the [US Department of Veteran Affairs](#), the [US Department of State](#), and personnel psychology research to create this guide. We suggest additionally looking at the resources linked there!

AN OVERVIEW OF STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

A structured interview is a job interview in which all candidates are asked the same predetermined, job-related questions and evaluated using the same standardized scoring criteria.

Structured interviews can be anywhere from 20 minutes to an hour long (or longer or shorter) depending on the role you're hiring for and how many individuals you're interviewing.

5-6 questions are typically asked in a 30-minute interview.

The questions should cover key competencies for the role, or KSAOs (knowledge, skills, abilities, other criteria) — as determined by SMEs.

The questions asked can be one of four types:

[Past behavioral](#)

[Situational](#)

[Background](#)

[Job knowledge](#)

Preference is typically given to past behavioral and situational questions, since they are the most valid, researched, and predictive of job performance across studies. We recommend saving most background and job knowledge questions, where applicable, for testing — especially in high-volume roles.

THE HIRING PROCESS

Structured interviews are one of the top predictors of job success, but they're difficult to scale when it comes to filling high-volume roles. Consider implementing another top indicator of on-the-job performance — pre-hire tests — early in your hiring process to find the right candidates to interview.

[eSkill](#) can help you implement customizable, job-relevant tests in your hiring process.

CHOOSING COMPETENCIES

Key attributes of job performance, as structured by HR professionals, are called KSAOs — that stands for knowledge, skills, abilities, and other characteristics. Together, KSAOs provide a framework for defining what makes someone qualified for a specific role and are commonly used in job analysis, hiring, and performance evaluation.

Consider asking SMEs in your company which attributes matter for the role you're hiring for.

Test 4-5 competencies (**KSAOs** — knowledge, skills, abilities, other characteristics.)

Competency	Definition	Examples
K nowledge	the theoretical or practical understanding of a subject	Accounting principles, AWS standards
S kills	the learned proficiencies needed to perform tasks	Coding, data analysis, welding
A bilities	more enduring, innate traits that influence how someone performs across a variety of situations	Critical thinking, manual dexterity
O ther characteristics	a wide range of personal attributes, such as personality traits, values, work style, or certifications	Reliability, patience, enthusiasm

Competencies: examples

Manufacturing Technician

Knowledge: Basic mechanical principles, safety regulations (e.g., OSHA standards)
 Skills: Operating CNC machines, reading blueprints, quality inspection
 Abilities: Manual dexterity, attention to detail, ability to lift 50+ lbs
 Other characteristics: Reliability, willingness to work night shifts, teamwork

High School Teacher

Knowledge: Subject matter expertise (e.g., U.S. History), educational psychology, state curriculum standards
 Skills: Lesson planning, classroom management, student assessment
 Abilities: Public speaking, adaptability, ability to engage diverse learners
 Other characteristics: Patience, enthusiasm, commitment to student development

Registered Nurse

Knowledge: Human anatomy, pharmacology, clinical procedures, patient care protocols
 Skills: Administering medications, taking vital signs, using medical equipment
 Abilities: Emotional regulation, quick decision-making, physical stamina
 Other characteristics: Compassion, empathy, strong communication skills

City Government Analyst

Knowledge: Public policy, data analysis tools (e.g., Excel, R), local government operations
 Skills: Research, report writing, statistical interpretation
 Abilities: Critical thinking, synthesizing complex information, time management
 Other characteristics: Integrity, discretion with sensitive data, civic-mindedness

CREATING QUESTIONS

Convene a panel of SMEs to develop and review questions

- The competencies being assessed and their definitions
- Some tasks associated with the competencies
- The best questions most related to job responsibilities

You can choose from the following:

Past Behavioral: ask candidates about their past behavior in situations relevant to the current job.

Situational: hypothetical, future-oriented questions that ask candidates how they would behave in hypothetical, realistic work situations.

Background: asks about a candidate's past experiences, education, or qualifications to understand their history and how it relates to the job.

Job knowledge: tests what a candidate already knows about the work, tools, or subject matter needed for the job

Make sure each question relates to one of the competencies you decided on to maintain interview validity.

KEEP IN MIND THE STAR MODEL

Interview questions should elicit three important pieces of information from the candidate:

- **Situation and Task:** Describes the context or background for the event and the tasks involved
- **Action:** Describes exactly what was done or what would be done
- **Result:** Describes the results of the candidate's actions

Develop probe questions to elicit answers from candidates, if necessary.

Probes are phrases used to follow-up open-ended questions that encourage a candidate to reveal more information.

Examples include:

What did you do?

What did you think about or want?

When did this happen?

Who was involved?

What was your contribution?

What was the result or outcome?

**Note: This is the most important probe since it allows the interviewer to determine the impact, or lack of impact, of the applicant's actions.*

Don't forget to **always ask open-ended questions!**

Don't ask questions regarding **protected characteristics by the EEOC** —
gender, age, or any other protected characteristic.

Question examples	
Creative thinking	“Tell me about two suggestions you have made to your supervisor in the past year. How did you come up with the ideas? What happened? How do you feel about the way things went?” “What projects have you started on your own? Why did you start the projects? What did you learn from doing the projects? What were the results?”
Flexibility / adaptability	“Tell me about the last new procedure you had to learn in your job. Tell me what specifically was the hardest aspect of learning the new procedure. Tell me specifically what you liked best about learning the new procedure. How well is the new procedure working now?” “Describe a situation where you were responsible for getting others to make a change. What role did you play and what actions did you take? What was the outcome? If you had to do it again, would you do anything differently?” “Describe an instance when you had to think on your feet to extricate yourself from a difficult situation. What caused the situation? How did your solution work?”
Customer service	“Tell me about a situation where you assisted a co-worker. What was the situation? What was your involvement and what was the outcome?” “Tell me specifically how you have communicated to line staff that they have permission to go around the ‘chain of command’ to expedite resolution of a patient problem. What has been the result of such communication? Success stories?” “In the past, how have you obtained and incorporated customer feedback into your organization’s planning and service standards? Give specific examples.”
Interpersonal effectiveness	“Describe a situation where you felt you had not communicated well. How did you correct the situation?” “Describe a time when you’ve had to work with strong-willed peers. What did you do? How did you handle them so you could influence their decisions?” “Describe the most challenging negotiation in which you were involved. What did you do? What were the results for you? What were the results for the other party?” “Tell me about a time when you had to use your presentation skills to influence someone’s opinion. How did you prepare for the presentation? What points did you emphasize? How was the information received?”

Organizational stewardship	“Give an example of a time you defended your organization. How did you feel about doing it? How did you go about doing it? What was the response of the other party/parties?” “Describe a time when one of your staff or your work team was working above work expectations. What was your response? How did the other party/parties respond?” “Tell me specifically what you have done to create an atmosphere of trust and empowerment within your sphere of influence. What tangible results have you seen from your efforts?”
Personal mastery	“Name three things you have done in the past two years to grow in your job.” “Describe a situation where you can take credit for the growth and development of a staff member or co-worker. Be specific about your role in terms of interactions and the outcome.” “In a supervisory role, have you ever had to discipline or counsel an employee? What was the nature of the discipline? What steps did you take? How did that make you feel? How did you prepare yourself?” “Tell me about a specific time you sought specific feedback on your performance from subordinates. Specifically, how did you use the feedback? Cite specific changes resulting from the feedback.”
Systems thinking	“How does the work you are currently doing affect your organization’s ability to meet its mission and goals? Do you think your work is important? If yes, why? If no, why not?” “In your current job, what organizational change have you made or contributed to that you are proud of? How did you go about making the change? What has been the impact of the change?” “Describe a change you are responsible for that improved the performance of your work area or organization. How did: 1) you come up with the idea for the change, 2) you go about implementing the change, 3) staff respond to the change, and 4) you measure the outcome of the change? Looking back, what things would you do differently?”

The Interview Process

DO	• Show up on time • Begin with small talk • Start with an easy past behavioral question to get the candidate warmed up • Leave five to ten minutes for candidate questions and a conversational close at the end • Stick to the structured interview script • Stay neutral and consistent across all interviews • Keep track of time and pace the conversation • Thank the candidate and explain next steps
DON'T	• Go off-script or improvise too much • Ask illegal or inappropriate questions • Talk more than the candidate • Make snap judgments based on first impressions • Forget to leave time for the candidate's questions

The Rubric

DO	• Leave good notes • Tell the candidate you're taking notes • Notes should reflect what the candidate says, rather than how he/she said it. Record observations (concrete things) and not evaluations, like "sociable" or "difficult." • Use the rating scale consistently • Justify each score with specific evidence from the candidate's response • Review your notes before submitting scores • Flag unclear or borderline answers for team discussion
DON'T	• Score based on gut feelings or likability • Skip sections of the rubric • Use vague notes like "good" or "bad" without examples • Let one strong or weak answer influence all your scores • Share personal opinions unrelated to the rubric

Rubric template (per question)	
Competency:	
Definition:	
Question:	
Suggested probes:	
Notes:	

5 <i>Excellent</i>	4 <i>Good</i>	3 <i>Fair</i>	2 <i>Poor</i>	1
Describe an excellent answer.	Describe a good answer.	Describe a fair answer.	Describe a poor answer.	Describe an off-topic or non- answer.
Final score				

Interviewer notes:

Rubric template (per question)

Competency:	Problem Solving
Definition:	The ability to identify issues, analyze information, and develop effective solutions in a timely and resourceful manner.
Question:	Tell me about a time when you faced an unexpected problem at work. What was the problem, and how did you resolve it?
Suggested probes:	Problem Solving What steps did you take to understand the problem? Who did you involve in the process, if anyone? What alternative solutions did you consider? What was the outcome?
Notes:	Look for evidence of logical thinking, initiative, creativity, and accountability. Did the candidate define the problem clearly, assess options, and select a sound solution?

5 Excellent	4 Good	3 Fair	2 Poor	1
Clearly describes a complex, relevant problem and walks through a logical, step-by-step process that led to a successful and lasting solution. Demonstrates critical thinking, initiative, and learning from the experience.	Describes a clear and relevant problem and a logical approach to solving it, with a generally successful outcome. May lack deep reflection or innovation.	Describes a basic problem and solution. The approach may be somewhat vague or lacking detail, but the outcome was neutral or mildly successful.	Describe a Describes a vague or irrelevant problem. The response lacks clarity in approach and/or resulted in a poor outcome.	Describe an off-topic or Does not describe a real problem or gives an incomplete answer with little to no structure or relevance.

Final score	
Interviewer notes:	

Date				
Candidate name				
Role				
KSAO 1				
5 Excellent	4 Good	3 Fair	2 Poor	1
Describe excellent	Describe good	Describe fair	Describe poor	Describe 1
KSAO 2				
5 Excellent	4 Good	3 Fair	2 Poor	1
Describe excellent	Describe good	Describe fair	Describe poor	Describe 1
KSAO 3				
5 Excellent	4 Good	3 Fair	2 Poor	1
Describe excellent	Describe good	Describe fair	Describe poor	Describe 1
KSAO 4				
5 Excellent	4 Good	3 Fair	2 Poor	1
Describe excellent	Describe good	Describe fair	Describe poor	Describe 1
KSAO 5				
5 Excellent	4 Good	3 Fair	2 Poor	1
Describe excellent	Describe good	Describe fair	Describe poor	Describe 1
Total score				

Date	August 7, 2025			
Candidate name	Alex Johnson			
Role	Customer Support Specialist			
KSAO 1	Communication Skills			
5 Excellent	4 Good	3 Fair	2 Poor	1
Clearly and professionally conveys ideas; adapts tone and content to audience; actively listens and provides concise, helpful responses.	Communicates clearly and effectively; may lack some nuance in tone or adaptability.	Understands communication basics; response may be unclear or slightly disorganized.	Struggles to express ideas clearly; limited listening or poor tone control.	Extremely unclear or inappropriate communication.
KSAO 2	Problem Solving Ability			
5 Excellent	4 Good	3 Fair	2 Poor	1
Identifies root cause, proposes effective and creative solutions, and follows through with excellent results.	Proposes a logical solution that resolves the issue, though may lack depth or innovation.	Identifies surface-level issues; solution somewhat effective.	Minimal analysis of the problem; unclear or ineffective solution.	Unable to articulate a problem or propose a coherent solution.
KSAO 3	Technical Knowledge (CRM Tools)			
5 Excellent	4 Good	3 Fair	2 Poor	1
Deep familiarity with CRM platforms; confidently uses features and shortcuts to maximize efficiency.	Comfortable with standard CRM operations; rarely needs assistance.	Basic CRM use; may need occasional help.	Struggles to navigate CRM tools or needs frequent support.	No knowledge or resistance to learning CRM tools.
KSAO 4	Customer Focus			
5 Excellent	4 Good	3 Fair	2 Poor	1
Demonstrates empathy, patience, and commitment to resolving customer issues with a positive attitude.	Keeps customer needs in mind and resolves issues politely and helpfully.	Understands importance of customers but may lack warmth or urgency.	Minimal regard for customer experience; transactional attitude.	Dismissive or inappropriate approach to customer concerns.
KSAO 5	Adaptability			
5 Excellent	4 Good	3 Fair	2 Poor	1
Embraces change and quickly adjusts to new tools and challenges without stress.	Adjusts to change after some initial hesitation; ultimately successful.	Struggles initially but eventually adapts.	Resistance to change; needs ongoing support.	Inflexible or negative attitude toward change.
Total score				