
Your Guide to Competency Based Interviews

Top tips for tackling competency based interviews, so that you can secure your next role.





Competency based interviews, also known as situational or behavioural interviews, are a style of interview designed to allow you to discuss a situation where you previously faced a particular type of challenge or situation, and how you approached solving that problem.

Whereas unstructured interviews are more of a conversation between interviewer and interviewee, competency based interviews are more systematic. Each question targets 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 to provide evidence of their experience and abilities.

The answer is then matched against pre-decided criteria and marked accordingly.

A lot of our candidates loathe the dreaded competency based interview, but if you are well prepared, there is no need to fear them. You have the answers, you just need to understand how to respond effectively.

In this guide we will give you our top tips for tackling competency based interviews, so that you can secure your ideal role.

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Typical Competencies

Key competencies regularly sought after by employers include:

- Building Relationships & Collaboration
- Influencing & Impact
- Analytical Thinking
- Developing Strategy
- Adaptability
- Commercial Awareness
- Communication
- Conflict Resolution
- Decisiveness
- Delivering Change
- Stakeholder Management
- Leadership
- Problem Solving
- Planning & Organisation
- Resilience
- Teamwork
- Delivering Results



The STAR approach

The STAR approach is a communication technique designed to enable you to provide a meaningful and complete answer to questions asking for examples. Its stands for:

- Situation
- Task
- Action
- Result

1. Situation and Task

Describe the situation that you were in and the task that needed to be accomplished. Keep it clear, concise and informative, making sure you only focus on information that is useful to the story.

2. Action

This is the most important section as it demonstrates the skills and personal attributes that the question is testing. Now that you have set the context of your story, you need to explain what you did, how you did it, and why you did it. The “how” can often be left out by experienced candidates, who may skip straight to the “result”. This is a big mistake, always give plenty of the “how”.

- Be personal, i.e. talk about you, not the rest of the team, so avoid “we did....”.
- Go into some detail. Do not assume that they will guess what you mean.
- Steer clear of technical information unless it is crucial to your story.

3. Result

Explain what happened and how it all ended. Use this opportunity to describe what you accomplished and what you learnt from the situation. This helps you make the answer personal and enables you to highlight further skills.

- Prior to any competency based interview you can ask the company what the competencies will be for the role to aid your preparation.
- If you have been given a job description the required competencies may be detailed within it.
- Some companies list their generic leadership competencies on their website in the About Us section.
- Prepare for the interview by; researching the competencies you will be asked about (see above), thinking through relevant examples you can draw upon to evidence this and sketch out some answers.
- At interview always stick to the question you have been asked, don't go off topic.
- If you don't catch all the question or need to buy time - ask for the question to be repeated.
- Provide specific evidence - not just what you did but how you did it.
- Avoid generalist answers, i.e. “I have lots of examples of that, when I am in that situation I usually...”. Keep it specific with an actual real example.
- Do not try to answer other potential competency questions within the same answer, the interviewer will not be able to give you credit for answering a question they haven't asked yet.
- A good detailed answer to a competency question may take five minutes, if it is ten minutes plus it is too long an answer.
- If you are unsure if you have given enough detail you can ask – “Have I gone into enough detail or are there any aspects you would like me to expand on?”
- If the interviewer asks several follow up questions on the same competency it may indicate you haven't provided sufficient evidence yet of that competency in your answer.

Example Questions & How to Answer

Competency - Influencing

Question:

Give me an example of when you had to influence a particularly resistant strategic partner or stakeholder.

Best practice answer -

This an example of how you could structure an answer and are also follow up questions an interviewer might ask you for this competency.

- Set the context of the situation and what you needed to do.
- What was the source of their resistance?
- How did you approach this?
- What arguments and counter-arguments did you use to win them over?
- How did you adapt your influencing strategies to deliver a win-win outcome?
- How did you tailor your approach to different people? What was the outcome?

Influencing						
Negative Indicators	1	2	3	4	5	Positive Indicators
Lacks clarity in when conveying ideas or when delivering communications to the wider business						Provides others with clear and unambiguous messages when conveying information
Does not present strategic messages effectively – lacks an ability to articulate the broader vision						Communicates strategic messages succinctly – articulates where the business is heading
Fails to establish credibility and influence over others. Unable to ‘influence without authority’ when working with important stakeholders						Able to influence key stakeholders and partners – changes how people think and “sells the proposition”
Communications lack energy or passion. Lacks confidence or conviction when seeking to convey key messages						Demonstrates conviction and self-belief when engaging with others. “Brings it life/makes it real” for others
Does not display effective presentation skills – low impact when working with large or challenging audiences.						Able to present with credibility and authority – unfazed by large, senior or challenging audiences when conveying complex messages

Example Questions & How to Answer

Competency - Leadership

Question:

Tell me about a time when you had to deliver a challenging objective through others. How did you empower them and gain their commitment to work towards the specific output?

Best practice answer -

This an example of how you could structure an answer and are also follow up questions an interviewer might ask you for this competency.

- What was the situation?
- How did you go about getting buy-in/commitment from the team?
- How did you maintain momentum during the challenging times?
- What remedial action did you need to take?
- How did you know your approach was successful?
- On reflection, what did you learn from this situation that has enabled you to be a better leader in the future?

Leadership						
Negative Indicators	1	2	3	4	5	Positive Indicators
Focuses on tasks more than people – limited attempt to inspire others						Motivates and inspires diverse, high-performance teams
Does not differentiate between different team members – lacks an understanding that different people have different drivers						Uses understanding of individuals' motives and drivers to align the team members with a common goal
Restricts people to 'what is on their job spec' – does not seek to empower them by providing new or stretching tasks to take people beyond their comfort zone						Empowers teams to perform independently - empowers people to identify and solve problems on their own, providing support where necessary
Less focused on optimising personal performance – does not facilitate others in reaching their potential						Brings the best out of people to optimise individual and team performance
Limits their leadership to those in their team or unit – does not seek to bring on others to get different ideas or perspectives						Involves a wider circle of people (who are not part of their formal team) in order to tap into wider organisational capabilities

Example Questions & How to Answer

Competency – Deciding Action

Question:

Outline a decision you have made that has impacted upon other functions across the organisation.

Best practice answer -

This an example of how you could structure an answer and are also follow up questions an interviewer might ask you for this competency.

- What was the decision that needed to be made?
- What broader factors did you consider?
- Talk me through how you considered the impact across the business?
- How did you explain/embed your plan with your colleagues and stakeholders?
- How did you manage the impact on other teams?

Deciding Action						
Negative Indicators	1	2	3	4	5	Positive Indicators
Tends to take a narrower view of business problems. Willing to implement plans and projects without aligning them with wider organisational objectives and goals						Considers broader strategic factors and the consequences of actions. Ensures all decisions and plans are aligned with, and work towards, broader organisational goals
Internally focused – lacks the willingness or ability to consider external factors such as the market, economic factors, competitor activity						Considers potential external threats (such as competitor activity) when making decisions and building plans
Tends to take a risk-averse approach – takes the safe option. Or does not take the time to consider business risks						Willing to take calculated risks if the benefits and returns on investment are clear and justified
Avoids decisions and/or procrastinates rather than acting incisively. May miss out on opportunities as result						Willing to make and take ownership for tough decisions. Acts quickly – seizes the moment
May hesitate in the ‘big moments’						Bold and assertive in making the crucial business decisions

Example Questions & How to Answer

Competency – Developing Strategy

Question:

Tell me about a time when you have developed a new strategy for your business / business unit?

Best practice answer -

This an example of how you could structure an answer and are also follow up questions an interviewer might ask you for this competency.

- How did you develop or create this strategy?
- Who did you involve?
- How did you mobilise your ideas and put them into practice?
- What was the impact in terms of improvements in business or bottom-line performance?
- What have you learned from this experience?

Developing Strategy						
Negative Indicators	1	2	3	4	5	Positive Indicators
Either more operational in outlook or lacks proactivity in proposing insightful strategic ideas within the SLT						Contributes to the creation of breakthrough strategies and compelling visions that transform and develop the business
Unwilling to put self forward as a visionary leader – leaves it to others to set the tone and the standards by which we work						Sets the values and principles of the organisation – creates processes and protocols that govern the way we do business
Takes a narrow and/or internal view of business issues						Demonstrates an understanding of the external factors which will impact on the organisation. Looks at issues from a holistic perspective
Builds plans and strategies within own business unit that do not take account of the wider organisational goals and drivers						Responsible for ensuring the business strategy within own area of responsibility is aligned with the broader organisational strategy
Takes a narrow or arrogant view when considering change – focuses on own ideas rather than being willing to learn from others						Seeks to learn from the competition and other sectors of the industry – identifies and embeds best practice from outside

Video Interviewing

It's common place these days that some interviews may take place virtually. Particularly for first interviews or if the role is overseas.

From our experience interviewing candidates via Teams, these are our top tips to ensuring the interview goes smoothly.

1. Make sure you have a decent internet connection.

Each of the options use a different amount of bandwidth. So, if one isn't working that well with your connection, then try a different one.

Failing that, using your phone as a hot spot if your signal is better than the broadband in your area.

2. Test out the video and audio in plenty of time before the call.

Learn from our mistakes here, you don't want to jump into an interview and spend 15 minutes trying to turn on your microphone or camera. All the options allow you to see yourself on camera and test audio before going into the call.

3. Check to see what's in the background.

Do a quick sense check to see what the person on the other end will be able to see in the call. Try and find a relatively neutral background or tidy up a bit beforehand. You don't want anything embarrassing or sensitive to be on display behind your shoulder.

If you are a hoarder and can't find a spare foot of neutral space, then Teams has the option to blur your background out or have an alternative background. Try and position your camera as centrally as you can, so your eye contact on the call is good.

4. Make a couple of internal calls first to practice.

Not only will this ensure that all of the above is working fine, it also means you have a chance to get comfortable with the setup. To begin with video conferencing can be a bit awkward and it's distracting to see yourself, so this gives you an opportunity to get used to it before talking with interviewers.

5. Pay attention to body language.

Body language is tricky to interpret in a video interview as you can only see from the shoulders up.

Therefore, you need to pay attention to what can be seen. Sit up straight, connect with the conversation, don't get distracted by other things around you.

Make sure that the screen displaying the interview is directly underneath the camera so you aren't looking off to one side – this can be off putting and difficult to build rapport.

About Newsom Consulting

Newsom Consulting is an executive search firm that focuses on the Rail, Aviation & Maritime, Highways, Energy, Utilities and Buildings markets. Since we were founded in 2010, our team has successfully placed over 600 experienced industry executives – from executive leadership to senior management and leading technical experts.

Our clients include many of the leading infrastructure asset owners and major projects, contractors, public sector bodies, manufacturers, consultancies, and technology suppliers.

We are dedicated to fostering diversity within the industry and continually strive to enhance diversity in the senior teams of our clients. In the past two years, 33% of our placements have been either gender or ethnically diverse, and we remain committed to increasing the diversity of the industries we operate in.



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