Competency based interview guide

Competency-based interviews are becoming an increasingly common part of the recruitment process with many organisations attaching a high level of importance to their outcome. To help you through these we have set out 16 typical competencies along with some typical questions and behaviours that employers seek to explore.

Competency interviews can sometimes be quite daunting, but with an element of preparation and a broad range of examples, they can actually run quite smoothly and be an opportunity to stand out from the crowd.

Competency-based interviewing is a structured interview approach which aims to gather evidence of how well a candidate will perform in a particular role. This is achieved by asking candidates to describe past experiences of when they have demonstrated particular competencies (or job relevant behaviours). Employers will want to explore your past experiences as a large amount of research suggests that past behaviour is a strong predictor of future behaviour. For each particular competency, you will usually be asked a number of questions, to give you more than one opportunity to demonstrate your abilities.

In order for an organisation to assess whether you are appropriate for a role it is important that you talk about specific past experiences, rather than your general way of working. It is also important that you describe what you actually did, rather than talking about the performance of a team you were a member of.

Competency-based interviews are very structured, with every candidate often being asked the same questions. This is to ensure that everybody gets the same opportunity and the process is completely fair to all.

Tips for participating in a competency-based interview

Before attending the interview:

- Think about what kinds of behaviours may be important to perform well in the job.
- Think about times in the past when you have demonstrated your abilities e.g. successful projects, interactions with other people, convincing a difficult audience, analysing a large amount of information.
- Think through exactly what you did in these scenarios and separate your own actions from those of any team you were a part of.
- Don’t be restricted to purely job related examples; you may also have good examples from school/university or hobbies.

During the interview:

- Listen carefully to the question and make sure you provide an example of what is being asked, not just telling the interviewer what you want them to know.
- Talk about a specific example, not about how you generally act.
- Talk about what you did e.g. “I spoke to lots of different individuals” not “We spoke to lots of different individuals”.

T: +44 (0)20 7415 2800 | brewermorris.com
16 Typical competencies

A  Action orientation  • Demonstrates a readiness to make decisions, take the initiative and originate action

B  Commercial awareness  • Understands and applies commercial and financial principles
• Views issues in terms of costs, profits, markets and added value

C  Creativity & innovation  • Creates new and imaginative approaches to work related issues
• Identifies fresh approaches and shows a willingness to question traditional assumptions

D  Drive & resilience  • Maintains effective work behaviour in the face of setbacks or pressure
• Remains calm, stable and in control of themselves

E  Flexibility  • Successfully adapts to changing demands and conditions

F  Interpersonal sensitivity  • Interacts with others in a sensitive and effective way. Respects and works well with others

G  Leadership  • Motivates and empowers others to reach organisational goals

H  Oral communication  • Speaks clearly, fluently and in a compelling manner to both individuals and groups

I  Personal motivation  • Commits self to work hard towards goals. Shows enthusiasm and career commitment

J  Persuasiveness  • Influences, convinces or impresses others in a way that results in acceptance, agreement or behaviour change

K  Planning & organisation  • Organises and schedules events, activities and resources
• Sets up and monitors timescales and plans

L  Problem solving & analysis  • Analyses issues and breaks them down into their component parts
• Makes systematic and rational decisions based on relevant information

M  Quality orientation  • Shows awareness of goals and standards
• Follows through to ensure that quality and productivity standards are met

N  Specialist knowledge  • Understands technical or professional aspects of work and continually maintains technical knowledge

O  Strategic  • Demonstrates a broad based view of issues, events and activities and a perception of their longer-term impact or wider implications

P  Written communication  • Writes in clear and concise manner, using appropriate grammar, style and language for the reader
Competency & definition

Action orientation

Demonstrates a readiness to make decisions, take initiative and originate action

Suggested questions

- How do you ensure that work you delegate gets done properly and on time?
- What have you found to be the most significant obstacles to getting people to take action? How have you handled these obstacles?
- Describe a fire-fighting situation which you dealt with, what did you do and how did you do it?
- What changes have you introduced into your current role?
- What have you done when something has happened, or needs to happen where there are no parameters to deal with it?
- Is there scope for improvement in your department? What have you done about it?

Desired behaviours

- Initiates activities, achieves outcome and sees situations through to conclusion
- Sets challenging performance standards for self and team
- Displays a clear sense of priorities and uses relevant information
- Shows evidence of contingency planning and recovery of situations
- Displays energy and enthusiasm to achieve outcome
- Willing to take a risk to do something differently.

Negative indicators

- Shows no evidence of completing projects
- Fails when obstacles are encountered
- Procrastination
- Misses opportunities
Competency & definition

Commercial awareness

Demonstrates a full understanding of how businesses & industries operate; knows his/her own market well & is commercially aware.

Suggested questions

- Thinking about the competition in your industry who do you think will be the winners and losers over the next couple of years? Why?
- How do you ensure that you keep abreast of developments in your respective market? (Both in terms of product & industry sector) How does this assist you in your current role?
- Tell me about an instance when you have turned business away. Why did you do it? How did you do it?
- Have you ever "lost" short-term business for a longer-term gain?
- How do you decide upon the priority business opportunities to focus on?
- Tell me about some of the mistakes you made in business. What were the consequences?

 Desired behaviours

- Knowledge of own market areas
- Knowledge of competitors
- General commercial knowledge of specific industry sectors
- Knowledge of how businesses operates
- Knowing which business activities/opportunities will yield the best results
- Knowing when efforts are not leading to results

Negative indicators

- Does not make commercially viable decisions.
- Does not "chase the money"
- Has no planned approach for business growth
- Afraid to turn business away
Competency & definition

Creativity & innovation

Demonstrates an ability to approach situations with an open mind and demonstrate a unique way to solve problems as opposed to relying on others.

Suggested questions

- Give me an example of a problem in work that you have resolved with a completely different, or unusual approach. What were the results?
- When have you had to back down and why? What were the outcomes? How did you take it?
- When, in business, the information you receive is unclear, how do you get clarity?
- How has your approach to solving a standard problem changed?
- How have you improved your product, services, and position in the market?

Desired behaviours

- Free thinking, broad vision, intuitive, imaginative
- Shows ability to think laterally, sees the angles
- Demonstrates the ability to try and experiment with alternatives
- Bored with tried and tested
- Introduced new products, service, markets
- Tries and experiments with alternatives, where initial routes have proved unsuccessful

Negative indicators

- Uses standard methodologies
- Predictable and conformist
- Sticks to the tried and tested
- Prefers routine approach
- Lacks imagination
Competency & definition

Drive & resilience

Remains positive and optimistic when setbacks occur; always finds a way forward.

Suggested questions

- Describe a situation where you have had to change something you were personally very pleased with. How did you feel?
- Tell me about a recent project where you have encountered some resistance. How did you deal with this? What was the outcome?
- Have resource limitations ever upset your plans?
- Tell me about the worst setback you have experienced in your career/personal life to date. What did you do?
- When did you last leave a project unfinished and why?
- Describe a situation where you gave your all but failed.

Desired behaviours

- Acts on own initiative
- Tackles problems in a determined fashion.
- Maintains effort until the client is satisfied.
- Remains positive in light of failure.
- Tough minded; becomes more determined when things don't go well.
- Ties up loose ends and successfully closes projects.

Negative indicators

- Becomes defensive when mistakes are made & blames others at every opportunity.
- Allows others to dictate to them without question.
- Does not actively seek feedback or avoids it at all costs.
- Gives up at the earliest opportunity.
- Leaves tasks unfinished.
- Impatient & easily bored.
Competency & definition

Flexibility

Ability to respond differently in different situations, to different people and to different ideas.
Ability to respond to changes in priority and deal with the unexpected.

Suggested questions

- What changes have you had to handle in your job over the past 6 months? How fast did you adapt? How did others adapt?
- What problems have you encountered by changing jobs and locations?
- Describe an occasion when you had to completely change your plans?
- Tell me about a situation you have encountered where you have had to make a major compromise.
- What have the cultural differences been between the companies in which you have worked and how did you react?
- Tell me about a situation in which you strongly opposed an initiative that was carried through.

Desired behaviours

- Manages conflicting priorities
- Applies new skills or knowledge in new areas
- Establishes structures and processes to plan and manage the orderly implementation of change
- Adapts to situations as they arise and responds appropriately
- Takes the lead in setting new business directions, partnerships, policies or procedures
- Helps employees to develop a clear understanding of what they will need to do differently as a result of changes in the organisation/market

Negative indicators

- Is indifferent / obstructive towards change
- Remains blinkered & unwilling to accept new ideas
- Says "we always do it this way"
- Unwilling to compromise.
Competency & definition

Interpersonal sensitivity

Ability to establish solid and durable working relationships with clients, and colleagues.

Suggested questions

- Describe the range of different styles you adopt in dealing with other people at work. Give specific examples.
- Tell me about an occasion when you have had to change your usual style to win business.
- Describe the nature of your relationships with your colleagues.
- Outline the history of a strong client relationship.
- When have you acted to retrieve a working relationship due to a mistake?
- How do you ensure a new member of staff fits quickly into the team?

Desired behaviours

- Establishes rapport with clients and colleagues.
- Understands quickly what the client's needs are, picks up cues.
- Takes a genuine interest in people and anticipates reactions
- Listens to what others think and feel, picking up on unspoken messages
- Concerned about what other people think and feel
- Seeks other's views

Negative indicators

- Lack of subtlety & awareness of other's position
- Opinionated / dogmatic
- Pompous, arrogant, insensitive to others
- Treats everyone exactly the same
Competency & definition

Leadership

Takes control of situations and events; recognises and rewards others’ performance; motivates; coaches and develops others.

Suggested questions

- Describe a time when you have set goals for an individual or for your team. How did you go about it? Were they achieved?
- Tell me about a sensitive or difficult staffing issue you have dealt with. What did you find most difficult about it? Why was this so? What was the outcome?
- When was the last time you disciplined a member of staff? How did you handle the situation? What was the outcome?
- How have you introduced change to your team?
- How do you ensure your team gets feedback on its performance?
- Describe a situation in which you coached a team member.

Desired behaviours

- Has effectively conducted performance appraisals
- Develops people on the job and recognises good performance
- Coaches and trains staff, motivating teams to give their best
- Sets clear and understandable development objectives
- Delegates effectively
- Confronts difficult management/staff issues promptly

Negative indicators

- Believes in a tell style of leadership.
- Is insensitive.
- Demonstrates an inconsistent style of leadership.
- Tries to change how things are done without any consideration of proven methods & working practices.
Competency & definition

Oral communication

Active listener; communicates clearly, concisely and confidently in all situations and using all media (e-mail, telephone, face-to-face etc).

Suggested questions

- You must have taken part in brainstorming sessions – can you recall some of the breakthroughs you achieved? How did these come about? Give me details.
- What methods/work style/approaches do you use to gain consensus in situations where there is disagreement?
- How and when do you prepare before a meeting with a client?
- Describe an occasion where by investigating a client's needs more closely, it helped you to make a good decision.
- What is the communication process in your company? What part do you play in it and how could it be improved?
- In what situations do you feel uncomfortable communicating?

Desired behaviours

- Communicates clearly, concisely and confidently
- Readily exchanges ideas/develops a dialogue
- Listens to others and uses the information when talking to others
- Structures what they say, so communication flows logically
- Takes the listener as the reference point
- Communicates information openly

Negative indicators

- Unable to give any examples
- Unable to express information/situations clearly or concisely
Competency & definition

Personal motivation

Demonstrates a need to achieve and is committed to personal, team and company objectives.

Suggested questions

- What are your objectives in your current role? What steps have you taken to ensure they have been / will be met? How do they impact on others in the team? How do they impact on the business?
- How do you monitor your own performance and what drives you to achieve objectives? Have you ever been faced with a brick wall when trying to achieve an objective?
- Have you felt at any time in the past 6 months that you achieved an objective through sheer persistence?
- What career goals have you set for yourself?
- How do you react to competition at work?

Desired behaviours

- Sees tasks through to completion.
- Motivated to achieve demanding targets.
- Prepares personal development plan with specific goals and a timeline for their accomplishment.
- Thrives on competition.
- Promptly notifies management about problems affecting ability to achieve objectives.
- Competitive, wants to be the best.

Negative indicators

- Waits for things to be done for them.
- Will ensure they achieve their objectives — at the expense of other people.
- Operates in a "blame" culture.
- Does their own thing without directing energy towards the business objectives.
Competency & definition

**Persuasiveness**

The ability to persuade and influence other people and gain support through strong argument

**Suggested questions**

- Tell me about a situation where you have had to influence a person or a group of people.
- Describe an unpopular change which you have had to implement/oversee. How did you achieve success? What was your intended outcome? How did you approach the situation? What challenges did you encounter? How did you resolve them?
- When have you persuaded a manager/colleague/client to do something they were reluctant to do?
- What approaches have you found most successful in influencing others to your point of view?
- Describe a situation, which you have handled poorly --what did you learn?
- How do you tackle aggressive individuals?

**Desired behaviours**

- Identifies people's needs and described the benefits to them in those terms.
- Assertiveness/positive influencing skills, knows when to escalate issues.
- Identifies solutions which at least appear equitable to both sides.
- Tailors the message to suit the recipient.
- Looks for leverage and areas of commonality, using analogies to illustrate and clarify points.
- Enjoys persuading people and will engage specialist help where required.

**Negative indicators**

- Waits for others to come up with new initiatives.
- Becomes defensive when challenged.
- Will shout someone down without hearing his or her point of view.
- Does not think through the pros & cons of suggestions.
Competency & definition

Planning & organising

Prioritises; sets stretching but realistic targets and deadlines; plans ahead and has a structured approach to work.

Suggested questions

- Describe a project you have managed / been responsible for. How did you plan your time? (& others time?)
- How did you deal with obstacles?
- Have you ever managed a project, which you knew would run over the timescale? What did you do? What could you differently next time?
- In your current job, how do you schedule your time and set priorities?
- What is your approach to deadlines at work?
- How did you prepare for this interview?

Desired behaviours

- Evidence of prioritising workload
- Works in a structured and methodical way
- Plans ahead to ensure timely delivery of results
- Manages time effectively
- Maintains accurate management information, administrative records etc.
- Puts a value on their own time, identifies what is appropriate to this value.

Negative indicators

- Works late but unproductively most of the time, regularly misses deadlines
- Seldom completes a task unless they do all of the work themselves.
- Reactive approach
- Inflexible in modifying plans/priorities
- Is easily fazed by obstacles/interruptions.
Competency & definition

Problem solving & analysis

Analyses issues and breaks them down into their component parts. Makes systematic and rational judgements based on relevant information.

Suggested questions

• Tell me about a time when you recognised a problem in your organisation, what did you do?
• Give me an example of a good decision taken recently. What were your options to resolve it? Why do you think your decision was the right one?
• Give an example of a time when you had to consider the impact of strategies on the organization and customers and how they could have affected products and services.
• What are the major frustrations in your job and how do you deal with them?
• What are the boring mundane or routine parts of your job, how do you keep them to a minimum?
• How have you dealt with a problem which has had seemingly impossible obstacles?

Desired behaviours

• Effectively uses business tools and systems in a systematic effort to organize and manage information for decision-making.
• Analyses problems by examining trends or the links between two separate parts (e.g., pros and cons using relevant, available information).
• Prioritises work in alignment with business goals (e.g., prioritise prospects).
• Analyses relationships among several parts of a problem, situation, product, or system.
• Makes causal links between potential causes of events, consequences of actions, or multiple-part chains of events (e.g. identify correct products for the customers’ needs).
• Anticipates obstacles and thinks ahead about next steps, and considers whether short-term goals will meet long-term objectives.

Negative indicators

• Doesn't gather all the facts before embarking on a course of action.
• Cannot explain solutions and basis for decisions.
• Gets easily deflected onto side issues or something more interesting.
Competency & definition

Quality orientation

Delivers a high quality service to external clients and internal colleagues, maintaining Company brand standards.

Suggested questions

- What examples are there during the past 6 months where you have personally initiated action to address a quality or service issue?
- How do you know what your customers think of your services?
- What complaints have you received in the past 6 months? How did you react?
- Have you ever been recognised as an individual or as part of a team for a quality award?
- What quality standards / systems does your current company use?
- Who are the quality leaders in your marketplace?

Desired behaviours

- Knowledge of quality procedures and standards, sets and develops appropriate systems
- Sets high standards of quality for themselves and others
- Sets up guidelines relating to quality and monitors work against the standards set.
- Initiates new initiatives in establishing and maintaining standards
- Goes for quality rather than quantity, carefully reviewing outputs
- Looks for ways of improving the quality of all work

Negative indicators

- Just wants to get the job done — goes for a "quick fix"
- Profit rather than customer focus ("short-termism")
- Negotiates on price too readily
- Lacks attention to detail
Competency & definition

Specialist knowledge

Has an extensive knowledge of his/her own field or department; understands the business and uses this to provide credible advice.

Suggested questions

- What examples are there during the past 3-6 months where you have made an important decision, which turned out to be correct?
- Have you made any poor decisions in the past 6 months? Tell me about it/them.
- How do you gather information on clients?
- How do you use that information to influence a business opportunity?
- When did a client last ask you for advice?
- How do you form business connections?

Desired behaviours

- Sound understanding of the appropriate sector.
- Sound understanding of clients
- Utilises knowledge management techniques to influence clients effectively.
- Provides the client with credible advice
- Networks within their specialist area
- Continued professional development, keeps abreast of cutting edge technology in his/her technical area

Negative indicators

- Limited knowledge of sector/market
- Does not develop business
- Shows no interest in upskilling
Competency & definition

Strategic

Demonstrates a broad based view of issues, events and activities and a perception of their longer term impact or wider implications

Suggested questions

- Describe a challenge or opportunity you identified and how you developed a strategy to respond to it.
- Describe a strategy you initiated to achieve a longer term business objective. What process did you use to identify it? How did you go about assessing its impact?
- What steps do you take to keep up to date with changes in the organisation?
- Have you ever been involved in writing a corporate/marketing/production plan?
- What policies have you been involved in and how were these arrived at?
- What plans have you made for your future career and how are you going to go about achieving your long term objectives?

Desired behaviours

- Takes broad strategic aims and turns them into practical plans
- Displays awareness of impact of external factors on specific areas of responsibility
- Demonstrates awareness of the whole system and how areas integrate
- Evaluates the implications and draws conclusions
- Anticipates problems and develops solutions
- Identifies future threats and opportunities, by understanding organisation's position as compared with competitors

Negative indicators

- Focuses on the here and now
- Lacks understanding of broader issues
- Shows a lack of awareness of the company goals and aims.
- Does not comply with company guidelines/best practice
- Responds on intuition and gut feel
Competency & definition

Written communication

Writes in a clear and concise manner, using appropriate grammar, style and language for the reader

Suggested questions

- How would you set up product information documentation or presentations in order to positively influence a new product or process?
- What examples are there during the past 3-6 months where you have had to make presentations to large or difficult audiences?
- During the past 6 months how have you prepared to present a case to your Director / colleagues/ client?
- In what situations do you feel uncomfortable with written communication?
- Have you compiled any papers or articles?
- How do you pitch the level of written communication?

Desired behaviours

- Report writing and preparing presentations will be a regular part of their role
- Regular usage of software tools in preparation of literature and as an aid to clarify complex information
- Has put together hand outs or capability documents
- Completed university/college dissertations
- Concise, succinct use of words
- Can give examples of tried and tested templates and documents used.

Negative indicators

- Does not use all media available (sticks to one method of communication)
- Hides behind the written word
- Cannot provide examples of compiling reports/papers

Conclusion

We hope that these guidelines provide a good indication of how competency interviews are usually conducted and some useful examples of types of competencies tested and typical questions.

With the right amount of preparation and a bit of thought, these meetings often prove to be the most constructive part of the whole interview process.

brewermorris.com
95 Queen Victoria Street, London EC4V 4HN
T: + 44 (0)20 7415 2800