

Tips for Success in Competence-based Interviews

What we mean by competence is “an appropriate skill, aptitude or ability that you have demonstrated”

Q - How do you demonstrate a competence at interview?

A – By describing specific times when you have demonstrated that competence

First - get as much supporting information about the post – including the Job Description and Person Specification, and if the competences are not clearly defined then analyse them in detail. As yourself, “How the job will be performed from a skills perspective”.

Second – Consider the questions you are likely to be asked and show how you *match* what is required. You should outline how your skills, knowledge and experience and how you meet the requirements of the Job Description and Person Specification. You may draw on past employment and/or out of work activities but give *specific* examples of times when you demonstrated the competences through your achievements.

Structured, Competence-Based, Criteria-Based, Criterion-Referenced – they are all names for essentially the same sort of interview and one that is quite commonplace, especially in larger organisations and the public sector. It is a selection and interview process designed to make selection as objective as possible and links it to strategic values and behaviours.

Behaviour-based interviewing is an assessment technique that focuses on what candidates have done in the past, not on what they say they might do in the future. This allows recruiting managers to assess applicants/candidates more fairly and objectively than other methods. The premise is that past behaviour is the best predictor of future behaviour.

This type of interview is usually carried out in pairs – one will ask the questions while the other records the evidence. The questions are designed to gather evidence specifically about their required competences – which may be generic and/or role specific. Whilst you must always answer the questions asked, be ready to volunteer extra relevant information.

During the interview, the interviewer will be:

- Focusing on each competence individually, using the opening questions provided as a starter, then probing answers by asking appropriate supplementary questions
- Making detailed notes of the evidence provided, covering: what the situation was, how the behaviour was demonstrated and what the outcome was

After the interview, the interviewer will:

- Identify positive and negative evidence for each competence, taking care not to categorise examples of behaviour that belong to different competences
- Review the evidence gathered and the examples of behaviour and decide on the rating description that most closely matches
- Prepare a summary report to support the rating chosen

- Many competences are common across organisations – though they may be worded slightly differently. Here is a list of some of the most common:

Customer Focus	Decision-making
Results Orientation	Problem Solving
Team Working & Team Leadership	Commercial Acumen
Interpersonal Sensitivity	Flexibility
Diversity	Initiative
Drive and Resilience	Strategic Thinking

Behavioural Indicators often describe the underpinning activities in more detail and are usually expressed as positive and negative indicators as in the example below on Customer Focus:

Effective(+)	Ineffective (-)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demonstrates concern for the needs and expectations by asking probing questions to obtain a full understanding of these 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shows a lack of awareness or concern for the needs and expectations of customers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Uses information about the customer's needs as the basis for problem solving and decision making 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fails to take into account customer needs as the basis for problem solving and making decisions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gives high priority to addressing customer complaints 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fails to identify or successfully resolve customer complaints
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Monitors service delivery and feedback and acts promptly on findings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does not monitor service delivery
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consistently and proactively seeks ways to exceed customer needs and expectations, achieving a realistic solution and win/win situation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fails to look beyond existing service provision

SELLING YOUR 'CAR' STORIES

Your achievements clearly demonstrate your competences and how you have contributed to the productivity and/or profitability of the organisation. They provide quantifiable and measurable evidence. They also suggest potential for the future.

Your achievements *substantiate* what you say are your key skills and experience, and these are critical to success in a competence-based interview. Indeed you will not be allowed to be vague or general in your answers.



The Ministry of Defence
working with
Right Management

A structure for talking about your achievements at interview – CAR

The components of an achievement include:

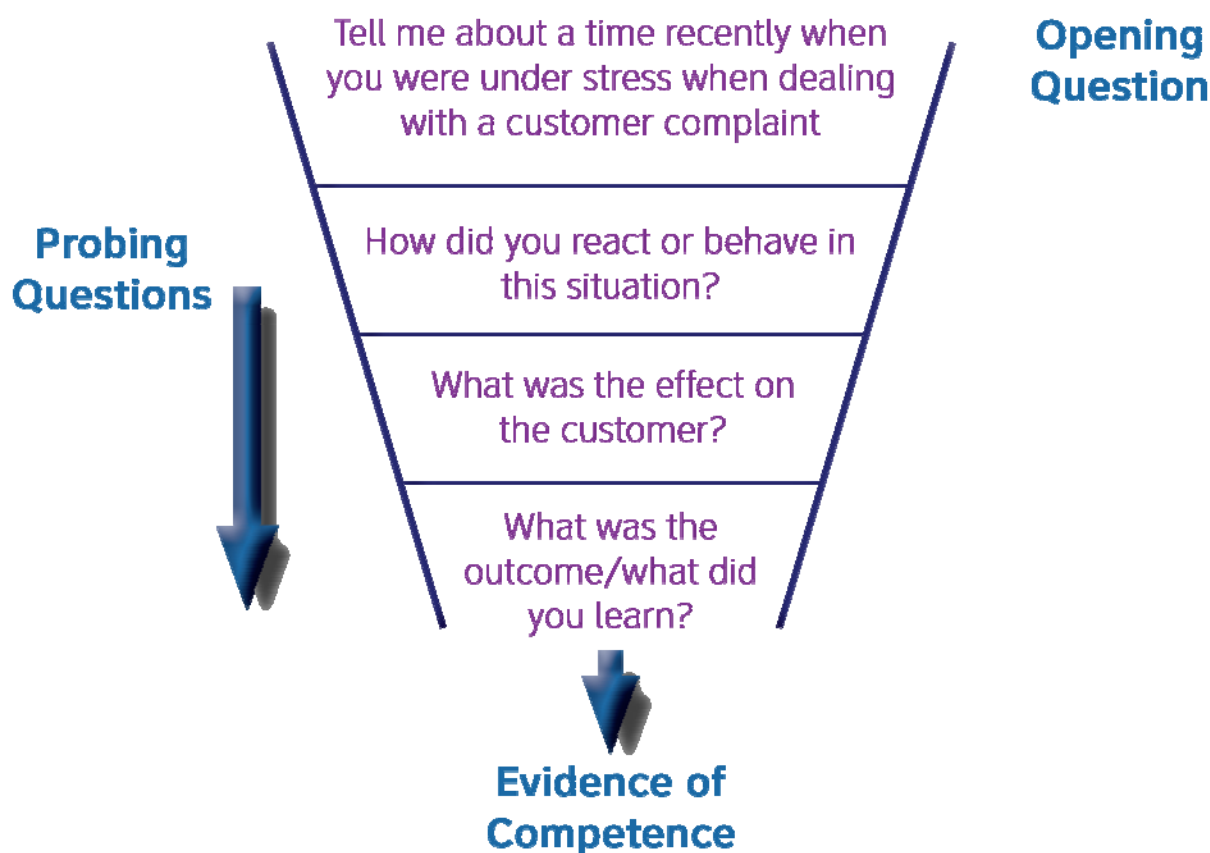
- C**hallenge → What was the specific situation or problem?
- A**ctions → What did you do? How did you go about it?
- R**esults → What was the outcome?

COMPETENCE-BASED QUESTIONING STYLE

In a behavioural interview questions are asked about real situations and you are asked how you have reacted or have dealt with them in the past. Questions focus on specific examples of your past performance as indicators of your future behaviours.

In this type of interview probing questions are used – this is often referred to as funnelling as you may feel like you are being pushed down a funnel!

The following diagram gives an example of a typical competence the interviewer is looking to uncover when probing or funnelling – Customer Focus by way of illustration. It also shows how they uncover evidence by using probing questions.



EXAMPLE INTERVIEW COMPETENCE-BASED QUESTIONS

Competence	Questions
Customer Focus	Give an example of a customer with whom you recently built a strong business relationship. How did you build trust? What were the benefits to them and to you/your organisation?
Results Orientation	Give an example when you failed to reach a target. What were the issues? What prevented you from achieving the target? How did you feel/react? What did you learn?
Team Working & Team Leadership	<p>Tell me about a time when you motivated a team to achieve a challenging task. What did you do to motivate the individuals and team as a whole? What was the outcome? What did you learn?</p> <p>Outline an example of a time when you needed the team to cascade information on your behalf. How did you motivate your team to communicate the key messages? How did you brief or prepare them? What was the most successful aspect of the communication? How was it received?</p>
Interpersonal Sensitivity	<p>What are some of the most difficult meetings you have had with colleagues? Why were they difficult? How did you/others behave? What was the outcome?</p> <p>Give an example of a time when your ideas were strongly opposed in a discussion. What were your reactions? What was the response of others? How did it affect your reputation?</p>
Diversity	Describe a time when you have been challenged by someone with different perspectives and background from your own. What was the situation? What did you do and why? What was the outcome of your actions?
Initiative	Describe a situation when you have had to use your initiative. Why did you take the action you did? What was the outcome? How did you feel as a result?
Flexibility	Outline an occasion when you have had to demonstrate flexibility in your approach to work. What options did you have? How did you react in the situation? What was the outcome?

Competence	Questions	Behavioural Indicators	Possible Responses
Customer Focus	Give an example of a customer with whom you recently built a strong business relationship. How did you build trust? What were the benefits to them and to you/your organisation?	Demonstrates a concern for the needs and expectations of customers, making them a priority. Uses the understanding of customer needs as the basis for decision-making and action.	Developed catering contracts for up to 1200 people daily, moving from service to a civilian contractor. Managed kitchens, developed menus, established local suppliers, trained local chefs and catering managers to meet contract demands. Established a protocol for service level agreements overseas as a result.
Results Orientation	Tell me about a time when you reached or exceeded a demanding target. What were the main challenges? What did you do? What criteria did you set to measure the success? How far did you meet these?	Maintains a focused commitment to achieving objectives. Sets measurable success criteria and milestones. Stays with a plan of action until the desired goal has been attained or is no longer reasonably attainable. Recognises opportunities and looks for ways to quickly overcome barriers. Perseveres in the face of difficulty.	Worked as part of a team to ensure up to 30 personnel were trained on communications equipment ready for operational commitment within 4 weeks. Delivered and carried out assessments on the practical element of the training in realistic and simulated environments and gave feedback along with one to one mentoring. This resulted in the successful completion of the training on time with a 100% pass rate.
Team Working & Team Leadership	Tell me about a time when you have worked together with colleagues. What was the situation? What did you contribute? What were the results?	Works collaboratively and encourages and motivates the team to work together by engendering a sense of collective responsibility, in order to achieve shared aims and goals.	Installed new communication equipment in 20 vehicles as part of a team within a 2 week period. This involved preparing the vehicles by safely removing all the old equipment, installing the new equipment along with performing fault finding diagnostics and mentoring the lesser experienced members of the team. This resulted in the successful installation of the equipment in to all 20 vehicles 3 days ahead of schedule.

Personal Sensitivity	Describe a situation when you adapted your usual style to accommodate the needs of people from diverse backgrounds. What was the greatest challenge? What did you do? What was the outcome? What would you do differently if you were to be in that situation again?	Seeks to understand the feelings, motives and reactions of others and adapts own behaviour accordingly. Is at ease in dealing with individuals of all backgrounds and maintains strong relationships.	Delivering medical treatment to Iraqi national patient and had to overcome a language barrier. Liaised via an interpreter to identify what the treatment needs were. However when it came to carrying out the treatment the patient refused to be treated in a public place in a mixed gender environment. I located a private cubicle and the necessary treatment was carried out. The patient returned later that week and thanked me for considering their personal feelings when treating them.
Diversity	Outline an occasion when you have been part of a multicultural team. What were the issues? What did you do to demonstrate your awareness and sensitivity to cultural differences? What was the outcome? What did you learn from the experience?	Respects the beliefs, perspectives and customs of people from all ethnic and religious backgrounds.	Worked with a local community workforce in the Middle East part of a voluntary group which helped to rebuild a school destroyed in the conflict. Devised a duty rota around the local workforces' religious commitments to make effective use of the time we had access to this additional help. The project finished on time and enabled local children to resume their education and to return more quickly to 'normal life'.
Initiative	Give an example of a problem you have been faced with where you have had to take the lead? What action did you take? What did you learn?	Anticipates need to take appropriate action prior to being requested. Always thinks of new or improved ways of doing things.	Identified the need for new procedures in the tender and risk assessment processes. Managed and produced the project brief, project approach, the business case and risks assessment along with the controlled tender selection process for the provision of 8000 all terrain vehicles. This was completed within timescale and resulted in a 5% saving against budget.

Flexibility	Outline a time when you demonstrated flexibility in your approach to work. What options did you have? How did you react? What was the outcome?	Adapts and maintains effectiveness in the face of changing priorities, resources and environments. Responds to change in a positive manner.	Managed the deployment of a large IT and Telecoms section of 200 technicians and staff to a hostile environment. Organised the specification and network build with 1st, 2nd and 3rd line support. Achieved within very tight timescale, while ensuring the safety of all individuals and equipment.
--------------------	--	---	--

SOME GENERAL COMPLETION TIPS

You can maximise your performance by good preparation.

- Try to obtain the list of competences for the job you have applied for. Some organisations will send this out as a matter of course, others will not. Always ask. If it is not forthcoming, use whatever information you do have about your target market and the job you have applied for to put together your own list of competences. It may not be 100% accurate, but you should be able to hit the main ones without too much difficulty
- Examine your track record. Provide examples and evidence of the required competences e.g. team working, influencing etc. using the CAR model. Remember that you want to demonstrate success in the past. You may re-use an example, say a major assignment or project, to provide evidence for a number of competences, but some variety does help.
- Don't flannel – remember the key word here is *evidence* and the interviewer will ask a lot of probing questions if they think you are being vague
- Remember to use the action words that will demonstrate the behavioural indicators the recruiter is looking for
- Practise. You don't want to sound glib or rehearsed, but you do want to sound confident and be reasonably fluent
- Finally, remember that you do not have to be perfect at everything to get the job. If there are areas where you are less than confident, don't panic. The perfect candidate, like the perfect interview, is a myth! However, do have ideas for how you would compensate for, or develop any gaps/weaknesses