



COMPETENCY QUESTIONS

TO MEASURE YOUR SUITABILITY, RECRUITERS WILL ASK QUESTIONS WHERE YOU WILL NEED TO DRAW ON EXAMPLES FROM YOUR LIFE SO FAR TO DEMONSTRATE TIMES WHEN YOU HAVE EMPLOYED PARTICULAR COMPETENCIES. THE LOGIC IS SIMPLE: YOUR PAST ABILITY TO USE A SKILL IS OFTEN A GOOD INDICATOR OF YOUR POTENTIAL TO BE SUCCESSFUL IN THE FUTURE.

WHAT ARE COMPETENCIES?

Essentially, competencies are skills, abilities and behaviours that will help you to be successful in a job. Employers will identify competencies that are particularly important to their organisation and the specific job role you're applying for. Job descriptions and adverts often list the key skills required for a role and many employers highlight the core and most essential competencies.

Different employers and careers might require a slightly different set of competencies but the most common are:

Communication / teamwork / problem solving / leadership / time management / planning and organisation / customer facing skills / delegation / influencing / decision making / motivation / adaptability / commercial awareness / creativity

WHAT IS A COMPETENCY-BASED INTERVIEW?

Once employers have identified the competencies that are vital for working in their organisation, they use these as selection criteria for choosing new recruits. A competency interview is one way to do this.

To measure your suitability, recruiters will ask questions where you will need to draw on examples from your life so far to demonstrate times when you have employed particular competencies. The logic is simple: your past ability to use a skill is often a good indicator of your potential to be successful in the future.

Competency-based questions usually start along the lines of:

- 'Can you talk me through an example of when you...'
- 'Describe a time when you...'
- 'How would you go about...'
- 'Have you ever...'

Interviewers may then probe deeper to draw out more information. For example, if you were asked about a time when you worked in a team, potential follow-up questions include:

- What was your individual contribution?
- What did you learn from the experience and what would you do differently in future?
- Tell me about another team you have been involved in.
- What factors do you think contribute to the success of a team?

WHAT ARE THE MOST COMMON COMPETENCY-BASED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS?

Employers don't make a habit of disclosing the exact questions they ask at interviews (for very good reasons) so there's never a guarantee that you will be asked a certain question. However, it's a safe bet to prepare for questions around the most popular competencies we mentioned earlier in this article. Here is a list of competency-based interview questions that could come up:

- Can you give me an example of when you worked in a team?
- Give me an example of a time when you showed initiative
- Have you ever had to deal with conflict and how did you manage the situation?
- Tell me about a time when you took on a leadership role.
- Can you describe a time when you had to be an effective decision maker
- Have you ever had to bring others around to your way of thinking?
- What has been your biggest failure and how did you overcome it?
- How do you manage tight deadlines?

HOW DO YOU ANSWER COMPETENCY-BASED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS?

With competency-based questions it is very easy to go off topic or meander around providing too much detail about the situation when the interviewer really wants to know how you acted.

- **Situation:** give the interviewer a context by describing the situation.
- **Task:** what did you need to do?
- **Action:** tell the interviewer what *your* specific actions were.
- **Result:** the end result – make sure it shows you in a good light, even if the overall project was not a success.

Examples of questions and answer are as follows: -

Please could you tell us about a time when you have faced a problem at work and how you handled it.

Situation – while working in my current company a colleague took a customer's order over the telephone and didn't take down the full delivery address correctly and the courier company were calling to find the accurate information.

Task – I had to get the customer order details quickly so that they could get the delivery there on time

Action – I firstly checked with my colleague to see if they had any further information on the delivery address that they had written down but perhaps didn't add to the client record, they did not, so I called the client to find out the correct information and reassure them that the delivery would be delivered on time. I communicated the information to the courier company.

Result – The delivery was delivered on time and the customer was extremely happy, and has reordered since.

If you are a student or graduate, you will have a more limited bag of work-related examples to draw upon but aim to use a different example for each competency you are asked to discuss. Use examples from your studies, work experience and extracurricular activities.

Proportionally, you should dedicate most of your response to the Action part. Keep reading for sample answers to three common competency questions, using the STAR approach.

Example competency-based interview questions and answers

You will need to come up with your own answers based on your own life and experiences, but here is a sample answer to give you a better idea of how to use the STAR technique to answer competency questions.

Give an example of a time when you worked in a team

Situation: I completed a group work project with four other students from my marketing course. Our task was to plan the relaunch of a brand.

Task: We had to use a range of research methods, provide a written report, and present our joint findings to the rest of our year group and an expert panel drawn from local media agencies.

Action: I had to devise, market, and analyse the results of an online brand awareness survey, but I also took responsibility for co-ordinating the activities of the rest of the group who were focusing on different activities. I facilitated initial discussions so that we were all clear on what we needed to do, and I encouraged us all to work to interim deadlines so that it wasn't all last minute. I also proposed that we met regularly to discuss progress and so that we could all support each other in achieving our aims. The regular meetings helped us to identify each other's strengths, which really helped when planning our joint presentation. We were also in a better position to support each other and work out how to complete the task amid competing priorities of our other academic work.

Results: We submitted a full report on time and won the prize for best presentation. We were commended by the expert panel for our ability to bring together our findings in a coherent form and present professionally. While I like to take a lead and organise, I also learned through our regular catchups that it is possible to accommodate different working styles happily if you keep communicating.

WHAT IF YOU ARE FACED WITH A HYPOTHETICAL SITUATION?

Questions in competency-based interviews are not exclusively based on behavioural evidence. You may be asked some hypothetical, scenario-based questions too, where you'll be asked to say what you would do in a given situation.

These are designed to see how you would apply a skill to a specific workplace, so by their nature they are often very focused on the job role. For example, a construction employer might ask a candidate for a trainee site manager role: 'What would you do if a water pipe burst and delayed construction work on site?'. However, there are some scenario-based questions that are more general, such as:

- What would you do if a client wasn't happy with your work?
- What would you do if you noticed that a colleague was underperforming and seemed unhappy?
- You've got a deadline for some important work, but you've been booked onto a training session. What would you do?
- While you can imagine how you might respond to a situation and explain how you would tackle it, try always to reinforce your skills by comparing the situation with something similar you have faced successfully before. Always give specific evidence where you can.

As always preparation is key, take time to practice some competency based questions and answer scenarios, so that whatever questions you are asked, you are well rehearsed in answering them as succinctly as possible.