COMPETENCY-BASED INTERVIEWS

Competency-based interviews (also called structured interviews) are interviews where each question is designed to test one or more specific skills. The answer is then matched against a pre-decided criterion and marked accordingly. For example, the interviewers may want to test the candidate's ability to deal with stress by asking first how the candidate generally handles stress and then asking the candidate to provide an example of a situation where he worked under pressure.

How do competency-based interviews differ from normal interviews?

Normal interviews (also called unstructured interviews) are essentially a conversation where the interviewers ask a few questions that are relevant to what they are looking for but without any specific aim in mind other than getting an overall impression of you as an individual. Questions are fairly random and can sometimes be quite open. For example, a question such as "What can you offer our company?" is meant to gather general information about you, but does not test any specific skill or competency. In an unstructured interview, the candidate is judged on the general impression that he/she leaves; the process is therefore likely to be more subjective.

Competency-based interviews (also called structured or behavioural interviews) are more systematic, with each question targeting 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. The interviewers will then dig further into the examples by asking for specific explanations about the candidate's behaviour or skills.

Which skills and competencies do competency-based interviews test?

The list of skills and competencies that can be tested varies depending on the post that you are applying for. For example, for a Personal Assistant post, skills and competencies would include communication skills; ability to organise and prioritise; and ability to work under pressure. For a senior manager, skills and competencies may include an ability to influence and negotiate; an ability to cope with stress and pressure; an ability to lead; and the capacity to take calculated risks.

Here is a non-exhaustive list of the more common skills and competencies that you may be asked to demonstrate:

Skills and competencies for competency-based interviews		
Adaptability	Delegation	Leadership
Compliance	External awareness	Leveraging diversity
Communication	Flexibility	Organisational awareness
Conflict management	Independence	Resilience and tenacity
Creativity and Innovation	Influencing	Risk taking
Decisiveness	Integrity	Sensitivity to others
		Team work

What kind of competency-based interview questions can you be asked?

Although most questions tend to ask for examples of situations where you have demonstrated specific skills, they can appear in different formats. Examples include:

How do you ensure that you maintain good working relationships with your senior colleagues?
Give us an example of a situation where you had to deal with a conflict with an internal or external client.

How do you influence people in situations where there are conflicting agendas?
Tell us about a situation where you made a decision and then changed your mind.

In many cases, the interviewers will start with a general question, which they will then follow up with more specific example-based questions. So, for example:
How do you manage upwards?

Give us an example of a situation where you had a fundamental disagreement with one of your superiors.

The key in answering all questions is that you are required to "demonstrate" that you have the right skills by using examples based on your prior experience, and not just talk about the topic in a *theoretical and impersonal manner.*

The acronym **STAR** stands for
Situation
Task
Action
Result.

It is a universally recognised communication technique designed to enable you to provide a meaningful and complete answer to questions asking for examples. At the same time, it has the advantage of being simple enough to be applied easily.

Many interviewers will have been trained in using the STAR structure. Even if they have not, they will recognise its value when they see it. The information will be given to them in a structured manner and, as a result, they will become more receptive to the messages you are trying to communicate.

Step 1 – Situation or Task
Describe the situation that you were confronted with or the task that needed to be accomplished. With the STAR approach you need to set the context. Make it concise and informative, concentrating solely on what is useful to the story. For example, if the question is asking you to describe a situation where you had to deal with a difficult person, explain how you came to meet that person and why they were being difficult. If the question is asking for an example of teamwork, explain the task that you had to undertake as a team.

Step 2 – Action
This is the most important section of the STAR approach as it is where you will need to demonstrate and highlight 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. In doing so, you will need to remember the following:
Be personal, i.e. talk about you, not the rest of the team.
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.
Explain what you did, how you did it, and why you did it.

What you did and how you did it

The interviewers will want to know how you reacted to the situation. This is where you can start selling some important skills. For example, you may want to describe how you used the team to achieve a particular objective and how you used your communication skills to keep everyone updated on progress etc.

Why you did it

For example; when discussing a situation where you had to deal with conflict, many candidates would simply say: "I told my colleague to calm down and explained to him what the problem was". However, it would not provide a good idea of what drove you to act in this manner. How did you ask him to calm down? How did you explain the nature of the problem? By highlighting the reasons behind your action, you would make a greater impact. For example:

"I could sense that my colleague was irritated and I asked him gently to tell me what he felt the problem was. By allowing him to vent his feelings and his anger, I gave him the opportunity to calm down. I then explained to him my own point of view on the matter, emphasising how important it was that we found a solution that suited us both."

This revised answer helps the interviewers understand what drove your actions and reinforces the feeling that you are calculating the consequences of your actions, thus retaining full control of the situation. It provides much more information about you as an individual and is another reason why the STAR approach is so useful.

Step 3 – Result

Explain what happened eventually – how it all ended. Also, use the opportunity to describe what you accomplished and what you learnt in that situation. This helps you make the answer personal and enables you to highlight further skills.

This is probably the most crucial part of your answer. Interviewers want to know that you are using a variety of generic skills in order to achieve your objectives. Therefore you must be able to demonstrate in your answer that you are taking specific actions because you are trying to achieve a specific objective and not simply by chance.