



# ***How To Master A Competency-Based Interview***



*Adapted from the book Competency-Based Interviews by Robin Kessler*

## *The New Competency-Based Strategy*



Today more interviewers at the best organizations are using behavioral interviewing techniques to help determine how competent candidates are in the key areas most critical for success. They are taught to evaluate the candidate's fit for the position based on their perceived competency level and assess the candidate's nonverbal and verbal communication in a more sophisticated way.

Organizations use many different names, including targeted selection interviewing and evidence-based interviewing, to describe what is essentially competency-based interviewing.

This type of interview uses behavioral questions to help the interviewer assess the candidate based on critical competencies that have been identified by the employer for the position. It is believed that past behavior is the best predictor of future success.

### ***Understanding Competency-Based Interview Systems***

There are two types of competency-based interviews. The first style is the most widely used type where the interviewers ask candidates behavioral questions targeting each competency area identified as being important to being successful in the position. Candidates have the opportunity to talk about a number of accomplishments. The second style asks the candidate to look at an accomplishment and then probes for additional information; including looking at accomplishments from the perspective of different competencies.

An example of the second type of competency-based interviews starts with the interviewer asking a candidate about their most significant accomplishment. Then they probe for the following:

- A complete description of the accomplishment.
- The company the candidate worked for and what it did.
- The actual results achieved: numbers, facts, changes made, details, amounts.
- When it took place.
- How long it took.
- The importance of this accomplishment to the company.
- The candidate's title and role.
- Why the candidate was chosen.
- The three to four biggest challenges faced and how they were dealt with.
- A few examples of leadership and initiative.

- Some of the major decisions made.
- The environment and resources available.
- How the candidate made resources available.
- The technical skills needed to accomplish the objective.
- The technical skills learned and how long it took to learn them.
- The actual role the candidate played.
- The team involved and all of the reporting relationships.
- Some of the biggest mistakes the candidate made.
- How the candidate changed and grew as a person.
- What would the candidate do differently if they could do it again.
- Aspects of the project truly enjoyed.
- Aspects that the candidate did not especially care about.
- The budget available and the candidate's role in preparing it and managing it.
- How did the candidate perform on the project vs. the plan.
- How the candidate developed the plan.
- How did the candidate motivate and influence others, with specific examples to prove the claims.
- Provide specific examples of dealing with conflicts.
- Provide anything else that was important to the success of the project.

Typically, most organizations have identified three to five primary questions targeting each critical competency area that interviewers may use to get the information from the candidate needed to assess their level of competency.

## *Identifying Key Competencies*



It is important to take the time to learn what the organization is looking for before the interview if you wish to convince the interviewer that you are the best candidate for the job.

Countries sharing the same language can have different priorities for competencies and within each country you can expect to have organizations with different needs and different competencies. Organizations develop their own list of competencies and may work closely with consultants to benefit from their expertise in competencies and competency modeling.

Some organizations have identified competencies for their positions, and they are listed as part of their online advertisements. The key competencies (or similar words such as success factors, dimensions or values) may also be part of a job description that a recruiter can provide. Other organizations may not have directly listed their competencies for the position, but in reality, they are all looking for competent people for their positions whether or not they have formally identified competencies.

When the competencies are not directly identified, you need to do several things to identify the competencies for the position on your own, before the interview. The three major steps to identify the competencies are:

1. Think about the obvious competencies for the positions.
2. Look at advertisements and postings from competitors.
3. Compile a list of competencies from other sources including employment websites, advertisements in newspapers, magazines and journals, professional associations and the organization's website.

The 10 most standard competencies being used by companies are listed below. They are not listed in order, they are just the most common.

1. Achievement/Results Orientation
2. Initiative
3. Impact and Influence
4. Customer Service Orientation
5. Interpersonal Understanding
6. Organizational Awareness
7. Analytical Thinking
8. Conceptual Thinking
9. Information Seeking
10. Integrity

## *Know What Interviewers are Trained to Look For*



Always consider the organization's needs first, then how you match those needs. Before the interview you need to think about how you can provide evidence to the interviewer that you are competent in the areas the organizations needs to be successful.

### *What Have Interviewers Always Been Looking For?*

The answer is - the best candidate for the job. Traditionally most interviewers look for three things:

1. Can you do the job? Do you have the right experience and education for the work?
2. Will you do the job? You may have a great educational background and the best technical experience, but may lack motivation. Being disciplined, hard-working, and determined still counts for quite a bit with most interviewers.
3. How well do you fit with their people, department, organization and culture. This category covers social skills and communication style. This is a category where nonverbal communication counts. In any interview, you need to recognize that interviewers are going to be trying to determine:
  - Do you have good social skills?
  - Are you articulate?
  - Do you use good grammar?
  - Are you dressed appropriately?
  - Do they like you?
  - Do you have the same sense of humor as the rest of the group?
  - Do you seem to know how to handle yourself appropriately?
  - How will your personality fit with the people you will need to work with?

### *What are Interviewers Taught to Avoid Legal Problems?*

Most sophisticated organizations train their interviewers to avoid asking questions that can cause a candidate to file a discrimination charge. Most countries, states, and provinces have employment laws in place to protect their citizens and residents against discrimination.

In the USA interviewers are trained to focus the interview on what it takes to be successful on the job and away from the candidate's personal life. In Europe and many other parts of the world, interviewers are more likely to ask questions about the personal life of a candidate as a way to get to know him or her.

Competency-based interviews are highly structured and provide interviewers with a list of three to five primary questions in each competency area. They reduce the probability of an interviewer asking a candidate illegal and even inappropriate questions. It focuses on the competencies the organization needs to be successful.

### *How are Interviewers Trained Differently for Competency-Based Interviews?*

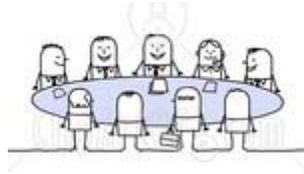
They focus on the key competencies for a particular position and core competencies for the organization. They are trained to know what to listen for and observe to be able to assess the candidate more accurately.

Usually, the interviewer goes through the introductions and clarifies some things in the candidate's background. They then begin the main part of the interview with a competency-based question. They look at the three main parts of any answer to a behavioral question: Situation/Task, Action, and Result (STAR).

1. Situation/Task. What is the basic situation, task or problem that you are giving to answer the behavioral question. Expect to give details. Some organizations use the word Problem instead of Situation or Task (PAR-Problem, Action, Result).
2. Action. What action did you take to make the situation better? What decisions did you make to handle the task or resolve the problem?
3. Results. What was the result of the action? How did it benefit the organization or your department? What did you learn that will help you be even stronger in the future? Any major lessons learned for you or your organization? Did you make money for the organization? Did you save time?

The interviewer is also asked to assess the candidate's communication skills. It is important to clearly convey information and ideas through a variety of speaking/media to individuals or groups in a manner that engages them and helps them understand and retain the message.

## *Expect Competency-Based Behavioral Questions*



The best interviewees prepare for an interview. Take time to be strategic.

- Look at the key competencies identified for the position you plan to interview for.
- Think about your strongest accomplishments that prove your competence – in each key competency area. Make sure to include at least a few accomplishments that are not already on your resume.
- Pick examples to talk about that show as high a level of competence as possible, unless you are interested in interviewing for a position you are overqualified for.
- Think about how to explain the accomplishment to the interviewer using conventional language.
- Be reasonably concise but also complete with your answers. Don't forget to cover situation/task, problem, action and result.
- Remember to be positive and to make sure your nonverbal communication supports what you are saying. Don't give the interviewer a mixed message.

What order should you use to talk about situation/task/problem, action and result? That depends on which part of the answer is the most important. You need to be aware of the organizations needs and talk about the most important part first. Saying this another way, what is most important to the interviewer should take priority over what is most important to you.

You need to consider the following when getting ready to answer a competency-based interview question:

- Listen well and respond to the question being asked. Be smart with the language you use in the interview. Use professional language with your colleagues and include terms showing that you are comfortable with the terms used in the organization's culture.
- Be prepared to answer follow-up questions probing your initial answer for additional details or competency-related information.
- Choose examples you are willing to talk about in detail.
- Prioritize the parts of an answer and always make your most critical points first.

## *Look Like a Strong Candidate*



Thinking about good answers to behavioral questions targeting the competencies for the position you are interested in is the first step you need to take. You also need to look the part, act the part and come across to the interviewer as a strong candidate.

Nonverbal Communication is important in any interview. In addition to strong competency-based answers, you should:

- Maintain good eye contact.
- Dress appropriately.
- Use the right gestures.
- Have a good, firm handshake.
- Behave appropriately.
- Smile at appropriate times.
- Respect your interviewer's personal space.
- Respond to your interviewer's nonverbal communication.
- Avoid giving a mixed message where your nonverbal communication contradicts your words.
- Deliver your answers in an organized way.
- Talk with your interviewer in a conversational way.

The right nonverbal communication to use will be different based on the country/culture the organization is in and perhaps the culture of the interviewer.

Besides answering a competency-based interview question the interviewer would notice the following which would signal a strong candidate in the competency *Achieve Results*.

- Does the candidate explain the results using quantitative and qualitative details?
- Are the answers organized, logical, concise and complete?
- Is the emphasis more on results than process? Do the results seem to be a priority for the candidate?
- Did the candidate get to the point quickly?
- Did the interviewee maintain good eye contact and show that he/she were engaged in the conversation?

An interviewer would consider a candidate to be strong in the competency *Impact and Influence* if they were:

- Almost always assertive, not aggressive, and consider the long-term relationship.
- Able to know how to sell their ideas effectively without selling too much.
- Good at reading people.
- Good at understanding subtleties and using them to convince others.
- Able to use stories and humor to make points and persuade others to change their point of view.

Good interviewers may perceive someone as not telling the truth if they:

- Give contradictory examples.
- Contradict their words with nonverbal communication.
- Fidget or avoid eye contact at specific, relevant times.
- Sit very still and move less than other candidates.
- Talk more slowly and make mistakes verbally.
- Pauses before and during communication.
- Use general terms that imply some knowledge.
- Are less specific, more general and vague.

There is no reason to be brutally honest. Be diplomatically honest instead.

## *Other Important Interview Tips*



If you are asked “Why are you interested in this position?”

- Focus on how your experience and interests match the competencies the employer is looking for.
- A strong candidate would give specific examples to support what he or she is saying.

If you are asked “Tell me about yourself”, you should:

- Key point: What about you does the employer need to know to realize you have the right competencies to help the organization be successful?
- Limit your answer to two minutes. Be logical, organized and concise.
- Focus on your professional experience that is relevant to this position, not your personal life.
- Be logical and follow either the traditional chronological approach or briefly discuss your background and education, and spend most of the time focused on your current strengths and competencies, and what you want to do next.

When you are asked questions about salary:

- Answer the question about your current salary unless there is a good reason not to.
- Answer the question about salary expectations by saying something like “I am sure if you decide I’m the right person for the job that you will do the very best you can for me.”

The most important things to remember when you are asked about your strengths is:

- Emphasize your strengths that match the competencies the employer needs.
- Choose three to four of the relevant competencies for the position that are strengths of yours.
- Start the answer with the competency that has the greatest weight and is most important to the employer.

- Paraphrase and use synonyms to describe the competencies to the employer. Take the time to put them in your own language.
- Listen carefully to this and other questions to know whether you are being asked about one strength or strengths with the “s” at the end which is plural and means you have to give at least two examples.

When you are asked to identify your biggest weakness:

- You should pick a weakness and turn it into a strength. To do this your answer should be diplomatically honest and original.
- Choose a weakness not related to the key competencies needed for the position you are interviewing for.
- Select a weakness that the interviewer may have already noticed in the interview.
- You need to answer this question because everyone has weaknesses and it is not believable to say you don't.
- Pick an example that shows humor and that you are human. Just make sure you are not the only one who thinks it is funny.

If you are asked about a competency that you don't have or can't prove:

- Talk about how you have compensated by using your strengths in another competency.
- Acknowledge the gap and explain what steps you have taken to overcome it, i.e. signed up for a class or project that will give you the evidence to close the gap in the future.

Other tips:

- Wear clothes that are considered conservative for your area.
- Don't take notes during the interview. Take them immediately after the interview so you can write an effective thank you note.
- Plan to arrive 5 to 10 minutes early.
- Be professional and discreet when talking about past employers.

## *Send a Thank-You Note*



Thank you notes are still important in today's world, so it is helpful to write a personal, non-generic thank- you note to the interviewer.

The thank-you note is a reflection of you so make sure you use capital letters at the beginning of sentences, use complete sentences that have good punctuation, grammar and spelling. Avoid using smiley faces, Internet lingo such as lol and emoticons such as : ) in your thank-you note.

In today's business environment candidates should plan to send than-you notes within 24 hours using e-mail. The only exception to this can be non-profit organizations where a letter could be appropriate. In this situation in helping make a decision consider how technologically advanced the non-profit seems to be. The best timing to send the note by e-mail is at least three hours after the interview and between the hours of 6 AM and midnight when most people are awake.

You should have asked for the interviewer's business card at the interview. If you were interviewed by a panel and know the names and titles of everyone on the interview panel, you can write individualized notes to each interviewer.

When you write the thank-you note:

- Tell the interviewer thank-you – that you appreciate his/her time or the opportunity to have an interview. Tell them that you enjoyed meeting them and learning more about the position.
- Second, tell the interviewer something about how, after speaking with them you are even more interested in the position and are convinced that you would be successful in the position. Identify how your competencies match their needs and will benefit the organization. Relate your comments to something that was said in the interview, i.e. "I was particularly impressed when you talked to me about....")
- Third, tell the interviewer you are looking forward to hearing from them in the near future and would be happy to answer any questions or provide any additional information they may need.
- Make sure to put the interviewer's name at the top of the e-mail and yours at the bottom. If you start off using the words Dear (name), make sure you close with a salutation (Sincerely,) before your name.