Competency Interviews

Preparation for performing well when answering competency questions in interview

Competency-based questions are common on both application forms and at interview. These questions are looking for evidence of skills that are used in the job. It's not enough to just say what you can offer. You must also provide evidence. Interviewers are less interested in what you've done than how you've done it. Competency interviews work on the basis that past performance is the best indicator of future success.

The interviewer will therefore be seeking examples of past behaviour that provide him/her with concrete evidence that you have the necessary competencies, or transferable skills, to succeed in the job.

What competencies is the interviewer looking for?
This will vary according to the job but competencies of importance to many recruiters of new and recent graduates include:

- Communication
- Negotiation
- Persuasiveness
- Teamwork
- Commercial Awareness
- Cultural Sensitivity
- Interpersonal skills
- Decision making
- Problem solving
- Planning and organisation
- Leadership
- Managing upwards
- Numeracy
- Self-awareness

Questions will then be asked in the format "Describe a situation where you showed persuasiveness" or “Tell me about a time when your communication skills were essential in achieving a successful outcome”.

How can I tell if I will have a competency-based interview or a traditional interview?

The application form may give you a clue. Many employers will design the application form to include a number of questions in this format. At the interview, the examples you give may be probed in more detail and further examples sought of the behaviour/competences in question.
Although you can’t always predict in advance what type of interview an employer will use, time spent preparing answers to competency questions will never be wasted. Even if the interview follows a traditional format, you will have thought about the competencies the employer needs and be able to back up your answers with concrete examples, which always makes a more positive impression.

Preparing for a competency-based interview

Preparation is key if you want to be able to answer all questions thrown at you without having to think too much on the spot on the day of the interview; it requires several steps:

Make sure that you understand which skills and competencies will be tested. It sounds obvious, but some person specifications can be a little vague and you will need to do some thinking in order to ensure that the examples that you will be using, hit the spot. For example, the person specification may say that you need to have "good communication skills in dealing with third parties". For someone who works in customer service and is expected to handle complaints all day long, this will most likely involve a mix of empathy/understanding as well as an ability to be assertive in a nice way whenever required; however for someone applying for a commercial law post, this will most likely involve an ability to explain complex matters in a simple way, and not so much empathy.

Understanding the requirements for the post, whether they are stated explicitly or not in the person specification, is therefore crucial.

Identify examples from your past experience which you can use to demonstrate that you possess the skills and competencies that you are being asked to demonstrate. You do not have to find really complicated examples; in particular the outcome of the story does not have to be extraordinary; what matters most is that the role you played in reaching the outcome was substantial.

Learn to structure the story using the STAR technique. This means setting the scene, explaining how you handled the situation by placing the emphasis on your role, and detailing the outcome/result.

**STAR Technique**

The acronym STAR stands for: **Situation, Task, Action, Result**

It is a widely recognised 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.

**Situation: 10-15% of your answer**

Describe the situation that you were confronted with or the task that needed to be accomplished. Set the context. Make it concise and informative, concentrating solely on what is useful to the story. Don’t give unnecessary detail.

**Task: 10-15% of your answer**

Drill down. What were you responsible for? Be really specific. Make sure the task links back to the skill you are evidencing.

**Action: 60% of your answer**

This is the most important section of the STAR approach as it is where you demonstrate your skills in actions.

Be personal, talk about you, not the rest of the team. Avoid saying “we” even in a teamwork example. This is about you and not the rest of the team.

Go into detail. Do not assume that the interviewers 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.

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, this 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.

Portray yourself as the driver of a successful outcome. Avoid saying “I had to….” This sounds as if you were acting under duress when you should be demonstrating your initiative.

Ensure that you are giving the interviewers an insight into your logical approach.

**Result: 15%-20%**

Explain what happened as a result of the action that you took. You can also use the opportunity to describe what you accomplished and what you learnt in that situation but this shouldn’t be the main focus of your answer.

**In brief it’s really, really simple:**

- List the competencies for the specific job
- Trawl your CV for two examples for each competency *(NB: if this becomes really hard or impossible, the chances are that the job may not suit you)*
- For each example, write a bullet point for each of the **STAR** headings above
- Practise your answers with a critical friend
- Enjoy the interview because you have prepared

**Extra support**

- For feedback and support preparing for interviews or completing application forms use your careers team. The Lancaster University careers team offer an application checking service that can be accessed either through TargetConnect or by attending a drop in appointment in The Base: 10.00-12.00 and 2.00-4.00 Monday-Friday. You can also book an appointment for a mock interview https://lancaster.targetconnect.net/leap/appointments.html

- [www.lancaster.ac.uk/careers](http://www.lancaster.ac.uk/careers)

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