Strength-Based Interviews

Graduate recruiters, such as Aviva, Standard Chartered, EY, Barclays, Nestlé, Royal Mail, Reckitt Benckiser, BAE Systems, FDM and Unilever all now use “strength-based interviews” in their graduate recruitment process. Strength interviews have a simple aim: to find out your interests and how you’d fit with the organisation.

Competencies are behaviours that an organisation needs. Competency-based interviews have been the most common type of graduate recruitment interview for a long time. Competencies can be defined as “what you CAN do”. Strengths however are “what you ENJOY doing”.

Matt Stripe, Nestlé UK & Ireland group HR director, says: "Strengths is particularly useful when recruiting individuals who don’t have a lot of experience – such as graduates. It allows us to identify potential and individuals who have the same passion about our industry as we do. It also generates fewer fake, pre-prepared answers, and gives a genuine insight into candidates."

Strength interviews focus on making sure you do more of what you are good at rather than what you are capable of.

The theory behind strengths interviewing is based on positive psychology: everyone has strengths they are born with but few people know what these are. By identifying your strengths and matching yourself to the role, you will enjoy it more and perform better than those who have to try hard to fill the role.

When a graduate is using their strengths they demonstrate "flow":
- a real sense of energy and engagement
- often lose a sense of time because of being so engrossed in a task
- rapidly learn new information and approaches
- demonstrate high levels of performance
- are irrevocably drawn to do things that play to their strengths – even when tired, stressed or disengaged.

By identifying your strengths and matching yourself to the role, you will enjoy it more and perform better than those who have to try hard to fill the role. This should also lead to more rapid career progression for you.
How to prepare for a strengths interview

One of the good things about strength based interviews is that you can't do too much preparation and are less likely to come up with the same trite answers candidates think interviewers want to hear. Think about what you love doing both inside and outside of work and be prepared to be open: don't try to be something you’re not. Be honest about what tasks you don't enjoy doing and think about how your preferences might fit with the organisation's culture, values and the job requirements.

Questions you might be asked during a strength based interview

- What are you good at?
- Have you ever done something differently second time round?
- What do you learn quickly?
- What did you find easiest to learn at university?
- What subjects do you most enjoy studying?
- Do you keep your promises? How do you feel if you cannot keep a promise?
- How do you keep your relationships with your friends?
- Have you ever wanted to quit something?
- What gets you out of bed in the morning?
- Describe a successful day that you have had.
- When did you achieve something you were really proud of?
- Do you prefer starting or finishing?
- What do you do when you find a task boring?
- Do you find you have enough hours in the day to complete all the things you want to do?
- What things are always left on your to-do list and not finished? These are probably weaknesses: things you dislike doing.
- What do you enjoy doing the least? These are likely to be areas where you lack natural aptitude or skills.

Body Language

Aside from what you say, interviewers will also be assessing your body language and facial expressions to see how animated you are when answering their questions and, therefore, how genuine your answer is. You should expect to face a large number of questions in a short period of time with limited probes from the interviewers. The questions can range from closed to open. Some questions may feel repetitive but this is to allow the interviewer to compare your body language cues from question to question to assess your genuine strengths and interests.
What can you do to prepare?

As you can see, the questions are not asking for examples, so although you cannot pre-prepare what you are going to say, there are still a few things you can do:

Research the strengths or values the company is looking for. Check their website; most companies have a section on their ‘values’. Review the job description, person specification and collate any knowledge you have from speaking with their representatives.

Use this information as a guide to think through if you have strengths in these areas, and what approach you would take to show this. Strengths are things you enjoy, pick up quickly or look forward to using. You can assess your own strengths on the Lancaster Careers profiling tool GraduatesFirst.

If you were asked “How do you make sure there are no delays in a project?” consider all the elements of project management; planning and timescales, project plans, ensuring sufficient budget (and contingencies!), involvement of all key stakeholders, having a senior business champion to support your cause. Also, think of external factors and how you would allow for these.

For some questions such as “Do you prefer starting or finishing projects?” either answer is ok as long as you support your answer with sensible reasons for your preference. For example, you can say you find it energising to start a project because you like to be involved from the beginning to help shape the project, or that you get a real sense of satisfaction when something finishes because you’ve been involved in completing something successfully.

Become familiar with the format of strengths based questions.

On occasion it may be appropriate to draw on an example from your past, but not in such a structured manner as with a competency interview.

Faking your way through the answers will just result in you being rejected, or worse, given a position within a company that you are entirely unsuitable for and will most likely hate.

Although the focus of a strengths based interview is your strengths, it’s not uncommon to be asked a question about your weaknesses. If you are, remember to be honest about your ‘weakness’ (no one is perfect!) but you should also talk about what steps you are taking to address/mitigate this. **Do not** say you’re a perfectionist. Everyone says this!
Benefits to organisations of the strength approach

Organisations hopefully get fewer plastic, boring, pre-prepared answers from candidates, instead getting a genuine insight into their personalities. This is turn increases engagement and interest from interviewers.

Candidates enjoy the interview more, so are attracted to the organisation. And rejected candidates understand why they weren’t successful and may realise they wouldn’t be happy in the role and so don’t feel they’ve failed.

Successful candidates will in theory perform better as they are built for the role rather than adapting to fit the role. Those employed are more likely to stay in the job and will perform better and learn new information faster.

Final thoughts

Assessing what you most enjoy will help you to clarify what you want out of your career, as well as preparing you for a strengths-based interview. If you find that the role you are applying for doesn’t really play to any of your strengths, will you enjoy it? Are there more suitable jobs out there?

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