

Competency-based interviews

A competency-based interview is a specific type of job interview, often used by large companies and organisations. This style of interview is popular in public sector organisations like local authorities and the Civil Service. An employer will usually tell you in advance if they use competency-based interviews. The information in the application pack should also indicate the interview type.

However, you might be thinking 'What on earth does competency-based mean?'

So, here is our useful guide to answer, hopefully, all of your questions!

What is a competency?

A competency is the ability to use a skill or personal quality effectively. For example, this could be the ability to communicate with others, or having the willingness to learn. Basically, it's something you can do well.

Employers often have a list of key competencies that are required to enable a person to do the job well.

How will I know what competencies are required for the job?

Employers using competency-based interviews normally have a 'competency framework'. This is a guide for employees, setting out what they should be good at and how they should approach their work. Each different job or role has its own set of competencies.

The competencies you need for a particular job will often be set out in the job specification or job profile. This lists the tasks and responsibilities of the job. You can often download this from the organisation's website or request a job application pack.

What happens in a competency-based interview?

In a standard (strengths-based) interview the interviewer might ask you 'What skills can you bring to the job?' or 'What are your main strengths?'

In a competency-based interview the interviewer will ask you to describe situations that demonstrate the skills and qualities they are looking for, rather than just asking you what these are.

Examples of skills and attributes include:

- organising your own workload
- customer care
- planning ahead
- problem solving
- managing your time effectively
- taking responsibility for your work
- making decisions

- working as part of a team
- willingness to learn
- knowing when to ask for help.

Examples of how the questions may be phrased include:

- Tell me about a time when....
- Can you give me an example of how/when you....
- Describe a way in which you.....

So, for example, if they want to know about your time management skills they might say 'Tell us about a time when you've had to complete a project or task to a tight deadline.'

They expect you to:

- think of an example from your previous experience at work, in school or from life in general
- tell them what the situation was, what you had to do, how you did it and what happened as a result.

They are looking for evidence that you have been able to complete tasks on time in the past. This should give them some idea of how well you'll be able to manage your time in the future.

Depending on your answer the interviewer may then ask some more in depth questions.

You could also be asked about a hypothetical situation. For example, 'Imagine your alarm clock hasn't gone off and you're going to be late for work. How would you deal with this situation?' This allows the interviewer to see how you might handle a situation that you haven't dealt with before.

A few organisations may let you see the interview questions five minutes or so before the interview. This gives you some time to think of examples of how you've used your skills and qualities in the past.

In addition to the competency-based questions, you may also be asked one or two standard questions. For example, 'Tell us about yourself' or 'What do you know about our organisation?' These are most likely to be at the beginning of the interview, almost like an introductory exercise. See our article [Standard interview questions](#) for examples of how to answer these.

How can I best prepare?

Make sure you have information on the competencies well before your interview. One or preferably two weeks would be ideal.

You will need time to think about:

- questions they might ask
- times and situations where you have used the skills they want
- how to describe what you did in a way that will highlight your skills.

Our article [Preparing for competency-based interviews](#) gives some useful tips and also describes the STAR method

of preparing some answers.