

Competency Based Interviews – an overview

By Robina Clough

What is competency based interviewing?

Competency based interviews (also referred to as behavioural interviews) are simply interviews designed to test whether a candidate has the specific skills to perform the role. The theory is that a candidate's past performance is the best indicator of future performance and, by asking questions based on actual experiences in a current or recent position, an employer can assess whether that candidate really can demonstrate the characteristics and proficiencies required in the role. Whilst not a new phenomenon, the use of competency based interviewing is becoming more prevalent in UK law firms (as well as in-house legal departments), influenced by the common practice of such techniques in the US.

Why use competency based interviewing?

In a traditional, non-structured interview, the interviewing partners or HR manager can engage a candidate in conversation about their experience, their personality and most importantly the depth of their technical knowledge. With competency based interviewing, it is possible to take these same key skills and characteristics and determine whether a lawyer has any practical experience of applying their knowledge and experience to actual situations. By further probing these specific examples it is possible to make an objective decision as to the prospective candidate's suitability for the role as oppose to relying on more generic answers which ultimately leave you relying on a more subjective, overall impression of a candidate.

Core skills and competencies for assessment

- Adaptability
- Compliance
- Communication
- Conflict management
- Creativity and Innovation

- Decisiveness
- Delegation
- External awareness
- Flexibility
- Independence
- Influencing
- Integrity
- Leadership
- Leveraging diversity
- Organisational awareness
- Resilience and tenacity
- Risk taking
- Sensitivity to others
- Team work

Structure of Competency Based Interviews

Although the actual competencies to be assessed will vary depending on the type and level of role, the structure is generally always the same and aims to address 3 stages of a situation:

Context – sets the scene for the situation;

Action – describes what actions were taken; and

Result – summarises the outcome (good or bad!).

The interviewer will have a list of questions ready prior to the interview which he/she feels are most relevant to the job on offer. In a fully competency based interview, it is important to stick to this list as the format for the interview in order to ensure that the purpose of the interview is accomplished.

Examples of Competency Based Interview Questions

The scope for questions within competency based interviews is non-exhaustive; however, as a guide to the type of questions an interviewer may use, we have compiled a list below with examples for various competencies.

Competency – Communication

Q. Tell me about a situation where you used your communication skills to convey an innovative idea to an individual or group.

Competency – Delegation

Q. What experience have you had of delegating tasks to other team members/support staff?

Competency – Time management

Q. Tell me about a time when you failed to complete a task or project on time.

Competency – Pressure

Q. Can you give an example where you have been under particular pressure to meet a client's expectations? How did you deal with this?

Competency – Team Work

Q. Describe a situation where you have had to deal with an underperforming or difficult colleague.

Competency – Leadership

Q. Tell me about a situation where you have been responsible for implementing a new idea or procedure to a team.

Competency – Independence

Q. When have you been responsible for making a decision without supervision?

Competency – Decision Making

Q. Give an example of when you have had to make a decision without being in position of the full facts.

Competency – Motivation

Q. Describe a time when you have felt unmotivated by something you have worked on.

These initial “context” questions are then generally followed up with more probing questions which address “action” and “result” such as “How did you deal with the situation?” and “What was the

outcome?”. Of course the questioning does not need to be limited to these simple statements, but this is the general gist of what is trying to be achieved from this method of interviewing.

Inevitably there may be a lot of cross-over between the competencies address in each question, such as leadership and delegation, pressure and time management, and flexibility and organisation, but it is important to identify before the interview which specific competencies you are aiming to address.

Assessing Competencies

Despite its formal nature, the competency based interview does not necessarily have any right or wrong answers. The key is to evaluate the responses to recognise which competencies a candidate has already demonstrated and whether these are sufficient for the role. It can also be used to identify areas for future development.

To evaluate and score candidate responses, the interviewer needs to determine positive and negative indicators (ideally these should be considered before the interview).

Positive Indicators

- Demonstrates a positive approach towards the problem;
- Considers the wider need of the situation;
- Recognises own limitations;
- Ability to compromise;
- Is willing to seek help when necessary; and
- Uses effective strategies to deal with pressure/stress.

Negative Indicators

- Perceives challenges as problems;
- Attempts unsuccessfully to deal with the situation alone; and
- Used inappropriate strategies to deal with pressure/stress.

Skills required by interviewers for Competency Based Interviews

Whilst it is not essential for an interviewer using the competency method to have specific training, it is important to have a full understanding of the objectives of conducting such an interview and to undertake thorough preparation prior to the interview:

- Identify key competencies for the role;
- Compile a list of questions to draw out these competencies;
- Structure and prepare the interview to maintain relevance to the key competencies;
- Practice interviewing and being interviewed to understand the process for both perspectives;
- Be ready with appropriate follow-up questions to further probe answers;
- Be able to assess an individual's suitability for key competencies based on provided answers;
- Distinguish between lack of experience and negative behaviour;
- Be aware of "fake" or inconsistent answers from interviewees;
- Remain unbiased to a candidate's personality in such interviews;
- Be able to provide constructive post-interview feedback to both candidates and other hiring staff; and
- Identify areas for further clarification.

Pros

- A more subjective way of determining a candidate's actual relevance to a role;
- Potential employees gain a clear idea of what skills and characteristics are required in the role which can save time and prevent "made a mistake" syndrome; and
- Avoids closed end questions that can be answered with yes or no.

Cons

- Not totally free of subjectivity – if an employer is favourably predisposed to a candidate, they may be more generous in identifying positive traits rather than negative ones;

- Can be an impersonal style of interviewing as it is more difficult to engage in conversation, which can potentially leave a candidate with an unfavourable impression of the firm;
- Candidate may not necessarily have the seniority required for certain situations but is interviewing for an opportunity that is specifically allows for such development;
- Candidates can prep answers if they know they are going to be attending a competency based interview; and
- Time consuming – it is important to have a predetermined set of competencies and questions ready for the interview, which can vary significantly depending on the team, the discipline and the level of the role.

Although not yet widely used for solicitor position interviews, in some law firms it is not uncommon to use competency based interviews. Your recruitment consultant should be able to let you know in advance if you are likely to encounter this type of interview prior to the actual meeting taking place.

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