

## COMPETENCY-BASED INTERVIEWS

This procedure-driven approach to interviewing has become increasingly prevalent across the spectrum of organisation types for a number of reasons:

- By focusing on your approach and process, it allows the interviewer to determine if you really did achieve all the successes you claim on your CV and, more importantly, how. Competency-Based Interviewing (CBI) is all about identifying transferable skills and attitudes (more so than knowledge) and the processes / methods you apply in order to fulfil your job.
- Structured, competency-based selection techniques have a better track record of identifying the soundest candidate rather than the candidate who merely sounds best. A bad hiring decision nowadays can be immensely expensive for an organisation – cost of the hire, training costs, severance pay, loss of productivity, impact on morale, cost of re-hiring, etc.. (Plus, it is now very difficult and usually quite time-consuming to get rid of an underperforming employee).
- With an increasing level of litigation, organisations (particularly in the Public Service) now need to be able to concretely show why they selected one candidate ahead of another. This is a total nuisance for the organisation, but if a candidate decides to take an action over what they felt was a unjustified disqualification from the hiring process, the hiring organisation needs to have all their ducks in a row. Competency-based interviewing material allows for speedy, accurate note-taking and also includes scoring for each of the key areas examined.

**“If you think competence is expensive,  
try incompetence.”**

(FROM A TRAINING BROCHURE)

If you are genuinely good at what you do and comfortable talking about how you approach work-related situations and problems; competency-based interviews will present no difficulties for you. But very few people can do that off the cuff. Despite the fact that we talk about our working lives so much of the time, we very rarely have to elucidate our approach or justify the work that we do to knowledgeable outsiders. In preparing, you must focus in on the core skills required in your current position and for the new position. It’s not good enough to just be competent at something – you need to be ready to talk about what *makes* you competent.

Questioning will either be hypothetical (“*how would you deal with situation X?*”) or based on historical examples from your current or previous experience (“*when such-and-such a situation arose, how did you deal with it?*”). In either case, the interviewer is interested in (a) your process and (b) the values and mindset that you brought to the process. It goes without saying that they are also *very* interested in how it all worked out – you may have a really excellent, logical and inclusive approach to problem-solving and bring just *spiffy* values to the workplace, but if you can’t solve the problem, you are no good to anyone ...

## **BUILDING AN ANSWER – AN EXAMPLE**

An example, to illustrate: you are asked a competency question about your approach to resolving conflicts. No doubt you have had many conflictual situations in your working life, but which one is best to use in answering this question? If you were hit with this question on the fly in an interview, you *might* come up with an example that showed your skills off to best advantage, but you could just as easily blow it.

Far better to have done the work in advance. Sit and think it out. Unless you are the reincarnated spirit of Mahatma Gandhi, it is unlikely that your early efforts at conflict resolution were entirely successful; so pick recent and pertinent examples to consider – say six to eight situations. Rank order them in terms of the ones that you solved best. Then rank them on a separate piece of paper in terms of the ones that mattered most to your employer or the organisation as a whole. Hopefully, there is some correlation here and you can talk about a meaty conflict that impacted on a whole division, department or project and which you had a large part in bringing to resolution. Now think again about all of your examples – *how* did you go about bringing the parties (including yourself) together? Was your process consistent across all the examples or did it vary? Did you:

- Remain solution-focused throughout the process?
- Maintain emotional control, setting aside your personal feelings (no matter how strong) and get on with solving the problem?
- Look for points of agreement between the parties?
- Listen really carefully and closely monitor the non-verbal cues, checking to see reaction to moves on both sides?
- Suggest minor (or major) concessions from one or both parties?
- Seek reciprocity from the other party following a concession?
- Attempt to gain substantial satisfaction for all concerned?
- Enable comfortable working relationships to continue after the issue was resolved?

Once that work is done, you can look at how the conflicts arose in the first place – is there anything you can learn here or do better the next time? Now you are in a position to pick and hone your answer according to the SPOUT Model.

## **THE SPOUT MODEL**

A beginning/middle/end structure to your answers is essential – **Situation, Process, Outcome (SPOUT)** – and delivering these answers well requires a great deal of meticulous preparation. The best way to practice for this style of interview questions is to write your answers out for each area of competence you are going to be probed on, using the SPOUT matrix below and reverse engineer your approach – start from the most positive outcomes, pick your examples accordingly and use these as the basis for your answering. When you have each answer roughed out in long form, distil it down to a 3"x5" card. In gearing your practice towards the interview itself, spend 10-20% of your answer time on the Situation, 66-75% on the Process you used and the remainder on the Outcome.

Competence / Skill: \_\_\_\_\_

	<b>SITUATION</b>	<b>PROCESS</b>	<b>OUTCOME</b>
	How did the situation arise? Anything I can learn for the future to prevent this from happening again?	Best-practice or seat-of-the-pants? How / where did I learn to use this approach? Did it all work or are there elements that I can improve upon the next time?	Marks out of 10 for me. Marks out of 10 for the organisation. Medium-long term impact of this?
1.			
2.			
3.			
4.			
5.			
6.			
7.			

Below are some common behavioural or competency-based interview questions. The questions are divided by competency category. *Italics indicate the kind of behaviours which would provide evidence of the competency from the interviewer's perspective.*

**INNOVATION**

*Promotes creativity and informed risk taking; Strives for technical and market leadership; Establishes process for continuous improvement; Socially flexible; Compromises appropriately.*

- Think of a situation where the old solutions just didn't work. How did you deal with it?
- How have you developed imaginative solutions in the past? Describe a couple of examples.
- Give me a couple of examples of specific instances of how you have encouraged and supported new ways of doing things.
- Cite some situations in which you had to introduce change and how you did it. What was successful and what was unsuccessful?
- Using a specific example, explain the criteria which you have used in evaluating risk.
- Tell me about some significant risks you have had to take and how they worked out. Also give me an example where it did not work out.

**BUSINESS / ORGANISATION KNOWLEDGE**

*Knows the broad environment; Knows the competition; Is familiar with strategies and tactics; Manages by fact; Demonstrates knowledge, commitment to and aptitude for business.*

- What do you do to keep up with current and possible future trends and issues in this sector? Give me a couple of examples.
- Describe a situation where your strategy did not work well for you. Why? How did you handle it?
- What key business setbacks have you experienced in your career? What did you learn from them?
- Give me a couple of examples of some calculated risks you have assumed. What were the results?
- Tell me about the biggest mistake that a competitor of yours committed. How did you find out about it and how did you take advantage of the situation?
- How do you move from the theoretical to the practical (strategy to action) with your team?
- Describe a strategy you developed and your contingency plans.
- Tell me about your key strengths and how they are demonstrated in your track record.
- Give me a couple of examples of what you have done to prepare to deal with global business opportunities.

**INTEGRITY**

*Widely trusted – strong reputation; Takes ownership; Candid and forthcoming; Implements self-imposed standards; Delivers on or above commitments.*

- Give me a couple of examples of when you had to bend the rules to get the job done. Why was that?
- Describe a situation in which someone confided in you and you felt you had to break that confidence.
- Tell me about a situation in which you made a significant mistake and had to admit it to your boss or peers.
- We all have some areas we would like to improve upon. What are some of yours? What have you done to change?
- Describe a couple of examples in which you believe someone broke the unwritten rules of business. What was the impact? How did you deal with it?
- Tell me how you have attempted to build trust with your employees, peers and customers. How do people know that they can trust you?
- What has been the toughest conflict you have had to deal with at a personal level on the job? What made it so tough and how did you deal with it?
- Describe a situation in which you promised more than you could deliver. How did you handle it?
- How have you handled providing feedback to suppliers or subordinates? What mechanism did you use (face-to-face, letter, etc.)? How often?
- Explain when you have had to take a stance at variance to management's position. How did you handle it? What were the results?
- Tell me about a time when you had to deliver on a commitment and found it extremely difficult. What did you do?

**LEADERSHIP / INITIATIVE**

*Getting ideas accepted; Guides a group towards a task accomplishment; Uses participative / inclusive style; Tackles and seeks to overcome negativism / cynicism; Balances concern for task and outcome with concern for staff wellbeing.*

- How do you influence your boss? Give me an example.
- Tell me about some of the toughest groups you have had to get co-operation from. Did you have any formal authority? What did you do?
- How do you influence your peers? Provide me with some examples.
- Describe your leadership style. When does it work? When doesn't it work?
- What tends to be your approach in working with a group?
- What have you found to be the most significant obstacles to get people to take action? How have you handled these obstacles?
- Describe your effectiveness as a leader. What have you used as criteria?
- Describe one or two examples of ideas you were successful in getting accepted.

## **CUSTOMER FOCUS**

*Identifies customers and demonstrates that meeting their needs is first priority; Meets external and internal expectations; Promotes and maintains strong partnerships; Focuses work processes on customer satisfaction.*

- Describe and example in which you had to meet a difficult customer need.
- Tell me about a time when your relationship with a key customer was unsatisfactory and what you did about it.
- In your current or previous position, who have been your customers? How did you determine and to what extent did you satisfy their expectations?
- At times we've all been unable to meet our customer's expectations. Describe a situation in which you were unable to do so. What did you do?
- What have you done to keep informed of your customer's objectives and priorities?
- What processes and methods have you used to keep your customers informed? How have they worked? How have they changed?
- Based upon your experience, what actions have you found most effective in building customer relationships? What hasn't worked and why?
- Describe the process and procedures you have put into place to improve the quality and timeliness of customer service.
- Tell me about a situation in which you had to inform a key customer of a serious problem and how you handled it.
- Relate for me how you have leveraged a customer relationship successfully. (unsuccessfully)
- Give me an example of the toughest customer relationship you have had to work with. What did you do? What were the results?

## **INTERPERSONAL SKILLS**

*Communicates effectively using multiple methods; Able to interact with people at different organisational levels; Able to focus on mutual goals; Demonstrates the ability to understand multiple perspectives; Persuasive – influences others; Inspires confidence when speaking by conveying points concisely and clearly; Able to deal with conflict and disagreement constructively; Socially mature.*

- Give me an example in which you and a peer disagreed significantly. What caused it? What did you do?
- What are some ways you have used to put people at ease? When haven't they worked?
- Tell me about a major conflict you had with a peer or customer that you were unable to resolve successfully. Why were you unsuccessful? What did you learn?
- Tell me about an incident involving someone you had to deal with who was very difficult. How did it work out?
- Which bosses did you like and dislike working for? How did this impact your relationship?
- How would your peers and former co-workers describe their relationships with you? Why?
- Tell me about one or two actions you've taken to build working relationships on the job with someone you personally did not like.
- What do you see as your strength and areas for improvement in working with others?

## **TEAMWORK**

*Initiates and supports meaningful team projects; Sensitive to the needs of others; Demonstrates trust in team members; Serves willingly on teams; Builds relationships by sharing information and working to attain practical compromises; Celebrate successes and confronts negativity; Builds overlap of personal and team goals.*

- Tell me one of the most effective teams you worked on and what you contributed to its effectiveness.
- What techniques or approaches have you found helpful in dealing with turf issues on your team? Give me an example.
- Describe what actions you have taken to encourage teamwork and tell me about some key issues that you have found which need to be addressed in building a team.
- Explain what you have done to build trust among team members.
- Provide me with a couple of example of teams you have served on describing the kind, problems, challenges and results.
- When teams reporting to you have been successful, what actions have you taken? Describe how you have monitored the progress of team assignments.
- What have you found helpful in determining what is and is not suitable for a team project?
- What specific criteria have you applied in selecting members for a team project?
- Give me some examples of how you have supported teamwork.
- Tell me what you have found to be the major obstacles to effective teamwork.
- Describe your worst experience in working on a team. What did you take away from the experience?

## **COMMUNICATIONS**

*The skills necessary for effective expression in oral and written communications and observable in the interview; Influencing; Articulate; Active listening; Confident delivery.*

- Give me an example of a time when you asked someone to complete a task and they did it incorrectly. What did this experience teach you?
- What are some of the most complex processes or ideas or technical information you have had to explain to other people?
- What kinds of writing have you done? Describe some examples. How did you approach it? Tell me about its content and the reactions you received.
- What kinds of reports are you currently working on that are most challenging and why?
- Describe one of your most successful oral presentations and what made it successful.
- What have you done to increase your effectiveness in making presentations? To what extent have you been successful? Tell me about one of the most difficult presentations you have had to make. Why was it difficult? How did it turn out?
- Give me an example of the most serious communication problem you've had. What did you do about it? What methods do you use to communicate with the other people? How effective were they?
- Sometimes it's important to disagree with others to keep a mistake from being made. Tell me about a time when you were willing to disagree with another person in order to build a positive outcome.

**BIAS FOR ACTION**

*Reduces cycle time and bureaucracy; Demonstrates high energy and provides a positive example; Sets priorities and seizes opportunities; Focuses upon speed; Demonstrates a sense of urgency to achieve important goals; Eliminates waste and unnecessary work.*

- Describe your typical work day. What time does it start and end? What do you do to relax?
- Tell me about a situation in which you felt you acted too quickly and later regretted it. What caused it?
- Give me an example of when something needed to be done urgently and you postponed action on it. What were the results?
- How do you ensure that work you delegate gets done properly and on time?
- Give me a couple of examples of when you had to motivate your team to get a project or assignment completed. What did you do?
- Describe a couple of situations when you had to maintain a high level of enthusiasm when things were very difficult. How did you do it?
- Tell me about a situation in which you took action without anticipating the impact of that action upon other parts of the organisation.
- Describe a couple of examples which required quick action. What made them so? What criteria did you apply in making those decisions?
- Tell me about the major challenges you have faced in your job or at school over the last year. What made them so?
- What have you found to be the most significant obstacles to getting people to take action? How have you handled these obstacles?
- What have you done to eliminate unnecessary or redundant work in past positions you have held?
- Describe a couple of opportunities which you capitalised upon and a couple you did not. What were the results?

**PERFORMANCE**

*Sets and achieves ambitious goals; Measures the right things; Drives for continuous improvement; Listens and responds; Provides feedback and recognises achievement.*

- What has been the most significant goal you have achieved? How did you achieve it? Were there other key goals you were unable to achieve? Why?
- In your past jobs, how have you determined what needs improvement and how have you ensured it was addressed?
- Have you consistently delivered expected results? Please explain.
- Describe how your performance has been evaluated by your last two bosses.
- What did they identify as strengths and developmental opportunities?
- Tell me about some of the major challenges you have been confronted with in your job. Why were they challenges? What did you do about them?
- What have you done to recognise others' achievements?
- Tell me about a couple of the most difficult situations in which you had to give feedback.

**FUNCTIONAL / TECHNICAL COMPETENCY**

*Displays functional / technical competency in the core requirement of the job.*

- Describe a time when you were proud of your ability to use your skills in (HR, finance, marketing, selling, etc. – *insert appropriate ability*) to solve a particularly difficult or challenging problem in a work assignment. What principles did you use, and what did you learn from the experience?
- Provide me with one or two examples of some of the most complex assignments or projects you've had. What made them so challenging? What was your role? How did it turn out?
- Give me an example of a difficult problem you've had to deal with and how you gathered information and evaluated it. How did you identify the root cause of the problem?
- Explain how you solve problems in your area of responsibility. Give me a specific example.
- Tell me about one of the major plans you developed and had responsibility for accomplishing. Explain the scope, objectives, time frames, budget and end results.