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Competency based interviews

Competency based Interviewing works on the premise that past accomplishments are excellent indicators of future performance.

The interview is structured in such a way that you will be probed for information that demonstrates your ability to execute the key competencies of the position. As such the questions are often phrased in the following format:

“Can you give me an example of a time when”...

The areas that will be examined during an interview will be very specific to that vacancy. Therefore in preparation, it is essential that you go through each point detailed in the job specification and identify and rehearse examples of prior achievements that demonstrate your ability to carry out the role.

General tips

It is important not to give general examples. Try to be as detailed in your answers as possible outlining the scenario, your role in and the outcome of the task.

The interviewer will examine the examples you give in more detail, asking a series of probing questions. In view of this, it is important to use good, solid examples, within which you are able to recall as much detail as possible.

If you feel it is appropriate, it is sometimes acceptable to use examples from your personal life. However, it is advisable to only do this in the absence of a relevant work example.

It is vital that you are prepared and have considered the examples you will give prior to interview. You may benefit from rehearsing your answers, to ensure the quality of your response.

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The "STAR" approach

The STAR approach is a universally recognised communication 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.

The acronym **STAR** stands for:

- Situation
- Task
- Action
- Result

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.

Step 1 - Situation or Task

Describe the situation that you were in or the task that you needed to accomplish. You must describe a specific event or situation, not a generalised description of what you have done in the past. Be sure to give enough detail for the interviewer to understand.

Step 2 - Action

This is the most important section of the STAR approach as it is where you will need to demonstrate and highlight the skills and personal attributes that the question is testing. Now that you have set the context of your story, you need to explain what you did. In doing so, you will need to remember the following:

- Be personal, i.e. talk about **YOU**, not the rest of the team
- Go into some detail. Do not assume that they can fill in any blanks
- Steer clear of technical information unless it is crucial to your answer
- Explain what you did, how you did it, and why you did it

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What you did and how you did it

The interviewers will want to know how you reacted to the situation. This is where you can start selling some important skills. For example, you may want to describe how you used the team to achieve a particular objective and how you used your communication skills to keep everyone updated on progress.

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, it 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 this provides another reason why the STAR approach is so useful.

Step 3 - Result

Explain what happened eventually - how it all ended. Use the opportunity to describe what you accomplished and what you learnt in that situation. This helps you make the answer personal and enables you to highlight further skills.

This is a crucial part of your answer. Interviewers want to know that you are using a variety of generic skills in order to achieve your objectives. Therefore you must be able to demonstrate in your answer that you are taking specific actions because you are trying to achieve a specific objective and not simply by chance. What was the specific, measurable result?