How to Answer Competency Based Interview Questions

This article clearly describes how to succeed at competency based interviews, and gives full advice on how to use the STAR technique in order to structure your answers to demonstrate effectively your ability to do the job.

In an interview situation you may be faced with competency based questions, which at first may seem a little daunting, and can potentially be fairly disastrous in you don’t know how to make the most of your answer. However, using the right technique this type of questioning at interview actually gives you an excellent opportunity to provide evidence of your suitability to the job. In this article I will explain what a competency based question is, why interviewers use this technique and how these questions can be easily and effectively answered. The aim of this article is to help you prepare and structure your responses, make the best use of the opportunity you have to demonstrate your suitability and very importantly to avoid the dreaded nervous rambling response!

**What is a Competency Based Question?**

Competency based questioning is a technique used by interviewers to assess your suitability to the job you have applied for, by using questions based on the competencies required to perform the job. These competencies will relate to the job role and the values of the company. Key competencies are specific skills you need for the job, i.e. decision making, leadership, problem solving, conflict resolution, customer service skills, management, project management, budgetary control or team working.

**Why do Interviewers use Competency Based Interview Questions?**

Faced with perhaps 6 good candidates who on paper may all have similar or equal attributes for the job, the hiring manager will have to make a decision based on a meeting with the candidates often lasting no more than an hour. The outcome of this meeting will be the appointment of one of the candidates. The hope is that the successful candidate will become a valuable and long lasting member of their staff. This person will be able to fulfil the role, fit in with the company ethos, prove profitable, be happy in the role, and not present unexpected problems or require training and development above and beyond what the hiring manager had initially envisaged for the role.

Competency based questioning is an effective way to assess the suitability of candidates in a short time, and is an unbiased method of comparing one applicant against another. The interviewer will ask a series of questions relating to the key competencies for the job. The best indicator for the future performance of an applicant is to look at their
previous performance in these key areas, this will demonstrate clearly if they have the required experience, behaviours and potential to fulfil the new role.

**How to Answer Competency Based Interview Questions**

You will be able to easily rehearse for this type of interview, and some good preparation at this stage will help you answer your interview questions fully and also reduce your interview nerves. The first task is to identify the competencies for the job. Look for the competencies for the particular job you are applying for, you should be able to spot these in the job description. You may come up with a list something like this: team working, project management, quality service, liaising with clients, working to deadlines, commercial awareness. You should also identify the mission statement and values of the company as you will probably be questioned on these too, remember they are looking for a fit for the company as well as the role. The type of areas company values and mission statements often cover are quality, team working and budgetary considerations, so be sure to revise these too.

The key to answering this type of question is to be specific in your response. You should avoid generalisations, it is important to remember why they are using this technique and what they are looking for. So do not generalise, use actual specific instances when you have demonstrated the competency they are questioning you on.

**The STAR Technique**

I would strongly advise you to use the STAR technique. By sticking to this method of answer you will be able to keep your response to the point and structure your answer effectively.

To explain, your answer should incorporate the following elements:
S – Situation

For the particular competency describe the background of a particular situation when you used the key competency in question. For example if the competency is budgetary control, you may answer "In my last job I was appointed to lead a project involving a £600,000k engineering factory shutdown lasting 2 weeks, and I had overall responsibility for the budget for this project. I did face some challenges on this project which required careful management to keep to budget."

T – Task

Describe what you particular task was in relation to this, i.e. "My responsibility was to ensure that the project came in on time and to budget, which required very close liaison with the discipline heads, maintenance managers and cost and planning team. As it was very important the project ran to timescale and costs were maintained as per estimates. This was my ultimate responsibility. Any overspend, delay or conflict had to be resolved immediately to keep the project to budget. 1 week into the project we were faced with unexpected delays due to unavailability of essential maintenance equipment which threatened the completion of the project on time and would ultimately have prevented the plant from becoming operational again on time. This would have obviously created a loss in production and so revenue."

A – Action

“I worked long hours with the buying and contracts manager, sourcing alternative suppliers and negotiating price, to keep to the original estimates. I worked closely with the planning team to reschedule some of the other work to ensure no time was lost. It was key that I kept in very close contact with the whole team throughout, as any delay would affect the budget. I examined all aspects of the project to ensure that there were no wasted costs and that despite the tight budget safety standards were never compromised.”

R – Result

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"I am pleased to say that through perseverance and my determination to deliver on time and to budget, the long hours paid off and a new supplier was found who have since proved to be a new and more effective supplier for us. The project was completed to time and came in a little under budget, and the whole project was carried out without accident or injury."

Remember the interviewer will probably score your response, and you will gain marks by giving a specific instance, quoting what the situation was, what you did and what your motivation was to do this. Think about what you said and what was the outcome? You might also add your observations about what you learnt from the experience. If you give a generalised answer it will be very difficult for the interviewers to award you any points on this part of the interview. Try not to use any scenarios which are too personal and which will cause any awkward moments in the interview. Try to think of a situation that you are quite familiar with, and one which involved interacting with other people, you may also be asked about your personal feelings in this situation, i.e. how did you feel about that? be prepared for this.

Finally, the interview may not be overtly competency based and if your interviewer is not very experienced may include questions such as: This job deals with a lot of confidential information, have you done this before? This question is in fact a closed question which could be answered with a yes or no. However, in order to make the best of this opportunity to demonstrate your suitability, think of it as a competency based question and answer with a specific example of when you have dealt with confidential information. Use the STAR technique and you will find that you will be able to stick to the question, demonstrate your suitability and present clear evidence to show you are capable of fulfilling the role.

Good Luck, although I’m sure using the STAR technique and with some good preparation into the key competencies and the mission statement of the company you will succeed.