

Competency Based Interviews

Increasingly, employers are using 'competency-based' (also sometimes called 'behavioural' or 'situational') interviewing techniques to separate out the good candidates from those who are simply trying to bluff their way into the job without the right skills or experience.

The theory behind competency-based interviewing is that past work behaviour is a good predictor of future job performance. When interviewers ask you competency-based questions, they want you to talk about how you have actually tackled real problems in the past. From this, they are trying to infer how effectively you would tackle future problems if they were to offer you a job.

In responding to a competency-based question, the most important principle is to: Give a real example that actually happened to you. Don't talk in broad terms about how you generally tackle those sorts of situations. Talk about a specific example.

Once you have talked about your example, the interviewer will probably ask you further questions to get a deeper understanding of what you did. So, the second key principle is: Be ready to talk about your example in a lot of detail.

An Example Question and Detailed Response

Imagine that an interviewer has asked a candidate the following question: "Please describe to me a situation when you have helped a colleague who was in trouble. What was the situation and how did you try to tackle it?"

On the face of it, it seems a fairly straightforward question to answer. However, a crafty interviewer could interrupt you at any point and follow up with all sorts of supplementary questions. Look at the following sample candidate's response. You will see certain underlined words and phrases, which indicate points at which the interviewer might want to interrupt to ask for further information.

The candidate's response might go along the lines of the following: "There was a time when John, the sales manager, came to me with a problem about his sales performance. He asked for some advice, so I tried to be supportive and make some suggestions. I also helped him on some site visits to customers. And, over the course of the next few months, he listened to my advice and managed to bring his performance up to satisfactory levels again."

So, supplementary questions (along with the candidate's responses) could include:

- Time - "How recently did this happen?" The candidate responds: "This was three years ago, when I'd just moved from the sales department to being the marketing manager. When I left the sales department, they recruited a young sales manager to take over my old role."
- Came to me - "Why did he come to you?" The candidate responds: "He came to me because we'd already struck up a good working relationship by that point. It was a small company, so I always tried to meet with new colleagues and take them out for a drink and explain to them that I was there if they ever needed any help."
- Problem - "And what was the sales manager's problem?" The candidate explains: "John wasn't hitting his sales targets. John was a really bright person - but didn't have that much sales experience."

- Sales performance - "What exactly was wrong with his performance?" The candidate replies: "John had two major targets. His first target was that he had to cold call enough companies every month to set up five meetings with prospective clients. His other target was to convert 50% of prospective clients into real customers. He was failing on both of them."
- Supportive - "How were you supportive?" The candidate explains: "John was on the verge of tears and really agitated about his poor performance because he was worried he was going to get fired. The first thing I did was to get him to calm down. I took him out of the office and bought him a coffee and tried to listen to him without judging him."
- Suggestions - "So what were your suggestions?" The candidate responds: "After talking to him and understanding that he was failing to meet both of his targets, my first suggestion was that I might listen in on some of his cold calls. So I spent a few hours one morning listening in on his cold calls. I discovered that he was telephoning customers without first doing enough research on them. He called them up without knowing anything about their business needs. So I worked with John to think about the sorts of facts that he would need to collect before making a call.'
- Site visits - "Tell me a bit more about what you did on these site visits." The candidate responds: "I also talked John round to letting me attend a couple of sales meetings with him. I went along, observed him and gave him some constructive comments about what he was doing wrong. In particular, he was being a bit too aggressive in trying to get the customer to sign on the dotted line there and then. So I persuaded him to give customers more thinking time - which resulted in more of them signing up in the end."

As you can see, a candidate who did not actually experience that situation would have found it difficult to provide so much detail. From the initial question then, the interviewer could have asked any number of supplementary questions - all of which you would need to have good answers to.