



ANDERIDA COACHING PRESENTS

# COMPETENCY-BASED QUESTIONS FOR INTERVIEWS

**Background to competency-based questions and example questions for interview practice.**

**ANDERIDA COACHING**  
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# WHAT THEY ARE & WHY RECRUITERS USE THEM

**Competency based interviews are now a popular way interview candidates to attempt to assess and predict a candidate's future performance by giving real-life scenarios, to which they have to respond how they would deal with the situation. In these behavioural questions, the interviewer will ask you to describe your response to a situation in an effort to ascertain the level of your abilities in skills that will be integral to the role you're interviewing for, e.g. team management in difficult situations. In this document you will get a better understanding of competency-based interviews and what is required from you.**

So, what's the difference to normal interview questions? Straight-forward interviews are also called by some, 'unstructured interviews'. These follow the traditional conversation pattern where the interviewer asks a series of questions about your background, experience and seeks to get a better idea of you as an individual. The questions tend to be quite open and don't test individual competencies for given scenarios, e.g. 'What can you offer our company?.'

Competency-based interviews (or structured or behavioural interviews) are more methodical and are designed to challenge your level of ability for a specific skill or competency. Questions are scenario-based and candidates are asked to describe their response if that situation was to happen to them and to back them up with concrete examples. Some more structured interviews might expect you to respond with more than 3 examples (although I have rarely come across that myself, or pushed candidates to give 3 examples). The interview might then dig deeper into the examples given to find more detail. Of course, some interviews are a mixture of the two, so it is worth your while to learn how to respond to them in case you find yourself in a situation where competency-based questions are slipped in!

## **What are they looking for in your answers?**

Businesses conducting competency-based interviews are looking to score the candidate in three areas: knowledge, skills and attitude. You might have excellent interpersonal skills (skills) but will not be considered unless you demonstrate a particular level of competency in 'knowledge', which might be your education and experience, as well as attitude, the right temperament or behaviour – and depending on the culture and expectations of the company, 'attitude' might be the most difficult score.

Your answers are matched against pre-set criteria which is designed to help recruiters be more 'objective' about their recruitment choice. It can be very easy for interviewers to 'get on well' with a candidate with that rapport overriding their 'knowledge' and 'attitude' criteria because they have either forgotten to interrogate it (as the rapport was so strong) or haven't noticed that the candidate scored measurably lower than others. At the end of the interview process, the employer then has a matrix of scores, as well as their own notes with which they can make a more objective choice in line with the objectives of the business. The number of competencies tested may differ depending on the job role, for example, this might be different from a front-of-house sales person to a senior manager.

## **What kind of questions are they?**

### **Individual competencies**

These refer to your personal attributes; your decisiveness, tenacity, knowledge, independence, risk taking and personal integrity.

A typical question: Tell me about a time when your work or an idea was challenged.

### **Managerial competencies**

Your ability to take charge of other people; leadership, empowerment, strategic thinking, corporate sensitivity, project management and managerial control.

A typical question: Tell me about a time you led a group to achieve an objective.

### **Analytical competencies**

Your decision-making abilities; innovation, analytical skills, problem solving, practical learning and attention to detail

A typical question: Tell me about a time when you identified a new approach to a problem.

### **Interpersonal competencies**

Social competence. Many workplaces function on the basis of project teams and the more collaborative they are, the more likely they are to thrive.

A typical question: Describe a situation where you got people to work together.

### **Motivational competencies**

The things that drive you; resilience, motivation, result orientation, initiative and quality focus.

A typical question: When did you work the hardest and feel the greatest sense of achievement?

# HOW TO ANSWER COMPETENCY-BASED QUESTIONS

There are various ways you can answer competency-based questions. One way of making sure that you cover all the bases is to use the **STAR Technique** to structure your responses, as follows:

- the **S**ituation,
- the **T**ask required as a result,
- the **A**ction you took and
- the **R**esult of that action.

Remember, use real-life examples and relate them to your experience, how you reacted or how it made you feel. These are not trick questions, they're designed to create the best match between an individual and an organisation. The reality is, competency-based questions actually enable you to really illustrate much deeper experience that relates to the role and show you off far more. Some examples of the skills and competencies they might be interested to explore:

## Skills and competencies for competency-based interviews

- 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





# HOW YOU ARE SCORED

Before the interview, the interviewers will have determined which type of answers would score positive points and which types of answers would count against the candidates. For example, for questions such as "Describe a time when you had to deal with pressure", the positive and negative indicators may be as follows:

## Positive Indicators

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

## Negative Indicators

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

In some cases, negative indicators are divided into two further sections: minor negative indicators, i.e. those which are negative but which don't matter so much; and decisive negative indicators i.e. those for which they won't forgive you e.g. not asking for help when needed.

Marks are then allocated depending on the extent to which the candidate's answer matches those negative and positive indicators. Here is an example of a marking schedule for the table above:

:





- |                     |   |
|---------------------|---|
| • No evidence       | No evidence reported<br>Little evidence of positive indicators                            |
| • Poor              | Mostly negative indicators, many decisive<br>Limited number of positive indicators        |
| • Areas for concern | Many negative indicators, one or more decisive  |
| • Satisfactory      | Satisfactory display of positive indicators<br>Some negative indicators but none decisive |
| • Good to excellent | Strong display of positive indicators   |

In some cases, negative indicators are divided into two further sections: minor negative indicators, i.e. those which are negative but which don't matter so much; and decisive negative indicators i.e. those for which they won't forgive you e.g. not asking for help when needed.





Marks are then allocated depending on the extent to which the candidate's answer matches those negative and positive indicators. Here is an example of a marking schedule for the table above:

If the interviewers feel that there are areas that you have failed to address, they may help you along by asking further questions. For example, in answering the question above "Describe an example of a time when you had to deal with pressure", if you focused on how you dealt with the practical angle of the problem but you forgot to discuss how you managed your stress during and after the event, the interviewers may prompt you with a further question such as "How did you handle the pressure at the time?" This would give you an opportunity to present a full picture of your behaviour. This is where the marking can become subjective. Indeed, if an interviewer likes you, he may be more tempted to prompt you and push you along than if he is not convinced about your responses.



# HOW TO PREPARE



Preparation is important. You cannot plan for every question because you won't know what they have prepared. However, if you prepare by considering the questions you think could be asked for the type of job role, it is unlikely you will be taken by surprise and you will have developed a thought-process and style to respond to the questions at hand.

**1. Look at the person specification for the job role.** Make sure that you understand which skills and competencies will be tested. Try and think more broadly than what they have put on paper because not all person specifications are comprehensive. What skills do you think this person would need for this job? For example, your person specification may say that you need to have "good communication skills in dealing with third parties". For someone who works in customer service and is expected to handle complaints all day long, this will most likely involve a mix of empathy/understanding as well as an ability to be assertive in a nice way whenever required. On the other hand, someone applying for a commercial law post, this will most likely involve an ability to explain complex matters in a simple way, and not needing as much empathy.

**2. Identify examples from your past experience** which you can use to demonstrate that you possess the skills and competencies that you are being asked to demonstrate. You do not have to find hyper-complicated examples; in particular the outcome of the story does not have to be extraordinary; what matters most is that the role you played in reaching the outcome was substantial.

**3. Learn to narrate the story using the STAR method.** This means setting the scene, explaining how you handled the situation by placing the emphasis on your role, and detailing the outcome/result.



# ANSWERING QUESTIONS IN A STAR FORMAT



## Step 1 – Situation or Task

Describe the situation that you were confronted with or the task that needed to be accomplished. With the STAR approach you need to set the context. Make it concise and informative, concentrating solely on what is useful to the story. For example, if the question is asking you to describe a situation where you had to deal with a difficult person, explain how you came to meet that person and why they were being difficult. If the question is asking for an example of teamwork, explain the task that you had to undertake as a team.

## 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 will guess what you mean
- Steer clear of technical information, unless it is crucial to your story
- Explain what you did, how you did it, and why you did it

## 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 etc.

## 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?



# ANSWERING QUESTIONS IN A STAR FORMAT



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 is another reason why the STAR approach is so useful.

## **Step 3 – Result/Reflection**

Explain what happened eventually – how it all ended. Also, 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 probably the most 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.





# EXAMPLE QUESTIONS

## General Questions

- Tell us about a time when you...
- Give an example of...
- Describe how you...
- How do you manage upwards?
- Give us an example of a situation where you had a fundamental disagreement with one of your superiors.

## Individual Competencies

These refer to your personal attributes; your decisiveness, tenacity, knowledge, independence, risk taking, decisiveness, makes well-informed, effective, and timely decisions, even when data is limited or solutions produce unpleasant consequences; perceives the impact and implications of decisions, personal integrity.

- Tell me about a time when your work or an idea was challenged.
- Tell me about a time when you achieved success even when the odds were stacked against you.
- Tell me about a big decision you've made recently. How did you go about it?
- What has been your biggest achievement to date?
- Describe a situation where you were asked to do something that you'd never attempted previously
- Give me an example of a challenge you faced in the workplace and tell me how you overcame it.
- How do you cope in adversity?





# EXAMPLE QUESTIONS

- Tell me about a time when you showed integrity and professionalism.
- Tell us about a situation where you made a decision and then changed your mind.
- What big decision did you make recently. How did you go about it?
- How did you reach the decision that you wanted to change your job?
- Give an example of a time when you had to delay a decision to reflect on the situation.
- What is the decision that you have put off the longest? Why?
- When is the last time that you have refused to make a decision?
- Give us an example of a situation where you had to make a decision without the input of key players, but knowing that these key players would judge you on that decision (i.e. superior unavailable at the time).
- Tell us about a time when you had to make a decision without knowledge of the full facts.
- Tell us about a situation where you made a decision that involuntarily impacted negatively on others. How did you make that decision and how did you handle its consequences?
- Tell us about a decision that you made, which you knew would be unpopular with a group of people. How did you handle the decision-making process and how did you manage expectations?





# EXAMPLE QUESTIONS

- Tell us about a situation where you made a decision too quickly and got it wrong. Why did you make that decision?

*Give an example of when you've overcome a problem at work.*

*Answer:*

*I have not really encountered many problems with work as this will be my first time in full-time work, though I do have deadlines to meet both at work in my part-time job and also in college. At college I have deadlines to meet and have tasks that need to be completed; these are often challenging, so I plan my time around them and also do what I can to deliver the best and highest quality work.*

## **Independence**

Acts based on his/her convictions and not systematically the accepted wisdom

- When did you depart from the "party line" to accomplish your goal?
- Which decisions do you feel able to make on your own and which do you require senior support to make?
- Describe a situation where you had a disagreement or an argument with a superior. How did you handle it?
- When do you feel that it is justified for you to go against accepted principles or policy?
- Which constraints are imposed on you in your current job and how do you deal with these?





# EXAMPLE QUESTIONS

- When did you make a decision that wasn't yours to make?
- Describe a project or situation where you took a project to completion despite important opposition.
- When have you gone beyond the limits of your authority in making a decision?

## **Analytical competencies**

Your decision making abilities; innovation, analytical skills, problem solving, practical learning and attention to detail.

- Give an example of a situation where you solved a problem in a creative way
- Tell me about a time that you made a decision and then changed your mind
- Tell me about a time when you identified a new approach to a problem.

## **Creativity**

Develops new insights into situations; questions conventional approaches; encourages new ideas and innovations; designs and implements new or cutting edge programs/processes.

- Tell us about a project or situation where you felt that the conventional approach would not be suitable. How did you derive and manage a new approach?
- Which challenges did you face and how did you address them?
- Tell us about a situation where you trusted your team to derive a new approach to an old problem. How did you manage the process?



- Tell us about a time when you had to convince a senior colleague that change was necessary. What made you think that your new approach would be better suited?
- Tell me about a time when you identified a new approach to a problem.

### **Motivational competencies**

The things that drive you; resilience, motivation, result orientation, initiative and quality focus.

- When did you work the hardest and feel the greatest sense of achievement?

### **Interpersonal competencies**

Social competence. Many workplaces function on the basis of project teams and the more collaborative they are, the more likely they are to thrive.

- Describe a situation where you got people to work together
- How do you maintain good working relationships with your colleagues?
- Tell me about a time when your communication skills improved a situation.
- How do you influence people in a situation with conflicting agendas?
- How do you ensure that you maintain good working relationships with your senior colleagues?
- Give us an example of a situation where you had to deal with a conflict with an internal or external client.
- How do you influence people in situations where there are conflicting agendas?

### **Influencing**

Ability to convince others to own expressed point of view, gain agreement and acceptance of plans, activities or products.

- Describe a situation where you were able to influence others on an important issue. What approaches or strategies did you use?
- Describe a situation where you needed to influence different stakeholders who had different agendas. What approaches or strategies did you use?
- Tell us about an idea that you manage to sell to your superior, which represented a challenge.
- What is your worst selling experience?
- Describe the project or idea that you were most satisfied to sell to your management.
- Describe a time where you failed to sell an idea that you knew was the right one.

## **Managerial competencies**

Your ability to take charge of other people; leadership, empowerment, strategic thinking, corporate sensitivity, project management and managerial control.

- Tell me about a time you led a group to achieve an objective.
- Describe a situation in which you led a team.
- Give an example of a time you handled conflict in the workplace.
- Describe a project where you had to use different leadership styles to reach your goal.

## **Delegation**

Able to make full and best use of subordinate, providing appropriate support.

- What type of responsibilities do you delegate? Give examples of projects where you made best use of delegation.
- Give an example of a project or task that you felt compelled to complete on your own. What stopped you from delegating?
- Give an example of a situation where you reluctantly delegated to a colleague. How did you feel about it?
- Give an example where you delegated a task to the wrong person? How did you make that decision at the time, what happened and what did you learn from it?
- How do you cope with having to go away from the office for long periods of time (i.e. holidays). Explain how you would delegate responsibilities based on your current situation.

## **Adaptability**

Adjusts to changing environments whilst maintaining effectiveness.

- Which change of job did you find the most difficult to make?
- Tell us about the biggest change that you have had to deal with. How did you cope with it?
- How do you influence people in situations where there are conflicting agendas?

## **Compliance**

Conforms to company policies and procedures.

- How do you ensure compliance with policies in your area of responsibility?
- Tell us about a time when you went against company policy. Why did you do it and how did you handle it?



## **Communication**

Communicates effectively, listens sensitively, adapts communication to audience and fosters effective communication with others.

### **Verbal**

- Tell us about a situation where your communication skills made a difference to a situation.
- Describe a time when you had to win someone over, who was reluctant or unresponsive.
- Describe a situation where you had to explain something complex to a colleague or a client. Which problems did you encounter and how did you deal with them?
- What is the worst communication situation that you have experienced?
- How do you prepare for an important meeting?
- Tell us about a situation when you failed to communicate appropriately.
- Demonstrate how you vary your communication approach according to the audience that you are addressing.
- Describe a situation when you had to communicate a message to someone, knowing that you were right and that they were wrong and reluctant to accept your point of view.

### **Listening**

- Give us an example where your listening skills proved crucial to an outcome.
- Tell us about a time when you were asked to summarise complex points.
- Tell us about a time when you had trouble remaining focused on your audience. How did you handle this?
- What place does empathy play in your work? Give an example where you needed to show empathy.
- Describe a situation where you had to deal with an angry customer.

### **Written**

- What type of writing have you done? Give examples. What makes you think that you are good at it?
- How do you feel writing a report differs from preparing an oral presentation?
- What positive and negative feedback have you received about your writing skills? Give an example where one of your reports was criticised.
- How do you plan the writing of a report?

## **Conflict Management**

Encourages creative tension and differences of opinions. Anticipates and takes steps to prevent counter-productive confrontations. Manages and resolves conflicts and disagreements in a constructive manner.

- Tell us about a time when you felt that conflict or differences were a positive driving force in your organisation. How did you handle the conflict to optimise its benefit?
- Tell us about a time when you had to deal with a conflict within your team.
- Tell us about a situation where conflict led to a negative outcome. How did you handle the situation and what did you learn from it?
- Give us an example where you were unable to deal with a difficult member of your team.

## **External Awareness**

Understands and keeps up-to-date on local, national, and international policies and trends that affect the organisation and shape stakeholders' views; is aware of the organisation's impact on the external environment.

- Describe through examples drawn from your experience how you measure and take account of the impact of your decisions on external parties.
- Give an example where you underestimated the impact of your decisions on stakeholders external to your organisation.

## **Flexibility**

Modifies his or her approach to achieve a goal. Is open to change and new information; rapidly adapts to new information, changing conditions, or unexpected obstacles.

- Describe a situation where you had to change your approach half-way through a project or task following new input into the project.
- Describe a situation where you started off thinking that your approach was the best, but needed to alter your course during the implementation.
- Describe a situation where one of your projects suffered a setback due to an unexpected change in circumstances.
- Describe a situation where you were asked to do something that you had never attempted previously.
- Give us an example of a situation where your initial approach failed and you had to change tack.
- Describe your strongest and your weakest colleagues. How do you cope with such diversity of personalities?
- If we gave you a new project to manage, how would you decide how to approach it?



## **Integrity**

Ability to maintain job related, social, organisational and ethical norms.

- When have you had to lie to achieve your aims? Why did you do so?  
How do you feel you could have achieved the same aim in a different way?
- Tell me about a time when you showed integrity and professionalism.
- Tell us about a time when someone asked you something that you objected to.  
How did you handle the situation?
- Have you ever been asked to do something illegal, immoral or against your principles? What did you do?
- What would you do if your boss asked you to do something illegal?
- Tell us about a situation where you had to remind a colleague of the meaning of "integrity".

## **Leadership**

Acts as a role model. Anticipates and plans for change. Communicates a vision to a team.

- Tell us about a situation where you had to get a team to improve its performance. What were the problems and how did you address them?
- Describe a situation where you had to drive a team through change.  
How did you achieve this?
- Describe a situation where you needed to inspire a team. What challenges did you meet and how did you achieve your objectives?
- Tell us about a situation where you faced reluctance from your team to accept the direction that you were setting.
- Describe a project or situation where you had to use different leadership styles to reach your goal.
- Tell me about a time when you were less successful as a leader than you would have wanted to be.

## **Leveraging diversity**

Fosters an inclusive workplace where diversity and individual differences are valued and leveraged to achieve the vision and mission of the organisation.

- Give an example of a situation or project where a positive outcome depended on the work of people from a wide range of backgrounds and ideas.
- Tell us about a time when you included someone in your team or a project because you felt they would bring something different to the team.

## **Organisational Awareness**

Demonstrates an understanding of underlying organisational issues.

- Describe a project where you needed to involve input from other departments. How did you identify that need and how did you ensure buy-in from the appropriate leaders and managers?
- Describe a time when you failed to engage at the right level in your organisation. Why did you do that and how did you handle the situation?

## **Resilience and Tenacity**

Deals effectively with pressure; remains optimistic and persistent, even under adversity. Recovers quickly from setbacks. Stays with a problem/line of thinking until a solution is reached or no longer reasonably attainable.

- Tell us about a situation where things deteriorated quickly. How did you react to recover from that situation?
- Tell us about a project where you achieved success despite the odds being stacked against you. How did you ensure that you pulled through?
- Give us an example of a situation where you knew that a project or task would place you under great pressure. How did you plan your approach and remain motivated?
- Give us an example of a situation where you worked under pressure.
- Under what conditions do you work best and worst?
- Which recent project or situation has caused you the most stress? How did you deal with it?
- When is the last time that you were upset with yourself?
- What makes you frustrated or impatient at work?
- What is the biggest challenge that you have faced in your career. How did you overcome it?
- Tell us about a time when you successfully pushed one of your ideas despite strong opposition.
- Which course or topics have you found most difficult? How did you address the challenge?



## **Risk-taking**

Takes calculated risks, weighing up pros and cons appropriately.

- Tell us about risks that you have taken in your professional or personal life. How did you go about making your decision?
- What is the biggest risk that you have taken? How did you handle the process?
- Describe one of your current or recently completed projects, setting out the risks involved. How did you make decisions? How do you know that you made the correct decisions?
- What risks do you see in moving to this new post?

## **Sensitivity to others/empathy**

Aware of other people and environment and own impact on these. Takes into account other peoples' feelings and needs.

- What problems has one of your staff or colleagues brought to you recently? How did you assist them?
- Tell us about an unpopular decision that you made recently? What thought-process did you follow before making it? How did your colleagues/clients react and how did you deal with their reaction?
- When is that last time that you had an argument with a colleague?
- When did you last upset someone?
- What steps do you take to understand your colleagues' personalities? Give an example where you found it hard to adjust to one particular colleague.

## **Teamwork**

Contributes fully to the team effort and plays an integral part in the smooth running of teams without necessarily taking the lead

- Describe a situation in which you were a member of team. What did you do to positively contribute to it?
- Tell us about a situation where you played an important role in a project as a member of the team (not as a leader).
- How do you ensure that every member of the team is allowed to participate?
- Give us an example where you worked in a dysfunctional team. Why was it dysfunctional and how did you attempt to change things?
- Give an example of a time when you had to deal with a conflict within your team. What did you do to help resolve the situation?
- How do you bring difficult colleagues on board? Give us an example where you had to do this.



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