

ADVICE FOR CANDIDATES

COMPETENCY BASED INTERVIEWS

Competency-based interviews (also called structured interviews) are interviews in which each question is designed to test one or more specific skills. The interviewer will then match your answer against pre-decided criteria and mark it accordingly.

For example, interviewers may want to test your ability to deal with stress by asking first how you handle stress and then by asking you to give an example of a situation where you worked under pressure.

Answers to competency based interview questions should include four key elements: Situation, Task, Action, Result (STAR).

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.

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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 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? 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

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.

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