

COMPETENCY BASED QUESTIONS AND SAMPLE ANSWERS USING SITUATION, TASK, ACTION, RESULT (STAR)

Competency Based Interview Questions

Competency based interviewing (also known as Structural, Behavioural or Evidence Based Interviews) is now the most popular technique for most employers to use. The aim is to use specific questions to discover whether you match the requirements of the role, and identify how you will behave based on how you responded to previous situations.

A lot of people struggle with this type of interview because despite feeling like a conversation, they are very structured. Every interviewee is asked the same questions, with the answers being scored. This makes competency based interviews very fair.

The exact questions you will be asked will vary, but will match the competencies for the role you applied for. This means that you can do some preparation using the person specification.

Competency questions will ask you to provide **specific** examples of how you dealt with particular situations, and will usually start with:

- Tell me about a time when...
- Give me an example of a situation when...
- Describe a scenario when...

A note of caution: Be prepared for probing questions, or follow on questions that explore your answers in more detail. These are designed to find out what you were thinking, and what your motivations were. Due to these additional questions, we advise **not** to use example answers as you will find it hard to explain yourself.

Using the STAR technique

These examples are designed to indicate some of the typical styles of questions that might be asked in a competency based interview, and highlight the structure, format and content of competency based responses. This should give you an idea of how to answer similar questions using your own experiences. These responses follow the STAR method

Situation – describe the situation that you were in at the time

Task – explain what you had to achieve/or the problem you were solving

Action – tell them what you did to overcome the problem or achieve the objective

Result – tell them what the outcome was, and what your evaluation of this is

Questions and Sample Answers

Key Competency: Accountability and Managing Priorities

Question: Tell me about a time when you were required to produce something to a high standard in a fixed period of time

Response:

S: Last year, I was required to conduct a research project on consumer brand loyalty and customer satisfaction

T: I needed to complete the project within a tight time period of 4 months, and obtain high quality research for our organisation. Additionally, I needed to manage several other on-going projects at the same time.

A: To ensure that the project was high quality, I attended additional training in quantitative research methodology, and ran a small scale pilot study in order to gain some preliminary data, before starting on the main project. I also prioritised my workload, managing tasks by deadline and importance.

R: Despite having a heavy workload at this time, and an increased amount of pressure, I was able to complete the project to the high standard that I wanted to within the deadline. I also managed to complete my other projects without allowing the quality of my work to drop. My organisation was really pleased with the results, and incorporated the findings in their overall marketing strategy.

Key Competency: Accountability and Managing Priorities

Question: Provide an example of when you managed to get everything done in a pressured time. What strategies did you use to ensure timely, high quality results?

Response:

S&T: I have been required to complete a training report every month, which has involved collating and presenting a large amount of information to the senior management team.

A: I scheduled all of the data collection tasks in my diary, so that I knew when to begin approaching others for their contributions. Each department was given a monthly deadline to submit their information to me, and I scheduled in reminders to be sent out before the deadline. This ensured that I had all of the information in from them to enable me to meet my own deadline. I set aside time in my calendar each month to collate the information and check it, and additional time for generating the report.

R: I found that scheduling in the time for reminders meant that I was never chasing anyone last minute for their contribution to my report. Using this method, I have been able to collate the information, check it, and write my report in time for my deadline.

Key Competency: Adaptability

Question: Give a specific example of how you have demonstrated your ability to handle multiple priorities and deliver results

Response:

S: In my present role, I am an accounts manager and have an existing case load of clients, but have new clients coming in all of the time. Some of it is routine work, following up to correspondence, and some of my work is matters arising from situations. I cannot really delegate my work as I am the assigned account manager.

T: Several weeks ago, I had five pieces of on-going case load work and two pieces of consultancy work. On one particular day, some urgent status reports were required before the end of the day.

A: The on-going case work has a management required turn-around of 10 days, however I set my own for 5 days to make sure that no routine work stays on my desk for long. This way I never have a backlog. The consultancy work is high priority, with strict deadlines. These are always to be completed 2 weeks before the deadline, and so I complete these ahead of this date by allocating time in my diary to work on these priority projects. When I get urgent work in, such as the status report, it needs to be immediately attended to. I don't really set priorities for this, and always have other work to do at the same time. Sometimes, I might have several of these at the same time, and need to ask management which is most important. On this particular day, the status report was given my immediate attention from the moment I got the email to complete it. I needed to reschedule all of my contract and regular work.

R: Due to the fact that I give myself tighter deadlines for my routine work, I am always able to keep to deadline, even when I get urgent tasks such as the status report. On that particular day, the report was sent before the deadline, and I was still able to complete all of my routine work on time.

Key Competency: Analytical

Question: Tell me about a decision that you made objectively, despite having personal opinions

Response:

S & T: Within my present role, working in the laboratory, I was tasked to find a more effective testing method. We had been using one particular method in the lab for a long time, and although it worked well, it was quite a lengthy process. Specialist sales consultants did come in demonstrating some new machinery, but I was totally unconvinced, and still believed that the traditional method was cheaper and less stressful. We already knew how to do the other method, even if it was slightly slower.

A: I decided to read some literature regarding the validity of the testing methods using the new machinery. I also did reading on how the machinery worked, and compared the speed of this to our manual testing methods. The peer reviewed research indicated that the tests performed by the machine were far more accurate than the manual methods than we had been using, and 10 tests could be completed per minute. Although the initial setup was expensive, it suggested that the return on investment was high. Despite my initial reservations, I could see clear benefits of installing this machine.

R: After reading the research, I summarised my findings and presented it to my managers. I convinced them of the superiority of the machinery, compared to our manual approach. The testing machine was installed 6 months ago, and our throughput is now 200% higher, and the quality of our testing has also improved. Although I do still have reservations, the advantages were clear, and my bias did not interfere with my decision.

Key Competency: Communication

Question: Tell me about a time when you have had to manage or resolve a conflict between two (or more) co-workers

Response:

S: In my previous position, I worked in a shop selling high price items. We were awarded commission based upon our sales, and so having an outstanding rapport with customers was incredibly important, as was closing sales and hitting our targets.

T: Two of my co-workers engaged in a dispute whilst on the shop floor, regarding who was entitled to £150 commission on recently sold items. It wasn't really clear who was entitled to this. In order to prevent this escalating into a heated debate, and put off our customers, I decided to intervene.

A: I took the co-workers off the shop floor and listened to them individually. I then searched for objective evidence, including payment details and customer records. Using this evidence I was able to see that both of the co-workers had participated equally in the sale of the goods. I brought this to the attention of my line manager, and recommended that the commission be shared equally.

R: Both of my co-workers and the manager agreed that they would share the commission. Upon my intervention, the policy was changed that multiple employees could share commission for the same sale. This new style has led to decreased conflict, and has encouraged collaboration within our team.

Key Competency: Communication

Question: Give an example which demonstrates your ability to develop successful working relationships

Response:

S: Last year, I was working as an Account Coordinator for an events company, and I succeeded in building a strong relationship with a major client.

T: On joining the employer, I contacted the client to introduce myself and start the relationship building process. However, my client advised that he was cancelling, as my predecessor failed to deliver what he promised. I knew that this would be a major loss, and I wanted to successfully persuade the client to review the situation.

A: On meeting with the client, I highlighted my background and skills, and aimed to build a good rapport through building trust. I agreed some shared objectives, and used my negotiating skills to develop a new Service Level Agreement. From the outset, I admitted our faults, and moved the conversation forwards. Back in the office, I scheduled a meeting with the account managers, and gained more insight into the client, and tried to think of new ways to improve our service. I suggested we set up a working group to address areas of concern.

The next meeting with the client went really well, and he agreed to preliminarily extend our contract by three months. During the period, I continued to build the relationship with the client, and contacted them on a weekly basis with updates.

R: After the three months, the client was so pleased with the performance and how we had turned the relationship around that he extended our contract for a further year. I am pleased to say that in that time he increased his expenditure with us by 27%.

Key Competency: Decision Making

Question: Describe a situation when you needed to adopt multiple points of view in order to make a decision.

Response:

S: When addressing the issue of payment and rewards in my department, our department generated a preliminary report. Due to economic difficulties, the annual pay rises were frozen and some other benefits were reduced. As a matter of policy, the department was not required to consult employees when drafting this report.

T: In order to ensure that the payment packages were still competitive, and costs were minimised, I wanted to ensure that the pay strategy was acceptable to all involved.

A: Due to the economic difficulties facing the organisation, I held a meeting between management, trade unions and representatives of different departments to address the pay. I listened to conflicting interests of each of these. Myself, and my department acted as mediators in the process, and I helped facilitate the meeting to reach a common agreement.

R: Through adopting the points of view of all at the meeting, I was able to successfully facilitate a joint agreement. Although trade unions pushed for higher salaries, and the management wanted to further reduce them, I managed to facilitate a compromise. This prevented union action, and allowed our organisation to save money. The unions, management and department heads all praised my efforts, thanking me for my impartial point of view. Despite the cuts in pay and rewards, we have not lost any staff, and the support from the union increased during this difficult time. In fact, we managed to adapt our rewards policy, looking for more input from external stakeholders.

Key Competency: Decision Making

Question: Give me a specific occasion when you conformed to a policy which you did not agree with

Response:

S & T: I distinctly remember a time, when I worked at Home Warehouse. I was always looking for ways to boost the employee morale. Unloading the trucks into the warehouse is a really physical and routine job, and can be boring. To improve the attitude towards the work, I put a radio into the loading bay. It did boost the morale of the staff, but the District Manager did not agree to the radio. I had already checked, and it did not break any of the company rules or objectives. Additionally, the radio was away from customer facing areas.

A: I did not agree with the District Manager's decision to remove the radio, but I did understand his point of view once he had explained his reasons to me. I promptly complied with his request. As I knew that the employees would be unhappy with this decision, I spoke to the manager about an alternative to boost morale. We agreed to implement a programme, which provided lunch for the staff once a month at a local restaurant, if they met/exceeded their targets.

R: As a result of the implemented programme, morale was boosted, and our unloading time decreased from 2.5 hours to 1.5 hours. This meant that we made savings in our payroll of approximately 8% of sales.

Key Competency: Developing Yourself and Others

Question: Tell me about a time when you were faced with a stressful situation and needed to use your coping skills

Response:

S: At my previous place of employment, I had a line manager who would shout at me when he was under a lot of pressure to meet his own deadlines. I used to get really upset, and think that it was my fault, and that I had done something wrong.

T: I decided that it was important to try and speak to my manager about how I was feeling, even though I knew that I would find that a really difficult conversation.

A: I wrote down some notes before the meeting, to make sure that I didn't get upset or lose track. I explained how I was expecting to be treated, and how I felt that I was being treated. I asked my manager why there was a difference. I also suggested things we could do to make a difference. Having identified that he was under a lot of stress, I suggested that he communicated his expectations to me clearly on a daily basis. I also suggested that I keep him well informed of my progress, and we meet early each morning for updates.

R: After our meeting, things were immediately improved. My manager was more thoughtful even when he was under a lot of pressure. As we were communicating often, I was able to reduce some of his pressure, and we were able to work more effectively as a team.

Key Competency: Developing Yourself and Others

Question: Describe when you have been given negative feedback, and explain how you handled this.

Response:

S: Having moved into a new role within my present organisation, I have been responsible for developing relationships with potential clients. I had a meeting with a potential client for some new business, and worked really hard on a presentation.

T: After the meeting, my manager told me that he was really disappointed with the quality of my presentation, and the customer had not been impressed.

A: Having worked really hard on the presentation, I was not sure why my manager was disappointed. I booked a meeting with my boss to try and get some more comprehensive feedback so that I could make necessary improvements to that presentation. He pointed out that I had used out of date information, and had not used the most recent financial details in the presentation. I researched my presentation again, and asked if I could send a re-worked proposal to the client. My manager agreed. Once the proposal was sent through, I followed it up with the client.

R: I was pleased, as although my initial attempt needed improvement, the feedback that I was given enabled me to make improvements to my proposal. We did not get that particular contract, but I was really happy as they company followed up requesting a submission for some other business, which is likely to bring significant revenue into our company.

Key Competency: Developing Yourself and Others

Question: Tell me about a time when you were not satisfied with your own performance. What did you do about it?

Response:

S: In my previous position, we had six monthly performance reviews. I had prepared for this, and was expecting a really good outcome. I had worked hard throughout the year, and felt that I had met all of my targets.

T: However, when I went into the meeting, my performance review rating was lower than I wanted it to be, and I was really disappointed.

A: I couldn't think of why it might be at the time of the performance meeting, and was not in the right frame of mind to discuss it in my initial review. I decided to make an additional meeting with my manager after I had time to think about the previous 6 months. I was able to reflect on some of the things that she had brought up in the meeting. I met with her again, and established a plan of action for areas to improve, and set some specific targets to be met on a monthly basis. I worked really hard to meet these goals, and constantly monitored my own performance. As I wanted to progress, I asked for regular feedback, and spent time reflecting on this in my own time.

R: After six months, I made my review meeting with my line manager again, and was really pleased to see that my rating was much higher. My manager was thrilled with the way that I had set to meeting my targets, and how I had exceeded them all. She suggested that it was just a minor set-back in my performance, and made a recommendation for me to take a line management course, so I could progress in my career.

Key Competency: Initiative

Question: Tell me about a time when you initiated a procedural change. How did you present these ideas to management?

Response:

S: I have been working in the customer complaints department at X, and I have personally introduced a system which has reduced the time it takes to deal with customer complaints from 7 days to 2 days

T: Soon after I started with the company, I noticed that we were getting a high volume of complaints through email and over the telephone. However, we had not developed a structured method to handle these, and on average it was taking 7 days to resolve each one. I realised this was a serious issue for us, which could damage our reputation.

A: I documented the existing process, interviewing the complaints team, and gathered their views on how the process could be improved. I completed a workflow map and identified where the delays were occurring, and where most time was spent. I then developed a new improved model. I investigated the common causes of complaints, and wrote a business case to my manager. I presented this, outlining the causes of delays and proposed solutions. I demonstrated how the solutions would work, and what the outcomes should be. I successfully achieved sign off for my proposal, and implemented this across the department. Throughout, I communicated to the stakeholders, overcame obstacles and focused on the end objective.

R: I am pleased to say that I delivered the new system on time, and within the budget. As a result, the new system handles all customer complaints within 2 days. I feel really proud of my achievement, especially as I was a new member of staff.

Key Competency: Leadership

Question: Describe a time when you were recognised for dealing effectively with a difficult situation

Response:

S&T: Recently, two of our team have left at short notice, during a time when we have been working on a challenging project. The team has been developing a new marketing strategy, and the deadline is especially tight. The loss of two individuals from our team has put us in a more difficult position, as everyone already had their allotted responsibilities.

A: Although the company has offered to send in a temporary member of staff to cover the workload until someone permanent is appointed, I convinced our team that we should cover the responsibilities of those that had left until someone permanent came in. I re-designated the work schedules, and allocated the responsibilities across the remaining team members. I also took on additional work unpaid to help.

R: The team and I contributed significantly to the new marketing strategy, which has been praised by senior managers. Due to our additional efforts, the loss of the members of staff did not inhibit our performance as a team, and we were recently awarded for having the highest productivity in the department!

Key Competency: Problem Solving

Question: Describe a problem which you needed to resolve in your last job. What was the impact of this?

Response:

S: In my last role, I worked as a manager in a large delivery warehouse. We appeared to be getting a number of complaints about late deliveries.

T: As a company, we prided ourselves on shipping items out to customers on time. For every late delivery, we refunded our customer their delivery cost, and so it was important to establish where the delays were, and if there was anything we could do to prevent them.

A: I met with the staff in the delivery department, and discovered that there were issues with the stock coming through on time. I investigated this further and found that requests for new inventory were not processed quickly causing a back log. This meant that orders were not followed up adequately with suppliers. Recognising this, I suggested a computerised system throughout both departments which meant we could quickly follow up on orders, inventory and deliveries.

R: Consequently, this new system meant we could follow products right through the business, and we were able to see exactly what stock we had. The computerised system reduced back logs, and eliminated our stock issues. The delivery staff were able to meet their deadlines, and since March, we have not needed to refund any customer delivery costs.

Key Competency: Team Work

Question: Tell me about a time when you were in a team, and you were not successful in meeting your goal. What went wrong, and what would you do differently now?

Response:

S: I would say that one of the times when my team has been least successful has been whilst I have been working in my present position at XYZ Limited.

T: Last year our team failed to secure a £2 million contract with one of our existing clients. I really think that the project should have been ours, but we did not get it.

A: I think that the biggest problem was because I took for granted that the project would be ours. We already had a good relationship with the client. We had just completed a very successful project for them. I went into the business meeting with them, and led a really solid pitch, and we did get great feedback but in retrospect, I do not think that I went that extra mile, and another business put together something better.

R: Losing that business was a real blow to our company, financially and for morale. I volunteered to lead the analysis of what happened and report what we could learn from the experience. Personally, I learned that we need to pay a lot of attention to our clients, and not to take them for granted. I also learned that we always need to deliver outstanding pitches. Since then, we have had a record year for new business. Although sales is not my primary role in the organisation, I have taken a sales course to develop my sales and negotiation skills, and am hoping to have a greater involvement in business lead development.

Relevant websites

- <http://www.interview-skills.co.uk/free-information/interview-guide>
- <https://www.assessmentday.co.uk/free/competancy-based-interview/CompetancyBasedInterview-Questions.pdf> - a document containing a large number of interview questions

Related documents

- [Sample Interview Questions](#)
- [General Interview Questions and Sample Answers](#)
- [Guide to Interviews](#)