



Information for Trainee Solicitors About Interviews



PREPARING FOR AN INTERVIEW

It is essential that you carefully prepare for every interview. Employers detect lack of interview preparation very quickly and most likely will view it as a sign of low motivation and lack of interest. Commence your preparation well in advance. Don't wait for an interview invite. You can get called for interview at short notice at any time.

Research the Firm, The Job and Associated Matters

Your preparation should go beyond gathering information about the firm. A typical question that candidates stumble on is: 'Where do you think our profession is heading?' Be able to show that you keep abreast of the latest developments and current views.

Prepare a Response to the 'Tell Us about Yourself' Question

At the start of most interviews you will be asked to 'tell us a bit about yourself' or some such open-ended question. Very few people can deal with this type of question without preparation and practice. You need a concise summary of yourself, your experience and achievements that takes less than five minutes to complete.

Be Able to Talk about Your Strengths

Think of what you have achieved. Refer back to the preparation you did when you created your CV and / or take time now to list successes you have had. You need to be able to answer the question "Why should I hire you?" comfortably, and briefly, with information about yourself.

Understand the Transferability of Your Skills

High performers at interview get an understanding of what the interviewer is looking for and then draw from experiences to date. Using their education, skills and aptitudes they can make a case as to why they can succeed at the job being recruited for.

Pivotal to all that is being able to understand how experience in a particular environment can be relied upon and used successfully in perhaps quite a different setting. That experience or skill may be used to address a very different set of challenges.

Get Ready To Answer Questions Generally

Questioning in the interview is likely to cover your work experience, your training, your education and you as an individual, to determine how closely you match the specification and whether you will fit into the organisational culture. Are there questions you are afraid of being asked? You need to document these, develop answers you are comfortable with and then practice them.

Important Disclaimer – Please Note

The Law Society does not give any guarantees, undertakings or warranties concerning the accuracy, completeness or up-to-date nature of information within this document. The Law Society also does not take responsibility for any dependence or reliance placed on the use of support services information provided and cannot accept liability for any loss or damage incurred as a result.

UNDERSTAND VARIOUS QUESTIONING TECHNIQUES USED

Interviewers use different questioning techniques and it is important to understand these - the way questions are asked can influence the response, and the judgement the interviewer is likely to draw from that response. Outlined below are the main questioning techniques you will come across.

Open Questions

These are questions which cannot be answered adequately with a yes or no answer, and which do not prescribe the direction of the conversation too tightly. They are designed to get you to talk, and will encourage you to include feelings and attitudes alongside the facts.

- And how did you get on there?
- How do you feel about ...?

Technical Questions

These questions are designed to test your expertise. Although solicitors are often not quizzed directly on their legal knowledge you should still be ready for this sort of question. You should be able to anticipate the type of question from your knowledge of the prospective job role.

- How would you set about solving this kind of problem?
- If the following happened, what would you do?

Probing Questions

These are direct questions aimed at obtaining information, clarifying issues or persuading you to justify what you have just said. They are likely to be quite specific, and frequently arise from the response to the previous question.

- How did that affect the outcome of.....?
- What was your reason for..?

Hypothetical Questions

These questions try to place you in a 'what if' situation to see how you will respond. The question may illustrate an actual situation you might have to face, or the interviewer may want to test your ability to react quickly in strange situations.

- What would you do if an irate client confronted you?
- What would you do if a client's employees rep threatened a strike unless.....?

Leading Questions

These questions might give you some indication as to what the interviewer is thinking, and may be a veiled request to confirm the interviewer's prejudices. Sometimes this technique may be used in an adversarial context. The interviewer might want you to demonstrate disagreement and reasoned argument. The important thing is to remain objective: agree or disagree as you see fit, or ask what the organisation's view on this issue is.

- I think.....What do you think?
- Isn't it quite dreadful, the way that.....nowadays?

Closed Questions

These questions are framed in such a way that a simple yes or no answer will suffice. Don't fall into that trap. Take the opportunity to sell yourself, and elaborate your answers in a concise way. Offer more facts, talk about your achievements, and give opinions.

- I see you have.....
- Have your frequent changes been due to.....?

Multiple Questions

These questions can be confusing. Which bit do you tackle first? These may be the sign of a poorly trained interviewer, or of a memory test! A good strategy is to explain how you will answer the question, or you could ask the interviewer his or her preference for the order of your reply.

- Can you tell me about your early school days; what you do outside of work?

Forced Choice Questions

These are testing and challenging questions, designed to put you into some sort of dilemma. You may be being asked to highlight the interviewer's pet solution to a particular type of problem, or to provide an alternative solution. You may find you can ask questions and engage discussion or, in a situation where you believe the interviewer would not appreciate that approach, you can speak rhetorically to set the scene for your response.

- Do you think it is better to provide staff with company cars, increase their salary to enable them to buy their own, or give them a car user's allowance?

Pretending

This technique is designed either to test that you know what you are talking about in a technical sense, or to determine whether you can explain something complex in a way that is comprehensible to the layman. Make sure you can explain technical issues lucidly and without jargon.

- I'm not an expert, but.....

Other Techniques Used By Interviewers

As well as using questioning techniques that are covered below, interviewers will use a range of other techniques when they interview, such as reflecting back and summarising.

Reflecting back is a technique used to keep you talking, without inferring any judgements on what you have said - but with a possible aim of letting you expand on an area of possible strength or weakness:

- I've never come across that approach before...
- So you are comfortable with that area of probate then?

Summarising allows the interviewer to confirm her or his understanding of what you have said.

- So what you are saying is.....
- Let me see if I understand this.....

TYPICAL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS YOU SHOULD CONSIDER

Why are you interested in this position?

The interviewer wants you to show enthusiasm and conviction. Outline how well you match up to the job. Emphasise what you can contribute, rather than what you can take, for example, 'This job is a perfect match for my skills and aspirations. This is a win-win opportunity where I know I can be successful with your company and that my successes will be rewarded'.

What was your greatest challenge and how did you overcome it?

Have an example ready which moved you outside your normal comfort zone, or into a new area, but keep it focused on the job!

You don't have any experience in litigation do you?

If it was a problem you wouldn't have been shortlisted, so don't say "No, I don't" instead talk about how you want to broaden your experience, how you are adaptable and quick to learn etc.

Tell us about yourself

This question is dealt with elsewhere in these notes.

What are your strengths?

Tailor your answer to what you think would sum up the interviewer's ideal candidate. Bear in mind also those aspects that most interviewers seek such as an ability at problem solving, team working, motivation, flexibility etc.

What is your biggest weakness?

This question is being asked to see if you are arrogant - "I really don't think I have any weaknesses", whether you know yourself, "I've never thought about that before" and also how you are working to overcome a weakness, "I knew as a solicitor my business knowledge was weak, so I took some business management credits to bridge the gap."

Do not be tempted to offer a real weakness or attempt to be funny. This question helps interviewers determine how you will handle difficult situations. Consider turning a negative into a positive e.g. "My biggest weakness is sometimes I work too hard so my life ends up out of balance" or "I can sometimes get too caught up in work".

What would your last boss say was the area you needed to improve on?

This is a variation on you having to identify your development needs. You could give one or two examples and what you have done about them e.g. my boss identified my lack of broad business knowledge so I opted to take a management diploma and also set aside time to shadow people in other parts of the organisation.

Where do you see yourself in 10 years' time?

The interviewer wants to know if you plan and how this job fits into your future. Say how this job is an opportunity for you to grow and develop. You don't want to discuss a goal that is unrealistic.

Do you prefer working on your own or in a team?

If you know this is a team or individual job you can base your answer on that. Probably best not to have a preference but enjoy both.

Why should we offer you this job?

You should talk about what you can offer the company, not the benefits to you.

Why are you looking to leave your current firm?

Don't say anything negative about your current / recent employer.

Why should I hire you over the other people I have interviewed?

This is a key question for you to sell yourself. The interviewer expects you to be confident in answering this question so be assertive and proud of your efforts e.g. "You mentioned you are looking for someone with proven experience and who is motivated. I am ideal for this position because with my previous experience I can step in and make an immediate contribution".

What has been your greatest mistake?

Do not describe a mistake that was avoidable or your fault. You could discuss not pursuing academic qualifications but say how well you have done without them, or recognising that you put the job above the family.

Why did you choose your degree subject?

This is often asked of recent graduates and people at the end of training. This gives insight into how a person thinks. They want you to show you have put thought into this decision and looked into the future e.g. "I chose law because I enjoy working with others and I am motivated by success. Law allows me to capitalise on my blend of creativity, hard work and ability to learn".

What are your interests?

Try to keep interests listed somewhat in line with the job but don't lie; if you don't play golf don't claim to. It is best to think in advance and have a balance of team and individual pursuits, perhaps showing leadership in a voluntary organisation. In practice there is always interest in a person's ability to bring in business over time. To tick this box, outline active involvements you have in groups, clubs and associations.

What are your short and long term goals?

This should link with the job you are applying for. If you want to be a solicitor, a job as a legal executive is a step along the way - but if you want to be a doctor, why are you applying for a job as a sales executive? For example "My short term goal is to join a company where I will be challenged and have room to grow. One of my longer term goals is to grow with the company and move into management."

Can you give me an example of team work and leadership?

You want to give an example of working effectively in a team and also a time when you took the lead; you don't want people to think that you can only work with others, so give an example of working effectively alone.

Have you ever failed in any job?

This is similar to asking about your mistakes, decide what to say, but be clear how you have learnt from it.

What major problems did you encounter in your last job?

Whatever you say, make sure the problem was overcome.

What do you know about us?

Employers want applicants to have had the initiative, courtesy and enthusiasm to find out something about them. What you know is not as important as just knowing something! You might, for example, refer to their annual report and comment on how they are expanding and go on to ask about associated opportunities.

Why do you want to work here?

Your response will be based on what you have learnt about the company. You will want to explain what you have found out and why it interests you. Perhaps you would like to include something about the company's reputation, and that environment would help to bring out your best.

If you could choose any job what would it be?

Do not start discussing your fantasies; the job you have always wanted is the one you are being interviewed for!

Why haven't you found a job yet?

If it's taken you three months or more, they may think there is something wrong with you. This is why you should opt for an intensive job search campaign. The best response is to say how you are selective - you could have accepted others, but unlike this one you did not see them as a good career move.

What is your ideal job?

Obviously the one you have applied to them for.

What would you describe as your greatest achievement?

Be prepared to give an achievement that is relevant to the job you are applying for.

Are you ambitious?

You don't want to be content to stand still, but you don't want to be seen as climbing over everyone to get to the top. You could say that you are ambitious to do well, but job satisfaction is the key.

Are you applying for other jobs?

Let them know you are in discussion with other companies. They will be reassured that other companies are interested in you.

What was your last boss's biggest weakness?

Do not be tempted to say anything detrimental. People expect loyalty e.g. "I have the highest respect for my manager. He has supported and challenged me so I am now in a position to apply for a greater challenge."

Has your career developed as you would have liked?

This is often asked of someone whose career has developed slowly. Say that the work was interesting, and you were gaining satisfaction. If you have been made redundant after 10 years you can emphasise your loyalty.

How would you describe your relationship with your subordinates?

If you have managed people you can answer these questions; just make sure to think this area through in advance of the interview. Give examples of a particular issue you have dealt with and the positive outcome and benefit to the subordinate and the company as a whole.

Would you be prepared to relocate?

You need to have thought this through in advance so you can answer honestly.

How would your colleagues answer if we asked them about your faults?

This is another way of getting you to describe your weaknesses. See earlier question.

How would your last boss describe you?

This is another question to allow you to describe your strengths.

What can you offer us?

This is another question to let you sell your strengths.

Would you accept this job, if it was offered to you?

Answer yes without hesitation. You can save the negotiations for later.

How do you prioritise when you are given too many tasks to accomplish?

This question is asking about the way you plan and prioritise your time. Whilst you want to be seen as someone who is flexible on hours, and does not stick to set hours, you will also want to show how you will manage your time by differentiating between what is important and urgent.

What salary are you seeking?

You want to keep this vague so you can move into the negotiation phase when you are offered the job. You could put the question back to them "How much does the job pay?" or "I'm sure we can come to some agreement where my skills and experience are fairly paid. This company pays a fair salary, doesn't it?" Salary negotiation is addressed later in this workbook.

Give an example of when your work has been criticised. How did you respond?

Make sure you describe an idea that was criticised, not your work. You suggested a new approach to your boss who told you exactly what was wrong with the idea. You listened carefully and realised he had some valid points. You went away, reviewed your work and came back with a revised suggestion which was better received.

What have been your best achievements?

You know your strengths, so refer to those, making sure they link in with what the new employer will want. Back up boasts with examples and quantify benefits to previous employers whenever it is possible to do this.

What are the qualities needed in a good solicitor / associate?

Your research should have established what they will be interested in, so provide this information, linking it to your strengths.

What would be the area you feel least confident about if we offered you a job?

You are being tested on your self confidence. Expand on your strengths and what you can bring to the company and how you are looking forward to this new role.

REHEARSING AND DOING MOCK INTERVIEWS

The number of people who undertake interviews without rehearsing and doing mock interviews beforehand is quite remarkable. Few would stand up to do an after dinner address without rehearsing it. Although more private, an interview is almost always of greater importance.

Rehearsing Hints

Consider questions and prepare winning answers – especially to the ones you fear most. Rehearse these answers and time how long it takes you to answer them. Never talk beyond two minutes straight.

Don't try to memorise answers word for word - you will come across as stiff and will be unable to function off the cuff. To help remember the content of answers, underline and remember key words.

Mock Interviewing

To facilitate you do a mock interview, questions are laid out below. Get someone to interview you in a formal way, asking you these or questions of their own.

To get best value out of this exercise, review the questions beforehand and work out effective answers to them as part of your preparation. For best results, you should record the interview - so you can play it back later.

As with a real interview, the interviewer needs to thank the person for attending, explain the format that will be being followed and then launch into the following questions:

- Please tell me about yourself.
- What area of the law do you want to work in and why?
- How did you find your training solicitor to work for?
- What makes a 'good' employer?
- What have you been doing since you finished your training contract?
- Tell us some of the things which you enjoyed doing at your last place of employment?
- What do you see as having been your greatest strengths as an solicitor?
- What have been your best achievements?
- How did you get your training contract?

- What would be the area you feel least confident about if in this job?
- How would your colleagues answer if we asked them about your faults?
- What do you feel you gained most from your time with your last employer?
- How would your last boss describe you?
- What do you see yourself doing here in 5/10 years' time?
- What led you to become a solicitor?
- How did you spend your vacations from school/college/ university?
- Tell me about your leisure interests.
- Why do you want this job?
- Why should we offer you this job?
- Are you considering any other jobs at present?

WHEN YOU GET CALLED FOR INTERVIEW

When invited to interview you need to know details such as the following:

- Who you will meet
- Who you will be interviewed by and their position in the organisation
- Whether there will be any psychometric or other types of assessment.
- Whether you be given a tour of the organisation

If you don't get this information, it is fine to ring and request it. Larger organisations will often send an information pack with the invitation to interview, or at your request when the interview is arranged. This may contain documents such as an annual report, a job description or outline company details and a map. It may contain details of the conditions of employment. Be proactive and ask if it isn't sent.

If they do not send you a copy of the job description, request one. You want to know about the job so that you can prepare well. If you have the opportunity to choose the time of your interview, seek a slot as late as available. That way you maximise the chances of an effective interview and of standing out in the interviewer's memory.

Confirm by letter or email the interview place, time, day and date - to avoid any mistake, as a courtesy and to record a good impression. It is also often worthwhile telephoning in advance of the interview. For instance you might call beforehand to obtain exact directions to the meeting venue or, if you have any special needs or disabilities, you might phone to forewarn them.

Preparation in Advance of the Interview

Reread the advertisement, application form and letters. Consider what you have to offer by way of experience and strengths. Your preparation should include a thorough analysis of your motives and interest in the specific appointment.

Further Research

Most likely you will be asked 'what do you know about us'. Employers want applicants who have had the initiative, courtesy and enthusiasm to find out something.

Your research should include:

- The firm's recent history
- The firm's office you are attending and information on other locations they have
- The names of the senior partner and other partners and staff
- Areas of business, any areas of specialisation.
- The firm's reputation among peers
- Any developments at macro level, which may have affected it
- The firm's future strategy

Good sources of information include:

- The company's website
- National, local and specialist press
- Sales brochures, catalogues, etc.
- Listening and talking to people
- Promotional materials

Interview Day

The importance of being on time to the interview cannot be overstated. It is crucial for you to find out the exact location beforehand. This may mean asking for specific directions if you are unfamiliar with the area. Also, ask if there are any parking regulations around the building you should know about.

Getting to the Interview

If possible, travel to the interview site a day or so before. This way, you can estimate how long it will take you. Can you get to the building via another route? You will want to allow for any contingency that could occur along the way. You don't want to rush into the interview hot and sweaty.

When You Arrive

Be punctual. Don't just be on time. Be outside a while in advance and arrive at reception 7 to 8 minutes before the appointment time in a small facility and 10 to 12 minutes ahead of time in a large facility (where it could take time clearing reception and getting to where the meeting will take place).

Be friendly with the receptionist - but not over familiar. When speaking with receptionists and secretaries, remember that they may later be asked by the interviewers to comment informally on the way candidates handled themselves outside the formal interview.

Visit the toilet, if possible, for a number of reasons. Walking to and from the toilet will often take you past working areas of the office from which you can indirectly glean a great deal about a company, e.g., cleanliness, atmosphere, friendliness, efficiency, etc. While you are there, check how you look.

Be prepared to shake hands. Make sure your hands are dry. Interviewers prefer a firm handshake. It can reflect your confidence level and some personal qualities. Your handshake should never be too firm, nor should it be limp.

Do not accept a drink within 5 minutes of your interview time. You don't want to be burdened with a hot drink just as your interviewer arrives. Keep calm and keep your cool even if you are kept waiting. It can help to have a book or magazine to look at.

Leave your overcoat, umbrella etc in reception so you won't need to worry where to put them in the interview room.

The Interview Itself

Aim to enjoy it, to stand out and impress. Remember that no interview is ever a formality. People may sometimes give you an impression that the job is in the bag. It isn't, until you have it in writing. Whatever anyone says, go into every interview prepared for a rigorous questioning session - even if you have been told 'We'd like you to see Sean, it's just a formality'.

Getting Started

Don't sit until you are invited to do so. If you are instructed to sit and find yourself in an awkward position, then ask "would you mind if I moved my chair?" and move it. Be friendly, confident and articulate. This involves standing and sitting with good posture. Grasp the interviewer's hand in a firm and decisive handshake. Call the interviewer by his or her name, saying how pleased you are to be there. A positive attitude says a lot about you.

Demonstrate you like the person. Expect to get on with your interviewer, and show you do through your verbal and non verbal behaviour. Speak loudly and clearly enough to be heard. Make sure you stress your good points; showing how well informed you are about the company. Keep your attitude businesslike and respectful.

Listen closely as the interviewer introduces themselves. You will want to address them by name at some point later during the interview. Sell yourself by outlining what you can do for them, given an opportunity. Make sure you recount things in an interesting and positive way so that the interviewer will remember you.

Take deep breaths, relax and act naturally. This is your opportunity to show the interviewer that you are the person they are looking for. Sit well back in your chair, in an upright but comfortable position. If you use your hands when talking don't overdo it. Make friendly eye contact with the person asking questions but don't stare.

If there is more than one interviewer make sure you also involve them by addressing the next part of your answer to them. For panel interviews address the main body of an answer to the questioner, but then hold eye contact with other panel members in order to involve them.

Dealing with Questions

Think before you talk. Take a few seconds to collect and organise your thoughts, and then answer each question simply and directly. If you do not understand the question, or the motivation behind the question, ask for clarification. Every time you are asked a question, consider the following before responding: 'How can I answer that question in a way that will show how I can be of value to this employer?'

Mentally tick off, as they arise in the interview, those five or six key reasons why you should be considered for the job. Find opportunities to raise any issues which have not been touched on. You might be asked whether you would like to add anything; or you might make the point yourself: “would it be helpful if I mentioned something else relevant to this job?”

Whatever the questioning techniques you encounter, take every opportunity to explain your achievements and your abilities within the context of the job role you are discussing. Never hesitate to ask the interviewer to repeat the question if you haven't fully heard or understood. You can also use the technique of restating the question in different words to check your understanding.

When the interviewer starts asking the “How would you handle...?” questions, imagine that you are a consultant helping a new client with a problem. Adopt a probing approach so that you can understand their situation in sufficient detail before providing an answer. Relate that answer to their business objectives rather than to theories or models (unless specifically asked to do so).

Similarly, when they ask about your past achievements, relate them to issues your employer was trying to address and the organisational benefits they gained. Use jargon or technical terms only if everyone involved fully understands them and if it will help show your knowledge of a subject.

Give careful consideration to all answers. Don't be afraid to pause and think before replying to a question and don't hesitate to say you don't understand something if that is the case. Giving questions their due consideration is also a good way to avoid interrupting the interviewer.

Be natural. Wanting to give your best doesn't mean that you have to be unnatural. High anxiety about the outcome can lead to candidates trying too hard or coming over as dull and stilted. Aim to strike a balance between being (a) comfortable and relaxed and (b) alert and incisive. Above all, show your interest by your natural enthusiasm for that winning future combination - you and the job.

Be Positive. Do not criticise previous employers. If you have made a mistake somewhere along your career, it is not a disaster to admit it - make sure you outline clearly the lessons it taught you. Admitting the odd mistake also gives you credibility when you start to talk about the positive things in your career.

Handling Salary Questions

Interviewers will want to make sure you are within the salary range they are planning to pay but it is generally in the interviewee's interest to defer discussion on salary and other benefits to a later stage. Here are typical questions asked:

“How much are you earning in your current position?”

If this doesn't provide a meaningful comparison or is comparatively low, then briefly spell out why this figure should not guide current discussions.

“What are your salary requirements?”

Summarize the requirements of the position as you understand them, and then ask the interviewer for the normal salary range in his/her company for that type of position. Be very slow to give them a salary figure, and if you have to, hedge everything you say.

“What are your salary expectations?”

You can respond by asking what the normal salary range for this position is and that will generally lead into a discussion that will help you understand where they are at. If you are then asked yet again, consider finishing with “I will consider any reasonable offer.”

Body Language

Whether done consciously or subconsciously, your body language communicates a great deal to a person you speak to. Interviewers pick up on body language and it has a significant impact on their assessment of you.

Have you ever spoken with someone who won't look directly at you? The feeling you are left with about them differs considerably from the person who looks right at you. During the interview your body language plays a big part in the relationship building process. Outlined below are some tips regarding body language.

Eye Contact

A crucial part - maintain good eye contact with the people you are meeting – yet do not go over the top and end up glaring at them. Avoid looking down, up, or to the side of people you are talking to. That, at best, suggests lack of confidence. Look at them in the eye in a friendly manner. Look directly at the person when you speak.

It is okay to look away for a few seconds especially when you may need to think about a response to a tough question. However only look away for a few seconds and then return your focus to the interviewer. If you feel uncomfortable holding eye contact with people, look at the forehead, just above their nose.

Posture

Maintain proper posture throughout the interview. Slouching and leaning down in your chair reflects laziness, lack of interest, and a lack of confidence. Being too rigid and tense will convey inflexibility and nervousness. Be comfortable. Keep your shoulders up and back. Don't lean on the interviewers' desk or otherwise invade their personal space.

Gestures

Gestures, such as use of hands, eyebrows, etc., can enhance your message – just as long as they are not overdone. Raising your eyebrows at something interesting or exciting and using your hands to express a point and relay a story, all add to your presentation. If these things are overdone however – and they regularly are at interview - they will distract the person you are speaking to and compromise what you are saying.

Don't fidget. Be aware of any nervous habits that you have. Watch your hands! If you're the kind of person who likes to gesture with your hands, keep them in check.

Keep the Matter of Body Language in Context

The more natural you appear at interview, the better – so don't stress yourself at that stage about all of the things that you're supposed to be doing or not doing. Consider them beforehand and practice if necessary, but at interview don't focus on your physical mannerisms and miss out on more important matters - such as what you're being asked.

COMPETENCY BASED INTERVIEWS

A competency based interview (also called situational, behavioural or competency interviews) is a style of interviewing that is increasingly used by employers – especially larger organisations. It is an interview style that is particularly useful when it is hard to select on the basis of technical merit: for example, for a graduate job and at end of traineeships where relevant experience is less important - or not required.

Increasingly, companies are also using competency based interviews as part of the selection process for more senior jobs. This is because this interview type can give valuable insights into an individual's preferred style of working and help predict behaviours in future situations.

Who Uses Competency Interviews?

Estimates indicate that a third of all employers are using competency interviews as part of their recruitment process. Large graduate employers are especially likely to use competency interviews as part of their graduate recruitment procedure and for interviewing at the end of traineeships

What are Competencies?

A competency is a particular quality that a company's recruiters have decided is desirable for employees to possess. During interviews and assessment processes competencies are used as benchmarks that assessors use to rate and evaluate candidates.

In interviews recruiters look for evidence of competencies by asking candidates competency based questions. This style of question forces candidates to give situational examples of times in the past when they have performed particular tasks, or achieved particular outcomes using certain skills.

Key Competencies

A firm will usually isolate several key skills or "key competencies" to look for in candidates at interview. You will be graded in terms of each competency based upon your answers to competency based questions.

Employers typically use some of the following as their key competencies:

- Teamwork
- Responsibility
- Commitment to career
- Commercial awareness
- Career motivation
- Decision making
- Communication
- Leadership
- Trustworthiness & Ethics
- Results Orientation
- Problem Solving
- Organisation

In the case of applications for graduate jobs, candidates typically have no experience in the industry to which they have applied. Consequently it is not possible to assess their suitability for a job role based upon their CV alone. This has led to the development of competency based interviews becoming the prime way to interviewing inexperienced graduate applicants.

Competency Based Interview: The first 60 seconds

Although competency based interviews are standardised, a typical interviewer will decide within minutes whether they like you or not, and this is likely to affect the outcome of the interview. It is very important to give a good impression to your interviewer from the very first moment you meet.

Shake hands confidently, smile, introduce yourself, and be generally convivial to the occasion. Sitting quietly and communicating poorly will not help you, and neither will boisterous or arrogant behaviour. You should be polite but outgoing, assertive but not aggressive and aim to be every bit as professional as the interviewer who is assessing you.

Typical Competency Based Interview Structure

Questions in competency interviews will usually refer to activities a candidate has participated in at school, college or university, or any other activities that can be used to effectively display evidence of particular competencies or a particular competency.

A typical competency question could be: "Describe two situations where you have had to work as part of a team." When asked a question like this, you should be able to talk for several minutes about your participation to a particularly strong team you have been part of in the past and how your sense of teamwork helped lead a task or project to successful completion.

You should have an idea before the interview of the experiences from your life that you could use as examples to demonstrate the key competencies of the firm to which you are applying. You are likely to have to provide at least two examples for each competency during your interview.

It is quite acceptable to ask for and to use a few moments of thinking time before answering competency questions. If necessary, simply notify your interviewer by explaining you "may need to think about this for a few moments". Once you have thought of a good example to use, continue with your answer.

Performing Well At Competency Based Interviews

Prepare

If you have not been advised of the competencies required for the particular job you are applying for you should ask for them. Knowing the competencies needed to meet the selection criteria puts you in a better position to succeed, not just because you are better informed, but also because you asked - which should impress the decision-makers. First, read through all the information you have about the job. The job description and person specification should tell you what skills and abilities are essential for the job.

Get Your Stories Ready

At competency based interviews you will be asked to provide specific examples of what you have done to date. Use your preparation time to think through your experiences to date and prepare 'stories' which you can use in the actual interview. These stories should be real experiences and achievements that you have been a part of. You should have 20+ one ready.

Having identified key parts of the job, think about when you have displayed relevant skills or behaviours in your life. Then seek to identify a specific instance where you used a particular skill or ability. Your examples can be from your work or home life.

Structure Your Answers

A very useful technique for answering competency based questions is the 'STAR' one which is an acronym for:

- Situation
- Task
- Action
- Result

To use the technique, you describe the Situation you were in, the Task you were asked to accomplish, the Action you took and why, and the Results of your actions. You summarise what you have to say to cover these four points concisely. This facilitates the interviewer understanding and, hopefully, remembering your story.

Here's an example of the method being used to address an employer's question:

Situation: I didn't initially do well in university and I failed my first year exams.
Task: I knew I had to develop better study habits and manage time better.
Action: I created a calendar with the dates for all of my assignments and tests. Then I set aside certain hours each day for studying and project work.
Result: My essays were in on time. And because I separated study time from social time, I worked hard and then relaxed successfully.

Common Mistakes by Interviewees in Competency Based Interviews

The candidate doesn't use a specific story to demonstrate their skill or ability.

For example, if you commonly deal with difficult clients, you might be tempted to say 'whenever I get a difficult client, this is what I do...' However, at a competency interview you are better to identify one event - 'last week, I spoke to a customer who was angry...'

The candidate says 'we', not 'I'.

Sometimes, if you are using examples where many people were involved in making something happen, you may be tempted to say 'we decided that... we did this...' The interviewer can only give you points for things that you personally did.

The candidate does not give enough detail in their answer

Competency based questions want to explore what you understand about a skill or ability. For example, if you start to describe a situation where you planned an event you need to demonstrate that you understood the need to:

- plan your time to achieve a goal
- build in extra time for unexpected eventualities
- prioritise tasks according to importance
- plan your resources (in this case, friends who could be asked to help)

Try to demonstrate in your answers that you understand the principles underlying the skill or ability you are discussing.

The candidate has no experience to talk about in areas they are asked about

Sometimes, people feel that examples have to be taken from their experiences in work. It is perfectly acceptable to use examples from any area of your life.

PROBLEM INTERVIEWERS

Most people who interview people for employment have never trained in this area. HR people are generally trained but others rarely are. If HR people are involved, they will usually discipline matters with proper structure and procedures. However, many interviews go ahead without planning and, in these circumstances, you can find yourself at the mercy of someone who is not up to interviewing effectively.

The Inexperienced Interviewer

There are very few good interviewers and most problems are down to inexperience. Do not become irked if the interviewer has no plan but use your own preparation to help the interviewer out. If questions seem unclear or complex, try to handle the points one at a time. An example of helping them like this might be to suggest a useful question while answering one that is not very relevant or otherwise appropriate.

If the interviewer runs out of questions, keep dialogue going by introducing new material. Two useful ways of doing this are:

- When talking about my experience at ...was it clear that...?
- When I was describing what I did at ... I should have added...

Another way to help out a nervous or muddled interviewer is to think what a skilled interviewer might be concerned about and then make sure you cover these matters. This can help you to reframe the situation, focusing on what is important to the job. Referring the person to your CV can also help recapture relevance and direction. Focus on reassuring the interviewer that you are the frontrunner for the job.

Interviewer Monopolises the Interview

This situation calls for careful judgement. There is research evidence to show that some poor interviewers actually rate candidates in direct proportion to the amount of time they, the interviewer, talk. Thus the more they talk, the higher they rate the candidate! Nevertheless, you still need to get some points across, so it is all the more important when you do comment that you are able to mention concisely your key prepared points.

Try not to encourage the interviewer by your nonverbal language or supportive comments. When the interviewer draws breath, you might say firmly, "I'd like to respond to what you've been saying" and keep going. Without being discourteous, you can also sometimes tactfully ignore the cues that the interviewer wants to speak again.

Interviewer Asks Only Closed Questions

In this situation, recognise the limitations of the closed question and then treat it as an open question. For example, you might expand on the Yes/No example such as: "Yes, because, when etc..." Or avoid saying "Yes" or "No" completely and instead answer the question using a more detailed response.

Interviewer Asks Discriminatory Questions

In Ireland we have excellent employment equality legislation and it is against the law to ask questions that are discriminatory, especially around gender, family circumstances, age, disability, race, religion and sexuality. It is important to note however that interviewers can ask questions around these areas; they just need to ensure that the questions are not discriminatory, either directly or indirectly.

As a general rule a question can be asked if everyone being interviewed is asked it, so you need to be careful about jumping to a conclusion that a question is discriminatory.