

HOW TO ANSWER COMPETENCIES:

Almost all organisations use the STAR technique to score candidates at interview. STAR is broken down as follows:

- Situation – set the context for your story. For example, "We were due to be delivering a presentation to a group of 30 interested industry players on our new product and Stuart, the guy due to deliver it, got stuck on a train."
- Task – what was required of you? For example, "It was my responsibility to find an alternative so it didn't reflect badly on the company and we didn't waste the opportunity."
- Activity – what you actually did. For example, "I spoke to the event organisers to find out if they could change the running order. They agreed so we bought ourselves some time. I contacted Susan-

- another member of the team, who at a push could step in. She agreed to drop what she was doing and head to the event."

Result – how well the situation played out. For example, "Stuart didn't make the meeting on time but we explained the problem to the delegates and Susan's presentation went well – a bit rough around the edges but it was warmly received. Stuart managed to get there for the last 15 minutes to answer questions. As a result we gained some good contacts, at least two of which we converted into paying clients."

TYPICAL QUESTIONS:

1. WHY DO YOU WANT THIS JOB?

One of the most predictable questions and very important! You need to demonstrate that you have researched the employer and tie your knowledge of them into the skills and interests that led you to apply. For example, an interviewee with a small public relations agency might say:

"I'm always ready to take on responsibility and feel this will come more quickly with a

firm of this size. A small firm also gives the chance to build closer working relationships with clients and colleagues and I've found through my past work experience that this makes an organisation more effective as well as more satisfying to work in."Try to find some specific feature on which the employer prides themselves: their training, their client base, their individuality, their public image, etc. This may not always be possible with very small organisations but you may be able to pick up something of this nature from the interviewer.

2. HAVE YOU GOT ANY QUESTIONS?

At the end of the interview, it is likely that you will be given the chance to put your own questions to the interviewer. Keep them brief: there may be other interviewees waiting. Ask about the work itself, training and career development: not about

vacations, 401k, and travel assistance!

Prepare some questions in advance: it is OK to write these down and to refer to your notes to remind yourself of what you wanted to ask. It often happens that, during the interview, all the points that you had noted down to ask about will be covered before -

- you get to this stage. In this situation, you can respond as follows:

Interviewer: Well, that seems to have covered everything: is there anything you would like to ask me?

Interviewee: Thank you: I'd made a note to ask about your appraisal system and the study arrangements for professional exams, but we went over those earlier and I really feel you've covered everything that I need to know at this moment.

You can also use this opportunity to tell the interviewer anything about yourself that they have not raised during the interview but which you feel is important to your application:

Don't feel you have to wait until this point to ask questions - if the chance to ask a question seems to arise naturally in the course of the interview, take it! Remember that a traditional interview is a conversation - with a purpose.

3. DESCRIBE A SITUATION IN WHICH YOU LED A TEAM.

This is an example of a competency-based question. Many junior positions involve people management, where you will be expected to plan, organise and guide the work of others as well as motivating them to complete tasks. The interviewer needs to assess how well you relate to other people, what role you take in a group and whether you are able to focus on goals and targets.

Outline the situation, your role and the task of the group overall. Describe any problems which arose and how they were tackled. Say what the result was and what you learned

from it. Examples could include putting on a drama or music production; a group project at university; a business game or Young Enterprise scheme or being a team leader in a fast-food restaurant.

This and other skills which the employer considers essential for effective performance in the job. While your example should indicate the nature of the team and the task, you need to focus on your own role as a leader and on the personal qualities that led you to take on/be nominated for this role and which helped you to succeed in it. Leadership involves many skills: planning, decision-making, persuading, motivating, listening, coordinating - but not dictating!

4. DESCRIBE A SITUATION WHERE YOU WORKED IN A TEAM

Another competency-based question. Most jobs will involve a degree of teamwork. The interviewer needs to assess how well you relate other people, what role you take in a group and whether you are able to focus on goals and targets.

Outline the situation, your particular role and the task of the group overall. Describe any problems which arose and how they were tackled. Say what the result was and what you learned from it.

5. WHAT DO YOU EXPECT TO BE DOING IN 5 YEAR'S TIME?

Try to avoid vague or general answers such as "I would hope to grow with the responsibility I am offered and to develop my skills as far as I am able" or "I would expect to be in a management role by then".

Talk about your interest in the industry in -

which the company with operates. Emphasise the value you can bring to the organisation and what you can do for it. You need to show that you are ambitious but also your goals must be realistic - saying you expect to be a senior manager after two years is unlikely to go down well! Use the employer's website or LinkedIn profiles to gain an idea of the career paths followed by past graduates.



This question allows you to demonstrate that you have done your research on the career routes open to you within the organisation and so you should try to be more specific - not necessarily tying yourself down to a particular route, but showing that you have at least a general idea of where you want to go.

Talk about responsibilities you would like to have and expected achievements rather than how much you would expect to be earning in five years time as this will make an employer think you're more interested in the material benefits than the career itself. Talk about your career development: skills you'd like to acquire or you'd like to be using, and professional qualifications you'd like to get.

6. WHAT ARE YOUR WEAKNESSES?

The classic answer here is to state a strength which is disguised as a weakness, such as "I'm too much of a perfectionist" or "I push myself too hard". This approach has been used so often that, even if these answers really are true they sound clichéd. Also, interviewers will know this trick. If you feel they really apply to you, give examples: you could say that your attention to detail and perfectionism make you very single-minded when at work, often blotting out others in your need to get the task done.

- A better strategy is to choose a weakness that you have worked on to improve and describe what action you are taking to remedy the weakness. For example: "I'm -

not a very self-confident person and used to find it very difficult to talk to people I didn't know well, but my Saturday job in the local library meant that I had to help people with all kinds of queries and that helped me a lot. Now I'm perfectly happy talking to anybody on a one-to-one basis and I've joined the debating society this year to give me experience of speaking in front of an audience."

- Don't deny that you have any weaknesses - everyone has weaknesses and if you refuse to admit to them the interviewer will mark you down as arrogant, untruthful or lacking in self-awareness. This question may be phrased in other ways, such as "How would your worst enemy describe you?"

7. WHAT ARE YOUR STRENGTHS

This allows you to put across your "Unique Selling Points" - three or four of your key strengths. Try to back these points up with examples of where you have had to use them. Consider the requirements of the job and compare these with all your own attributes - your personality, skills, abilities or experience. Where they match you should consider these to be your major strengths.

The employer certainly will. For example, teamwork, interpersonal skills, creative problem solving, dependability, reliability, originality, leadership etc., could all be cited as strengths. Work out which is most important for the particular job in question and make sure you illustrate your answer with examples from as many parts of your experience, not just university, as you can. This question may be phrased in other ways, such as "Tell me about yourself" or "How would a friend describe you?"

8. WHAT HAS BEEN YOUR GREATEST ACHIEVEMENT?

Try to say something different that will make you stand out. This doesn't have to be an Olympic medal or an act of heroism. Ideally, it should give evidence of skills relevant to the job such as communication, initiative, teamwork, organising or determination:

Duke of Edinburgh's gold award - especially the expedition and community service parts
Organising a sports or fund-raising event
"Overcoming my fear of heights and learning to abseil"
"Learning enough Spanish in three months to make myself understood when I travelled around Mexico"
Training for and completing a marathon .. or even a 5 Kilometre race.

