

Competency Based Interviewing



1. What are competencies?

There are two main themes when defining competencies. These are:

- Descriptions of work tasks or job outputs - a '**competence**'

These competencies have their origins in 'the ability of a person to perform to the standards required in employment'.

- Descriptions of behaviours - a '**competency**'

These have evolved from the work of researchers who linked into what made people effective. A competency is an underlying characteristic of a person in that it may be a motive, a trait, a skill, an aspect of one's self-image or social role, or a body of knowledge which he or she uses.'

2. Identifying competencies for recruitment purposes

The principles of a job/role description and person specification still apply when using a competency-based approach. However, it is necessary to break the job tasks, outputs, skills and experience into competencies and behaviour indicators to indicate what will be required of the successful applicant in order for them to perform effectively within the job.

A competency approach provides greater clarity for the selector and candidate about what is required. For example, a person specification that states that 'flexibility' is required may mean different things to different people, whereas the use of a competency such as 'willingness to perform tasks outside the normal range of duties' provides greater clarity about what is required.

By breaking the requirements of the job into a list of competencies, the hiring authority can then determine the most appropriate method of assessing an individual against each competency. For example, competencies that focus on personal qualities and attributes may best be assessed through personality testing, whilst an assessment centre approach may best measure behaviours.

3. How can competencies be identified?

When establishing appropriate competencies, it may still be helpful to break down the competency areas. The following may be a helpful model:

- **'Natural'** competencies - personality traits and characteristics
- **'Acquired'** competencies - those that the individual has attained or developed such as qualifications and experience
- **'Adapting'** competencies - how the individual has applied themselves during their career

4. Selecting against competency requirements

Once a job's requirements have been determined and candidates have expressed interest in the job, the hiring authority needs to determine who to shortlist and ultimately appoint. As with any selection process, different competencies may be identified best through different selection methods and therefore using a range of selection methods may be the most beneficial way to design a selection process.

5. Overview of the complete competency based process

Application forms and CVs

The application form or CV should provide evidence of the candidate's acquired and adapting competencies (i.e. their knowledge, experience and how they have applied their talents to different circumstances or situations). The screening process should identify the competencies against those set out in the person specification. In order to help identify competencies within the application form, it is helpful if the form requires the candidate to give examples and provides a 'free text' box within which the candidate can detail their response. This approach can also enable the candidate to consider more fully how suitable they are for the job.

Tests

Ability tests may be best suited to measuring acquired competencies, whilst personality tests may be more suitable for measuring natural or adapting competencies. It is essential to consider what competencies are to be assessed and whether testing is the best approach. When using tests as with other selection methods, it is necessary to consider the relevance of the test to ensure that the test does not unfairly discriminate against certain groups. This can be minimised by ensuring that the decision to use a test is only taken following careful consideration of the competency requirements of the job (taken from the person specification).

Interviews

A structured interview that probes past behaviours is most beneficial when using a competency-based approach. This style of interview will seek responses to questions about previous history and experience. The questions and potentially suitable answers should be determined around the competencies set out in the person specification and should focus on the natural and adapting competencies.

Assessment centres

This method brings together various methods such as interviews and tests and may therefore help to ensure that natural, acquired and adapting competencies are measured during the same process.

References

When using references as part of a competency-based approach, it may be beneficial to provide referees with a pro forma which requires responses linked to key competencies. A reference may seek information on natural, acquired or adapting competencies. However in order for the information received to be useful, it may be beneficial to seek specific examples rather than a yes/no or good/bad response.

Scoring

As with any selection process, it is useful to use scoring for each selection method. These may be weighted in terms of the importance of each method in identifying competencies and the importance of the competencies themselves. In terms of scoring against each selection method, a simple scoring method such as that set out below may be beneficial. However, when using any method of scoring it is essential that those undertaking the selection process have a clear understanding about how the process works and that there is a degree of uniformity across the decision makers.

Competency Interviews

This involves interviewing jobholders and/or managers in order to identify the specific events that form a critical part of the job. Interviewees are usually asked to describe particular experiences in their work and the interviewer will then probe to determine the actions taken and the outcome. From this, the interviewer can infer the competencies required, particularly when dealing with critical incidents. This approach tends to be most helpful in determining the difference between average and superior performance as it focuses directly on the competencies required rather than analysing the work that then needs to be developed into appropriate competencies. It is essential when implementing this approach that the interviewer is experienced in a competency approach and has the necessary interview skills

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