



## **GREATEST GUIDE TO COMPETENCY BASED INTERVIEWS**



## **PLUM'S COMPETENCY INTERVIEW SECRETS ... FOR YOUR FUTURE SUCCESS**

# COMPETENCY BASED QUESTIONS

**Competency based questions can sound a little scary as they are so involved. However, they are just a way for employers to make sure you know what you're talking about – complete with detailed explanations.**

Competency-based interviews are interviews where each question is designed to test one or more specific skills. The answer is then matched against pre-decided criteria and marked accordingly. For example, the interviewers may want to test the candidate's ability to deal with stress by asking first how the candidate generally handles stress and then asking the candidate to provide an example of a situation where he worked under pressure.

**Make sure that you answer these questions properly and you'll be in with a great chance of getting an interview!**

**Q: Describe a situation where you have worked as part of a team to achieve something.**

**What they're looking for:**

- Evidence you can work as part of a team
- Evidence you're able to make a contribution on an individual level
- Analytical skills. Reflecting on a work-based task, can you learn from the experience and apply this to your career?

**What you might say:**

"During peak season at Dixons I worked with my store colleagues to meet branch sales targets set by head office. It was important that all members of the team were positive and remained enthusiastic even though the shop was very busy. I contributed by meeting all of my personal targets and helping my colleagues close sales. I learnt that helping out team members rather than simply focusing on my own goals improves productivity and makes for a happier work environment."

**Q. Describe a situation where you implemented change.**

**What they're looking for:**

- They might not have spelt it out, but this isn't just a matter of describing a situation - you need to link it back to your key skills.
- Evidence of some of the following skills: planning and organisation, working with people, diplomacy, negotiation, communication, analytical, people management, problem solving.
- Evidence you're a pro-active employee who wants to make a contribution to the business. Show them you take your work seriously and care about the companies who employ you.

**What you might say:**

"I implemented and managed a formal work experience programme at my last company. As a result, we attracted young talent and found new recruits for junior roles which saved the company the high costs of advertising and wide interviewing. The scheme gave young people the experience to help them make career choices and improve their CVs while providing us with good quality work at a very low cost. I used my organisational skills to plan a busy summer placements schedule and put together a welcome pack to make sure the individuals were well-looked after and to promote the benefits of the company to them."

**Q. Provide an example of where you overcame a problem. Given the chance, what would you do differently?**

**What they're looking for:**

- Details of your problem solving skills.
- Evidence you can analyze a situation, come up with the right solution and implement it well.
- Don't get carried away with how well you performed. Good problem solvers should be able to learn from their experience and recognise that there's always room for improvement. Show them you're good but also that you can be even better.

**What you might say:**

"I was responsible for sending the company's new brochure to print but our managing director requested significant changes to the design at the last minute and I knew that it would not be possible to meet the printers' deadline. I had built a strong relationship with the printing company so my first move was to give them a call and explain the situation. It was agreed they would hold off for a few hours but I knew this would still not give the designers enough time."

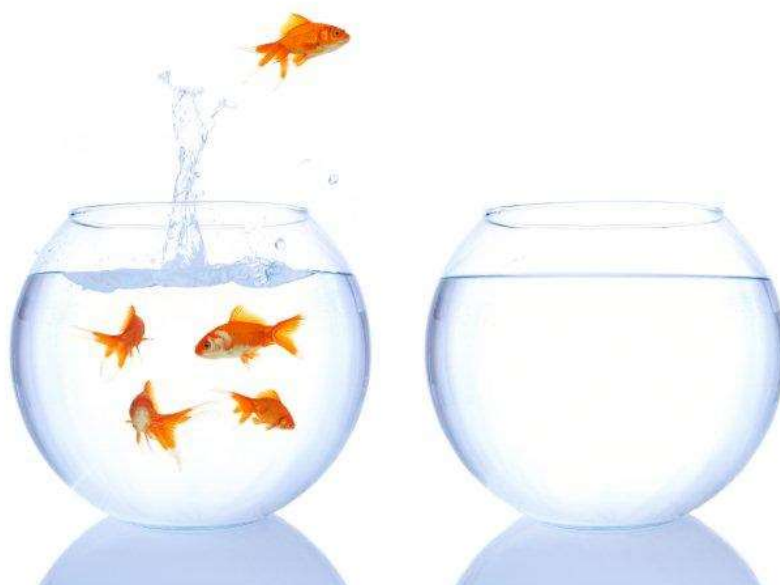
"I then spoke to the designers and together we worked out what had to be changed and what was quick to change. I approached my managing director and explained that certain amends should be left as their significance was disproportionate to the late fees we would incur. Having secured his sign off, the designers focused on the main issues and we were able to send the brochure to print without being penalised."

If the interviewers feel that there are areas that you have failed to address, they may help you along by probing appropriately. For example, in answering the question above "***Describe an example of a time when you had to deal with pressure***", if you focused on how you dealt with the practical angle of the problem but you forgot to discuss how you managed your stress during and after the event, the interviewers may prompt you with a further question such as "***How did you handle the stress at the time?***" This would give you an opportunity to present a full picture of your behaviour. This is where the marking can become subjective. Indeed, if an interviewer likes you, he may be more tempted to prompt you and push you along than if he has bad vibes about you.



## PREPARING FOR A COMPETENCY-BASED INTERVIEW

1. Preparation is key if you want to be able to answer all questions thrown at you without having to think too much on the spot on the day of the interview; it requires several steps:
2. Make sure that you understand which skills and competencies will be tested. It sounds obvious, but some person specifications can be a little vague and you will need to do some thinking in order to ensure that the examples that you will be using hit the spot. For example, your person specification may say that you need to have "good communication skills in dealing with third parties". For someone who works in customer service and is expected to handle complaints all day long, this will most likely involve a mix of empathy/understanding as well as an ability to be assertive in a nice way whenever required; however for someone applying for a commercial law post, this will most likely involve an ability to explain complex matters in a simple way, and not so much empathy. Understanding the requirements for the post, whether they are stated explicitly or not in the person specification is therefore crucial.
3. Identify examples from your past experience which you can use to demonstrate that you possess the skills and competencies that you are being asked to demonstrate. You do not have to find hyper-complicated examples; in particular the outcome of the story does not have to be extraordinary; what matters most is that the role you played in reaching the outcome was substantial.



**Learn to narrate the story using the STAR method. This means setting the scene, explaining how you handled the situation by placing the emphasis on your role, and detailing the outcome/result.**

**Using the 'STAR' technique to answer  
competency based questions**



The acronym **STAR** stands for

- Situation
- Task
- Action
- Result

It is a universally-recognised communication technique designed to enable you to provide a meaningful and complete answer to questions asking for examples. At the same time, it has the advantage of being simple enough to be applied easily.

Many interviewers will have been trained in using the STAR structure. Even if they have not, they will recognise its value when they see it. The information will be given to them in a structured manner and, as a result, they will become more receptive to the messages you are trying to communicate.

**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

## 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.

## Result/Reflection

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.



## EXERCISE

**Now it's your turn! See if you can apply the STAR method of answering competency-based questions for these examples ...**

**Q: Describe an achievement that you are proud of and tell us why. What did you find challenging?**

**What they're looking for:**

- An idea of what motivates you and what you value.
- You might think you lack the awards and prizes necessary to impress but remember examples in your private life can be relevant. The scale of your achievement will also reflect your level of work experience.

**Q: Tell us about the biggest change you have had to deal with. How did you adjust to it?**

**What they're looking for:**

- Evidence that you're comfortable with change. The significance of your example will be important here.
- Evidence of adaptability

**Q: Tell us about a time when you went against company policy? Why did you do it and how did you handle it?**

**What they're looking for:**

- If you're happy sticking to company rules
- Evidence you can deviate from the rules in a professional way
- Throw in communication, diplomacy and negotiation skills if possible!

**Q: Tell us about a time when you had to deal with a conflict within your team.**

**What they're looking for:**

- Team skills, diplomacy, empathy, conflict management...
- To know if you back away from arguments or take a leading role in resolving them

**Q: Please provide further information in support of your application**

**What they're looking for:**

- Even if this section appears to be optional you should always fill it out.
- This is your last chance to sell yourself: Use the space to cover off what you feel hasn't been adequately covered elsewhere, such as relevant experience or achievements.
- Tell them why you're the best candidate – how does your skill set and experience match the role?
- Explain why you're interested in their company. Perhaps you admire the work they produce, agree with the company culture or respect the way they do business.

**We hope you find our guide helpful and of course if you need any further help ... please contact us on [info@plum-personnel.com](mailto:info@plum-personnel.com) or call us on 0121 705 8157 and we'll be pleased to help.**



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## APPENDIX ONE

Here is a non-exhaustive list of the more common skills and competencies that you may be asked to demonstrate:

Skills and competencies for competency-based interviews		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Adaptability</li><li>• Compliance</li><li>• Communication</li><li>• Conflict management</li><li>• Creativity and Innovation</li><li>• Decisiveness</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Delegation</li><li>• External awareness</li><li>• Flexibility</li><li>• Independence</li><li>• Influencing</li><li>• Integrity</li><li>• Leadership</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Leveraging diversity</li><li>• Organisational awareness</li><li>• Resilience and tenacity</li><li>• Risk-taking</li><li>• Sensitivity to others</li><li>• Team work</li></ul>

### How competency-based interview questions are marked

Before the interview, the interviewers will have determined which type of answers would score positive points and which types of answers would count against the candidates. For example, for questions such as "Describe a time when you had to deal with pressure", the positive and negative indicators may be as follows:

Positive indicators	Negative indicators
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Demonstrates a positive approach towards the problem</li><li>• Considers the wider need of the situation</li><li>• Recognises his own limitations</li><li>• Is able to compromise</li><li>• Is willing to seek help when necessary</li><li>• Uses effective strategies to deal with pressure/stress</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Perceives challenges as problems</li><li>• Attempts unsuccessfully to deal with the situation alone</li><li>• Used inappropriate strategies to deal with pressure/stress</li></ul>

In some cases, negative indicators are divided into two further sections: *minor negative indicators*, i.e. those which are negative but which don't matter so much; and *decisive negative indicators* i.e. those for which they won't forgive you e.g. not asking for help when needed.

Marks are then allocated depending on the extent to which the candidate's answer matches those negative and positive indicators. Here is an example of a marking schedule for the table above:

0	No evidence	No evidence reported
1	Poor	Little evidence of positive indicators Mostly negative indicators, many decisive
2	Areas for concern	Limited number of positive indicators Many negative indicators, one or more decisive
3	Satisfactory	Satisfactory display of positive indicators Some negative indicators but none decisive
4	Good to excellent	Strong display of positive indicators



## COMPETENCY-BASED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Competency-based interview questions vary widely between sectors and depending on the level of responsibility to which you are applying. The type of competencies against which you will be assessed also depends on the actual post and the company who is interviewing you. For example, some companies view leadership as a competency on its own whilst others prefer to split leadership between a wide range of components (creativity, flexibility, strategic thinking, vision, etc).

You will find below a spectrum of competency-based interview questions, ordered by competency. The list is by no means complete but will give you an idea of what you can expect to be asked.

### ADAPTABILITY

Adjusts to changing environments whilst maintaining effectiveness

- Which change of job did you find the most difficult to make?
- Tell us about the biggest change that you have had to deal with. How did you cope with it?

### COMPLIANCE

Conforms to company policies and procedures

- How do you ensure compliance with policies in your area of responsibility?
- Tell us about a time when you went against company policy. Why did you do it and how did you handle it?

### COMMUNICATION

Communicates effectively, listens sensitively, adapts communication to audience and fosters effective communication with others

#### *Verbal*

- Tell us about a situation where your communication skills made a difference to a situation.
- Describe a time when you had to win someone over, who was reluctant or unresponsive.
- Describe a situation where you had to explain something complex to a colleague or a client. Which problems did you encounter and how did you deal with them?
- What is the worst communication situation that you have experienced?
- How do you prepare for an important meeting?
- Tell us about a situation when you failed to communicate appropriately.
- Demonstrate how you vary your communication approach according to the audience that you are addressing.
- Describe a situation when you had to communicate a message to someone, knowing that you were right and that they were wrong and reluctant to accept your point of view.

#### *Listening*

- Give us an example where your listening skills proved crucial to an outcome.
- Tell us about a time when you were asked to summarise complex points.
- Tell us about a time when you had trouble remaining focused on your audience. How did you handle this?
- What place does empathy play in your work? Give an example where you needed to show empathy.
- Describe a situation where you had to deal with an angry customer.

## **Written**

- What type of writing have you done? Give examples. What makes you think that you are good at it?
- How do you feel writing a report differs from preparing an oral presentation?
- What positive and negative feedback have you received about your writing skills? Give an example where one of your reports was criticised.
- How do you plan the writing of a report?

## **CONFLICT MANAGEMENT**

Encourages creative tension and differences of opinions. Anticipates and takes steps to prevent counter-productive confrontations. Manages and resolves conflicts and disagreements in a constructive manner.

- Tell us about a time when you felt that conflict or differences were a positive driving force in your organisation. How did you handle the conflict to optimise its benefit?
- Tell us about a time when you had to deal with a conflict within your team.
- Tell us about a situation where conflict led to a negative outcome. How did you handle the situation and what did you learn from it?
- Give us an example where you were unable to deal with a difficult member of your team.

## **CREATIVITY AND INNOVATION**

Develops new insights into situations; questions conventional approaches; encourages new ideas and innovations; designs and implements new or cutting edge programs/processes.

- Tell us about a project or situation where you felt that the conventional approach would not be suitable. How did you derive and manage a new approach? Which challenges did you face and how did you address them?
- Tell us about a situation where you trusted your team to derive a new approach to an old problem. How did you manage the process?
- Tell us about a time when you had to convince a senior colleague that change was necessary. What made you think that your new approach would be better suited?

## **DECISIVENESS**

Makes well-informed, effective, and timely decisions, even when data are limited or solutions produce unpleasant consequences; perceives the impact and implications of decisions.

- What big decision did you make recently. How did you go about it?
- How did you reach the decision that you wanted to change your job?
- Give an example of a time when you had to delay a decision to reflect on the situation.
- What is the decision that you have put off the longest? Why?
- When is the last time that you have refused to make a decision?
- Give us an example of a situation where you had to make a decision without the input of key players, but knowing that these key players would judge you on that decision (i.e. superior unavailable at the time).
- Tell us about a time when you had to make a decision without knowledge of the full facts.
- Tell us about a situation where you made a decision that involuntarily impacted negatively on others. How did you make that decision and how did you handle its consequences?
- Tell us about a decision that you made, which you knew would be unpopular with a group of people. How did you handle the decision-making process and how did you manage expectations?
- Tell us about a situation where you made a decision too quickly and got it wrong. Why did you take that decision?

## **DELEGATION**

Able to make full and best use of subordinate, providing appropriate support.

- What type of responsibilities do you delegate? Give examples of projects where you made best use of delegation.
- Give an example of a project or task that you felt compelled to complete on your own. What stopped you from delegating?
- Give an example of a situation where you reluctantly delegated to a colleague. How did you feel about it?
- Give an example where you delegated a task to the wrong person? How did you make that decision at the time, what happened and what did you learn from it?
- How do you cope with having to go away from the office for long periods of time (i.e. holidays). Explain how you would delegate responsibilities based on your current situation.

## **EXTERNAL AWARENESS**

Understands and keeps up-to-date on local, national, and international policies and trends that affect the organization and shape stakeholders' views; is aware of the organisation's impact on the external environment.

- Describe through examples drawn from your experience how you measure and take account of the impact of your decisions on external parties.
- Give an example where you underestimated the impact of your decisions on stakeholders external to your organisation.

## **FLEXIBILITY**

Modifies his or her approach to achieve a goal. Is open to change and new information; rapidly adapts to new information, changing conditions, or unexpected obstacles.

- Describe a situation where you had to change your approach half-way through a project or task following new input into the project.
- Describe a situation where you started off thinking that your approach was the best, but needed to alter your course during the implementation.
- Describe a situation where one of your projects suffered a setback due to an unexpected change in circumstances.
- Describe a situation where you were asked to do something that you had never attempted previously.
- Give us an example of a situation where your initial approach failed and you had to change tack.
- Describe your strongest and your weakest colleagues. How do you cope with such diversity of personalities?
- If we gave you a new project to manage, how would you decide how to approach it?

## **INDEPENDENCE**

Acts based on his/her convictions and not systematically the accepted wisdom

- When did you depart from the "party line" to accomplish your goal?
- Which decisions do you feel able to make on your own and which do you require senior support to make?
- Describe a situation where you had a disagreement or an argument with a superior. How did you handle it?
- When do you feel that it is justified for you to go against accepted principles or policy?
- Which constraints are imposed on you in your current job and how do you deal with these?
- When did you make a decision that wasn't yours to make?
- Describe a project or situation where you took a project to completion despite important opposition.
- When have you gone beyond the limits of your authority in making a decision?

## **INFLUENCING**

Ability to convince others to own expressed point of view, gain agreement and acceptance of plans, activities or products.

- Describe a situation where you were able to influence others on an important issue. What approaches or strategies did you use?
- Describe a situation where you needed to influence different stakeholders who had different agendas. What approaches or strategies did you use?
- Tell us about an idea that you manage to sell to your superior, which represented a challenge.
- What is your worst selling experience?
- Describe the project or idea that you were most satisfied to sell to your management.
- Describe a time where you failed to sell an idea that you knew was the right one.

## **INTEGRITY**

Ability to maintain job related, social, organisational and ethical norms.

- When have you had to lie to achieve your aims? Why did you do so? How do you feel you could have achieved the same aim in a different way?
- Tell me about a time when you showed integrity and professionalism.
- Tell us about a time when someone asked you something that you objected to. How did you handle the situation?
- Have you ever been asked to do something illegal, immoral or against your principles? What did you do?
- What would you do if your boss asked you to do something illegal?
- Tell us about a situation where you had to remind a colleague of the meaning of "integrity".

## **LEADERSHIP**

Acts as a role model. Anticipates and plans for change. Communicates a vision to a team.

- Tell us about a situation where you had to get a team to improve its performance. What were the problems and how did you address them?
- Describe a situation where you had to drive a team through change. How did you achieve this?
- Describe a situation where you needed to inspire a team. What challenges did you meet and how did you achieve your objectives?
- Tell us about a situation where you faced reluctance from your team to accept the direction that you were setting.
- Describe a project or situation where you had to use different leadership styles to reach your goal.
- Tell me about a time when you were less successful as a leader than you would have wanted to be.

## **LEVERAGING DIVERSITY**

Fosters an inclusive workplace where diversity and individual differences are valued and leveraged to achieve the vision and mission of the organisation.

- Give an example of a situation or project where a positive outcome depended on the work of people from a wide range of backgrounds and ideas
- Tell us about a time when you included someone in your team or a project because you felt they would bring something different to the team.

## **ORGANISATIONAL AWARENESS**

Demonstrates an understanding of underlying organisational issues

- Describe a project where you needed to involve input from other departments. How did you identify that need and how did you ensure buy-in from the appropriate leaders and managers?
- Describe a time when you failed to engage at the right level in your organisation. Why did you do that and how did you handle the situation?

## **RESILIENCE AND TENACITY**

Deals effectively with pressure; remains optimistic and persistent, even under adversity. Recovers quickly from setbacks. Stays with a problem/line of thinking until a solution is reached or no longer reasonably attainable.

- Tell us about a situation where things deteriorated quickly. How did you react to recover from that situation?
- Tell us about a project where you achieved success despite the odds being stacked against you. How did you ensure that you pulled through?
- Give us an example of a situation where you knew that a project or task would place you under great pressure. How did you plan your approach and remain motivated?
- Give us an example of a situation where you worked under pressure.
- Under what conditions do you work best and worst?
- Which recent project or situation has caused you the most stress? How did you deal with it?
- When is the last time that you were upset with yourself?
- What makes you frustrated or impatient at work?
- What is the biggest challenge that you have faced in your career. How did you overcome it?
- Tell us about a time when you successfully pushed one of your ideas despite strong opposition.
- Which course or topics have you found most difficult? How did you address the challenge?

## **RISK-TAKING**

Takes calculated risks, weighing up pros and cons appropriately

- Tell us about risks that you have taken in your professional or personal life. How did you go about making your decision?
- What is the biggest risk that you have taken? How did you handle the process?
- Describe one of your current or recently completed projects, setting out the risks involved. How did you make decisions? How do you know that you made the correct decisions?
- What risks do you see in moving to this new post?

## **SENSITIVITY TO OTHERS/EMPATHY**

Aware of other people and environment and own impact on these. Takes into account other peoples' feelings and needs.

- What problems has one of your staff or colleagues brought to you recently? How did you assist them?
- Tell us about an unpopular decision that you made recently? What thought-process did you follow before making it? How did your colleagues/clients react and how did you deal with their reaction?
- When is that last time that you had an argument with a colleague?
- When did you last upset someone?
- What steps do you take to understand your colleagues' personalities? Give an example where you found it hard to adjust to one particular colleague.

## TEAMWORK

Contributes fully to the team effort and plays an integral part in the smooth running of teams without necessarily taking the lead

- Describe a situation in which you were a member of team. What did you do to positively contribute to it?
- Tell us about a situation where you played an important role in a project as a member of the team (not as a leader).
- How do you ensure that every member of the team is allowed to participate?
- Give us an example where you worked in a dysfunctional team. Why was it dysfunctional and how did you attempt to change things?
- Give an example of a time when you had to deal with a conflict within your team. What did you do to help resolve the situation?
- How do you build relationships with other members of your team?
- How do you bring difficult colleagues on board? Give us an example where you had to do this.