

The competency based approach

Professionalism in the IT Industry
(COMP1635)



Job specs revisited



- Job specifications usually provide a wider-than-needed scope...
 - Why?
- Need to consider:
 - The basic job spec
 - *How the firm present themselves*
 - *The skills they place emphasis on*
 - The technical skills required
 - The soft skills required
 - What are the **key skills** they ask for



What's the point of a job spec?

- To inform **you** about the nature of the position
- To inform **you** of the skills required
 - Essential?
 - Desirable?
- To give **the recruiter** a baseline against which to assess your application form/interview
- To give **you** a mechanism through which **you** can demonstrate that **you** are **the right person** for the job.

What format should a job spec be in?



- Unfortunately, there are no hard and fast rules
 - Some give extensive information including
 - Job specification
 - Task specification
 - Person specification
 - Some just give the job specification without detailing the specific skills etc that the employer is looking for
 - **Many employers use a competency approach to assessing application forms and interviews**

The competency approach to assessment (1)



- This is based on the belief that:
 - *past actions are a strong indicator of future performance*
- Assessment (for both application form and interviews) focuses upon the specific skills required to succeed in a particular role e.g.
 - *Communication, negotiation, team leadership etc*

The competency approach to assessment (2)



- The competency approach (if employed correctly) will be used throughout the organisation:
 - To specify key competencies (skills) for particular job levels
 - To specify key competencies for a particular job role
 - To assess the application form for a particular role
 - To assess the interview for a particular role
 - To assess progress of an employee over time



What is a competency?

- A particular quality that an organisation has decided is required by its employees
- Typically, a competency will be based on one of the following key skills:
 - Team work, responsibility, commitment to career, commercial awareness, career motivation, decision making, communication, leadership, problem solving, ethics



Are they really that important?

- **YES!!**
 - Approximately a third of all employers use competency based techniques
 - Large employers especially use them
- For example:
 - Lloyds TSB; KPMG; IBM
 - Public sector employees:
 - London Fire brigade, Police, Civil Service...

An example: UBS

....competencies candidates are assessed against



- The **seven** core competencies:
 - *Problem Analysis;*
 - *Judgment & decision-making;*
 - *Innovation;*
 - *Communication & Impact;*
 - *Drive & Commitment;*
 - *Teamwork & Collaboration;*
 - *Planning & Organising.*

Details at:

https://www.ubs.com/global/en/about_ubs/careers/graduate-and-intern/application/assessment-procedure.html

Another example: IBM

...their view of competencies



- The firm uses a classification of:
 - ***Foundational competencies***
 - ***Leadership competencies***
- “....establish a consistent standard of excellence across our organisation and help us define what it means to be and “IBMer” to our clients, to our partners, and to our IBM colleagues”.
- **Note: IBM is used here as an example; the industry’s view on competencies, though, is very similar across the board...**



Foundational competencies (1)

- “The nine foundational competencies outline the characteristics and behaviours identified as *essential* for achieving success at IBM”.
- <http://www.ibm.com/ibm/responsibility/report/2010/the-ibmer/what-it-means.html>
- IBM’s application process as an example:
 - http://www-05.ibm.com/employment/uk/graduate-programmes/application_process/index.shtml
- Look at IBM’s job ads as examples:
 - <http://www-05.ibm.com/employment/uk-en/graduates.html>

Foundational competencies (2)



- **Adaptability**
 - Can you demonstrate that you are flexible enough to be able deal with changing situations, demands and uncertainties?
- **Client focus**
 - Can you show that you understand your client's needs? Can you build up a rapport quickly with your clients? Can you anticipate your client's needs and respond to them?
- **Communication**
 - Can you demonstrate that you are able to communicate openly and honestly?
 - Can you show that you can match your communication and style and method to your audience and situation?
- **Creative Problem Solving**
 - Can you give an example to show that you are able to take an analytical creative approach to a problem?
- **Drive to achieve**
 - Can you show that you are committed to success?
 - Can you show that you are willing to actively seek new knowledge and skills to help you achieve your goals?
- **Passion for the business**
 - Can you demonstrate you enthusiasm for and pride in your work?

Foundational competencies (3)



- **Taking ownership**
 - Can you demonstrate that you are able to identify and take responsibility for tasks and decision-making?
- **Teamwork and collaboration**
 - Can you show that are able to collaborate with others effectively?
 - Can you show that you respect and value others' differences?
- **Trustworthiness**
 - Are you able to demonstrate you have integrity in what you do?
 - Are you able to demonstrate that you take a professional approach when dealing with both clients and colleagues?



Leadership competencies (1)

- These are supposed to represent the characteristics they look for in their future leaders.
 - Note how they can address very different competencies to the foundation competencies



Leadership competencies (2)

- Client Partnering
- Collaborative influence
- Embracing challenge
- Thinking horizontally
- Informed judgement
- Strategic risk taking
- Earning trust
- Enabling performance and growth
- Developing firm-centred communities

Competency based applications (1)



- You will be given the competencies identified for the particular job you are interested in as part of the specification
- A competency will usually be addressed by a particular question on the application form
- For example:
 - Describe a situation in which you recognised a problem and then devised a solution to it. (This question relates to the Creative Problem Competency)

Answering competency-based questions (1)



- Demonstrate the competency by:
 - By giving a clear, relevant example
 - Providing a ***structured answer***
 - Making sure you have answered the question
 - Don't lose focus: demonstrate the skills they want you to!
 - Using appropriate key words

Answering competency-based questions (2)



- Use the **STAR** technique to make sure you have thought through your example and have covered every part of the question:
- First describe the **situation**, then what you had to do (**task**), then what you personally did (**action**), and finally what the outcome was (**result**).



The **STAR** technique

- **S**ituation – When? Where? With whom?
- **T**ask – Describe the situation or the task you were faced with
- **A**ction – How? What action did YOU take?
- **R**esult – What results did you achieve/ conclude? What did you learn from the experience?



STAR example (1)

- **Example:**
 - *Describe a situation where you have led a team in order to successfully complete a task or project.*



STAR example (2)

- **Situation**

- Part-time employment in retail outlet – Rixons'

- **Task**

- The sales staff had to set up the Christmas display once the store had closed with little time to spare.

- **Action**

- I was in charge of the team. I split the staff up into groups depending on their strengths.

- **Result**

- We managed to set up the Christmas display successfully. The Store Manager commended me for my supervisory skills.



STAR example (3)

- Now put it all together into a short paragraph:
 - *As a part-time store supervisor at Rixon's electronics, I was given responsibility for setting up the Christmas display as specified by Head Office. I was in charge of six staff members and we had three hours in which to complete the task once the store had closed. There were a number of different elements to the display – window dressing, connecting up the electronic gadgets and displaying the Christmas promotions. I organised the staff into teams so that we could work in parallel, using our skills appropriately. I had to coordinate each of the teams and resolve any problems that arose. The display was successfully completed with twenty minutes to spare and the Store Manager commended me on my supervisory skills..*



Weighting ↓

25%	S	Situation – when, where, who was involved?	Tip: Quantify! Try to quantify everything that you say. Always clarify timelines and numbers.
	T	Task – what was the specific challenge?	
50%	A	Actions – what did you do, what was role?	
25%	R	Results – what was the outcome, what did you learn?	

Writing phrases such as ‘I have great team-working skills’ is not enough; further detail must be supplied. The following is a STAR example of the team-working competency (attributing skills are highlighted):

Situation when, where, who was involved?	Throughout the three years of my degree, I was involved in six different team projects with over 25 different classmates.
Task what was the specific challenge?	To maintain my 2:1 grade (and, where possible, to exceed it)
Actions what did you do, what was role?	I took responsibility for coordinating the weekly team meetings, reviewing goals and progress, identifying weak areas and suggesting solutions, and motivating the team to achieve a 2:1 or over.
Results what was the outcome, what did you learn?	I obtained a 2:1 in five of the team projects (over 67 per cent) and a First (80 per cent) in one of our projects. I learned the importance of reviewing task management.



Prompt questions to help you with STAR

What was the situation and why was it difficult to handle?

I was working as a receptionist at a leisure centre, and I had to deal with a member who was not happy with one of the centre's rules. This rule did not allow children under 10 years to swim without an adult. Yet she wanted to leave her 7-year-old son with us to swim while she went shopping. It was difficult because she became angry when I did not want to sell her a swimming ticket for her son.

What did you do to address the situation and what was the outcome?

I clearly explained the rule regarding children under 10 years requiring adult supervision in the pool. I explained that this rule was there to ensure children's safety, as the centre did not have the facilities to be able to look after young children swimming without an adult. I did suggest that she could leave her son in the centre's supervised play area, and that she could go swimming with her son once she returned. The woman calmed down, and agreed to leave her son in the play area.

If you had acted differently, what could the outcome have been?

If I had not explained the reason behind the rule, or offered her an alternative, the woman would probably have felt that the centre was unreasonable and not customer-friendly. She might have cancelled her membership. She might also have asked to speak to the centre manager. She would no doubt have done so if I had been impatient with her, or changed my tone and become rude.



You may have more than one example to consider; try to choose the one that:

-
- is relevant and describes the skill being asked for
- demonstrates action and is something you actually did, as opposed to what you learned, or what you might do in a hypothetical situation
- is personalised by stating what you did, as opposed to saying what other people did or what happened
- has a positive outcome
- is appropriate and gives you something you can talk comfortably about if asked for more detail
- is specific - if the question asks for an example, then you should only describe one.

Keep your examples specific, recent and relevant. Employers want to hear how you have used skills and behaviours in a positive way, so that they can see how you would apply them in the workplace.



To summarise

- Competency based assessment is commonly used by large organisations (and smaller ones recently)
- It isn't easy – it isn't meant to be! The more you rehearse the more comfortable you become.
- The point is to assess your merit/suitability for a post based on previous experiences.
- Spend time considering competencies before the interview: it is time well-spent!
- Typically competencies are repeated across firms (they just go by different names or they are repackaged!)
- Try and create a pool of examples that can be reused and adjusted to match different competencies as required.

Acknowledgement



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