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Competency interviews

Advice on how to prepare for a competency interview

I am an senior manager and I will be attending an second interview for a position of Operations Director with a blue chip multinational next week. The second stage interview will be a half day on site. I will be interviewed by a number of my peers who are on the board of directors. I also will meet the hiring manager again as well as some direct reports. I am comfortable with the interview schedule but I have been told that the interviews will be competency based interviews. Do you have any suggestions/guidelines on what approach I should take and how I should prepare for this type of interview?

The interview is one of the most important parts of the job search process. It gives both you and the employer an opportunity to exchange information to determine whether you are a good match for the position and for the company. The interview should be regarded as a focused business conversation. Use this time to learn more about what the employer's needs are, and express what you can do to meet those needs. In many cases, you will interview twice for a position - once in a brief screening overview and once in a meeting specifically focused on the job opening. A second job interview is a systematic, purposeful conversation.

Your goal is to show the employer that you have the skills, background and ability to do the job and that you can successfully fit into the company and its culture. Essentially it is a competition and you are looking for them to choose you above the other candidates. It is also your opportunity to gather information about the job, the company and future career opportunities to determine whether the job and the company are right for you.

Most employers do not hire on the basis of qualifications alone - personality, confidence, enthusiasm and a positive outlook are also taken into consideration when making decisions to select the chosen candidate. It is increasingly popular for companies to use competency based interviews at the second round and final selection stages of a recruitment process. Here the emphasis is on job related questions which are compared with internal standards and criteria.

A competency is a specific quality, knowledge, skill or behaviour that a person should have to be successful in a position. Therefore, a competency based interview works on the principle that past performance is the best predictor of future behaviour. All candidates

are asked the same questions and notes are taken in order to evaluate candidates.

The aims of a competency based interview are:

1. To obtain information about how you have previously demonstrated the key competencies for the position through specific questions.
2. To explore the examples of competencies further to obtain a clear understanding of the situation, what you did, your contribution and the outcome.

Preparation is key to performing effectively at a competency based interview. Here are a few guidelines to help you prepare.

- Ensure that you have a copy of the job description which clearly defines the key competencies for the role.
- Know what the key competencies are for the role and what are not.
- Review and examine your experiences, achievements and successes and their relevance to the job.
- Think about examples, either past experiences or projects, which can be used at interview to illustrate each competency.
- Know why you think you should be considered for this role and why it appeals to you and be prepared to sell yourself at interview.

For an Operations Director, the key competencies could be deemed to be the following:

1. **Sets Priorities**

Tell me about a time when a crisis at work took precedence over your usual duties.
Why did you choose to handle it this way?
What specific steps did you take?

2. **Results Orientation**

Tell me about a time when you set and achieved a goal.
What achievement are you most proud of?
Describe something you have done to improve the performance or output of your work.
Tell me about a time when you have 'made things happen' for yourself/your team.

3. **Planning Capability**

Describe a time when you had to plan a large piece of work.

4. **Team Building**

Describe a situation where you were successful in getting people to work together to achieve a goal.

Describe a situation where conflict arose within a team. What did you do?

5. **Demonstrates Integrity and Trust**

How do you know that people trust you? Give an example.

6. **Problem Solving and Decision Making**

Describe your problem solving style.

Prepare examples and answers to the questions above for each specific competence. A useful way of preparing answers is using the **STAR** Technique.

Situation

Task

Action

Result

Action and results should contain most of your answer. Apply the who (you), what, where, why and how technique that is the model often used by journalists. As the interview will be focused on the past, it is important to assess the possible examples you could use by answering the following questions.

- What was your role in the situation?
- What were the potential barriers or pitfalls?
- How did you overcome them?
- Why did you choose that action?
- Where did this event take place?

Prepare clear, concise answers to each question. Practice your answers with a friend or even in front of a mirror. Ask for constructive feedback on your performance. The most successful candidates are those that practice the most.

Good Luck!!

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