Competency Assessment & Selection

Worktect's Competency Interview Guides

Provides questions and probes for each of 35 competencies. Includes positive and negative behavioral indicators, and a candidate summary. Can be used for panel/group interviews, and is customizable.

ASSESSMENT

For assessment of competencies, surveys are used most frequently. You can construct a competency assessment survey based on a competency model. The following section discusses considerations in developing a competency assessment survey. In a later section, we briefly discuss other methods of competency assessment.

Competency Assessment Surveys

If the competency model includes behavioral indicators, a competency assessment survey can be developed based on three to seven behavioral indicators per competency. Typically, there are four or five items per competency. The items may be grouped by competency or presented in random order. Rating scales may be based on various dimensions, as illustrated in the table below.

Assessment Dimension	Question used for all items	Sample Rating Scale					
Frequency	How often does the person demonstrate this behavior in an effective way, in relevant situations?	Rarely or Never	Occasionally	Often	Very Often	Almost Always	No Basis for a Rating
Descriptiveness	How well does this behavior describe the person you are rating?	Describes the person not at all	Describes the person to a small extent	Describes the person to some extent	Describes the person well	Describes the person extremely well	No Basis for a Rating
Effectiveness	Rate the person's effectiveness in demonstrating each behavior.	Poor	Fair	Good	Very Good	Excellent	No Basis for a Rating
Competency Levels	Which level best describes the person you are rating?	Not Developed	Basic	Intermediate	Advanced	Expert	No Basis for a Rating

Because most raters limit their ratings to the upper portion of whatever rating scale is used, we recommend using at least a four-point rating scale. In our experience, raters are more willing to use a wider range of a rating scale if the scale appears less evaluative, as are the rating scales based on frequency and descriptiveness from the table on the preceding page.

Here is an example of how the first few items of a survey can be formatted. To what extent does each behavior describe the person you are rating? Use the following rating scale and circle one number opposite each behavior.

Describes Not at All			Describes To Some Extent			Describes Extremely Well	No Basis for a Rating
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	X

1. Establishing Focus

1a.	Ensures that own unit's direction is aligned with the direction of the larger organization.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	X
1b.	Ensures that people in own unit understand how their work relates to the work of the larger organization.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	X
1c.	Ensures that people in own unit understand how their work supports the strategy and plans of the larger organization.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	X
1d.	Focuses own unit's efforts on a small number of critically important goals.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	X

2. Fostering Teamwork

2a.	Offers ideas, resources and support to peers and other throughout the organization.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	X
2b.	Draws out and carefully listens to the ideas, perspectives and concerns of others.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	X
2c.	Works toward solutions that all parties can support and that further the organization's goals.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	X
2d.	Provides opportunities for people to work together as a team.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	X

Competency assessment surveys often include a few open-ended questions, such as these;

- What are two or three of this participant's strengths?
- What could this person do to increase his/her effectiveness?

Survey Assessment Option 1: Assessment by Self and Manager

This option is easy to implement. Each participant completes a self assessment, and each participant's manager separately assesses the participant. The participant and manager then meet to compare and discuss their assessments and agree on several areas to target for development. We do not advise using only a self-assessment, because we have found that many persons are unable or unwilling to assess themselves accurately. It is important and useful for people to get feedback from others.

Survey Option 2. Multi-Rater or 360°-Degree Feedback

In multi-rater feedback surveys, multiple persons rate participants. The term, "360 feedback" is used when the feedback comes from all directions (e.g., from the participant's managers, peers, direct reports, and internal or external customers). Because of its richness and power, and the ease of computerized administration and scoring, 360-feedback has become widely used in the past decade.

For several reasons, we recommend implementing 360-feedback only with the assistance of external consultants. First, trained professionals can help participants understand the feedback, which usually includes item scores from each rating source, competency scores from each rating source, and frequency distributions of ratings. Second, because the feedback can be surprising and upsetting for some participants, it is important to have qualified staff available to help participants understand and manage their reactions to the feedback. Third, having external consultants receive and process the surveys helps ensure anonymity for participants' direct reports and peers, who might otherwise be reluctant to provide honest ratings. External consultants can also help the organization make and implement policy decisions about who will have access to feedback reports and whether the reports will be used as part of other talent management programs, such as performance appraisal and succession planning.

When 360-feedback is used, the organization needs to:

- Decide who will have access to feedback reports or summaries of them.
- Implement procedures ensuring confidentiality of data from individual raters Hold group or one-to-one feedback sessions, staffed by trained professionals, who can help participants understand the feedback reports, deal with emotional reactions to the feedback, and plan constructive action based on the feedback
- Develop and implement tools and procedures to support development planning based on the feedback

Other Forms of Competency Assessment

Several additional ways of assessing competencies will be briefly mentioned here.

Proficiency Tests

For some technical competencies, formal tests are available that are administered by organizations that offer training and certification. For example, tests are available to assess proficiency in typing, foreign languages, programming languages, and in selected areas of finance and accounting.

Assessment Centers

An assessment center is a program in which a group of participants completes a variety of activities such as an in-basket exercise, role-plays, group simulations, case analysis, and various tests. A team of trained raters observes the participants during the exercises and assesses them on the competencies. At the end of the program, which usually runs for one to three days, participants receive a feedback report summarizing the competency assessments and scores on all activities. Because it is very expensive to develop and implement assessment centers, they are not widely used.

Behavioral Event Interviews

Some organizations use Behavioral Event Interviews to assess the competencies of jobholders in an important category of jobs, such as mid-level or senior managers. Usually, there is a one-size-fits-all competency model that specifies a set of non-technical competencies for persons in this job category. A Behavioral Event Interview is developed to assess the competencies. This general method was described in the section of this workbook on Data Gathering. An assessment version of this interview takes 1 ½ to 3 hours and has "event" questions designed to elicit evidence of the competencies. For example, if Influence Skill is one of the competencies to be assessed, one of the "event" questions might be:

Tell me about a time when you needed to gain the support for an initiative from several different groups or individuals from different parts of the organization.

The interview might include 5 to 10 "event" questions like this. The interviewer uses a probing strategy to learn what the interviewee did, said and thought at key points during the situation described by the interviewee in response to the event question. The interviewer also asks about the outcome of the event.

After the interview, the interviewer "codes" the interview by assessing the amount and quality of the evidence for each competency. The interviewer prepares a feedback report and may hold a one-to-one feedback session with the participant to review the feedback report and help the participant begin to plan his/her development based on the feedback.

Because of the high-level of skill required to conduct this type of assessment, it is often done by external consultants. Behavioral Event Interview assessments are expensive, because a day or more of a consultant's time is required to conduct each interview, code it, prepare a report, and meet with the participant to review the report. Nevertheless, the power of the data from this type of assessment may justify the expense, especially if the participants are senior leaders.

Competency-Based Selection

Introduction

Applications in competency-based selection usually include selection interview guides for assessing candidates against competencies required for the job. The assessment usually focuses on those competencies that are more trait-like and thus more difficult to develop on the job. The assumption is that people who already possess these competencies will be more likely to achieve successful performance in the job than candidates who do not possess the competencies when hired. Several types of competency-based selection interviews are described in the sections that follow.

Behavioral Event Interviews

In a Behavioral Event Interview the candidate is asked to describe how he/she approached a specific past experience of a particular type. Here is an example of a main question asking for an "event."

Tell me about a time in the past two years when you needed to gain the support of several different individuals or groups for a project you wanted to implement. Walk me through how you approached this situation, the key things that you did, and the outcome of your actions.

The interviewer uses a probing strategy to elicit detailed descriptions of behavior and to keep the interview focused on what the candidate thought, did, and said at key points during the sequence of the event. Each "event" question is selected to elicit evidence for one or more of the competencies being assessed. The interviewer spends 15-30 minutes probing each event.

Immediately after the interview, the interviewer reviews his/her notes and assesses the candidate against each competency, using a rating scale or checklist of behaviors.

Behavioral Event Interviews may take from 30 minutes to two hours or more. In a longer interview there are more "event" questions, so that more competencies can be assessed.

Training Requirements

The standard Behavioral Event Interview is a powerful tool, but mastering the probing strategy is not easy. A typical interview training program takes two to three days and is often supplemented by additional practice or coaching activities. Most companies today would not allocate that much training time except for staff whose primary job role is in recruitment and selection.

Simplified Behavioral Event Interviews

More commonly used today are simplified Behavioral Event Interviews which provide specified follow-up questions after the initial "event" question. Here are some examples of specified follow-up questions that could be used with the "event question" asking about a time when the candidate gained support for a project he/she wanted to implement.

- What was the project that you wanted to implement?
- Whose support did you want to get for this project?
- What were your initial thoughts about how to approach this situation?
- What were four key things that you did in this situation?
- The first key thing that you said you did was _____. Tell me specifically what you did and how.

Instead of applying a complex strategy to decide what to ask, the interviewer simply selects from the follow-up questions or asks each of them in turn. The more detailed interview guide ensures that the interviewer will gain some useful data about the candidate's demonstration of competencies relevant to the job. But the process may feel a bit stilted and artificial to interviews, since it does not take into account all of the varied ways that candidates can respond to questions. For example, the interviewer may ask a question that has already been answered in the response to an earlier question. Senior managers are often reluctant to use a detailed interviewing guide.

Hypothetical Situations Interviews

In interviews of this type, the candidate is presented with a brief scenario, like this one: for a first-level manager.

• Your team of five employees has been working hard to meet a deadline. One of your employees asks to take the morning off to care for a sick parent whose regular nurse has quit. What would you say and do in this situation?

Each hypothetical situation is designed to assess one or two competencies. In this case, the competencies might be Diagnostic Information Gathering and Interpersonal Awareness. Based on the candidate's response, the interviewer rates the candidate on these competencies. The interview might include three to ten hypothetical situations, each designed to assess one or two competencies. Sometimes the hypothetical situations are presented as a written task to be completed between other, in-person interviews.

Interviews to Assess Technical Competencies

When it is important to assess technical competencies as part of the selection process, the interviewer must have sufficient technical skill to evaluate the candidate's responses to technical questions. The process does not need to be highly structured, and the interviewers do not need to be highly trained in interviewing skills. The interviewer can ask the candidate to describe how he/she approached a technical project or problem. The interviewer listens to the response, probes for detail about the candidate's actions and the reasons for them, and makes a judgment about the candidate's breadth depth of technical knowledge. Alternatively, the interviewer can pose a question about a technical situation he/she has faced and ask how the candidate would approach this situation.

DESIGNING A SELECTION PROCESS

The selection process often includes the following steps:

1. Prepare a job description for the vacant position.
2. Identify key competencies required for the position, along with other requirements (e.g., educational degree, previous experience, technical skill/knowledge, regular travel, salary range).
3. Advertise the position to attract candidates.
4. Screen candidate resumes to identify which candidates to interview.
5. Conduct initial screening interviews to identify short list of candidates.
6. Invite short-listed candidates to visit company and undergo additional screening interviews with short-listed candidates.
7. Conduct reference checks.
8. Make selection decision.
9. Extend offer.

The selection process often addresses other needs besides making good assessments of candidates. For example, the company may want to make a positive impression on candidates so that selected candidates will be more likely accept an offer. Another goal of the selection process may be to ensure that co-workers and key senior managers have an opportunity to meet short-listed candidates. Competency-based selection activities, which typically focus on Steps 5 and 6, need to be integrated into the overall selection process in a way that allows all goals of the selection process to be met. This may mean, for example, that a selection interview is not devoted only to assessment. Time must often be allotted to allow the interviewer and candidate to get to know each other.

PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS IN COMPETENCY BASED SELECTION

PREPARING INTERVIEW GUIDES

General Guidelines

1. Lay out the topics, questions and ratings in a sequence designed to make the guide easy for interviewers to use.
2. Include an outline of key points for the interviewer to cover at the start of the interview, including initial rapport-building chat.
3. Include spaces for the interviewer to take notes in response to each question.
4. Set the expectation that during the interview the interviewer will focus on eliciting information. Assessment ratings should be completed after the close of the interview.
5. In a one-hour interview, a total of 15-20 minutes must be set aside at the start or end, for initial warm-up and for the candidate's questions of the interviewer. This leaves 40-45 minutes of assessment time, which is enough to ask about three "event" questions assessing three to six competencies.

Guidelines for Creating Main Questions Asking for Events

1. When using the simplified behavioral event interviews, create main questions designed to elicit evidence for one or at most two competencies.
2. Avoid questions that give the candidate a clear idea of the desired answer. For example, to assess Customer Orientation, the second of the following two alternatives is preferable.
a. Tell me about a time when you were highly responsive to a customer.
b. Tell me about a time when you dealt with a demanding customer.

Guidelines for Creating Ratings Sections of Interview Guides

1. Provide specific behavioral criteria to use in rating the extent of evidence for each competency.
2. Use a simple rating scale such as the one below, for assessing the evidence for each competency:

1	2	3	4
No Evidence	Possible Evidence	Clear Evidence	Strong Evidence

Preparing Other Materials Used in the Selection Process

In addition to interview guides, competency-based selection usually requires additional forms and materials to be used by hiring managers or HR staff who are managing the selection process for a job. For example, it is often useful to have:

• A selection process planning form to plan who will be involved at each step of the selection process, what kinds of interviews they will conduct, and which competencies they will assess in each interview.

• A candidate comparison form on which the competency ratings of different candidates are entered, to facilitate comparison across candidates.

• Alternate forms of interview guides to assess different subsets of the competencies for a job or to assess the same competency using alternative main questions. Alternate forms facilitate the division of the assessment among different interviewers and ensure that the candidate does not get asked the same questions in different interviews.

• Interview guides for other types of interviews that are part of the selection process, such as a technical skills assessment interview or a hypothetical situations interview.

Training Interviewers

Interview training is essential to the success of a competency-based selection process. Besides learning to use a specific interview guide, interviewers usually need to learn techniques for follow-up probing and for keeping the interview on track. Learning these techniques can be difficult, because interviewers also need to stop doing things that they may normally do, such as asking leading questions (ones which suggest a particular answer), and making judgmental statements. Besides learning to elicit behavioral information, interviewers need to learn to base assessments on behavioral data from the interview, not on impressions and assumptions about the interviewee. Many interviewers also need to learn to be "tough" graders who are willing to note that there was no evidence for a competency, if that was case.

For persons who will be doing significant numbers of selection interviews on an ongoing basis, training in behavioral event interviewing may be worth the two- to three-day investment of training time. For staff who will be doing less interviewing, a one-day training program is sufficient.

For senior managers who will be doing selection interviewing, an abbreviated training program (2 to 4 hours) may be necessary, due to senior managers' limited availability for training, but in this case it is desirable to ensure that candidates are also interviewed by someone with significantly more training.

Using More than One Interviewer at a Time

When it is feasible, try having two interviewers sit in on one interview. One interviewer can ask the questions, while the other takes notes. These roles can be switched mid-way through the interview. After the interview, the two interviewers can discuss and agree on the ratings, reducing potential errors due to memory limitations.