

# Strengths-based interviews

In recent years, competency-based interviews have been the norm for many employers. However, as this was such a popular format, recruiters are finding that candidates turn up for interview knowing what to expect and giving well-rehearsed answers. This makes it difficult for them to find out what applicants are really like. Some recruiters are now moving to strengths-based interviews which focus on what candidates ENJOY doing rather than focusing on what they CAN DO.

The theory, based on positive psychology, is that everyone has strengths they are born with. By identifying your strengths and matching yourself to the role you will enjoy it more, thereby performing better and being able to rapidly learn new information. If you enjoy what you are doing, you may become engrossed and lose your sense of time – the state of consciousness referred to as ‘flow’ where you are driven to do things that play to your strengths, even when tired, stressed or disengaged.

During an interview situation, most people are likely to come across at their best when talking about what they enjoy, so it makes for a better interview experience for the candidate as well as the recruiter. Feedback on discussion forums where candidates have undergone a strengths-based interview often indicate that they found it interesting and less stressful than they expected.

Employers who now use the strengths-based approach include Reckitt Benckiser, Aviva, Standard Chartered, Ernst & Young, Royal Mail, Royal Bank of Scotland, BAE Systems, Unilever and Cisco.

## What might you be asked?

The recruiter in a strengths-based interview is looking to find out what kind of activities engage you and energise you. Interviewers will seek to assess your personal attributes, identify your abilities and look for genuine pride in what you do. They tend to ask questions relatively quickly in order to get a genuine response, which means you’ll probably be asked quite a few questions. Candidates have reported being asked up to 30 questions in an hour-long interview.

Some of the questions you might be asked include:

- What energises you?
- What makes a good day for you?
- What activities come naturally to you?
- What are your greatest strengths? When do you use them at their best? Are there situations in which you overuse these strengths? How can you capitalise on your strengths more?
- In your life, what have you done that you are most proud of? What made it significant to you and what did you learn from the experience?
- Do you think life is fascinating?
- What gets done on your ‘to do’ list? What never gets done?
- Do you prefer to start a task or finish a task?
- What do you do when you find a task boring?
- How do you stay motivated?
- How do you make sure you always do your best?
- Have you ever done something differently the second time round?
- How do you make others feel confident in your abilities?
- Have you ever used what you know to improve a situation?
- Do you prefer detail or the bigger picture?
- Do you keep your promises? How do you feel if you cannot keep a promise?
- Do you communicate differently with different people?
- How do you keep your relationships with your friends?



- Did you meet anyone new last week?
- Do you need to be an expert in something in order to be a leader?
- How do you handle working with someone you don't like?
- When would your friends and family say you are happiest?
- Would your friends describe you as organised?
- Are you a good listener?
- What does success mean to you?
- What have you contributed to a team to help their success?
- How do you feel about deadlines?
- When you have a plan, and then have to change it, how do you feel?
- When deadlines change, how do you feel?
- Have you ever missed a deadline?
- Do you act differently in different parts of your life?
- If you were at work and got a surprise couple of hours off, what would you do with the time?
- What makes you more likely to succeed in this role than other applicants?
- What makes you less likely to succeed? (Be careful to end this one by putting a positive spin on the factor that you say makes you less likely to succeed).
- Tell me about a company you admire? What would you like to ask them?

## Other things to remember

Interviewers will take note of your body language and tone of voice, which provide cues to what you have enjoyed. For example, if someone is genuinely enthused by an experience they tend to become more animated, their tone of voice is upbeat and they will sit up straight, smile and look happy. Many of the books on interview techniques that are stocked in the Careers Service have more information about body language and voice.

## How can you prepare?

Recruiters using the strengths-based approach tell us that it isn't possible to prepare for what questions you might be asked. However, this doesn't mean that you can't think things through beforehand. Start by considering your academic achievements, work experience and extracurricular activities. Think about what you most enjoyed, and why. When were you most engaged? What did you learn quickly? What did you take most pride in? Think about times when you've had a successful day. What did you do to that made it successful? What did you enjoy most about that day? Why? Put together a list of your strengths, with some examples of how you've used them in the past (recruiters are not looking for such lengthy answers as for competency questions – but still have examples to hand to back up your claims). Think about how these strengths could be used at the organisation you are applying to.

To aid your reflection and develop self-awareness, it may help you to have a go at personality questionnaires such as Profiling for Success: [www.sheffield.ac.uk/careers/students/gettingajob/psychometric](http://www.sheffield.ac.uk/careers/students/gettingajob/psychometric). Online interactive career planning tools such as 'Jobshopping' ([www.yorkshiregraduates.co.uk/graduates/jobshopping](http://www.yorkshiregraduates.co.uk/graduates/jobshopping)) have activities which can help you understand what you like to do, within a careers context. Also try the Values in Action free VIA survey [www.viacharacter.org](http://www.viacharacter.org)

You should also think about potential weaknesses (most probably things you dislike doing). For example, what things are always left on your to-do list and not finished? How might you overcome these weaker factors?

## Final thoughts

Assessing what you most enjoy will help you to clarify what you want out of your career, as well as preparing you for a strengths-based interview. If you find that the role you are applying for doesn't really play to any of your strengths, will you enjoy it? Are there more suitable jobs out there?