

Demonstrating your skills and competencies

Employers will decide if you have the necessary abilities to perform well in a job by assessing your skills and competencies.

Competencies are a set of skills that are needed to carry out a particular role. These are outlined in the job description and person specification. They are often called 'soft' or 'transferable' skills, such as communication, leadership and problem-solving skills.

By measuring against their chosen list of competencies, recruiters will decide if you have the necessary abilities to perform well in the job.

Competencies in context

Competencies can sound quite generic. However, analysing them in terms of the actual job can help to make them more tangible. Let's look at communication skills. This competency could be interpreted in many different ways. For example, these different contexts will require distinct elements of verbal communication skills:

- Giving a concise presentation to an academic audience
- Engaging disruptive schoolchildren in educational arts workshops
- Pitching creative ideas persuasively to an advertising client
- Reporting on performance to a critical board of trustees
- Providing impartial and non-judgmental advice to a distressed customer

By better understanding the context of the job, you can decide which examples from your own experience would best demonstrate these competencies.

Common competency questions

There are various ways in which an employer can ask competency questions during the recruitment process. They may explicitly reference the skill, or they may ask the question in a different way.

Understanding questions

e.g. "What are the essential elements of good communication?"

Self-description questions

e.g. "How would you describe your style of communication?"

Scenario questions

e.g. "What would you do if someone didn't understand what you were trying to communicate to them?"

Behavioural questions

e.g. "Describe a situation in which you demonstrated good communication skills."

Experience questions

e.g. "Tell me about your experience of communicating in different settings."

It is often useful to provide a specific example of when you demonstrated that particular competency. Turn over to see how you can do this using the STAR approach.

Using examples as evidence

Simply listing the required skills in your CV or application won't suffice – the employer needs evidence of each of these skills to feel confident that you have what they need. Think through your experiences carefully and find the best example to highlight each skill required. Work experience, volunteering, part-time work, extra-curricular activities and your studies can all be useful sources of examples.

For example, if you wanted to demonstrate leadership, you could describe a time when you helped your team to reach a decision when completing group coursework, or have taken the initiative to fundraise. These would require leadership skills such as careful communication, motivating others and delegating tasks.

If there is an area you feel you have little experience in, think about how you could get some experience to gain exposure to that skill.

The STAR approach

STAR is a handy acronym to use to structure examples of how you have demonstrated a particular competency.

Situation	Set the scene by briefly outlining the context of your example.
Task	Define what the task, problem or goal was.
Actions	Explain in specific detail what you did, how you did it and why you did it, as a way to demonstrate the skills they've highlighted.
Results	Outline the outcome to show your success in using that skill. You may also want to reflect on what you could have done differently or what you learnt from the experience.

Example

Can you describe a time when you had to adapt your communication style?

While working as a Spanish tutor for a GCSE-level student, I noticed that the student was becoming disengaged. (S)

I wanted to find out why this was, so I arranged to have a discussion with him on a more informal basis so he might feel more comfortable explaining his feelings. He explained that he was having trouble understanding the content and was doubting his language skills. I knew he had the ability, and provided evidence of this to boost his confidence. I encouraged him to talk about his favourite subjects, to gauge whether he preferred alternative teaching styles. It seemed he was a visual learner, and therefore we agreed that I would incorporate more visual techniques into my tutoring. I tried this and his engagement increased. I also regularly checked his understanding by asking him to use visual tools to represent his learning. (A)

As a result, he exceeded his predicted grade and achieved a B. (R)

What if I don't have a list of competencies?

- Be proactive and contact the organisation to ask which skills are essential to the role. You can then follow up with an application perfectly tailored to their requirements.
- Look at similar job adverts. Find a comparable opportunity in another organisation. Think about how the requirements they list would map over onto the position you are applying for.
- Look at a different job advert for that organisation. This might give you an insight into the culture of the organisation and the kind of people that they hire.
- Create your own person specification. What duties might you be carrying out in this job? Think about what skills you would need to perform those tasks effectively.
- www.prospects.ac.uk has profiles of lots of different types of jobs, with lists of typical duties and transferable skills that are commonly needed for those jobs.