

SKILLS & COMPETENCIES EMPLOYERS LOOK FOR

Familiarise yourself with the top skills employers look for in graduate candidates. Your understanding and skill matched experience will increase your understanding of competency based recruitment and boost your chances of success in today's competitive graduate labour market. This information will help you to:

- Familiarise yourself with the competencies used by employers in graduate recruitment,
- Enhance your answers in competency-based applications and interviews,
- Prepare yourself for strong performance and evidence-based examples at assessments,
- Gain a stronger awareness of your employability skills, and practical ways to fill your skill gaps.

Sixteen commonly used competencies have been listed; each is accompanied by a definition, a set of positive behaviours underpinning the competency (known as “behavioural indicators”) and a couple of example questions that many employers use either in application forms or at interviews.

The behavioural indicators are presented after it says, “People who are good at this:”. Many employers have a set of similar if not identical indicators that they associate with the competencies particular to their organisation, often referred to as a “competency framework”. When sifting application forms, conducting interviews and observing assessment centre activities, they will allocate points for answers or behaviour which provides evidence of these indicators. The indicators we have included can be viewed as the answer-sheets to job-hunting success!

Strong written applications and interview answers do not necessarily need to provide evidence of every single indicator associated with every competency. Identify the key competencies for your chosen area of work and then try to focus on 2 or 3 indicators when choosing your best examples. For example, if planning and organising is an important part of your chosen job, a strong answer might illustrate how you spent some time drawing up a plan of action before starting a project and then focus on how you prioritised specific action points and reviewed your plan regularly. Structuring high quality evidence around a few behavioural indicators is likely to impress future employers.

However, if you are taking part in group activities or presentations at an assessment centre, try to display as many of the positive behavioural indicators for relevant competencies as you can. Depending on the role you are applying for, teamwork and interpersonal sensitivity, oral communication and influence and persuasiveness may all be critical competencies to focus on. If you would like further guidance on how to use this leaflet to assist you in your particular career plans then you might wish to talk things through with a Careers Consultant, book today via [MJO](#).

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Achievement Orientation

What does this mean?

Maintains and inspires results – driven, focuses on results and key objectives.

People who are good at this:

- accept tight deadlines.
- act on their own initiative without being prompted.
- act to minimise risk.
- are prepared to make decisions.
- keep trying to achieve goals despite obstacles or failure and overcome setbacks.
- pursue issues until results are achieved.
- seek responsibility and challenges.
- take prompt action to get things done.
- translate ideas into objectives/goals and actions.

Examples of application/interview questions:

Recall an important goal that you set in the past...

- What strategies did you use to achieve it?
- What was successful?
- What personal achievement are you most proud of over the past year and why?

Commercial Awareness

What does this mean?

Understands the economics of the business. Understands the business benefits and commercial realities from both the organisation's and the customer's perspectives.

People who are good at this:

- are able to analyse financial trends (e.g., revenue, profit, productivity) and forecast accordingly,
- demonstrate breadth of awareness of business knowledge (e.g., recognises issues in finance, sales, marketing),
- identify new business opportunities,
- identify ways to reduce costs,
- show an awareness of commercial activity,
- show an awareness of competitive products and services and market trends,
- show consideration of such business implications such as increased revenue/profit, decreased expenditure, increased productivity, improved company image and market share,
- take commercial constraints into account.

Examples of application/interview questions:

Tell me about an occasion when you made a cost saving in the past.

- How did you choose where to make the savings?
- How much money do you think you saved?

What do you know about the competitors in this business?

- What differentiates us from our competitors?

Creativity and Innovation

What does this mean?

Generates and/or recognises how best practice and imaginative ideas can be applied to different situations.

People who are good at this:

- build on other peoples' ideas,
- encourage others to think laterally and to generate ideas,
- produce new, unusual, or different ideas,
- question traditional ways of doing things,
- recognise "innovative" solutions to issues and develop them,
- take a broad and receptive view of situations and courses of action without being,
- bound by convention.

Examples of application/interview questions:

Think about a problem that you have solved in a unique or unusual way.

- How did you generate the solution?
- What was the outcome?

What is the most entrepreneurial or innovative activity or idea that you have driven?

- How did you approach it?
- What was the result?

Customer Focus

What does this mean?

Understands who the customers are and provides a service that effectively meets their needs.

People who are good at this:

- actively seek and value feedback from customers,
- are professional, friendly and polite when dealing with customers,
- ask questions, listen to and understand customer needs,
- build and maintain relationships with customers,
- can identify internal or external customers in an organisation,
- contribute ideas for improving or developing customer services,
- deal constructively with customer complaints,
- keep customers informed and communicate effectively regarding any difficulties,
- put customers first,
- take responsibility for resolving customer problems.

Examples of application/interview questions:

Give an example of a time when you "went the extra mile" to help a customer...

- What was the situation?
- What did you do?
- What was the end result?

Give an example of a time when you had to deal with an angry customer...

- Why was the customer angry?
- What did you do?
- What was the outcome?

Decision Making

What does this mean?

Demonstrates a readiness to make decisions, takes initiative and originates action.

People who are good at this:

- assess situations and alternatives quickly,
- can make decisions without referring to others,
- commit self and others,
- make decisions on incomplete information,
- make decisions that may result in criticism,
- make quick decisions under pressure,
- take responsibility for own actions and decisions,
- take the first step to start a new idea.

Examples of application/interview questions:

Give an example of a time when you had to make a difficult decision...

- What was your decision?
- What was the possible impact of a poor decision?
- What was the outcome?

Describe a time when you did something that needed to be done but there was no one there to give you guidance?

- What was the situation?
- How did you approach it?
- What was the outcome?

Flexibility

What does this mean?

Successfully adapts to changing demands and conditions and maintains effectiveness.

People who are good at this:

- adjust schedules to take account of changing priorities,
- change or modify their approach/style in order to reach desired goals,
- handle several activities at one time with no loss of control,
- quickly focus on new topics,
- recognise when current approaches will not work,
- respond positively to external changes,
- respond quickly to new information, changes in objective/direction.

Examples of application/interview questions:

Give an example of a time when you had to adjust to a colleague's working style in order to complete a piece of work or project...

- What did you do?
- What was the result?

Describe a time when you had to change your plans unexpectedly...

- What were the main changes?
- What was your initial reaction?
- How well did you adapt?

Influence and Persuasiveness

What does this mean?

Effectively expresses self in a group and in one-to-one situations in a way that results in acceptance, agreement, or behaviour change.

People who are good at this:

- explain terminology in appropriate language,
- gain commitment by putting forward arguments supported by logic, facts and key benefits,
- make fluent, concise, and well organised contributions,
- negotiate or trade in order to win others over and sell ideas as opportunities,
- sell the benefits of an idea or change and summarise for the benefit of others/self,
- speak clearly, audibly and with animation,
- use different approaches and influencing techniques that are appropriate to the people or situation.

Examples of application/interview questions:

Describe a situation where you were able to positively influence the actions of others in a desired direction...

- How did you approach it?
- What happened?

Tell me about the last time you won someone over to your point of view...

- What were the key things you did which persuaded them?
- What kind of agreement did you reach?

Leadership

What does this mean?

Takes responsibility for the directions and actions of a team. Motivates and empowers others in order to reach specific goals.

People who are good at this:

- address issues of weakness and conflict and take appropriate decisions,
- allow and support the team in making their own decisions,
- clarify what needs to be done and set team objectives,
- co-ordinate group activities and allocate work and responsibilities,
- delegate tasks and responsibilities without losing control,
- develop/encourage a sense of purpose and unity in the team,
- keep the objectives of the task in the mind of self and others,
- make unpopular decisions to get the task done,
- motivate others to achieve objectives even when these seem difficult to achieve,
- provide a positive team environment (resources, attitude etc.),
- set up processes/plans to make the team more effective.

Examples of application/interview questions:

Tell me about a time when you were able to gain commitment from others to really work as a team...

- What did you do to motivate the team?
- Why did this work?

Tell me about a time when you had to lead a team that did not get along...

- What happened?
- What did you do?
- What was the result?

Motivation and Initiative

What does this mean?

Works hard towards goals and shows enthusiasm. Identifies opportunities and is proactive in putting forward ideas and potential solutions.

People who are good at this:

- achieve goals and then seek new ones,
- are enthusiastic,
- do a good job for the sake of doing it,
- do more than the minimum,
- identify problems and recommend solutions,
- look forward to or enjoy a challenge,
- make suggestions to solve problems and improve work,
- seek new opportunities and get involved,
- set challenging goals for self and others,
- show drive and determination to get results,
- tackle problems/issues without being asked.

Examples of application/interview questions:

Tell me about a time when you identified a problem at work and took steps to improve it..

- What did you do?
- What was the outcome?

Describe a time when you worked especially hard...

- What motivated you to work hard?
- How well did you do?

Oral Communication

What does this mean?

Speaks clearly, fluently and in a compelling manner to both individuals and groups.

People who are good at this:

- are expressive and interesting to listen to,
- explain terminology in appropriate language,
- keep to the point,
- make fluent and well organised contributions,
- retain the audience's attention e.g., by use of summary and restatement,
- speak confidently and articulately without hesitation,
- use different approaches that are appropriate to the people or situation,
- vary tone and intonation, speak clearly and audibly.

Examples of application/interview questions:

Tell me about a talk or presentation which you have given recently...

- How did you tailor it to suit your audience?
- What steps did you take to capture/hold the attention of the audience?

Describe a time when you had to explain something to someone you had never met before...

- How conscious were you of regional/national differences in speech/communication?
- How did you adapt your style?
- How did you gauge the effectiveness of your communication?

Personal Development

What does this mean?

Maintains an up-to-date personal development plan and takes action to ensure personal development takes place.

People who are good at this:

- actively seek feedback on performance from colleagues,
- actively seek out learning opportunities,
- ensure that opportunities are found to reinforce new and developing skills,
- keep up to date in his/her speciality,
- learn and can apply new information/skills effectively to problems,
- maintain an up-to-date learning log or achievement portfolio,
- put time aside to further own skills and competencies,
- regularly review objectives, improvement plans and career development,
- seek out opportunities to develop self.

Examples of application/interview questions:

Give an example of a time when you learned a new skill...

- What was the skill?
- What did you do to learn it?
- How did you apply your learning?

What have you done outside of formal study to develop your skills?

- What did you do?
- What was the result?

Planning and Organisation

What does this mean?

Organises and schedules events, activities and resources. Sets up and monitors timescales and plans.

People who are good at this:

- achieve tasks and assignments within the required timescale,
- consider what resources (e.g., people, money, equipment) are needed to achieve objectives,
- make a list of things to do,
- make contingency plans,
- make time for planning and plan a course of action before starting projects or activities,
- review plans and actions regularly,
- set targets and priorities, taking into account short and long-term needs,
- use a system (e.g. a diary, a Gantt chart) to keep track of activities and deadlines.

Examples of application/interview questions:

Give me an example of when you had to organise a piece of work, project or event...

- How did you prepare and plan for it?
- What time scales did you set?
- How well did it go?

Give me an example of a time when you had to work to an important deadline...

- How manageable were your timescales?
- What did you do to ensure that the deadline was met?
- What did you learn?

Problem Solving and Analysis

What does this mean?

Identifies and solves problems, works with information and handles a mass of diverse data, assesses risk and draws conclusions.

People who are good at this:

- analyse facts, figures or information looking for trends,
- anticipate obstacles/problems,
- break down complex data and identify key information,
- can see several points of view and weigh up the alternatives accurately,
- distinguish between fact and assumption,
- draw clear conclusions from complex information,
- identify and evaluate alternative courses of action,
- identify strengths and weaknesses in arguments/situations,
- identify the main components or root cause of a problem,
- relate and compare data from several sources.

Examples of application/interview questions:

Give me a recent example of a time when you were faced with a complex problem...

- What made it complex?
- What key steps did you take to resolve the problem?

Describe the last time you had to analyse a lot of information or data...

- How did you pick out the essential information from the less relevant?
- What did you learn from the analysis?

Resilience

What does this mean?

Maintains performance under pressure or opposition. Remains calm, stable and self-controlled.

People who are good at this:

- are not overtly sensitive to criticism,
- are optimistic,
- are self-controlled,
- cope with disappointments/setbacks and keep going,
- deal with pressure calmly,
- find ways around difficulties,
- keep control in stressful situations,
- keep difficulties in perspective.

Examples of application/interview questions:

Describe a situation where you had to work under pressure...

- How did you feel under this pressure?
- What impact did this have on your work?
- What was the cause of the pressure?

Give an example of a time when you experienced a set back...

- Describe what happened.
- How did you react to the problem?
- To what extent did others see how you were feeling?

Teamwork and Interpersonal

What does this mean?

Builds and develops appropriate relationships with peers, academic staff, colleagues or customers. Interacts with others in a sensitive and effective way. Respects and works well with others.

People who are good at this:

- allow time for others to understand and contribute,
- appreciate and use the strengths of others in the team,
- are aware of the impact of their behaviour on others,
- are friendly, open and communicative,
- co-operate with others to achieve goals and value the team as a way of getting things done,
- deal with difficult people effectively,
- encourage and acknowledge other people's contributions,
- listen to other people in the team and build on ideas put forward by others,
- share knowledge, information, and opinions with the team,
- take time to understand issues from other standpoints.

Examples of application/interview questions:

Think of an example of working co-operatively as a team member to accomplish an important goal...

- What was the goal or objective?
- How did you interact with others on this project?

From time to time, we come across people who we find it difficult to deal with. Describe a particular occasion when this happened to you...

- How did you handle the situation?
- What was the outcome?

Written Communication

What does this mean?

Expresses ideas effectively in a clear and concise manner, using appropriate grammar, style and language for the reader.

People who are good at this:

- clearly state the purpose of the communication and any actions,
- compile documents that are concise and easily understood,
- convey complex concepts in words or diagrams,
- do not use unnecessary word/phrases,
- structure information appropriately with a clear introduction and conclusion,
- use appropriate and meaningful headings,
- use correct spelling, punctuation, and grammar,
- vary vocabulary, style, and tone according to the recipient,
- write reports that are well presented and conform to standards.

Examples of application/interview questions:

Consider a time in which you had to use your written skills in order to get an important point across.

- How did you approach this? What was the result?

Think about a significant written document/report/presentation which you had to complete...

- What was difficult? What was easy?
- How did you feel about the result?
- What would you have done differently?