

## Preparing for a Core Competency Interview

Researchers have thoroughly explored the effectiveness of various interview, assessment, and testing strategies for making hiring decisions. Their studies have shown that when employers use only conventional one-on-one interviews, they have a lower chance of successfully predicting how well a candidate will perform on the job than when they add core competency interviews.

Core competency interviews (also known as behavioral event interviews) are research-style interviews that read between the lines of people's resumes to determine their competencies. For instance, is a candidate motivated more by achieving results or by working with a team? Is he or she more of a directive manager or a coaching one?

Core competency interviews also avoid many of the well-known pitfalls of conventional interviews, such as when interviewers make a decision in the first five minutes or are influenced by a halo effect or other cognitive biases.

## NOT A STRESS INTERVIEW

Not only does a core competency interview yield more reliable data than a conventional one, but for most candidates it is at worst a neutral experience, and at best an interesting and enjoyable one. It can be intense because it requires people to remember past experiences in detail in order to tell their stories. It is also longer than most traditional interviews, lasting as long as two hours. But it is not a stress interview. At the end of a core competency interview, it is not unusual for an executive to report that it was the first time she felt an interviewer truly learned anything about her, or that she enjoyed having someone really listen to how she works (because during conventional interviews, the interviewer usually talks more than the candidate).

## THE INTERVIEW FORMAT

Core competency interviews are structured with a standard format and consistent probing strategy that elicits detailed descriptions of a person's past behavior—not what he or she boasts about or believes about him- or herself, but what he or she actually did, said, thought, and felt in particular past situations. When done well, this technique re-creates a vivid movie, as if the interviewer were back in the past following the candidate with a video camera and having access to his or her thoughts.

These interviews do not elicit general descriptions, philosophies, jargon, and rehearsed responses. (A classic rehearsed response: "What is your greatest weakness?" "Sometimes I work too hard.")

A typical core competency interview includes the detailed stories of three or more situations from the recent past. For the first situation, it's best if the candidate describes something that happened within the past 12 months. This makes it



easier to remember the details. People with particularly good memories can use older examples for the other situations if they do well with the first one.

The candidate selects the situations in response to general questions from the interviewer. For each situation, the candidate gives a short nuts-and-bolts timeline of key events, followed by a much longer, more detailed description.

## CODING THE INTERVIEW

When the interview is finished, the interviewer codes it carefully for behavioral evidence of specific competencies, and presents a competency summary to the hiring manager and selection committee.

The core competency interview is just one piece of the hiring puzzle—it is not used in isolation to make a hiring decision. It avoids many of the pitfalls inherent in conventional interviewing, and adds reliable, robust data to the information that the hiring manager and selection committee obtain in other ways.

## ABOUT THE INTERVIEWER



Debra Howard founded her consulting business in 1991. Before then, she worked for Cambria Consulting, a human resource consulting firm in Boston, where she was certified in job competency assessment and core competency interviewing. She conducts core competency interviews for critical searches, and offers a half-day training program, *Interviewing and Hiring High Performers*, to teach clients how to improve their interviewing technique and search process to attract, hire, and retain high performers.