

Why Competency-based Selection should be in your toolkit

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Overview

Competency-based selection (also known as Behavioral selection) is a well-known selection method about which many books have been written, and many training courses delivered. Despite this, in my conversations with other in-house recruitment teams, it has surprised me how few companies apply the technique as part of their recruitment methodology.

I therefore thought that it might be helpful if I provided an overview of the concepts and logic behind this system. Whether or not you choose to actually apply the process, I certainly think it should be given consideration first.

Key Advantages of Competency-based Selection

- Improved Objectivity, leading to truer talent acquisition
- Consistency in hiring decisions
- Legal Protection for the employer
- Improved consensus on hires across multiple stakeholders

How it Works

The intention of a competency-based assessment is to move hiring decisions away from the classic intuition-led process (i.e. away from: "I *feel* that this person would be a great hire"). Instead, the system brings in a certain amount of objectivity, replacing much of the subjectivity of traditional assessments. Candidates are not primarily assessed or rated based upon their aspirations, opinions or similar. Rather, the underlying premise is that we can anticipate how a candidate will behave in a role in the future through an assessment of their behavior in the past.

In competency-based interviews, questions are asked that require reference to specific events (e.g. "When was the last time you were overwhelmed by your workload?"). Candidates are discouraged from giving general answers and asked to focus on specific incidents. By examining how a candidate has actually approached real situations in the past, we can judge more accurately how they will act again in similar circumstances.

I state above that this is a 'certain' amount of objectivity, rather than total objectivity, because no selection system can be expected to entirely remove opinion. However, what competency-based selection does is provide substantial justification for recruitment decisions. By drawing upon multiple sources and contributors, and aggregating the data drawn from these interviews, the outcome ceases to be an individual manager's choice and instead becomes a consensus. This means that new hires will have the buy-in of all stakeholders, improving prospects for their successful induction into the company. It also results (through keeping the structured interview notes from each interviewer) in a substantial body of evidence to justify hiring decisions, protecting employers from litigation.

Setting the Target

In order to be able to make a judgment on a candidate's capability, we need to have a frame of reference to set them against. This is something that is individual to every business, as no

two organizations have the same expectations. Candidates need to be assessed against defined personality traits (Competencies) appropriate to the role in question. Typically these Competencies will be drawn from a large global framework, in combinations that are different for each business area (as different departments will need different profiles).

Competencies tend to measure behaviors such as Adaptability, Working under pressure, Customer management etc.. A candidate's interview performance against each Competency is related to Key Actions and other criteria that the employer has defined as belonging to the trait in question.

Rating the Candidate

By asking a series of specific questions (at Red Hat we provide interviewers with the questions they need in a formal interview guide, customized for each business area) and rating the capability that the candidate has demonstrated in their answers against the chosen Competencies, the interviewer has all that they need to move into the process of decision-making.

All interviewers gather together (virtually, where required) to discuss their findings. The different scores that they have each given to the candidate are compared and discussed, enabling agreement of an overall score for the candidate against each Competency. It is these Competency scores that are then used to decide whether to pursue a candidate further or not.

In the process of discussing their findings, there will be differences of opinion between interviewers. That is where the interviewer's notes are essential, as all decisions on scoring need to be justified by findings from the interview. I've found that as an interviewer knows that they will have to justify their score encourages a high-level of self-discipline in producing these notes. Thus there is no room left for hunches and loosely-explained opinions, which as I stated at the start is one of the intentions and benefits of a Competency-based system.

Conclusion

We've seen why a competency-based selection system can benefit businesses in a number of directions. By having a consistent and objective process in place, employers are not only being transparent and fair to candidates, but they are also greatly reducing corporate risk from litigation associated with decisions that can be challenged as unfair or discriminatory.

Perhaps most importantly, introducing this objectivity helps ensure that organizations are truly hiring the best talent, which is ultimately our goal as recruiters.