

Writing behavioural interview questions

On this page

Capability-based questions

Motivation questions

Steps in writing behavioural interview questions

Taking the time to write interview questions for the role to be filled will put you, and the other assessors, in a good position to measure candidates' capabilities.

Behavioural interview questions should:

- be capability-based, allowing you to assess behaviours expected for the role
- be realistic
- be clear, brief and unambiguous
- be open-ended
- use past tense – e.g. “How did you...?”, “Tell us about a time when...”
- ask for facts, not a candidate's feeling or opinion about something
- ask about practical situations, not hypothetical (how they think they might behave)
- be outcomes-focused.

Capability-based questions

Capability-based questions are interview questions that examine whether candidates have capabilities (knowledge, skills and abilities) at the level needed for the role. It is recommended that each question focuses on no more than two capabilities, although responses often provide evidence that covers other capabilities.

Use the interview to explore the main role requirements. These include the **focus capabilities**, and knowledge and experience where these requirements are in the role description. Each interview question can be designed to allow candidates to give examples of how their capabilities, knowledge and experience meet the role requirements. **Complementary capabilities** may also be assessed in the interview to help to distinguish between high performers, for example.

Motivation questions

You can also ask questions about motivation to decide if the candidate's values, interests and preferences are suited to the role. For example, in asking candidates about their motivation to work in the public sector you are looking for people who want to create a better society more so than those who driven by money or status.

Asking candidates about their motivation can span topics such as having a passion to work in a particular field (e.g. social services), having an interest in supporting and developing team members as part of manager responsibilities, being inspired by using their creativity etc."

Steps in writing behavioural interview questions

The following steps will help you to design behavioural interview questions that are customised to the role you are recruiting for.

Step 1: Identify capabilities and levels

Firstly, refer to the role description and your assessment plan or matrix to identify the capabilities to assess (see **Selecting assessment methods**). Also make sure you are aware of the capability level being assessed so that you are getting information relevant to the role.

Step 2: Decide capabilities to be assessed for each question

Decide which capabilities you want to assess with each question and think about how these relate to the role. For example, when examining the Manage self capability for a Park Ranger role, you may be looking for something different than for the same capability and level for a Disability Support Worker role.

Step 3: Develop behavioural questions

A good behavioural question allows candidates to draw on their work experience. To do this is to think about the types of situations that are encountered in the role. For example, a Client Services Officer in a call centre is likely to have challenging situations where they need to seek assistance from a more senior colleague or where they cannot resolve an enquiry to the client's satisfaction. You could base a question on these challenges.

For example:

Client Services Officers often deal with clients who are not satisfied with the outcome of their enquiry. Could you tell us about a time when you dealt with a dissatisfied client?

It is important to avoid making questions too specific; asking about situations they may not have encountered or that is unique to your work environment. Your questions should allow all candidates to demonstrate relevant experience that is transferable to the role you are filling. Here is an example of taking a narrow question and making it applicable to a broader audience, while still assessing the capability (in this case Act with Integrity):

Narrow question

Tell me about a time when you were involved in a procurement process and an external service provider asked you for preferential treatment.

Replacement question

Tell me about a time when you were asked to do something that went against policy or that you believed was not right.

Finally, if a question doesn't relate to the role, don't ask it. See: [Australian Human Rights Commission: Questions in job interviews](#).

Step 4: Probing questions

Probing questions are useful for:

- Drawing out more information – e.g. what was the situation? Can you give an example? What was your role?
- Examining a candidate's level of self-awareness and commitment to personal growth – e.g. What did you learn from this situation? What would you do differently if faced with a similar situation?

Preparing probing questions in advance allows assessors to be consistent in seeking further information from all candidates.

Step 5: Set standards for rating responses

It is a good idea to set the standards for rating responses when designing your questions. By listing the main points you want candidates to cover you can score responses using a standard rating scale. See [set the standards and rating approach](#) for more information.

Example – Act with Integrity (Adept)

The following question is assessing the Act with integrity capability at the adept level:

“Give an example of a time when you identified and explained ethical issues to your team/unit?”

Some of the points you could look for candidates to address include:

- The nature of the issue (does the situation reflect an appropriate level of seriousness or complexity given the seniority of the role)
- How did they identify the issue (e.g. did they rely on judgment, experience, knowledge of the code of ethics?)
- How did they approach the team conversation (e.g. did they do it in an appropriate way e.g. in a structured way during a team meeting or in a negative way e.g. by criticising one team member in front of others)
- What was the result (e.g. did they make sure everyone understood the message? Was there a change in behaviour as a result of the discussion?).