

Competencies – communicate them effectively

Across the world of work, the use of competencies in much human resources decision-making has become increasingly widespread – also in the UN. Questions and answers about competencies and their relevance for your future.

If you have been applying for positions within the UN system and have been invited for an interview, it is important for you to know that you may well find yourself taking part in a competency-based interview. Perhaps these are the questions you are asking yourself:

What exactly is a competency?

It is the combination of knowledge, skills, personal characteristics and behavioural traits that you possess – in addition to your specific technical knowledge – and use appropriately for optimum success performing specified work.

Why are competencies so important?

Across the world of work in general over the last two decades or more, the use of competencies in much human resources decision-making has become increasingly widespread. All types of organisations have come to see that defining the competencies they seek in their staff at any level can lead to better choices, higher productivity and greater job satisfaction.

How do I know what competencies are needed for a particular job?

Defining certain competencies needed for specific jobs, and assessing applicants against those competencies is widely considered to be a more standardised and fairer method of assessment than previous selection processes. As competencies relate more to what you can **do** rather than what you **know**, they are observable and therefore can be measured more accurately by identifying behavioural indicators. These are actions or behaviours that describe how people perform in different situations when exemplifying the presence of the underlying competency. Every job can be described in terms of key competencies. This means they can be used for all forms of assessment, including appraisals, training needs analysis and perhaps most importantly – recruitment.

What does this mean for me if I want to apply for a vacancy?

If you are considering applying for a post, it is vital that you do a thorough self-analysis of your own core competencies, skills and experience. It means not only demonstrating that you have the qualifications and experience required for any specific position, but also in showing that you match the specific competencies identified as vital for that job. It requires also a level of self-judgement of own strengths and weaknesses, of mistakes made and lessons learned from previous work and other life experiences.

Why is it important to have done this self-analysis of competencies and skills?

Access to information on vacancies in any of the organisations and agencies within the UN system has never been easier. Most vacancies at all levels are posted on the websites of the individual agencies with relevant application information. However, this has enormously increased the rate of both internal and external applications for each post. If you are interested in applying, it is important that you carefully analyse what any vacancy is asking for in terms of education, years of experience and competencies before deciding whether it is realistic to apply. Most importantly – because this is where self-knowledge and preparation reveals itself – is the way that you match your own competencies and experience with the competencies identified as needed for the job. A well prepared application clearly demonstrating this match – while not guaranteeing a successful result – can make an immeasurable difference to that application moving to the next stage – a competency-based interview.

What exactly is a competency-based interview?

The rationale for competency-based interviewing¹ is that past work behaviour is a good predictor of future job performance. Accordingly, the interviewer's goal is to learn, by obtaining specific examples of when and how a person demonstrated particular behaviours, whether they can apply the same competency in the position for which they are being interviewed. Through the experiences and examples given, the interviewers are also listening for the candidate's clarity of thinking, self-knowledge and how well ideas are expressed. Competency-based interviews reveal considerably more about you than traditional interviews.

What are the particular challenges of a competency-based interview?

Specific, behaviour-based questions related to competencies are more difficult for you to anticipate or to prepare «pat» answers for. Therefore, if you are already clear about your abilities and have ready examples to illustrate them, you will be seen by interviewers as more authentic. To have these ready examples easily recalled at a moment of stress during the interview, the key to success is preparation, preparation and more preparation.

How can I best prepare myself for a competency-based interview?

For every competency, it is important to relate a specific situation – or preferably several situations – where you demonstrated that competency, the actions you took and the results you achieved. In this way, you will more easily be able to formulate your answers in a way that will help the interviewer determine if there is a good fit between you and the job in question. A simple formula for phrasing your answer is to think of CAR – briefly give the Context, state the Actions you took and the Results you achieved. At the interview when stress is usually quite high, it is a simple and effective method to form your answer in a concise and coherent manner.

What sort of questions will the interviewers ask to identify my competencies?

Usually the Interviewers will have agreed upon a number of pre-planned questions to ask you. For each of these questions they will ask for real-life evidence where you have demonstrated the behaviour or skills. They will know what the desired behaviours are and will look for positive indicators that you have demonstrated these. Questions will often start with phrases such as: «Tell me about a time when you....», «Give an example of a situation where....», «Describe a scenario....». You may also be asked questions such as «How would you rate your communication skills?», «Describe your management style». Even with this type of question, you should wherever possible relate your answer to a particular experience.

What can I do to maximise my chances of success?

While competency based interviews are standardised and considered to be more objective and fairer than traditional interviews, there is always the human element in any interaction. A typical interviewer will form an impression of you within minutes from the start of the interview. It is therefore very important that you give a good first impression. The more prepared you are for the interview, the more likely it is that you will feel confident, and therefore able to present yourself in the best light. It is good to remember that being open and answering the questions fully helps the interviewers in their work of assessing the best candidate for the job. Politely but confidentially showing your strengths and achievements, admitting your mistakes and demonstrating the lessons learned from those mistakes, will give the interviewers a full picture of you to help them in their decision-making.

How will I be measured?

The Interviewers will be assessing your answers to each competency against a rating criteria based on the behavioural indicators – both positive and negative. Finally, you will be evaluated against the other applicants across the various competencies to find the best match.

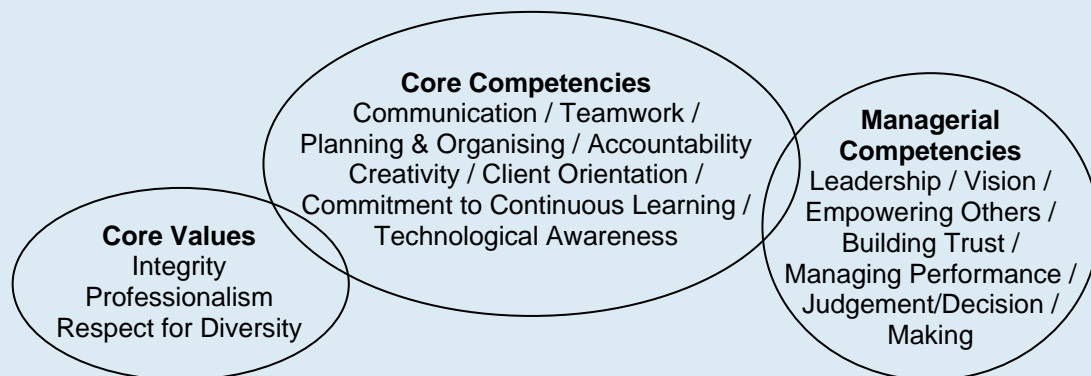
¹ Sometimes called behavioural interviewing, structured interviewing or evidence-based interviewing.

How can *cinfo* help?

cinfo offers workshops on CV writing and competency-based interviewing practice. These one-day workshops are offered twice-yearly, often as one programme of two sessions, but also as one-day stand-alone workshops. Places are restricted (maximum 20 participants per workshop) so there is an initial screening for eligibility. Candidates should have the basic educational requirements (usually a masters degree or significant relevant experience) to benefit from these trainings. To read a first hand experience of a participant of the workshop, see below, and get more information about the [workshop](#).

Core Values, Core and Managerial Competencies of the United Nations

Today, across the organisations and agencies within the UN – competencies are embedded in all processes from initial recruitment to placement and performance management. In addition to the eight core and six managerial competencies initially identified, various UN agencies have chosen to identify other competencies, or specific functional competencies, that are considered essential for the work undertaken by that organisation.



Nevertheless, the core values and competencies remain universally recognised as the base. It would be hard to find a vacancy announcement today within the UN that does not clearly define the competencies sought for that specific vacancy alongside the duties defined.

My lessons with the *cinfo* workshop «Applying to UN Organisations»

After five years of working for different professional organizations in the humanitarian sector, I developed a keen interest in working with a UN organization. I asked myself: «Am I prepared for an application or even an interview with a UN Organization? Do I know about application procedures and about how to present myself to be successful?» Application procedures for jobs in international organizations, especially the UN, have changed over the past years and I had to admit that I had no big idea what «a competency based interview» – the key instrument for requirement nowadays – would be. Then, in *cinfo*'s newsletter I saw an announcement for the workshop «Applying to UN Organizations». This was a chance for me to close an gap in my application know-how.



The workshop itself was a really positive experience. Different backgrounds, languages, views and experiences could be shared and I took a lot more back home than expected. The aspect I personally enjoyed the most was a clear evaluation of my skills, achievements and qualifications. I also learnt about the «Do's and Don't's» of an application and benefited from the experiences of the other workshop participants and the moderator.

Lessons learnt and how I applied them concretely

The workshop raised my chances for getting an interview with the UN. More precisely, I passed the first screening based on my written documents and was invited for a competency based interview during UNDP's last recruitment mission to Switzerland in fall 2008. To prepare for this interview, I read through the documents, hints and lessons learned from the workshop. As a result, I felt well prepared. The interview itself was challenging. But I left with a strong feeling of having been able to clearly demonstrate my experience, my qualifications and to have placed my competencies in the right context.

Hence, one year passed and I never imagined in how many situations and different application procedures I could use the newly acquired skills and the information and input received from this workshop. Being able to reflect on, describe and communicate one's competencies and being able to formulate a clearly structured personal history profile is a key in today's employment world. Not only with the UN. But also with other development related institutions.

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