COMPETENCY BASED APPLICATIONS

Competency-based applications are applications where each question is designed to test one or more specific skill(s). The answer is then matched against pre-decided criteria and marked accordingly.

For example, we may want to test the candidate's ability to deal with stress by asking the candidate to "Provide an example of a situation where they worked under pressure".

How do competency-based applications differ from normal applications?

Standard applications often request the attachment of a CV. Northamptonshire Police runs a recruitment process that is intended to ensure fair representation from all areas of the community we serve. As such, we anonymise applications and only provide recruiters with the detail required to make a shortlisting decision. This, as far as is possible, prevents bias entering the process by omitting data that would help the recruiter to infer any characteristics about the candidate and therefore don't accept a straight CV as these are more difficult to anonymise and don't always provide the information we might be looking for.

Competency-based applications are designed to be more systematic, with each question targeting a specific skill or competency. Candidates are asked to evidence against specific circumstances, which they then need to back up with concrete examples. The examples provided are scored to enable a consistent approach to how each application is marked.

HOW COMPETENCY BASED APPLICATIONS ARE MARKED

During advertising of the role, the shortlisting panel will have determined which type of answers would score positive points and which types of answers would count against the candidates. For example, for questions such as "Describe a time when you had to deal an angry customer", the positive and negative indicators may be as follows:

Positive indicators	Negative indicators
Demonstrates a positive approach towards the problem.	Perceives challenges as problems.
Is able to compromise.	Attempts unsuccessfully to deal with the situation alone.
Is able to see the issue from other peoples perspectives.	Used inappropriate strategies to deal with pressure/stress.
Is willing to seek help when necessary.	
Uses effective strategies to deal with pressure/stress.	

PREPARING YOUR COMPETENCY BASED APPLICATION

Preparation is the key if you want to be able to answer all questions in a concise but detailed way.

Make sure that you understand which skills and competencies are being tested. It sounds obvious, but some person specifications can be a little vague and you will need to do some thinking in order to ensure that the examples that you will be using hit the spot. For example, your person specification may say that you need to have "good communication skills in dealing with third parties".

For someone who works in customer service and is expected to handle complaints all day long, this will most likely involve a mix of empathy or understanding as well as an ability to be assertive in a nice way whenever required; however, for someone applying for an IT support post, this will most likely involve an ability to explain technical issues in a simple way.

Understanding the requirements for the post, whether they are stated explicitly or not in the person specification is therefore crucial.

Identify examples from your past experience which you can use to demonstrate that you possess the skills and competencies that you are being asked to demonstrate. You do not have to find complicated examples; in particular the outcome of the story does not have to be extraordinary; what matters most is that the role you played in reaching the outcome was substantial.

Learn to narrate the story using the STAR method. This means setting the scene, explaining how you handled the situation by placing the emphasis on your role, and detailing the outcome/result.

COMPETENCY-BASED APPLICATIONS THE "STAR" APPROACH

The acronym **STAR** stands for

Situation
Task
Action
Result

It is a commonly recognised communication technique designed to enable you to provide a meaningful and complete answer to questions asking for examples. At the same time, it has the advantage of being simple enough to be applied easily.

Many recruiters will have been trained in using the STAR structure. Even if they have not, they will recognise its value when they see it. The information will be given to them in a structured manner and, as a result, they will become more receptive to the messages you are trying to communicate.

S or T =	Situation or Task Start by describing the SITUATION you were involved in or the TASK that you were asked to complete. This situation can be from a previous job, from a personal experience or from any relevant event. Give enough detail for the reader to understand what was involved.
A =	Action Describe the action you took, the process you followed and the steps you completed. Even if you are discussing a group project or task, describe what **you did** rather than the achievements of the team.
R =	Result This is the most important part of the answer and you will need to show that your actions resulted in a successful outcome. Talk about what you accomplished, what you delivered in terms of benefit and what you learned.

THE IPAR TECHNIQUE

I =	**Always use I and give an Introduction** Always answer in the first person using 'I' rather than 'we' even if your example refers to a team effort. The interviewers want to hear about *what you did* and if you constantly use 'we' it could weaken your answer. Give an INTRODUCTION consisting a single sentence summarising your achievement for example: "*I recently introduced a new system which reduced the time it takes to deal with customer complaints from 4 days to 4 hours.*" This has the effect of informing the reader and heightening their interest as well as being a powerful sales statement for yourself.
P =	**Problem** Detail the PROBLEM (situation or task), give sufficient details so that the reader can get a full grasp of the challenge involved. If you can also show that you identified the problem and initiated the action this will stand in your favour however it is not essential.
A =	**Action** As with the STAR technique, describe the ACTION you took, the process you followed and the steps you completed being clear about the part you played.
R =	**Result** As mentioned above the RESULT is the most important part of your answer as a successful outcome *proves* that your actions were effective. If possible, detail statistics or figures which highlight the magnitude of your success, mention positive feedback you received and write about what you learned and how this learning will help you in the job being recruited.