

INTERPRETING COMPETENCIES

Find out exactly what they want

WHEN companies decide to hire someone, they tend to know what they want. Unfortunately they don't always make their requirements entirely clear when they put the advertisements together. This means that it's up to job hunters to decode the small print and put together a list of the competencies being sought.

The first step is to break through the jargon, says Chris Watkin, a director at Hay Group, a management consultancy. Robert Myatt, a director of Kaisen Consulting, the business psychologists, agrees. "Nearly all organisations have competency models," he says. "There will be some idiosyncratic elements but all competency models largely measure the same things."

For example, "incentive driven" and "self starter" both mean initiative; communication might be expressed as influence, stakeholder management or impact; and words such as robustness, emotional strength, emotional intelligence, performance under pressure and stress tolerance all indicate that the employer wants someone who can demonstrate resilience.

If the advert does not con-



tain enough information to decode, ring up or check the website for a fuller job description.

Then it's a matter of thinking like the organisation, but in reverse. They took a list of competencies and turned it into an advertisement; you

need to turn it back into a list.

Your initial application should briefly address each competency you've identified (don't emphasise your strengths by ignoring your weaker competencies — you need to tick every item), but in

the interview you'll need to be prepared to go into detail. Simply making assertions isn't enough. "Saying 'I am a team player with strong leadership qualities' won't get you anywhere," Watkin says. You need well thought-out exam-

ples that demonstrate your grasp of the competency.

"Think through your career and come up with examples of where you used the competency," Myatt says. "Theoretically they can come from anywhere ... but in practice it seems more powerful if you have done it in a work context." If you have no work experience, draw links that make clear how the examples you give are relevant to the workplace. And don't draw all your examples from one project or event: "The aim is to show that you can use your competencies in a broad range of situations."

Some interviewers will ask broad questions, making it tough to decide which competency they want demonstrated. For example, they might ask you to tell them about a recent project you were involved in. Think about the competency list you wrote: do you think they want to hear about your leadership skills? Teamwork? Customer focus? Decide, then draw on the anecdote you prepared to illustrate it. If you really can't tell what they want to know, ask, Myatt says. "Say 'Is there a particular aspect that you are interested in?'"

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CODEBREAKER

COMPANIES begin the hiring process by defining the competencies needed for the position they are filling, then creating or commissioning a job advertisement that will attract candidates with the required characteristics.

However, many companies use their own terms and jargon to indicate the competencies that they want, leaving job hunters the task of decoding the advert before they can start preparing their application. For example, the competency known formally as conceptual thinking can be expressed in a number of ways, such as creativity, inventiveness and breakthrough thinking; alternatively, two competencies might be merged into one phrase.

■ **Next week: initiative. What does it take to show that you're a self-starter? Information based on research by Hay Group, the management consultancy. www.haygroup.co.uk**