

# BEHAVIOURAL COMPETENCIES

for Canada's Substance  
Use Workforce v. 2

**Guide to Behavioural  
Competency-based Interviewing**



Canadian Centre  
on Substance Use  
and Addiction

Evidence. Engagement. Impact.



# GUIDE TO BEHAVIOURAL COMPETENCY-BASED INTERVIEWING

## INTRODUCTION

**The professionalism and success of the substance use field depends on the quality of the workforce— the employees and volunteers—it engages.**

This guide describes a structured, behavioural approach to conducting interviews. Compared to unstructured approaches, the behavioural approach can greatly increase your chances of making the best selection decisions. A behavioural approach provides critical information about candidates' past performance and accomplishments that you can use to predict their performance and accomplishments in the job you are hiring for.

The primary responsibility of the interviewer is to collect behavioural information about the candidate's experiences and accomplishments that relates to the target job so that the best selection decision can be made.

The interviewer seeks job-related information by assessing competencies. Establishing the competencies required for successful performance of the job is the first and most fundamental step in developing a good selection strategy. The skills and competencies required for effective performance will vary depending on the job and whether the position has managerial or supervisory responsibilities.

A “job competency” describes any skill, knowledge, ability or other attribute that is required for successful work performance.

Competencies can be classified as behavioural or technical, although this differentiation is somewhat artificial. The two types of competencies can be defined as follows:

- **Technical Competencies** are the knowledge and abilities required when applying specific technical principles and information in a job function or role. Technical Competencies are usually learned in an educational environment or on the job. They are the “what” of a job. Counselling is one example of a technical competency.
- **Behavioural Competencies** are the abilities, attitudes and values required to perform effectively in a job function or role. Behavioural Competencies are typically learned and developed through life experiences. They are the “how” of performing a job and complement Technical Competencies. Effective communication is one example of a Behavioural Competency.

**This interview guide focuses on assessing candidate proficiency in CCSA's Behavioural Competencies only.** Technical Competencies are more easily examined through knowledge tests and can be used to screen applicants, as these competencies often relate to education and training. The Technical Competencies needed for each job are unique to the role and setting, therefore an employer can use the education requirements or develop specific questions to assess technical knowledge.



## BEHAVIOURAL QUESTIONS

The use of behaviour-based questions has been shown to be one of the most effective structured interviewing strategies. These types of questions are based on the premise that:

**Past behaviour is the best predictor of future behaviour.**

Past behaviour is often used to predict future behaviour in all facets of life. For instance, banks lend money more readily to people with a proven track record of paying loans back. People continue to return to shop at stores that have given them good service.

The same concept is used in the behavioural interview. The questions aim to obtain information about the candidate's past experiences and accomplishments in order to make a reliable prediction about how the candidate is likely to perform on the job. For example:

**Can you give me an example of a time where you worked with an individual with complex needs?**

To effectively predict future behaviour, behavioural data does not need to come from past positions that are identical to the target position.

If the target position involves teaching students in an academic environment, the interviewer gathers information on the candidate's teaching experience in past positions. If the target position requires handling marital disputes, the interviewer collects information on the candidate's past experience in handling similar conflict situations.

The data gathered can include other life experiences, such as volunteer work, that provide information on the candidate's competencies. The behavioural interview is focused on gathering examples of how candidates performed in previous positions and situations that require the same kinds of competencies as the target position.

### The Goal: Behavioural Examples

Behavioural questions are designed to collect behavioural information about the candidate's past experience and accomplishments that relates to the competencies required in the target job. Past experience does not need to be from a job that is the same as the one being interviewed for, since Behavioural Competencies are transferrable across positions. It is preferable that the experience be work-related, including voluntary work, but personal examples can be given in the absence of work experience.

Knowing a candidate's actions is of little use if the interviewer does not understand the circumstances surrounding the actions and the results produced by those actions. Therefore, the answers to behavioural questions need to include the following components in order for the interviewer to fully understand a candidate's past behaviour:

- The **Situation or Task** in which the candidate was involved;
- The **Action** the candidate took to complete the task or address the situation; and
- The **Result** of the candidate's action.

All of these components are necessary to make an informed judgment about whether the candidate displays the level and quality of behaviour required.



## False Behavioural Examples

Behavioural examples may be better understood by defining what they are not. They are not:

- Future-directed comments about what a candidate *will do* or *would like to do*
- Statements of feelings or opinions
- Vague statements that cannot be interpreted

**All of these are false behavioural examples.**

### *Theoretical or Future-oriented Statements*

Theoretical or future-oriented statements provide no information about past behaviour. They indicate what a candidate thinks they would do or should do, not what they have done.

*I expect to finish my degree next year and go on to an executive position five years after that.*

*If I had been in charge of that situation, I would have made sure the person got all of the support they needed.*

### *Feelings or Opinions*

Feelings and opinions provide no insight into behaviour. These statements are simply an individual's emotional reaction to a situation or event.

*I am really good at teaching myself how to use new software.*

*I was the best executive assistant and deserved more responsibility.*

### *Vague Statements*

Vague statements are general summaries or descriptions of past actions. They often contain descriptions of results that are reported in a very general way, as demonstrated in this example:

*I always had the best interest of the customers in mind and never tried to get pushy or in an argument with anyone.*

In many cases, the candidate's role is not clearly defined, as in this example:

*We prepared the report and submitted it to the president in record time.*

**When you, the interviewer, hear false behavioural examples, you must probe further.**

## LEGAL CONSIDERATION IN SELECTION

Governments have passed human rights laws dealing with employment discrimination. These laws reflect a commitment to provide fair workplace opportunities, as well as recognition that equal opportunity in employment has not existed in many situations in the past.

*Discrimination... means practices or attitudes that have, whether by design or impact, the effect of limiting an individual's or a group's right to the opportunities generally available because of attributed rather than actual characteristics.*

*(Abella Report on Equality in Employment)*

As used in human rights laws, discrimination means making a distinction between certain individuals or groups based on a prohibited ground, such as race, national or ethnic origin, religion, sex, or physical or mental disability.



## History

Human rights laws have been introduced and amended continuously to reflect our developing understanding and interpretation of discrimination. The number and definition of the prohibited grounds for discrimination included in federal, provincial, territorial and constitutional protection is expanding. At a minimum, they include:

- Race
- Colour
- National or ethnic origin
- Religion
- Age
- Sex (includes pregnancy and childbirth)
- Gender expression and identity
- Sexual orientation
- Marital status
- Family status
- Pardoned conviction
- Physical or mental disability

## Interview Questions

An interview is conducted to learn more about the suitability of people for a particular job. However, sometimes the information sought during interviews is not relevant to the job being filled and may let discriminatory elements affect the selection process.

For example:

A candidate's place of birth has nothing to do with ability.

Height and weight requirements are not always accurate measures of physical strength and may act to screen out women or some racial or ethnic groups that tend to be smaller in stature.

For helpful guidelines on questions to avoid in an interview, consult the *Canadian Human Rights Commission's Guide to Screening and Selection in Employment* at the following link:

<https://www.chrc-ccdp.gc.ca/eng/content/guide-screening-and-selection-employment>

## PREPARING FOR THE INTERVIEW

Interviews have a serious purpose. Still, you need to create a friendly, comfortable atmosphere. This can make a big difference in how a candidate performs in the interview— and how they perceive the job and your organization. Some key factors to consider in preparing for, conducting and evaluating the interview are described below.

You may decide to have a series of interviews or different types of interviews, depending on the job for which you are recruiting. Ensure you communicate to the candidate how many interviews are expected and the purpose and estimated length of each. (Interviews should be no longer than one hour each.)

Actual interview tools have been provided separately for several occupational clusters (job groups) within the substance use field. Each interview tool includes behaviour-based questions that correspond to the Behavioural Competencies commonly required for jobs within that occupational cluster (see *Interview Tools for Occupational Clusters*).



### Setting Up the Interview

- Schedule interviews far enough in advance to allow the candidate adequate preparation time.
- Choose the competencies to focus on during the interview.
- Determine who the interviewers will be and ensure they have all read the interview guide and questions beforehand. If you have a panel of interviewers (e.g., the manager of the position, a representative from Human Resources and a peer of the position), be sure to determine who will ask each question and in what order.
- Let candidates know in advance how long the interview will last and provide a few details on the interview process (e.g., if using multiple interviewers).
- Inform candidates of anything you would like them to bring to the interview (e.g., samples of writing, certificates or diplomas).
- Schedule enough time between interviews so that you can evaluate each candidate immediately after their interview.
- Arrange an appropriate location for the interview— quiet, comfortable and free from interruptions.
- Have a separate area for those waiting to be interviewed.
- Review the candidate's résumé in detail, in advance, and highlight any specific areas of interest to probe during the interview.

### Opening the Interview

- Greet the candidate and introduce yourself, giving your name and job title.
- Offer the candidates a refreshment, as some people become “parched” or “dry-mouthed” during interviews.
- Thank the candidate for their interest in the job and for coming in for an interview.
- Briefly describe the job and relevant organizational characteristics to allow candidates to become comfortable in the interview setting.
- Explain the interview process in a general way. Inform the candidate that you will be taking notes throughout the process.
- Ask the candidate if they have any questions before beginning.

### During the Interview

- Take notes on the candidate's answers during the interview so you have an accurate record of the information to evaluate later.
- Make periodic eye contact with the candidate to show your interest.
- For each question, obtain one or more specific examples of the candidate's experience or accomplishments, ensuring that the candidate describes:
  - The Situation or Task related to the example;
  - The Actions the candidate took to address the situation; and
  - The Results of the candidate's actions.
- To obtain complete descriptions, ask follow-up questions to clarify or obtain additional information on any one or more of the elements (Situation, Action and Result).
- Provide an opportunity at the end of the interview for the candidate to ask questions or clarify the next steps in the selection process.



### Evaluating the Interview

Assess the candidate's responses against the competency requirements using the rating criteria in the interview guide. If you have more than one selection board member, each member should do this assessment individually, then members can discuss their results and reach a consensus on the candidate.

Evaluate candidate responses against the criteria or behavioural examples for each competency. Avoid comparing candidate answers.

When assigning ratings, consider the behavioural examples provided by the candidate in terms of:

- **Significance:** The importance of the examples in relation to the job being filled; and
- **Recency:** The more recent the behaviour, the better it predicts future behaviour.

Assign a rating to each competency based on the candidate's demonstration of the relevant behaviour indicators.

### Common Rating Errors

It is important to be aware of the most common types of rating errors that can occur during candidate assessment to ensure that your ratings are fair:

- Allowing prejudices about certain groups of people or types of personality to interfere with being able to fairly evaluate a candidate's performance. Refrain from considering any factors not related to performance when making rating decisions.
- Allowing ratings in one competency to influence ratings for other competencies. For example, allowing a high rating for Effective Communication to bias a rating for Creativity and Innovation, regardless of the candidate's performance on Creativity and Innovation.
- Rating all competences at the middle of the rating scale (for example, giving mostly 3s on a 5-point scale). Remember that a high rating does not indicate perfect performance; it means demonstrating more of the behaviours required for a competency than is generally exhibited. Similarly, a low rating does not mean the candidate does not possess the competency; it means they did not demonstrate the required behaviours with their answers.
- Giving high or low ratings to all candidates, regardless of their actual performance; being too strict or too lenient.
- Giving higher than deserved ratings to candidates who appear similar to you. People have a natural tendency to prefer others who are similar in various ways to themselves. Concentrate on the responses given by the candidate rather than on the outward characteristics and personality of the candidate.

### Using Interview Tools for Specific Occupations

Interview tools for specific occupations have been developed for each of the seven job clusters identified in the substance use workforce and are collected in *Interview Tools for Job Clusters for the Behavioural Competencies*. Each tool provides a selection of sample behavioural questions for the competencies and proficiency levels relevant to the seven job competency profiles. The tools also include procedures for conducting the interview and evaluating candidate responses.

It is important to understand that these tools are **useful templates** for your interview process, but they might not accurately represent the competencies required for the position for which you are interviewing.

Before using it, review each tool to determine if the suggested competency profile is relevant. If not, review the Behavioural Competencies to determine which competencies and proficiency levels you should change to give a more accurate representation. A brief overview of the steps involved in identifying the relevant competencies for a profile has been provided in the resource, *Adapting Competency Profiles*.



A job competency profile should only include the critical competencies required for the job, not those that are “nice to have” – that is, not essential to performing the job successfully. Preferably, each profile has no more than 12 competencies.

After confirming the competencies and proficiency levels in the relevant competency profile, you must determine which competencies you will assess in the interview and which questions you will ask to assess them. Sample questions have been provided for the relevant proficiency levels for the profiles. *Generic Interview Questions for Behavioural Competencies* contains a generic interview bank to assist you in selecting and adapting alternate questions if a different competency profile is used.

Do not expect to assess all competencies by interview. It would take far too much time, and some competencies are better assessed through other methods (e.g., reference checks, knowledge tests or simulations). For a one-hour interview, five to seven questions would be a reasonable number to ask.

To determine which questions to ask, consider the relative importance of a competency to the position. Also, review the competencies for overlap to determine if asking a question on one competency will provide information on another competency that can then be excluded.

You might choose to assess the same competency using more than one method if it is important for the position. For example, if Interpersonal Rapport is more important than other competencies, you may wish to assess this in both the interview and through a reference check. Alternatively, you can ask two questions on this competency instead of one in the interview.

Questions can be used for reference checking by adapting the text to ask about the candidate in a third-person narrative, rather than in the second person. For example:

**Interview Question:** “Please provide an example of a time when you coordinated a large project”  
(*second person*).

**Reference Question:** “Please provide an example of a time when Mark coordinated a large project”  
(*third person*).

**Ensure that all interviews are conducted in accordance with existing organizational policies and procedures.**