



Financial Career Insight Series: Strength-Based Interviews

This Fact Sheet should be read in conjunction with the 'Financial Career Insight Series: Competency-Based Interviews'.

It is likely before a first round interview that the company will indicate whether the interview is going to be 'competency-based' (see the relevant *Financial Career Insight Series* document) or 'strength-based'. Although competency-based interviews have been the most common type of graduate recruitment interview for a long time there is currently a move away from this format both within and outside the financial sector to choose a strength-based approach instead. Perhaps the interview style split in financial circles today approaches 50:50. Interviews with financial employers such as **Barclays, Morgan Stanley, Standard Chartered** and **Thomson Reuters**, for example, all now use strengths-based interviews in their graduate recruitment process. Strengths-based interviews have a simple aim; to find out your interests.

Competencies are behaviours that an organisation needs. Competencies can be defined as "what you **can** do", while strengths are "what you really **enjoy** doing".

When a candidate is using their strengths they demonstrate a real sense of energy and engagement often losing a sense of time because of being so engrossed in a task. They rapidly learn new information and approaches and demonstrate high levels of performance. They are irrevocably drawn to do things that play to their strengths – even when tired, stressed or disengaged.

This focuses on making sure you do more of what you are good at rather than what you are capable of doing. By identifying your strengths and matching yourself to the role, you will enjoy it more and perform better than those who have to try hard to fill the role.

How to prepare for a strengths interview

One of the benefits, and at the same time challenges, of strengths-based interviews from a candidate perspective is that you can't do much preparation. Employers like this to avoid candidates coming up with pre-prepared answers that candidates think interviewers want. Candidates need to think about what they like doing both inside and outside work and be prepared to be open; don't try to be something you're not. Be honest about what tasks you don't enjoy doing and think about how your preferences might fit with the organisation's culture and the job requirements.

Questions you might be asked at strengths interviews

You can also identify your strengths by asking yourself these questions

- What things give you energy?
- What are you good at?



- What comes easily to you?
- What do you learn quickly?
- What did you find easiest to learn at school or university?
- What subjects do you most enjoy studying?
- Describe a successful day you have had.
- When did you achieve something you were really proud of?
- Do you prefer to start tasks or to finish them?
- Do you find you have enough hours in the day to complete all the things you want to do?
- What things are always left on your 'to-do' list and not finished? *These are probably weaknesses; things you dislike doing!*
- What do you enjoy doing the least? *These are likely to be areas where you lack natural aptitude or skills.*

See a comprehensive list of strength-based questions in Appendix below.

Organisational Benefits

- Strength-based questions are especially useful for recruiting staff who don't have much experience such as graduates where you are looking for potential and passion for the job
- Strength spotting is easier at application and first interviews so potentially needing less assessment days
- Cost and time saving as job offers potentially made earlier
- You get fewer 'plastic' pre-prepared answers from candidates
- You get a genuine insight into candidates
- Increases engagement and interest from interviewers
- Candidates enjoy the interview more, so are attracted to the organisation
- Rejected candidates understand why and may realise they wouldn't be happy in the role and so don't feel they've failed
- Identifies successful candidates who have better performance as they are built for the role rather than adapting to fit the role
- Those employed are more likely to stay in the job and will perform at their best and learn new information faster

Example: Barclays

- Barclays receives around 50,000 applications annually for its global graduate training programmes, which result in about 500 appointments. The firm is now moving away from traditional **competency-based recruitment**, as many applicants understood the formula too well: **many answers and relevant experiences were well rehearsed**.
- Competency interviews are based round the assumption that past behaviour will predict future performance. **Competency interviews are known to be reliable**, objective and consistent **but techniques to answer questions well can be learnt**. You cannot significantly prepare for a strengths-based assessment other than by your own reflection.



- **Strengths are argued to lead to higher performance** than competencies and are easier to spot. Strengths are innate: talking about strengths gives candidates energy and real authenticity.
- **Barclays has moved to a strengths-based system**, looking at people's more innate strengths: natural aptitudes that people have for a role. They think this system will lead to better recruitment decisions.

Example: Thomson Reuters

- **Thomson Reuters has similarly moved to a strength-based approach.** The firm identified 10 strengths via focus groups of their high performers that relate to the work that Thomson Reuters does. Graduates are asked about such specific strengths to test their role and organisational fit.

It is worth noting that in most strength-based early round interviews a high number of questions are asked at a quick pace to draw **spontaneous answers from candidates**.

Indeed common features of early round strength-based interviews are:

- a broad range of questions
- asked at a high pace
- an interviewer unable to explain a question, but only repeat it, as this draws out your interpretation of the question

Firms are seeing more authentic candidates as they are less prepared than they would be for a competency-based assessment. Spotting strengths comes from seeing the energy and enthusiasm of a candidate. It is a **better experience for the candidate**; they learn from the sessions and can identify whether they are suited for the role themselves. It's also a more positive experience as they gain energy from the experience.

Interviewers also look at body language and other signals like tone of voice, to identify whether someone has pride in what they have been doing or has a specific interest in a subject.

A key driver for firms using the strength-based approach is to differentiate themselves from other employers via the selection process.

Strength-Based Interview Scoring

Just like competency-based interviews a candidate's **answers will be scored**. At large firms, with multiple Human Resource personnel interviewing a few hundred candidates or more, there has to be a system and template in place to appraise candidates in a fair and consistent manner.

Example Question: **"To what extent do you prioritise shared team interests ahead of your own?"** (The interview waits for a response and may follow up with "Are you a natural collaborator?")

Note: If this question was asked in a competency-based interview the format would likely be *"Describe a time when you have put shared team interests ahead of your own?"* The candidate would



ideally answer using the **S-T-A-R** or **S-A-R** technique (see relevant Financial Career Insight document). There is a subtle, yet distinct, difference in the two question formats.

A typical strength-based interview scorecard for this question would look like:

0	Provides a weaker, generic response, with a preference towards promoting personal goals over collective goals. Response lacks energy/motivation towards collaboration.
1	Provides a functional and effective example rather than an energised one. Response suggests they may sometimes put the team's interests ahead of their own, but lacks energy / motivation.
3	Provides a general example of putting shared interests ahead of their own to achieve a successful outcome. Answer may lack some compelling detail, but shows motivation towards teamwork.
5	Provides a specific and detailed example of putting shared interests ahead of their own to achieve a successful outcome. Demonstrates high energy towards achieving results through teamwork.

In other words, as a candidate, you receive a score for each strength-based interview question answered. Your total score from all questions will be compared to other candidates and you will proceed, or not, to the next interview stage on this basis.

Strength-Based Video Interviews

Video interviews are increasingly common. Again, this is an effective way for Human Resource personnel to screen large numbers of candidates. Candidates are usually asked approximately 10 questions. Such questions appear one-at-a-time on the candidate's laptop who then has, normally, 30 seconds to think of his/her answer, and then a further 2 minutes to deliver it. Strength-based questions are common in video interviews but it all depends on whether that organisation has migrated to a strength-based recruitment model.

Quick Tips

- Understand whether the interview is going to be competency-based or strength-based. If this is not stated it is perfectly fine to ask your HR contact.
- Reflect on the full list of strength-based questions ahead of interview.
- Understand that if the interview does not go well, the job probably does not match your natural skills and interests.



Appendix

Common Strengths-Based Interview Questions

- What do you enjoy doing in your spare time?
- Tell me about something you are particularly proud of?
- What do you find is always left until last/un-done on your 'to-do' list? And what gets done first?
- What would you say is your biggest weakness?
- When would your friends and family say you are at your happiest?
- Tell me about an activity or task that comes easily to you?
- What were your favourite subjects at school and why?
- What unique qualities could you bring to the company?
- Describe a situation in which you feel most like 'yourself'?
- What would you say is a successful day?
- Are you a starter or a finisher?
- What do you feel you are good at?
- What kinds of tasks boost your energy?
- When do you feel you are most like 'yourself'?
- What would your closest friend say are your greatest strengths?
- When are you at your best?
- What activities (inside or outside of work) do you least like doing and why?
- Are there enough hours in the day?
- What comes easily to you?
- What did you find easiest to learn at school or university?
- What do you learn quickly?
- What do you enjoy doing the least? *(These are likely to be areas where you lack natural aptitude or skills).*
- Are you a big picture or a detail person?
- What does a 'great' day look like for you - when did you last go home energised, and why was that?
- Do you like challenges?
- Which do you like more, understanding a concept or applying practical work?

Same questions but modified:

- Describe a situation in which you feel most like 'yourself' – what are you doing or taking part in?
- What has to happen during the day to make it a successful day?
- What do you do well?

As stated, expect a larger than normal amount of questions when the interview is strength-based.

