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Strengths-based job interviews: what are they and how do they work?

Strengths-based questioning discovers your interests so recruiters know their job vacancy will suit you. **Hannah Friend** explores the new approach and how best to prepare



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Traditional competency-based questions are being ousted by a wave of strengths-based questions. Photograph: Nic Bothma/EPA

If you've been for an interview recently, you may have been asked a few curve-ball questions like "are there enough hours in the day?" or "do you prefer starting or finishing things?" These might look like random questions to test your quick-wittedness, but there's more to it.

Traditional competency-based questions, such as "can you describe a time when you've successfully used communication skills?", are being ousted by a wave of strengths-based queries. While it's not a completely new approach, it's being used more and more, and benefits candidates just as much as employers.

Strengths-based recruitment (SBR) has a very simple goal: to find out a candidate's interests. It's still about finding someone who can do the job, but also who will enjoy the role and organisation, and therefore perform better and be more likely to stay in the job. This is a win-win situation for your job satisfaction and saves the employer time, while getting better results.

Elizabeth Bacchus, director of the Successful CV Company, says: "Companies have recognised they

are seeing a more genuine insight into candidates with strength-based interviews. When an individual uses their strengths they perform at their best and learn new information quicker."

The process can also be very revealing for the person being interviewed, and help you to work out whether you want the job if offered it.

Sally Bibb, director of strengths consultancy, Engaging Minds: "We have found time and time again that the people who don't get offered the job a) understand why and realise that they wouldn't be happy in the role because it's just not them, and b) don't feel like they've failed as they often do if they don't get through a competency-based interview."

With big names, such as Barclays, Nestlé and EY, using SBR as part of their recruitment process, if you're actively looking for a new job it's not something you can ignore.

Matt Stripe, Nestlé UK & Ireland group HR director, says: "Strengths is particularly useful when recruiting individuals who don't have a lot of experience – such as graduates. It allows us to identify potential and

individuals who have the same passion about our industry as we do. It also generates fewer fake, pre-prepared answers, and gives a genuine insight into candidates."

Since SBR focuses on what you like instead of what you can do, you might be tempted to jump for joy and throw your interview preparations out the window; it's easier to identify what you enjoy doing, over where your skills lie.

But like all aspects of interviews, these types of questions still need preparation and careful thought. While you can't change the fundamentals of what you enjoy for a recruiter, thinking about how your preferences fit with the organisation's culture and the job requirements is still important.

Sally Bibb says: "The preparation is about mental state, ie be relaxed, be prepared to be open, think about what you love doing (in life, not just work) and don't try to be something you're not. The feedback we get from the thousands of people who our clients have interviewed for a range of roles is that they enjoyed the interview and the interviewers learned a lot about them as people."

Strengths-based questions will also inevitably show your dislikes, so be honest with yourself and the interviewer about what tasks you don't enjoy.

Lisa LaRue, career coach at London consultancy CareerWorx, says: "It's equally important to understand your weaknesses as interviewers are just as likely to be questions that aim to uncover these too. A classic question is: 'What part of your job do you enjoy the least?' It's likely that those parts of your job you like least are the areas where you lack natural aptitude or skill."

So as long as you're prepared for both competency and strengths-based questions, this trend seems to be a good thing for potential candidates.

Elizabeth Bacchus, says: "I'm very pleased that companies are recognising that strength-based interviews are giving them much more valuable insights into candidates and how those individuals can add value to organisations. I think it will expand the talent pool and enable organisations to align staff in a more structured and strategic way that will benefit companies."