



A COMPETENCY-BASED GUIDE FOR GTM INTERVIEWING



TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	3
Building a Foundation for Hiring	4
Defining Competencies	6
Creating Scenarios & Questions	7
Creating Response Assessment Guidelines	8
Presentation & Role Play Options	9
Conclusion	10

INTRODUCTION

Hiring the right talent is crucial for start-ups and VC-backed companies, particularly when it comes to early GTM – where the quality of initial talent is imperative to new revenue acquisition and delivering customer value that extends the runway for building great organizations.

While being able to network and evangelize for the business helps open up the talent funnel, knowing how to run a structured hiring process is critical for making the best decisions, mitigating unconscious bias, and retaining the best hires after their start. Your advisors and board may send candidates with exceptional track records your way, but ultimately it's up to you and your leadership to make sure that potential additions align to the needs of your business and role specifics.

Writing excellent interview questions is pivotal to running a structured process. In our experience, many early-stage companies continue to rely on “winging it,” often by failing to prepare their own questions in advance or orchestrate the questions asked by participants in their interviewing.

It's not any better to rely on a LinkedIn or Google search – or ChatGPT, for that matter – for questions to ask. In our opinion, writing your own interview questions is the most effective way to ensure that you're in a position to assess talent for the competencies required to execute effectively in your business. Cloning questions is fundamentally backwards; it means starting with an end result – the conversational touchpoint with talent – that may or may not be suited for the specific things you need to assess. Also, interviewing is always a two-way street; the more that you think about it as an opportunity to help candidates vet you and your company, the higher the odds that whomever you extend an offer to will be keen to join and prepared to make lasting contributions. A structured interview makes all of this happen.

This guide will provide a framework for writing questions and implementing a structured process to help you best prepare to make quality hires repeatably.

Using AI to write interview questions is not a viable strategy.

BUILDING A FOUNDATION FOR HIRING

Having a great job description is imperative to hiring.

Even for early-stage companies with limited resources in place, this ensures a clear and consistent articulation of the role itself that can be used to ensure clarity and transparency across all channels being used to promote the opportunity and generate candidate enthusiasm to pursue it.

Before writing interview questions, it is important to build a foundation to support hiring. This includes:

- Creating a job description that provides a candidate-facing overview of the company, the problems it solves, prerequisites for consideration, and what success looks like in the role.
- An ideal candidate profile that defines for internal consideration the competencies and behaviors sought for a given GTM role.

A great job description covers three key considerations for potential talent:

1. What does the business do?

Even when you've got a clear explanation on your website and in third-party coverage, use the job description to provide a tight overview of your business mission and vision in the market. What are the key problems being solved – and why does it matter? How does your company uniquely solve them and what are indications of its success here (reference customers, news links, etc.)?

2. What is the role?

Role descriptions should clearly share the prerequisites for consideration (work experience). Second, they should define the duties in the role using active verbs and plain language (avoid jargon). Finally, they should cover what success looks like in the role, whether that means impact on revenue attainment numbers, pipeline coverage, or other considerations.

3. What are key values and organizational maturity?

Great job descriptions give applicants an overview of your core values and how those influence behaviors sought in your search. They also tie these values to the maturity of your organization and needs related to this.

BUILDING A FOUNDATION FOR HIRING

Your ideal candidate profile provides your talent team, partners, and external agencies with a deeper blueprint for recruiting efforts. While the behaviors and competencies sought should always align to the job description, the ideal candidate profile often outlines in more depth why these are needed, and more specifically how this should translate into a candidate search strategy.

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Once your job description and ideal candidate profiles have been completed, it is important to have a general definition of a hiring process in place, including an outline of how you will attract and source candidates and the key steps and participants involved in the interviewing process all the way through to offer.

According to the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM), structured interviews (those that use pre-determined and standardized questions) have been shown to be more reliable and valid in predicting job performance than unstructured interviews (those that do not use pre-determined questions).

YOUR IDEAL CANDIDATE PROFILE

ROLE NAME	COMPENSATION RANGE	REPORTING STRUCTURE
CANDIDATE DEMOGRAPHICS		ELEVATOR PITCH
Ideal location (state/region)		What sets this role/department apart?
Estimated Travel		What sets the company apart?
RTO or Hybrid		Why would they want to work for you vs. a competitor?
PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE	KEY COMPETENCIES & WHY	YELLOW AND RED FLAGS?
Min role level experience & ideal roles for targeting	Competency A and why?	What are the behaviors to avoid?
Min stage-level experience	Competency B and why?	
Min business problem/industry experience	Values?	

DEFINING COMPETENCIES

An effective approach to creating interview questions starts with a detailed definition of the key competencies required based on the ideal candidate profile and job descriptions. This needs to be done BEFORE writing any questions.

These definitions can be organized on a digital worksheet or in your applicant tracking system, depending on available functionality. We recommend tailoring each definition to the role itself.

Let's use "business acumen" as an example. Assume we are hiring a Customer Success Manager for Series A, Acme Technologies, a vertical SaaS company that helps home care agencies deliver better patient services to increase efficiencies and carrier referral rates.

The hiring team for this open role might identify business acumen as a key competency to hire for in the market based on experiences with the team to date and the nature of their solution.

The definition might look like the following:

Business acumen in Acme Customer Success refers to an ability to understand how businesses in mission-driven and regulated industries operate, including their financials, business goals, compliance, and key metrics, in order to ensure that all customer success activities align with these outcomes, which may or may not always track with the needs of immediate users of a solution.

Once the competency is defined, consider identifying the number of instances required for competency validation in the hiring process. This number can be refined over time, but the idea here is to have a point of view on where redundancy is valuable to ensure accuracy of an assessment and the number of points of view required to get a more full picture of the competency in action.

For example, when assessing business acumen in Customer Success hiring, the function leader may want to consider having a sales leader make a cross-functional assessment as well given the strength of this competency in their own function.

Defining competencies includes looking at key values and behaviors, or "soft skills," that you want to hire for as well. These should be included as part of a competency framework, as they help to encompass the desired culture and work style for a company and inform how individuals are expected to perform in their roles. In addition to "harder" skills and experience, values and behaviors are important indicators of whether a candidate will be a good fit for the company and its customers.

CREATING SCENARIOS & QUESTIONS

Once you've defined all of the key competencies required for a given role (skills, knowledge, behaviors, and attributes), create an outline of a scenario where each competency can be illustrated. Think about how you want to see it SHOWN and how much latitude you'd like to give to a candidate to do this by referencing more general life experiences versus workplace-oriented ones.

In the case of our search for business acumen competency for a Customer Success role, we might aim to create two distinct questions to validate:

1. We may want to understand how they believe they have previously used data and analytics to help a prior client better achieve key business outcomes.
2. We might want to have a sales manager see them walk through their general understanding of the financial performance of a business they either helped manage or worked for in any capacity.

It's at this point that we can write the questions themselves.

- "Can you share a specific example of a time in your prior work in customer success where you used data and analytics to help drive a superior customer outcome?"
- "We sell a subscription software offering to the home care vertical. Based on your experience working with [this or other verticals], can you walk through the ways companies like this generally measure financial performance?"

The documented scenarios here help us think through who will ask the question, when we might want to ask in the process, and how open-ended the question should be in order to see the skills sought in action.

CREATING RESPONSE ASSESSMENT GUIDELINES

It's not enough to write great questions based on key competencies. To run a great hiring process, leaders need to ensure that an assessment and scoring framework is robustly defined in advance. In many cases, questions will not have a "single correct answer" – hence it's imperative for interviewers to know in advance how to balance expected levels of response subjectivity with objective standards for making an assessment.

We recommend doing this by documenting the attributes of a "great versus mediocre answer," and then circulating by others participating in your hiring process to be sure that your expectations align well to what you are ultimately looking to assess for. This can also be an opportunity to gain alignment with HR and ensure that questions and response expectations do not introduce any unconscious bias into interviewing.

In some cases, you may decide to use a scoring system for measuring answers (1-10, A-F, binary, etc), but regardless, it's most important to document how you assess thoughtfully.

Here's what we might document for the two questions above:

- 1. Data and analytics questions:** "A superb response gives a specific scenario where one used an understanding of product data or organizational metrics to highlight something that either boded well or needed course correction. In either case, the individual should walk through what they discovered, how they shared it, and what this resulted in in terms of better business outcomes for the company (whether experienced or hypothesized if the time frames were too long to see). A mediocre answer is either too focused on feature functions, is a generalization of their standard process(es) or fails to connect the dots between how data of some sort provided insights into business trends that might predict superior outcomes down the line."
- 2. Business performance question.** "A superb answer gives some level of detail on how prior clients or businesses they are familiar with, in any capacity, measured top and bottom line performance. It might get into accounting principals or simply walk through the key benchmark financials that mattered most during their tenure with a company (for that business itself or their customers). A mediocre answer is either vague or non-specific and shows a gap in the ability to think about financial performance in any meaningful way."

CREATING RESPONSE ASSESSMENT GUIDELINES

Lastly, note that training interviewers on how to use the questions and provide feedback on their effectiveness is crucial. Consider bringing in a third-party organization to do interview training to ensure that questions stay geared towards required competency assessments and do not inadvertently introduce biases that can adversely impact the process and keep it fair for candidates from all walks of life.

PRESENTATION & ROLE PLAY OPTIONS

Interviewing candidates and asking the right structured questions should go a long way towards identifying talent with the right mix of skills and behaviors for your roles, but presentations and role play scenarios themselves can be used for final validation and as a way to mitigate the risk of missing gaps in a candidate who interviews well but otherwise lacks execution readiness.

We recommend using the same framework articulated here to plan out presentation or role play options. Define all required competencies and scenarios for exhibition.

Using a competency-based framework is useful not only for designing the right interview questions, but also for determining when it might make sense to incorporate role plays and presentations into a hiring process.

SAMPLE ROLE PLAY INSTRUCTION SET

SCENARIO

You are running a discovery call with **[X individual]** at our company **[Acme]**.

Based on pre-call research, you know **A, B, C** about the individual and their business challenges and pain points.

INSTRUCTIONS

[Hiring leader] will play the role of **[X individual]** in a call you've scheduled for 30 minutes with them. Use the time to run further qualification and discovery for potential next steps.

CONCLUSION

While building out an interview process can seem formidable for time-constrained business leaders, our goal here is to outline a framework for doing this in a more simple and efficient way. The goal here is not to create more work; it's to promote excellence in hiring repeatably.

To recap our framework:

1. ***Start with your hiring foundations.*** Create a great job description and an ideal candidate profile. Be sure you've identified every key competency required in hiring.
2. ***Define your competencies for your business.*** Be specific without overcomplicating it.
3. ***Create scenarios and questions for implementation in the process.*** In some cases, competencies may need inspection by multiple parties. In others, one question may be sufficient.
4. ***Document assessment standards.*** Use a scoring system if desired, but make sure first to furnish a detailed description of a great answer versus a mediocre one to constrain how subjectivities influence scoring.

Need help organizing your process for generating great interview questions to use in a structured process? Feel free to use our simple template linked below. The interview template here gives you a place to define competencies for each role and develop scenarios and questions to use in the interview process itself. Think of this as the building blocks to create a repeatable process for running more structured interviews.

INTERVIEW TEMPLATE

Need more help with overall recruiting and screening of candidates for open roles? [**Contact us!**](#)