

Heidi Wright

RECRUITMENT

COMPETENCY INTERVIEW GUIDE

A practical guide to preparing relevant, evidence-led interview answers.

ACCOUNTANCY & FINANCE

Preparation guidance for candidates at every stage of their finance career.

Understanding competency-based interviews

Competency-based questions ask you to describe how you handled real situations. Employers use them to explore your approach, judgement, communication and results—not simply your knowledge of a subject.

- Questions often begin “Tell me about a time...” or “Give me an example...”.
- Choose genuine examples that are relevant to the role and reasonably recent.
- Make your own contribution clear, even when the outcome was achieved by a team.
- Prepare examples rather than memorising scripts.

Structure your answer using STAR

Situation Set the context: what was happening and why did it matter?

Task Explain your responsibility and what needed to be achieved.

Action Describe what you personally did, the decisions you made and the people you involved.

Result Explain the outcome, ideally with evidence or measurable impact. Include what you learned.

RECRUITMENT INSIGHT

Keep the background concise. Most of your answer should focus on your actions and the result. This is where your individual contribution becomes clear.

Example: improving month-end reporting

Situation: Month-end reporting was taking ten working days and managers were receiving information too late.

Task: I was asked to review the process and improve reporting timeliness without weakening controls.

Action: I mapped the close timetable, identified manual reconciliations, introduced ownership of key deadlines and automated recurring reports.

Result: The close reduced to six working days, with clearer responsibilities and more timely information for operational managers.

Core finance competencies

Technical knowledge & judgement

Example question “Tell me about a time you had to interpret a complex accounting, tax or regulatory requirement.”

What to demonstrate Accurate technical understanding, appropriate research or advice, and the ability to translate requirements into practical action.

Planning & prioritisation

Example question “Describe a period when you had several competing deadlines. How did you manage them?”

What to demonstrate Forward planning, prioritisation, allocation of resources, communication and dependable delivery.

Accuracy & internal controls

Example question “Give me an example of when you identified a financial error or control weakness.”

What to demonstrate Attention to detail, root-cause analysis, professional scepticism and proportionate corrective action.

Problem-solving & analysis

Example question “Tell me about a time you identified and resolved a complex issue within a financial process, report or set of accounts.”

What to demonstrate A structured approach to identifying the root cause, analysis of relevant information, consideration of possible solutions and a clear, measurable outcome.

Decision-making & commercial judgement

Example question “Describe a significant decision you made when the information was incomplete.”

What to demonstrate Risk assessment, balanced judgement, accountability and communication of your decision.

Communication & business partnering

Example question “Tell me about a time you explained financial information to a non-finance colleague.”

What to demonstrate Clear, audience-appropriate communication and the ability to turn information into useful action.

Leadership, change & technology

Leadership & team development

Example question “Describe a time you improved the performance or confidence of a team member.”

What to demonstrate Coaching, clear expectations, constructive feedback and measurable development.

Influencing & stakeholder management

Example question “Tell me about a time you constructively challenged a stakeholder.”

What to demonstrate Listening, evidence, professional confidence and maintaining effective working relationships.

Process improvement & change

Example question “Give me an example of a process you improved.”

What to demonstrate Ownership, stakeholder engagement, practical implementation and an identifiable benefit.

Systems & data

Example question “Tell me about a time you used a finance system or data tool to improve reporting.”

What to demonstrate ERP, Excel, Power BI or other relevant skills, alongside data integrity and business impact.

AI awareness & responsible use

Example question “Have you explored AI in your work? How would you assess its usefulness and risks?”

What to demonstrate Curiosity alongside accuracy checks, human oversight, confidentiality and appropriate company policies. Direct AI experience is not essential for every role.

Resilience & adaptability

Example question “Describe a time priorities changed unexpectedly.”

What to demonstrate Calm reprioritisation, communication and maintaining critical deliverables.

Strengthening your answers

Specific evidence is more persuasive than general claims. Where relevant, explain the scale of your responsibility, the complexity of the situation and the difference your work made.

- Use measures such as days saved at month-end, debtor-day improvements, cost savings or forecast accuracy.
- Explain your own decisions and actions—not only what “we” achieved.
- Avoid unnecessary confidential, commercially sensitive or personal information.
- If you have no direct example, say so and offer the closest transferable experience.
- For a hypothetical question, explain your assumptions and approach rather than inventing a past achievement.

INTERVIEW CHECK

For each example, can you explain the context briefly, your actions clearly and the result confidently?

Your preparation checklist

- Select six to eight examples that can be adapted to different questions.
- Review the job description and match examples to its main competencies.
- Prepare at least one example involving a challenge, mistake or lesson learned.
- Refresh relevant technical and systems knowledge.
- Practise aloud, while keeping your answers natural rather than scripted.

After the interview

Make a note of questions asked, any examples you would strengthen next time and any remaining questions about the opportunity. If Heidi Wright Recruitment arranged the interview, share your feedback promptly so we can discuss the next steps with the client.

CANDIDATE SUPPORT

Heidi Wright Recruitment can help you prepare for the particular role and interview process, ensuring your examples are relevant while remaining an authentic reflection of your experience.