

Behavioral Interviewing Guide

This guide is designed to provide hiring managers with sample behavioral interview questions when screening candidates on the skill needs identified in the USGS Workforce Plan 2015-2020.

USGS

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Implementing the USGS Workforce Plan: Enhancing our Skills and Capabilities

The U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) is the Nation's principal natural science research and information agency. The challenges of meeting the USGS science mission across the Nation and throughout the world are complex, and the USGS is uniquely positioned to conduct scientific research that is objective, highly relevant, cutting edge, and addresses complex and difficult topics.

In order to achieve our mission, there are key skill sets and capabilities that while currently found in the USGS, will be increasingly needed in the future. Researchers and research managers will need effective communication and entrepreneurship skills. There will be increasing demand for multidiscipline synthesis and landscape-level science, and the USGS will need a workforce that can adapt to new technology and respond quickly to changes in science and management priorities. This guide takes into account the range of capabilities, that due to external and internal drivers, will be increasingly needed as the bureau moves into the future.

Focus on Competencies

This guide utilizes specific competencies to help analyze the capabilities of candidates. According to the Office of Personnel Management, a competency is a measurable pattern of knowledge, skills, abilities, behaviors, and other characteristics that an individual needs to perform work roles or occupational functions successfully. Competencies specify the "how" of performing job tasks, or what the person needs to do the job successfully. The term skill and competency is used interchangeably in this guide.

The competencies in this guide were identified from common themes in center, regional, mission area, and office workforce plans at USGS, and were therefore deemed as USGS-wide skill set needs in the USGS Workforce Plan 2015-2020. Since it is impractical to assign these competencies to specific occupations; it is the discretion of the hiring manager in consultation with the human resource specialist to determine which skills are appropriate to use during candidate evaluation. When utilized, this guide will help managers screen potential applicants for key identified skills sets when conducting interviews.

Behavioral-Based Interview Overview

Behavioral-based interviews focus on discovering how a candidate performed in specific work-related situations and seek to uncover how a potential employee actually did behave in a given situation, not on how he or she might behave in a hypothetical scenario.

Behavioral-based interviews are becoming more common throughout industry and government and many candidates are familiar with this technique and are well prepared for these interviews. Candidates can and should draw on previous work related experiences as well as non-work related experiences (e.g., school projects, community involvement) that are relevant to the interview questions. **The suggested questions in this guide should be used to supplement other technical questions relevant to the specific position being filled.**

The primary purpose of the behavioral interview is to gather information from job candidates about their actual behavior during past experiences which demonstrates proficiency in skills required for the job. The behavioral interview questions should be designed around no more than five skills that have been deemed "essential for success" in the position, job function, or role (see section [Selecting](#)

[Competencies to Interview Against](#) for additional information on how to select the appropriate skills). Once the three to five skills have been selected, there should then be one or two interview questions around each skills related to the responsibilities of the job that the candidate will be performing. These questions should be open-ended, clear and concise, free of jargon, and designed to elicit detailed information about how the applicant has demonstrated the specific skill in the past. Additional information about preparing interview questions can be found in [Preparing for Interview Questions section](#).

During the interview, the interviewer may also need to ask additional probing questions to seek additional details or to help clarify a candidate's response. When probes are necessary, interviewers should use **very similar probes for all candidates** to ensure candidates are given the same opportunities to excel. While probes may need to be tailored to address each candidate's specific response, the general meaning of the probes should not change. It may also be helpful to establish the desired range of probing questions prior to the interview (i.e., no probes, a limited number of probes, unlimited probes) and if probing questions will be used, determine the specific probes for each question the interviewer is allowed to use. Examples of probing questions can be found in [Appendix B](#).

[Interpersonal Bias and Rating Errors](#)

Bias and rating errors are inconsistent with the purpose of the structured interview process, mainly, ensuring candidates are evaluated fairly, consistently, and have equal opportunities to excel. The interviewer should be aware of common risks and triggers associated with personal biases to avoid rating errors. Please reference [Appendix A](#) for additional information on how to minimize rating errors and interpersonal bias.

[Selecting Competencies to Interview Against](#)

Typically, competencies for applicant selection are identified in the job analysis process and are usually leadership and/or non-technical competencies selected for behavioral based interview questions. These are the behavioral/cognitive skills needed to be successful in the role being interviewed for and are not directly related to the candidate's technical proficiency. Non-technical competencies represent **how** the work is carried out. The leadership competencies represent the essential competencies necessary to be a successful and effective leader and/or manager. These competencies are based on "official" positions of leadership within the organization (i.e., team lead, branch chief, deputy/center director).

Using the job function's, choose no more than five competencies that the candidate will be interviewed against. Competencies chosen should represent the ones **essential for success** in the position. When thinking about which competencies to choose, it may also be helpful to consider the following questions:

- What did the best person in this position do to set him/herself apart?
- What challenges did you have before if someone wasn't the best fit for this type of position?
- What were the behaviors that were incorrect or that you expected and did not see?
- What future organizational challenges will these people need to address?
- What gaps exist now or in the past?

- What would be the most difficult competency to develop in an employee?

Should you have questions regarding selecting competencies, please contact your Human Resources specialist.

Preparing Interview Questions

- For a competency-based behavioral interview, interview questions should be designed around the competencies required for success in the job or role and should be tailored to the appropriate level of the job the candidate is interviewing for.
- As much as possible, all questions should relate to experiences that have occurred in the last 2-3 years (best for recollection of behavioral details).
- All behavioral interview questions should focus on what the interviewee did, said, felt or thought in the past. The interviewer should be looking for phrases such as “I did....,” “I said....,” etc.
- If possible, avoid questions about what the interviewee would do in a given situation or what they would have done differently. The focus is on what the interviewee *actually* did/said/thought in the past. If the interviewee uses such phrases as “I would,” the interviewer should probe by saying, “What did you actually do at that time?” (This focus may not always be practical, such as cases where an employee has not had any previous official supervisory positions.)
- The interviewee should focus on what he/she did, rather than what “we” did. While working as part of a team is very common and desirable, it is important to understand what the candidate’s individual role was. The interviewer should probe the interviewee if “We” is used in describing actions. For example, if the interviewee says, “We implemented the new system by...,” it is the interviewer’s job to ask the interviewee what his/her role was and what he actually did (as an individual).
- Prior to delving into the detail of each question, ask the interviewee to provide a brief (30 second) overview of the situation by highlighting the beginning, middle, and end. This helps the interviewer to keep the interview on track. For example, if you feel lost in the discussion, you can pause the conversation by asking the interviewee where you are in the story (beginning, middle, or end).

Candidate Evaluation Questions

There are five skills and associated interview questions described in this section: multidisciplinary synthesis; landscape level science; entrepreneurship; ability to adapt to new technology; adaptability/flexibility.

The competencies in this section were identified from common themes in center, regional, mission area, and office workforce plans at, and were therefore deemed as USGS-wide skill set needs in the USGS Workforce Plan 2015-2020. Since it is impractical to assign these competencies to specific occupations; it is the discretion of the hiring manager in consultation with the human resource specialist to determine which skills are appropriate to use during candidate evaluation.

During the interview, the interviewer should focus on the candidate's response to each question to determine the extent to which the candidate has demonstrated the competency in his/her response. The key behavioral indicators for each competency should be used as examples to assist in determining if the candidate has demonstrated the competency in their response. Each skill has two sample interview questions to use.

<p>Multidiscipline Synthesis</p>	<p>Integrates scientific knowledge generated through studies, investigations, reports, and findings from across organizational elements, thereby generating scientific observations only achievable through deliberate cross discipline/mission area efforts.</p>
<p>Key Behavioral Indicators</p> <p><i>(Examples of how you know the candidate is demonstrating the competency)</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demonstrates an understanding of the link between one's own scientific focus and the issues that impact other organizational goals. • Focuses and guides others in achieving business results related to cross discipline/mission area efforts. • Helps and supports fellow employees in their work to contribute to overall organization success. • Looks beyond the requirements of one's own job to offer suggestions for improvements of overall organization operations. • Performs one's job with the broader goals in mind. • Takes personal ownership in organization's success.
<p>Interview Question 1:</p>	<p>Describe a time when you used broad organizational understanding to further the outcomes of your own scientific work (alternate: specific area of work). What was the situation? How did you incorporate knowledge from across the organization? What did you learn from it? How did this effort make your work product better?</p>
<p>Interview Question 2:</p>	<p>Give a specific example of how you have demonstrated your ability to incorporate scientific understanding (alt: broad-based understanding) from multiple disciplines/mission areas (alt: fields of study) to deliver results that were greater than the outcome from your own scientific focus (alt: specific area of focus). Describe the situation and the manner in which you addressed it.</p>

Entrepreneurship	Focuses on expanding the knowledge about USGS capabilities and actively seeking opportunities to put USGS science in the spotlight. This helps to ensure that USGS science is brought to bear on important societal issues and to further USGS's role as a leader in earth science.
Key Behavioral Indicators <i>(Examples of how you know the candidate is demonstrating the competency)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assesses the potential barriers and resources necessary for enhancing awareness of USGS science. • Acts as a catalyst for seeking opportunities to put USGS science in the spotlight. • Develops a strategy that includes milestones and timelines for expanding the knowledge about USGS capabilities. • Envisions and articulates the intended result of awareness raising efforts. • Helps to generate support for awareness efforts throughout the organization (e.g., within office, center, mission area, bureau). • Identifies and enlists allies who support the process. • Provides direction and focus during the awareness raising process. • Provides resources, removes barriers, and acts as an advocate for those initiating action. • Understands and supports the need for action.
Interview Question 1:	The USGS is focusing on opportunities to put USGS science in the spotlight. Tell me about an opportunity you had to increase others' knowledge of your current organization's mission. What were the specifics of the situation? What challenges did you face and how did you handle them?
Interview Question 2:	Tell me about a time when you had to apply your work to an important societal or organizational issue. Who were the other parties involved? What did you do first? <i>Or</i> The USGS has opportunities to spotlight our work to Congress, the public, and potential sponsors. Describe how you would prepare for these opportunities.

Ability to Adapt to New Technology	Delivers timely, relevant, and useable information. Some examples include the design and mining of large databases; automated and real-time data collection; more advanced and specialized scientific data management; embracing technologies to ensure development and testing of new instrumentation.
Key Behavioral Indicators <i>(Examples of how you know the candidate is demonstrating the competency)</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Capability to work in virtual environments and use mobile and social media tools to collect and disseminate science. • Facility collaborating using new workplace tools that change how employees, supervisors, and managers interact with each other.
Interview Question 1:	Describe a time when you had to integrate the use of a new system or tool to accomplish your work. What was your strategy? What challenges did you encounter? How did you overcome those challenges?
Interview Question 2:	Give me an example of a time when you worked in a virtual environment and used technology to maintain your connection with colleagues and potentially with your supervisor. What were the change/transition skills that you used? What challenges did you encounter and how did you overcome those challenges?

<p style="text-align: center;">Landscape Level Science</p>	<p>As the pressures on land and natural resources increase and are exacerbated by the impacts of climate change, resource managers and policy makers will need science conducted at a landscape-scale to inform a wide range of decisions that affect the following in an increasingly interconnected landscape: public safety, the siting of energy development, water resource allocations, recreation, the conservation of species and habitat, or the identification of transmission line rights-of-way, to name a few.</p>
<p>Key Behavioral Indicators</p> <p><i>(Examples of how you know the candidate is demonstrating the competency)</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Uses an array of tools to analyze, visualize, translate, and extrapolate science on a landscape scale. • Skills and capabilities required include mapping, geospatial data integration, remote sensing, predictive modeling, scenario development, forecasting, simulation, and decision support to inform policy and decision-making, provide a basis for the analysis of cost benefit and trade-offs, and aid in the understanding of the long-term impacts of near-term decisions.
<p>Interview Question 1:</p>	<p>Describe a situation in which you were able to conduct science and/or produce a product using an array of tools to analyze, visualize, translate or extrapolate science on a landscape scale (alt: your work to a larger scale). How did you approach this work? What tools did you use? What were your lessons learned?</p>
<p>Interview Question 2:</p>	<p>Describe a time when you had to manage multiple data sets or sources. How did you integrate the information you received? Or – Describe a complex project/program that required a range of disciplines/partners and how you went about the collaboration.</p>

<p style="text-align: center;">Adaptability/ Flexibility</p>	<p>Adapts quickly to changing priorities and easily considers new approaches.</p>
<p>Key Behavioral Indicators</p> <p><i>(Examples of how you know the candidate is demonstrating the competency)</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acknowledges new information and adjusts responses accordingly. • Adjusts timelines, results and expectations appropriately to changing needs. • Identifies ways to incorporate new practices into existing framework. • Overcomes obstacles to achieve results. • Persists towards solutions and goals in changing circumstances. • Remains flexible and open to new ideas and encourages others to value change. • Thinks and acts effectively under pressure. • Understands changes in work tasks, situations, and environment as well as the basis for change. • Possessing good problem-solving and analytical skills. • Proficient in information technology and computer skills. • Working collaboratively within and outside one’s organization, possessing diplomacy, negotiation, relationship-building skills. • Ability to communicate job-specific knowledge to both technical and non-technical audiences. • Maintaining relevant and current skills.
<p>Interview Question 1:</p>	<p>Tell me about a time when you had multiple important projects competing for your time. What challenges did you face and how did you handle them?</p>
<p>Interview Question 2:</p>	<p>Tell me about a time when you had to adapt quickly to changing priorities and new approaches. What caused the shifts in priorities and how did you respond? Who was involved and how did you contribute to resolving the situation?</p>

Appendices:

Appendix A: Common Rating Errors and Interviewing Mistakes

Common Rating Errors

One way to minimize rating errors is to make interviewers aware of the most common types of error, which are summarized below.

1. **Rater Bias:** Allowing prejudices about certain groups of people or personalities to interfere with being able to fairly evaluate a candidate's performance. Interviewers should refrain from considering any non-performance related factors when making judgments.
2. **Halo Effect:** Allowing ratings of performance in one competency to influence ratings for other competencies. For example, allowing a high rating on Oral Communication to bias the rating on Problem Solving, irrespective of the candidate's performance on Problem Solving.
3. **Central Tendency:** A tendency to rate all competencies at the middle of the rating scale (for example, giving all "3s" on a 5-point scale). When hesitating over making a high rating, interviewers should realize such a rating does not indicate perfect performance; it means demonstrating more of the competency than is generally exhibited. Similarly, when hesitating over a low rating, interviewers should realize it does not mean the candidate does not possess the competency; it means he/she did not demonstrate much of the competency in his/her interview responses.
4. **Leniency:** A tendency to give high ratings to all candidates, irrespective of their actual performance. There may be candidates who could benefit from further development in certain areas. Interviewers should allow their ratings to reflect these intra- and inter-individual differences.
5. **Strictness:** A tendency to give low ratings to all candidates, irrespective of their actual performance. There may be outstanding candidates whose demonstration of competencies warrants high ratings. Interviewers should allow their ratings to reflect these intra- and inter-individual differences.
6. **Similar to Me:** 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. Interviewers should concentrate on the responses given by the candidate in making evaluations, rather than on the outward characteristics and personality of the candidate.

Interviewers can minimize these rating errors by thoroughly understanding the competencies being assessed and by learning to compare the behaviors exhibited in the interview with the behaviors anchoring the proficiency-level ratings for each competency.

Common Interviewing Mistakes

1. **Relying on First Impressions:** Interviewers tend to make rapid decisions about the qualifications of a candidate within the first few minutes of the interview based on minimal information. Interviewers should reserve their judgment until sufficient information on the candidate has been gathered.

2. **Negative Emphasis:** Unfavorable information tends to be more influential and memorable than favorable information. Interviewers should avoid focusing on negative information to the exclusion of positive information.
3. **Not Knowing the Job:** Interviewers who do not have a comprehensive understanding of the skills needed for the job often form their own opinion about what constitutes the best candidate. They use this personal impression to evaluate candidates. Therefore, it is important to make sure interviewers fully understand the requirements of the job.
4. **Pressure to Hire:** When interviewers believe they need to make a decision quickly, they tend to make decisions based on a limited sample of information, or on a small number of candidate interviews. Interviewers should adhere to the established interview procedure and timeline with each candidate to avoid making erroneous decisions.
5. **Contrast Effects:** The order in which the candidates are interviewed can affect the ratings given to candidates. While making ratings, interviewers should refrain from comparing and contrasting candidates to those who have been previously interviewed.
6. **Nonverbal Behavior:** Interviewers should base their evaluation of the candidate on the candidate's past performance and current behavior as it relates to the competency being evaluated and not just on how the candidate acts during the interview. Questions and probes relating to the competencies of interest will usually direct the interviewer to the important information.

Appendix B: Examples of Probing Questions

Examples of probing questions include:

- What factors led up to the situation?
- Could you or anyone else have done something to prevent the situation?
- What did you determine as the most critical issue to address in this situation?
- How did you respond?
- What was the most important factor you considered in taking action?
- What is the first thing you did?
- What was the outcome?
- Is there anything you would have said and/or done differently?
- Were there any benefits from the situation?
- Tell me more about that.
- Is this typical for you?
- How did that make you feel?
- Please give me some more detail
- What eventually happened?
- What did you learn from this?

Appendix C: General Interviewing Protocol

The Interview Setting

- The interview should take place in a comfortable environment that is quiet, non-threatening, and private.
- Seating arrangements should be the same for all candidates.
- The interview room and facilities must be accessible to candidates with disabilities.
- There should be a separate area for those waiting to be interviewed and individuals who have been interviewed should not be allowed to communicate with those waiting to be interviewed.
- Interviews should be scheduled far enough in advance to provide adequate preparation time for the interviewer.
- All candidates should be allotted the same amount of interview time.

Prior to the Interview

- Interviewers should:
 - Review the position description
 - Review the job announcement and job assessment questions
 - Review the assigned competencies, the definition, and key behaviors that comprise each competency the interviewee will be assessed against
 - Review the candidate's resume

Suggested Introduction to the Interview

The information provided below offers suggestions for conducting behavioral-based interviews. Interviewers should use this information as a tool and tailor the interview to meet the needs of the individual organization.

- This is a behavioral interview, which may be different from interviews you have had in the past. A behavioral interview focuses on what you have done, said, felt and thought in past experiences. Please use the first person as much as possible because I am most interested in what you have done, said, thought and felt in the situations. So if you use the term “we” rather than “I,” I may interrupt you to clarify what you did in the situation versus what others did.
- I am going to ask you specific questions about your experiences and will ask that you try, as best as you can, to discuss experiences that have occurred within the past 2 or 3 years so that you will be able to recall the details of the situations.
- I will ask follow-up questions to get as many of the details regarding what you were doing in the situation. Imagine that I am making a movie of what you were doing in the given situation. I am interested in everything you did, said, thought and felt.

During the Interview

- Greet and welcome the candidate and spend a few minutes building rapport. Talk about areas in which the candidate is interested.

- Thank the candidate for his/her interest in the position and for coming to the interview.
- Briefly describe the job and relevant organizational characteristics to allow candidates to become comfortable in the interview setting. Provide a realistic job preview to allow the candidate to also assess his/her fit with the position and organization.
- Explain the interview process in a standardized way. You may also provide this information in writing to each candidate.
- Inform the candidate that notes will be taken throughout the interview.
- Ask the candidate if he/she has any questions before beginning.
- Transition into the formal interview.
- Ask the same predetermined questions to each candidate and use follow-up questions when necessary to probe for accomplishments. Ideally at least two to three examples in each area should be given by the candidate. Try to get the candidate to give complete examples which include the
 - **situation** that the candidate encountered.
 - **task** that the candidate was working toward.
 - **actions** that the candidate took.
 - **results** or outcome of the actions taken.
- Use this guide to take notes and evaluate the candidate.
- Allow time for the candidate to ask questions of the interviewer(s).

After the Interview

After the candidate completes the interview and leaves the room, the interviewers should review their notes discuss their observation of the candidate.

- Check off appropriate behavioral indicators and summarize key observations and notes. Evaluate the candidate on each of the assigned competencies as outlined in each of the interview questions.
- Ensure the total performance of each candidate has been considered thoroughly and objectively.
- Ensure evaluations are tied to specific behavioral examples.
- Conduct interviews of the rest of the candidates using this guide.
- Review final evaluations of all candidates and order candidates accordingly.
- Make a hiring recommendation.

The background information and guidance in this guide are based on a behavioral interview guide prepared by the Office of Workforce Effectiveness (OWER) Workforce Planning and Competency Management Team, National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID), part of the National Institutes Health, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.