Beyond Competency-Based Structured Interviewing:

HOW ADDING FACTORS, CLUSTERS, AND STALLERS AND STOPPERS LEADS TO BETTER INTERVIEWING RESULTS

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Key Takeaways:

• Assessing competencies in structured interviews helps differentiate skill levels between candidates.

• Career Stallers and Stoppers aid in assessing a candidate’s shortcomings.

• Global Focus Areas help assess suitability for the rigors of a global assignment.

• Clusters are best used when you are trying to form initial perceptions about the candidate.

• Factors add the most value during an intake assessment for an executive coaching assignment.

67 COMPETENCIES, 19 CAREER STALLERS AND STOPPERS, 7 GLOBAL FOCUS AREAS, 26 CLUSTERS AND 8 FACTORS

The addition of new content to the Interview Architect® Express now gives you access to structured interview content from any area of the Leadership Architect® Library. Specifically, you can assess candidates on any of the following:

• 67 Competencies
• 19 Career Stallers and Stoppers
• 7 Global Focus Areas
• 26 Clusters
• 8 Factors

That is a total of over 1,200 questions you can choose from!

A broader array of content presents you with more options to tailor and enhance the interviewing process. This guide provides you with tips for the appropriate and beneficial use of this content. Each of the different elements of the Leadership Architect® Library will be described along with when and how they are best applied in the interview process.

Competencies—What they are, what they tell you, how to use them

Competencies defined
Competencies are defined as “a measurable characteristic of a person that is related to success at work. It may be a behavioral skill, a technical skill, an attribute (such as intelligence), or an attitude (such as optimism).” (The Leadership Machine, p. 5)
The Leadership Architect® Library contains a total of 67 specific competencies (highlighted below):

**What competencies can tell you about a candidate**

The assessment of competencies as part of a structured behavioral interview process can provide you with strong insight into whether a candidate possesses the competencies identified as critical for success in a particular job or functional area.

The candidate's responses to behavior-based questions and follow-up probes will indicate whether or not that candidate's skill level in a competency falls above or below the requirements for the position in question.

**A caveat on drawing conclusions**

Conclusions need to be limited to the scope of specific competencies that are assessed. Just because a candidate demonstrates skill in one competency (e.g., Decision Quality) does not mean that the candidate demonstrates equal skill in a related competency (e.g., Problem Solving).

Also, the assessment of competencies will not inform you directly of other independent qualities of the candidate such as expertise in a specific functional/technical area or organization/culture fit.
When to use competencies in the selection process

Competencies can be assessed at just about any point of the selection process. Generally, we recommend that a candidate be assessed on competencies once he or she has gotten past the initial stages of the selection process and has been identified as a truly viable candidate.

This would likely include a determination that the candidate possesses the appropriate educational background, work experience, and technical skills and represents a good fit with the organization’s culture. The assessment of competencies then serves to differentiate the top candidates from those who are merely qualified.

Combining competency and cluster level interviewing

In the case where you choose to use both competency and cluster level interviewing for the same candidate, we generally recommend that competencies are applied following a cluster level assessment. This allows for the opportunity to validate assessments made from the cluster level interviews. It also provides an opportunity to drill to a deeper level and probe for more specific information in particular skill areas.

Challenges in competency-based interviewing

When interviewing at the competency level, the main challenge faced by interviewers is determining which competencies to include and which ones to leave out. Given the time constraints of the interview process, typically only 5-7 competencies can be evaluated in an hour-long interview.

Paring down the competency list

Since up to one-third of the 67 competencies may be identified as mission-critical to performance in a given position, this presents the interviewer with some choices to make in order to pare the list down. One method to guide decision-making is to classify competencies into different categories based on their developmental difficulty and the number of individuals in the general population – the supply in the labor pool – who are skilled in the competency.
Based on this differentiation, we can identify three primary categories of competencies:

- **Price-of-Admission Competencies**: Competencies that are in high supply and are usually important in any job. They are readily found in candidates and are likely to be easier to develop.

- **Differentiator Competencies**: These competencies are in shortest supply and hardest to develop. They differentiate candidates to a much greater degree because they make a real difference when someone has them.

- **Competitive-Edge Competencies**: Competencies that are in shorter supply and more difficult to develop, therefore providing a competitive edge to candidate possessing these skills.

**Price-of-Admission Competencies—Best used in pre-screening**

It is important to establish that the candidate has the price-of-admission competencies for the position. However, if these are the competencies primarily used for selection, it would be difficult to differentiate one candidate from another due to the wide availability of the skills. Therefore, the price-of-admission competencies fit best as a preliminary screen during the initial stages of talent attraction.

**Differentiator Competencies—In shortest supply and hardest to develop**

In contrast, the differentiator competencies are in shortest supply and are hardest to develop. They may be suitable for use at advanced stages of selection to differentiate candidates who have similar skills in competitive-edge competencies. Otherwise, plan to focus on these competencies for long-term talent development with successful candidates.

**Competitive-Edge competencies—The focus of your selection efforts**

That leaves us with the competitive-edge competencies. More often than not, these competencies will be the focus of your talent selection efforts.

The relative position of each of these competencies at each level, based on data from our Research and Interpretation Placemats, is displayed on the sample matrices found in the appendix to this document.
Consider these categories as general rules of thumb in selecting competencies to interview for, not absolutes. The ultimate decision of which competencies to include depends on the specific nature of the job and your understanding of the requirements candidates need for success.

**Career Stallers and Stoppers—What they are, what they tell you, how to use them**

**Career Stallers and Stoppers defined**

Career Stallers and Stoppers are the negative characteristics or flame-out factors that can derail a person’s career. In many respects, they represent the flipside of competencies. The Leadership Architect® Library contains a total of 19 specific Career Stallers and Stoppers (highlighted below):

What Career Stallers and Stoppers can tell you about a candidate

The assessment of Career Stallers and Stoppers provides insight into whether a candidate demonstrates behaviors that might cause difficulties with people and results on the job, potentially leading to derailment. Evidence of staller and stopper behaviors is not a sure sign of problems, but should definitely raise your attention and concern.
When to use Career Stallers and Stoppers in the selection process

Conditions that call for the assessment of Career Stallers and Stoppers include:

- Negative behaviors demonstrated by the candidate at earlier stages of the selection process that raise concern and need to be validated and better understood,

- A history of problem behaviors by previous incumbents of the role that raise others’ sensitivity and awareness (e.g., the previous VP of Marketing was Defensive (108) and Insensitive to Others (112)), or

- A high degree of potential harmfulness associated with a particular staller and stopper (e.g., having a CFO with a Lack of Ethics and Values (109) could be potentially disastrous for an organization).

Caveats for using Career Stallers and Stoppers

Ideally, Career Stallers and Stoppers are an important consideration in assessing a candidate’s potential shortcomings and risks and determining overall fit with the role and the organization. They should not be assessed for the purpose of looking for “red flags” or delivering a “knock out” punch to a candidate.

In some cases, evidence for a staller and stopper behavior might be established during the interview process and a plan might be put in place to properly mitigate it and address it developmentally once the person is on the job.

Global Focus Areas—What they are, what they tell you, how to use them

Global Focus Areas defined

The Global Focus Areas are the additional characteristics required for global business leaders. The Leadership Architect® Library contains a total of 7 Global Focus Areas (highlighted on next page):
What Global Focus Areas can tell you about a candidate

The Global Focus Areas are especially valuable if you are assessing a candidate who will be relocating to a different country or working in a role with a high-demand for partnering with customers and colleagues from around the globe.

Each Global Focus Area hones in on a particular skill set essential for conducting business globally. The assessment of these areas will help you determine the candidate’s suitability for the rigors of a global assignment. However, it is also important to assess that the candidate possesses some of the competencies and/or clusters that are critical to performance, regardless of whether or not the job has a global scope.

When to use Global Focus Areas in the selection process

Global Focus Areas are versatile and can be used at just about any point in the selection process and pair well with the evaluation of either competencies or clusters.

Caveats for using Global Focus Areas

Many of the Global Focus Areas are globally-themed derivatives of some of the 67 competencies. For example, 161. Global Business Knowledge is in many respects the global equivalent of 5. Business Acumen. As a result, avoid assessing the candidate on competencies and Global Focus Areas that may have considerable behavioral overlap.

Assessing candidates in Global Focus Areas helps determine suitability for global assignments.

Avoid assessing the candidate on competencies and Global Focus Areas that may have considerable behavioral overlap.
Clusters—What they are, what they tell you, how to use them

Clusters defined
Clusters are statistically-supported groupings of related competencies. The Leadership Architect® Library contains a total of 21 competency clusters and 5 career staller and stopper clusters (highlighted below):

What clusters can tell you about a candidate
Clusters shift the focus to one level up from competencies. Therefore, they provide an assessment of broader, but still closely related, groupings of behavior. Using clusters, for instance, can give you a good read on how effective a candidate is at dealing with difficult situations (Cluster H – Dealing with Trouble) or being an inspirational leader (Cluster Q – Inspiring Others). What you will likely be missing is some of the finer detail with regard to things such as how effectively the individual can address poor performance (13. Confronting Direct Reports) or deliver a compelling vision (65. Managing Vision & Purpose).

When to use clusters in the selection process
Like competencies, clusters can be used effectively at just about any point in the selection process. They tend to function ideally closer to the beginning of the process, at the point where you are still trying to form some initial perceptions of the candidate. Because you can potentially cover a fairly broad spectrum of behaviors by assessing 5-7 clusters,
you can start to create a good behavioral sketch of the candidate’s strengths and developmental needs. Follow-up interviews aimed at assessing a carefully targeted group of competencies add depth to your initial assessment and provide a more complete picture of the candidate.

Caveats for using Clusters
Because there are far fewer clusters than competencies, you generally do not face the same challenges with trying to pare down the number of clusters you want to assess during the interview process. Also, the categories of price-of-admission, competitive-edge and differentiator tend to blur because the majority of clusters contain competencies from multiple categories. One exception is Cluster J — Focusing on the Bottom Line, where all three competencies are price-of-admission.

Factors—What they are, what they tell you, how to use them
Factors defined
Factors are the highest-order grouping of related competencies and are created by applying factor analytic statistical methods. The Leadership Architect® Library contains a total of 6 competency factors and 2 career staller and stopper factors (highlighted below):
What factors can tell you about a candidate
Because factors are at such a high level in the overall structure of the Leadership Architect® Library, they tend to provide very broad generalizations about the candidate and not much in the way of specifics.

When to use factors in the selection process
We believe factor-level interviewing adds value during an intake assessment for an executive coaching assignment. Assessing the coachee on all eight factors can be done within the scope of a 90-minute coaching session and allow the coach to get a rough understanding of how the candidate acts across different areas of behavior and inform the diagnosis of initial areas that need to be addressed. These perceptions can then be refined during subsequent sessions with the candidate.

Caveats for using factors
In general, we caution against using factors during the interviewing process because they simply don’t provide sufficient information upon which to base an employment decision. The exception would be Factor IV: Energy and Drive, which is synonymous with Cluster J – Focusing on the Bottom Line.

Multi-level, multi-category interviewing
A broad array of interview content allows you to combine content in powerful ways and to pull interview content from different levels of the Leadership Architect® Library. For example, a candidate may be assessed at both the cluster and competency levels.

Another possibility is to sample from different behavioral categories. For example, a candidate can be assessed on competencies, career stallers and stoppers, and global focus areas. A blend of multi-level, multi-category interviewing is yet another possibility.

No hard and fast rules exist to govern what combinations of content you may choose to include as part of your interviewing process – use a balance of creativity and common sense as your primary guide.
### Appendix A

**Sample Competency Matrices from the Interview Architect® Learning & Application Guide**
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About Korn/Ferry International
Korn/Ferry International, with more than 90 offices in 39 countries, is a premier global provider of talent management solutions. Based in Los Angeles, the firm delivers an array of solutions that help clients to identify, deploy, develop, retain and reward their talent.

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