Personal Experience and Judgement

Interview preparation summary · SC track

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INT.KJ.1.a · Stories that prove it

Build a story bank of five or six real experiences mapped to the common competencies, so that every typical question has a strong story ready and no story is used twice.

An experience interview asks for stories on a small set of themes: leadership, teamwork, achievement or impact, conflict, failure and often initiative or influence. Most candidates have enough material; they fail because they have not looked at it in advance, so they reuse one story or freeze when asked about failure. A story bank lists five or six experiences from work, study, sport, volunteering or projects. Beside each you write the competencies it can prove, the one number that shows the result and your own role in a sentence. Choose stories where you owned a decision, something was at risk and the result can be checked. Scale matters less than ownership: a society budget you rescued beats a vague part in a big programme. Check coverage like a consultant: each competency needs a lead story and a back-up, and no story should lead twice. Do not stretch or invent a story, because probing follow-ups will find the gap.

WORKED EXAMPLE: MAPPING SIX STORIES TO SIX COMPETENCIES

Maya Okonkwo has six experiences and expects questions on leadership, teamwork, achievement, conflict, failure and initiative. Story A is rescuing a student society budget, B is a four-person hospital data project, C is a marathon she finished after injury, D is an internship pricing model she got wrong, E is redesigning a shop rota, F is settling a dispute at a charity event. She has marked which competencies each story can prove. Is her bank complete, and which story should lead for each competency?

Answer: The bank is complete: 12 mappings, 2 stories per competency, and each story leads once (F, E, C, B, D, A for leadership, teamwork, achievement, conflict, failure and initiative). Story A is the flexible back-up.

> **Interview tip:** Say aloud before the interview which story you will use for each theme, and write the one-line headline result for each. If you are asked a second question on a theme, switch to the back-up rather than repeating the lead story.

INT.KJ.1.b · Stories that prove it

Tell an experience story in the situation, task, action, result and reflection structure in about two minutes, using I for your own actions, we for the team and at least one number.

A good story has five parts: the situation and task in a few sentences, the actions you took, the result with a number, and a short reflection on what you learned or would change. The balance is the skill. Candidates spend too long on background and too little on what they personally did. As a guide, close to half of the time belongs to your actions, a fifth each to context and result, and the rest to reflection. Use I for decisions you made and we for what the team did, because interviewers listen for ownership and for a candidate who takes credit for everything. Quantify: a change in time, cost, revenue, grades or satisfaction is better than adjectives. Open with a one-line headline so the listener knows where you are going, which is the same answer-first habit used in a case. Practise out loud, since a story that reads well can run to four minutes when spoken. Never claim a result you cannot defend.

WORKED EXAMPLE: BUDGETING A TWO-MINUTE STORY

You will tell the story of redesigning the rota at Harlow Garden Centre, an invented shop where you worked one summer. Before your change there were 14 uncovered shifts a month; afterwards there were 5. You speak at about 150 words a minute and have 2 minutes. How many words should each part get, and what is the headline result?

Answer: Plan 300 words: about 60 on context, 135 on your actions, 60 on the result and 45 on reflection. The headline result is that uncovered shifts fell from 14 to 5 a month, a fall of 64%.

> **Interview tip:** Give the headline first, then the story, then repeat the number at the end. If you hear yourself still describing the background after 30 seconds, move to what you did.

INT.KJ.1.c · Stories that prove it

Answer probing follow-ups on a story honestly: separate your contribution from the team's, defend your numbers, and say what you would do differently.

After the story come the probes: What exactly did you do? Whose idea was it? How do you know the result was yours? What did others think? What would you change? These are not hostile. The interviewer is testing depth, ownership and honesty, because a story that was rehearsed but not lived collapses after two questions. Prepare for each story the facts behind the claim: the baseline, the measure, the date, the people involved, the alternatives you rejected and one thing that went wrong. Answer a contribution question with a proportion or a list of specific tasks, and credit the team for the rest; that raises credibility instead of lowering it. If you do not know how a number was measured, say so and explain what you believe. When asked what you would do differently, give a real change and the reason, not a disguised strength. Pausing to think is fine. Defend a view with evidence but update it if the interviewer raises a fair point.

WORKED EXAMPLE: SIZING YOUR OWN CONTRIBUTION

You say you helped a five-person team find cost savings of 240k a year for an invented client, Fenwick Packaging. The interviewer asks: how much of that was actually you? The team found eight savings levers worth 60k, 50k, 40k, 30k, 25k, 15k, 12k and 8k. You personally found and sized the 60k, 40k and 15k levers and ran the weekly client update. Give an honest, specific answer.

Answer: Of the 240k a year, I personally found and sized three levers worth 115k, about 48%, and ran the weekly client update. The rest came from colleagues, mainly the 50k and 30k levers.

> **Interview tip:** Give the proportion first, then the specific tasks, then credit the team by name or role. A candidate who says I did all of it invites doubt; one who says just under half and shows how is believed.

INT.KJ.2.a · Judgement

Work through an ethics or client-confidentiality dilemma: pause, identify who is affected, separate fact from assumption, choose the least harmful action that protects the client and the firm, and escalate.

Consulting firms handle confidential information about clients, often including competitors in the same industry, so interviews test whether you will protect it under pressure. A dilemma has no trick answer; the marker looks for a sequence. Pause before acting. Say what you know and what you are assuming. Name who could be harmed: the client, another client, the firm, individuals. Check the obvious rules: the firm's policy, your contract and any applicable law, which vary by country and firm, so say you would ask rather than guess. Choose the least harmful action that still serves the client, usually stopping, not using the material, telling your manager or the firm's ethics or risk contact, and offering a legitimate alternative such as public data. Count the cost honestly, such as lost days, and do not pretend integrity is free. Avoid the two common mistakes: quietly using the information because it helps, and dramatically refusing without offering a way forward.

WORKED EXAMPLE: A COMPETITOR'S FILE ON THE SHARED DRIVE

You are on a 15 working day engagement for Brightmere Foods, an invented client. On the shared drive you find a spreadsheet that appears to hold unit costs for Tarvane Dairy, a rival, which looks like it came from another team's work. Using it would let you build the cost benchmark in 1 day; rebuilding the benchmark from public sources would take 3 days. What do you do, and what does it cost?

Answer: Stop, do not use it, report it to my manager and the firm's risk contact, and rebuild the benchmark from public sources. The cost is 2 extra days, about 13% of a 15-day engagement, which I would manage openly.

> **Interview tip:** Say the sequence aloud: pause, facts, who is affected, action, cost, alternative. Add that you would follow the firm's policy and ask what applies, since rules differ and this is not a legal ruling.

INT.KJ.2.b · Judgement

Deliver a recommendation the client will not like, and handle an error you have made, by leading with the answer, showing the evidence, acknowledging the cost and offering a path forward.

Clients sometimes hold a strong view, such as a chief executive who wants an acquisition, and the evidence says otherwise. The consultant's value is an independent view, delivered with respect. Lead with the answer, not a long build-up. Show the two or three facts that matter, quantified, then say what would change your mind, so the discussion is about evidence and not authority. Acknowledge what the client gets right and the cost of the recommendation to them, and propose a next step they can accept. Errors work the same way: tell the right person promptly, state what was wrong and its size, give the corrected

figure, say whether the decision changes, and say how you will prevent a repeat. Do not hide an error, over-apologise or blame a colleague. Interviewers want judgement, accountability and calm. The usual mistake is softening the message until it is no longer a recommendation.

WORKED EXAMPLE: TELLING A CHIEF EXECUTIVE THE PRICE IS TOO HIGH

The chief executive of an invented client, Aldmoor Engineering, wants to buy Calder Tools for the 90m the seller is asking. Calder earns EBITDA of 8m. Comparable deals typically value similar businesses at 7 to 8 times EBITDA. Your team estimates cost synergies of 3m a year, which a buyer could value at 7 times, but you judge only half likely to be delivered. What is the most Aldmoor should pay, and how do you say it? Ignore tax and deal costs.

Answer: I would recommend paying no more than about 75m. The business is worth 56m to 64m alone and risked synergies add 10.5m, so the 90m ask is about 15.5m above the ceiling.

> **Interview tip:** Say the recommendation in your first sentence, then the evidence, then what would change your view. For an error, use the same shape: what was wrong, how big, the corrected number, the decision, the fix.

INT.KJ.2.c · Judgement

Handle ambiguity, a first-100-days question and a weak spot in your record by stating assumptions, setting a phased plan, and describing gaps honestly with evidence of change.

Three judgement questions often come together. When a request is ambiguous, ask one or two sharp clarifying questions, state your assumption and proceed, instead of waiting for certainty. When asked what you would do in your first 100 days, give a phased plan with a reason for each phase: learn the client, the team and the data first, deliver something small and useful next, then take ownership of a piece of work. Name what you would measure and whom you would ask for feedback. When asked about a weak spot, such as a low first-year grade, a gap in your CV or a failed project, do not hide it or blame others. Say what happened in one plain sentence, what you did about it, and the evidence that it changed. Interviewers are not looking for a flawless record, but for self-awareness and a track of improvement. Avoid the disguised strength: I work too hard is not a weakness.

WORKED EXAMPLE: A WEAK FIRST YEAR AND A FIRST 100 DAYS

The interviewer says: your first-year average was 54% and you finished with 69%. Why the gap, and what would you do in your first 100 days if you joined? Your honest account is that you took a heavy part-time job in year one and did not plan revision; in year two you changed your timetable and joined a study group. Your marks were 54%, 61% and 69% across three years.

Answer: My first year was weak because I took on too many hours and did not plan revision. I fixed that and rose 15 points to 69%. In my first 100 days I would learn for 30, deliver for 40 and own a piece of work for 30, checking feedback at each stage.

> **Interview tip:** Keep the weak spot to three sentences: what happened, what you did, what the result was. Then move to the forward-looking part of the answer.