



eustraining.eu

Prepare . Improve . Succeed

**EPSO's Situational
Competency-Based
Interview:**

State of Play

Written by Jan De Sutter

Senior EPSO coach and trainer

The background of the page is a dark grey-blue color. It is decorated with several interlocking puzzle pieces. Most of the pieces are a light teal color, while a few are a bright orange color. The pieces are scattered across the page, with some appearing to be missing or floating. The overall theme is one of assembly or completion.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

- 1. Introduction*
- 2. What is the SCBI?*
- 3. SCBI vs CBI*
- 4. SCBI vs ROLE-PLAY*
- 5. SCBI Assignment*
- 6. How to Prepare*
- 7. Competencies & Indicators*
- 8. Possible Questions*
- 9. Conclusion*




INTRODUCTION

Since its first use in December 2020, the Situational Competency-Based Interview (SCBI) has undergone quite a few transformations. The first versions of the assignments looked very much like reworked Group Exercise assignments with 15-20 pages of background information. Then, the assignments became considerably shorter and the interview was more of a role-play. Later, the focus of the questions was very much on the interpretation of the background documents. And in the most recent competition, the feedback we got from our clients was even more confusing: the questions were indeed competency-based, asking for how the candidate would respond in situations (remotely) connected to the original situation in the assignment.

Here at EU Training, we must admit that EPSO has been challenging our Resilience. Were the consecutive Selection Boards giving their own interpretation of this brand-new exercise? Did we misinterpret EPSO's intentions? Did the candidates who gave us feedback do so? Or was it EPSO gradually refining the exercise in order to obtain more reliable results?

In this article, we'll explain our current understanding of the SCBI and how to best prepare for it. No guarantee that this is the "Ultimate" guide to the SCBI, but we think we're getting there.



The Situational Competency-Based Interview: **What is it?**

In 2020, Due to the Covid-19 outbreak, and to conclude the open competitions within a reasonable timeframe, EPSO decided to organise online testing – remotely – for the Assessment Centre tests. Remote online testing allows candidates to sit the tests at home or in the office without needing to travel to an EPSO testing centre. The testing takes place via online videoconferencing.

To ensure equal treatment, all candidates must take the same tests. However, the group exercise cannot be conducted remotely in a satisfactory way. If technical problems were to emerge, the group dynamic could be compromised, and participating candidates adversely impacted. Therefore, all candidates have to take another test instead, the Situational Competency Based Interview (SCBI).

The SCBI is an interview that aims to assess general competencies by asking the candidate how he/she would react in a specific situation. Prior to the interview, the candidate is invited to consult and read an online written assignment and background information in order to prepare for the exercise. The situation described in the assignment will be discussed during the interview and additional situations, not based on the assignment, will also be included. The SCBI takes place remotely using a videoconferencing tool. During the interview, the candidate may consult the written assignment and background information.

The duration of the interview will be announced in the assignment. In the past, this varied between 25 and 40 minutes, with AD SCBIs tending to be longer than the ones for ASTs. Additional time can be added should there be interruptions to the network connection.

Also, in the past, candidates were interviewed by an EU staff member. Two selection board members observed and assessed the performance of each candidate and scored the competencies covered by the test. The interviewer was not involved in the scoring of the candidate. In a recent (AST) competition, however, there were two interviewers, and it seems that they were both assessors (because their names figured on the list of the Members of the Selection Board). This may have been a one-off situation, but it could also be related to the new working methods that are gradually being introduced by EPSO.

Examples of assignments can be found here:

- [Assistants \(AST\)](#)
- [Administrators \(AD\)](#)

Comparing the SCBI with the General Competency-Based Interview

Much like the General Competency-Based Interview, the SCBI is a behavioural interview. During a behavioural interview, the interviewers are not asking if you have a skill, they're going to ask you to show them how you implement that skill in or out of the workplace. Behavioural interviews focus on the past, allowing the interviewers to predict the future. In the General Competency-Based interview you can take that literally as most of the questions will be formulated as follows:

"Tell us about a situation where XYZ happened, what did you do and what were the results of your actions?"

Therefore, in the General Competency Based Interview they are asking about how you implemented a given skill (competency) in your past experiences.

In contrast, the questions asked during the SCBI will be about the situations as described in the assignment, or additional situations that will be inserted during the interview. Examples of SCBI questions based on the assignment could be:

"Based on the assignment, if you were to take a leading role, how would you manage the conflict between X and Y?"

or

"How would you decide what is relevant and what is less relevant in the information provided by Z?"

You could even expect some questions that will not be based on the assignment, like:

"How would you deal with a colleague that...?"

or

"How would you react if your project receives comments that...?"

The SCBI is "semi-scripted," meaning that not all the candidates will get the same questions. Instead, the interviewer will have the choice of a list of questions from which he can freely choose during the interview. This also means that it will be a bit more difficult to prepare for this interview, as there is more uncertainty involved. This will, however, allow them to test your resilience in a better way than by just asking you questions about it (for which you can prepare very well).



Comparing the SCBI with a Role-play exercise

The SCBI is also a role-play exercise. In the assignment, you are explicitly asked to take on the role of an X in the Department Y at organisation Y. During the interview you are “playing the role” of that person. All the documentation you need to prepare yourself for your interview is included in the information brochure and there is no need for additional research.

Please note that the role you are supposed to assume has nothing to do with the duties or the selection criteria for the competition. After all, in this interview, the aim is to assess your general competencies as an assistant or administrator, not to test your knowledge or know-how in the field. A recent and striking example was where the candidates were asked to assume the role of a nurse working for the Medical Centre of the European Parliament, while taking an exam for AST4 for Audio/Video, Conference, Building, or Laboratory Technicians.

On the other hand, the interviewer(s) will typically NOT be playing a role; they are conducting the interview in their capacity of interviewer.

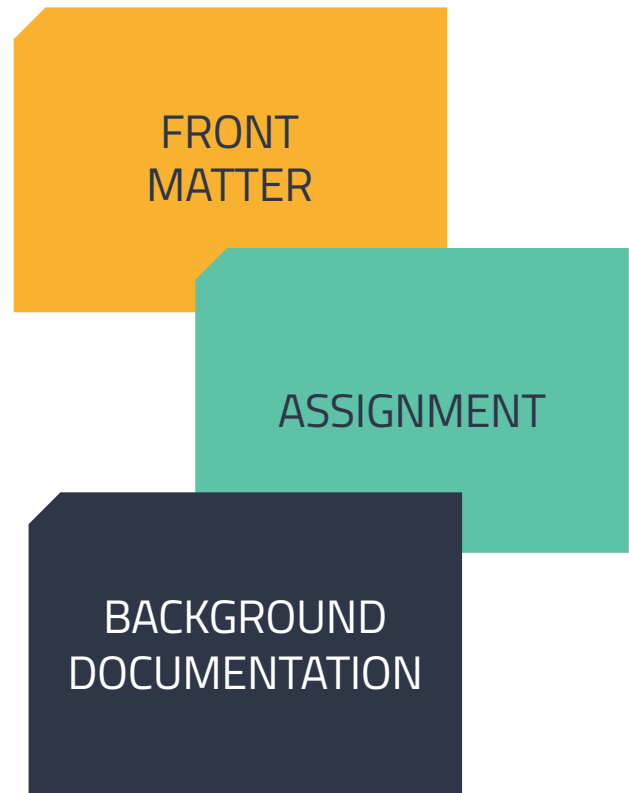
The Assignment

The assignment is composed of a number of documents in various formats, for example:

- Pages with text and figures
- Emails
- Press articles
- Notes for the file
- Webpages

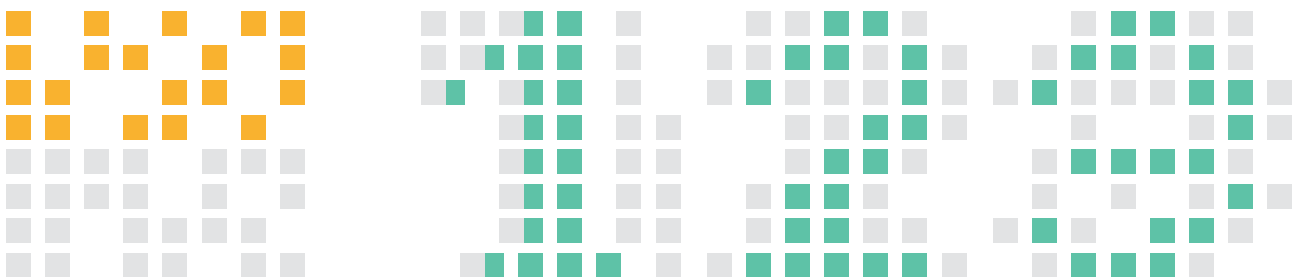
Most of documents will have a clear date of validity and for those that don't you can assume that they were available to you before the "Today" date as indicated at the bottom of the "Assignment" document, which is the first document after the front matter.

Equally, for most of the documents it will be clear who is the originator. If not clear, you can assume that the document/page contains "meta-data" about the exercise. One could classify the documents/pages as presented below:



Surprisingly, the entire booklet only contains 6-8 pages, of which only 4-5 pages offer "meaningful" information, apart from the metadata.

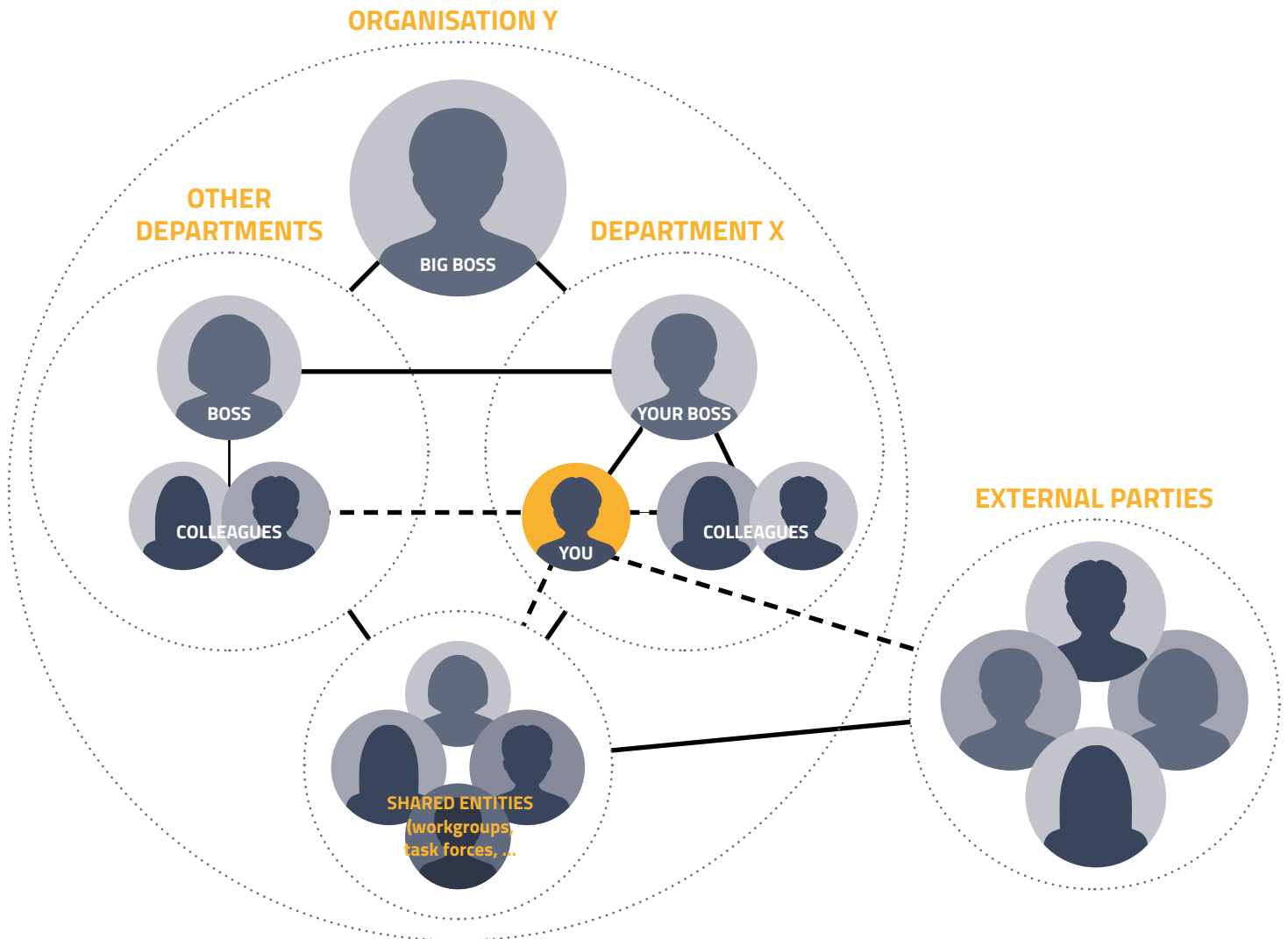
As it stands, the description of the situation is very incomplete, and there are almost no hard data on the current situation available. By receiving a very incomplete assignment, with a lot of unknown elements, the main challenge for the candidates is to find out which parts of the puzzle are missing and make hypotheses to reconstruct a coherent image of the situation. Much like in real life, there is rarely a unique, best solution possible:



How to prepare for the SCBI

Analyse the organigram

In any assignment, there will be some information on the organisation around you. In the diagram below you find a generic organigram with the relations between the actors (solid line = formal/hierarchical relation, dotted line = informal/personal relation): This is a further illustration that competencies are interrelated or overlapping. Certain anchors or indicators are the hallmark of a given competency but can have a clear relation with some other competencies as well.



By analysing the background information (including the assignment itself) you should be able to put names on the titles like "Your Boss", "Other bosses", "Colleagues", etc. Also give a thought on the nature of your relationship with those people; formal/informal, subject, mandate...). If things are not entirely clear, complete the puzzle by making reasonable assumptions.

Analyse the Mission

What needs to be accomplished or achieved by the organisation (Y), your department (X), and what is your mission/task in this? Unlike in other exercises like the Case Study or the Oral Presentation, your mission will not be explicitly mentioned in the assignment, you have to think about what it is.

Try to formulate the organisation's/department's/your objectives in a SMART¹ way. Frequently, there will be a lack of "hard" data (numbers, quantities) in the background documents. If such is the case, make reasonable assumptions.

Analyse the time frame

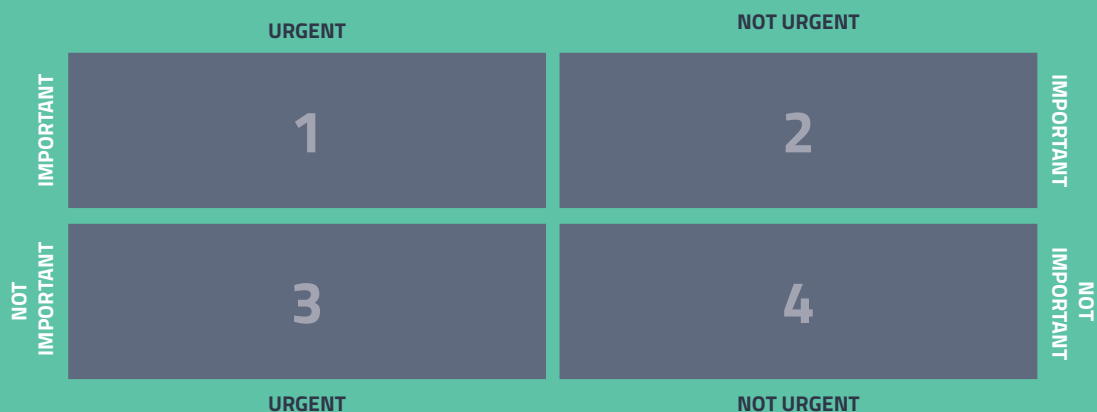
On the first page of the assignment, they will tell you what the date of today (i.e., the date of your interview) is. You will also find other dates in the rest of the background documents (date of writing, events in the past, deadlines, milestones...). Put everything on a timeline and try to make sense of the chronology of things as well as the causal relation between the various artefacts/events.

Make a Plan

Think about what you should do to reach the organisation's/department's/your own objectives. Explore the options, think of delegating or asking for help, prioritise, negotiate, and recycle/reuse work that has already been done (by yourself or by others) in the past.

The Eisenhower Matrix

Although it was Stephen Covey who made this method popular in his book 'First Things First', the concept is originally credited to US President Dwight D. Eisenhower. Whenever confronted with something that needed to be done, he would ask himself two questions: First, is the task important? Second, is it urgent? Based on this, the task would end up in one of four categories: important and urgent, important but not urgent, not important but urgent, and neither important nor urgent.



Obviously, the priority has to go to the tasks that are both important and urgent (quadrant No. 1 in the matrix). However, what is not so obvious is that tasks labelled important but not urgent get the next priority (No. 2). This is what Eisenhower's point was all about: 'What is important is seldom urgent and what is urgent is seldom important'. Tasks that are in quadrant No. 3 are typical candidates for delegation, and the ones in No. 4 can even be dropped because they are neither urgent nor important, so why bother?

Expect questions about the future (under the form of new events that are introduced during the interview) and try to anticipate changes in your plan.

¹ Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic, Time-based

COMPETENCIES and POSITIVE INDICATORS

Reflect on your own behaviour for the competencies that will be assessed

*In order to do so in a systematic way, you can use the lists below.
If you think there is room for improvement, think about how you would answer a question that is related to a situation similar to the assignment.*



Analysis and Problem Solving

- Analyses and prioritises situations to identify and solve problems.
 - Solutions increase efficiency and improve quality.
 - Involves others in solving problems and making decisions.
 - Factors organisational goals into decisions.
 - Makes clear, transparent, and timely decisions.
 - Dealing with complexity.
 - Identifying the relevant aspects from a mass of information.
 - Proposing useful and practical solutions.
 - Gathering information from various sources and critically evaluating it.
 - Using judgment and analysis to find solutions to problems.
- Seeks input from others.
 - Protects private and confidential information.



Delivering Quality and Results

- Taking responsibility.
- Taking initiative.
- Overcoming obstacles.
- Delivering quality work on time.
- Working to a high standard of quality.
- Manages workload efficiently and effectively.
- Understands the value of innovation and of quality improvement.
- Links up the various elements of the work.
- Demonstrates efficiency and effectiveness in own work.
- Manages and sustains change initiatives.



Communication

- Demonstrates effective written communication skills.
- Adapts written communication to the level of the audience.
- Writes clearly, in a visually appealing manner.
- Explains ideas clearly, simplifies the complex.
- Is methodical, structured and precise in speech.
- Adapts verbal communication to the level of the audience.
- Communicates clearly and knowledgeably.
- Shares information with others.



Leadership

- Explains ideas clearly, simplifies the complex.
- Adapts communication to the level of the audience.
- Communicates clearly and knowledgeably.
- Shares information with others.
- Seeks input from others.
- Understands and supports organisational goals.
- Helps others perform at their best.
- Self-aware and open to feedback.
- Leads by example.
- Delegates effectively.
- Learning and Development



Learning and Development

- Explains ideas clearly, simplifies the complex.
- Actively developing and applying new knowledge, skills, and competencies.
- Personal development.
- Asking for advice and assistance.
- Seeing own role within the organisation.
- Seeing the "Bigger Picture."
- Learning other languages.
- Learning strategy.
- Active listening.
- Teaching others.



Prioritising and Organising

- Understands goals and implements plans to achieve them.
- Mobilizes the appropriate resources to achieve goals.
- Develops and implements metrics to measure results.
- Anticipates and solves problems.
- Sets realistic deadlines and milestones.
- Manages workload efficiently and effectively.
- Prioritises tasks appropriately.
- Links up the various elements of the work.
- Is flexible in taking into account new aspects coming in.
- Collaborates effectively with others



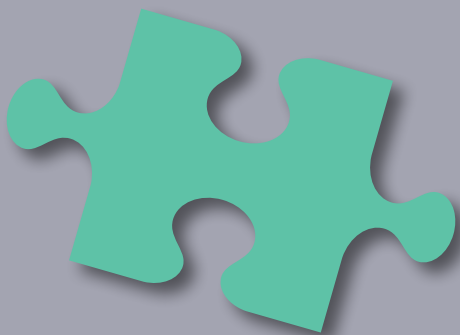
Resilience

- Social Support.
- Healthy mind in healthy body.
- Positive thinking.
- Communicating and problem solving.
- Coping with heavy workload and tight deadlines.
- Adjusting to peaks and troughs in workload.
- Handling failures and setbacks.
- Working constructively with management.
- Facing changes.
- Self-control.



Working with Others

- Treats others with respect.
- Cooperates and collaborates with colleagues.
- Includes relevant others in decision-making.
- Working with other cultures.
- Utilising other backgrounds, skills and motivations.
- Empathy and Sympathy.
- Assertiveness.
- Balances individual and team goals.
- Resolves conflicts among team members.
- Builds productive working relationships.





POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Practice, if possible, with a sparring partner, on the following list of questions. It is also a good idea to record your answers and observe yourself in the recordings afterwards. You may find points of improvement, especially in your (oral) communication during the mock interview.



Analysis and Problem Solving

1. You are member of a Working Group on an organisation-wide issue. In a meeting, the chair asks you to share your point of view and make a proposal. What would you do?
2. You oversee writing a document on topic X, but the background documents contain contradicting information. On top of that, some of the crucial information is missing. How would you proceed?



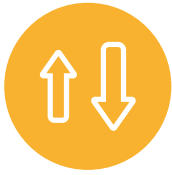
Delivering Quality and Results

1. You are currently working on a report on topic X and you're almost done. Then, new information comes in, leading to completely different conclusions and recommendations for the report. The deadline is imminent. What would you do?
2. In your department, doing overtime is part of the game. Your colleagues claim there is a systemic understaffing. You are new to the department. What would you do?
3. You are in the process of finalising an important document and the intranet goes down because of a cyber-attack. You have no access to your files. What do you do?



Learning and Development

1. Your colleague who is specialized in topic X and represents your department in a meeting covering that topic called in sick this morning. Your boss asked you to replace your colleague in that meeting, which takes place in four days. What would you do?
2. You must deliver a presentation on topic X to the other members of a working group you are part of. You master the topic very well but feel uncertain about giving an oral presentation. The presentation will take place in two weeks from now. What would you do?
3. You must write a report on the state of play of dossier X, but you don't have the latest information yourself. Instead, you know that information is available with another department, but your boss doesn't get along with the boss of that department. What do you do?
4. Explain how the decision chain on topic X works in your organisation.
5. You are in charge of organizing a meeting with people from another organisation. How do you proceed?



Prioritising and Organising

1. How would you organise your work for the coming 4 weeks to achieve your personal objectives, in line with the organisation's objectives?
2. It is 2 PM and you have tasks, A, B, and C on your to-do list. Task A is related to a request from another boss (your own boss was in Cc but didn't comment on it) and needs to be completed by tonight, but you know that you don't have the time to do so. Task B was given to you by your own boss, saying that it was important to have the results by tomorrow at noon. Task C consists of the update of a working procedure for the entire department. What would be your priorities?
3. Your boss assigned you a task which you had never done before. Having talked to a colleague, you learned that it took him 4 weeks to complete that task. Given the fact that you are 70% occupied with the rest of your work, and that you plan to take holidays soon, how would you tackle this situation?



Resilience

1. Your boss asked you to submit the roster for next month for the staff by the end of the day, and you very busy working on a report that needs to be ready tonight as well. What would you do?
2. Today, things are very quiet at the office, and you have no urgent files to deal with. On top of that, since it is a holiday period, most of your colleagues are on leave. What would you do?
3. You realize that you made an important mistake in a report your boss asked you to produce. The mistake may have far-reaching consequences for the entire organisation. What do you do?
4. You don't agree with the instructions given by your boss on a certain dossier. What would you do?
5. Because of an internal reorganization, you will be transferred to another department and your duties will change dramatically. What would you do?



Working with Others

1. You know two of your colleagues in the working group you are equally part of worked in the past on a project and they didn't get along. What would you do?
2. One of the participants in a Working Group you are also part of, is new. That person is also new to the organisation and is working in another department than yours. When the chair of the WG is presenting that new person in a WG meeting, what would you do?
3. For religious reasons, one of your colleagues doesn't agree with a policy that has been adopted by the organisation. What would you do?
4. You are member of a task force composed of people from different departments for which you know the positions and interests differ largely from your own department. How would you tackle this issue?
5. Person X, who is a direct colleague of yours, has the reputation to be difficult to work with. Today, you learned that you would have to work with that person on the same topic Y. What would be your approach?



Leadership (AD only)

1. You are member of a working group and the most knowledgeable person on one of the topics on the agenda. The chair is new and unaware of that fact. How do you proceed?

CONCLUSION

Our approach to preparing for the SCBI is twofold:

1.

Analyse the assignment in the most thorough way possible. Understand the organigramme, the timeline(s), the mission of the organisation, your department, and yourself. Make a plan on how you would solve the issues posed by the assignment.

2.

Compare your own (intended) behaviour with the (positive) indicators, at least for the competencies listed in the Notice of Competition for your specific competition and adjust your (intended) behaviour if needed.

You have about two to three weeks to prepare and it is entirely possible to do so!

Good luck!

Please note that the official source of information for EU competitions is the European Personnel Selection Office (EPSO). We do everything in our power to provide you with the most accurate and up-to-date information possible.



eutraining.eu

Prepare . Improve . Succeed

Copyright EU Training (Arboreus Kft.)
1075 Budapest, Rumbach Sebastyén utca 12.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying or otherwise, without the prior permission of EU Training.