



AIM FOR THE STARS

Solano County
Oral Board Guide

Solano County Oral Board (Interview) Examination Preparation Guide

Hiring decisions are among the most important decisions supervisors and managers make. There are many types of examinations that can be administered to identify the best candidate(s). One or more types of examinations, such as written examinations, performance tests, assessment centers, or oral interviews, may be administered to help distinguish those who meet the minimum qualifications from those who are the most qualified to be appointed to the position. Research shows that Oral Board interview examinations (Oral Board) are more effective than unstructured interviews or written examinations in predicting job performance.

An Oral Board, sometimes referred to as a structured interview, is a tool designed to assess a candidate's preparedness for the position. During an Oral Board, candidates are asked a series of questions directly related to the competencies needed to successfully perform the duties of the position. Competencies are defined as a group of behaviors including all the related knowledge, skills, abilities, and attributes that a person needs to be successful in their jobs. Identifying a candidate's competencies can contribute to improved organizational performance.

The key to being successful in the Oral Board process is in understanding how to translate work, volunteer, and school (internship) experiences into meaningful responses to the interviewers, otherwise known as panel members. In order to put your best foot forward in the process, we've outlined what you can expect and identified some helpful tips to guide you through the process.

For purposes of this guide, we will refer to a position that does not exist in Solano County government, but one that exists in private sector organizations: *Customer Service Sales Associate*. This guide walks you through what to expect and how you would prepare for your oral board examination.

The Oral Board/Interview Panel

The Oral Board is typically comprised of three (3) or four (4) panel members, who have a background related to the position (e.g., someone who shares the same body of knowledge) or above the position (e.g., a supervisor sitting as a panel member for a line staff position).

Panel members have been provided with structured interview questions designed to solicit a candidate's experience – specifically, the candidate's

knowledge, skills and abilities. In addition, the panel has a copy of each candidate's job application and the responses to the supplemental questionnaires (if applicable).

Panel members share the responsibility of asking the questions.

The Oral Board/Interview Process:

Past performance is one of the best predictors of future performance. Therefore, rather than asking a candidate "how would you handle" a certain situation (a hypothetical question), candidates are asked, "How have you handled" a certain situation. These types of questions are known as behavioral-based questions.

Behavioral-based questions require the candidate to describe specific situations, actions and outcomes from their past experience. An example of a behavioral-based question for a customer service competency might be:

Sample Questions:

- "Tell me about a specific time when you had to deal with a difficult customer. Why was the customer upset? Describe your actions. What was the outcome?"

Preparing for the Oral Board:

As previously stated, the Oral Board process is designed to allow candidates to share their experiences that will demonstrate their ability to assume the position if s/he is successful. Therefore, the best place to start your preparation is by thoroughly reviewing the class specification (sometimes referred to as a job description.) Solano County's job descriptions can be found online, www.jobsatsolanocounty.com.

Reviewing the job duties:

By reviewing the job duties, a candidate can get an understanding of the types of duties s/he may be asked to perform on the job. Based on those duties, you should be able identify the competencies needed to perform on the job. Below is a classification description for our hypothetical classification of Customer Service Sales Associate.

Customer Service Sales Associate: Class Description

Class Summary: The Customer Service Sales Associate is responsible for providing direct service to store customers up to and including the

completion of sales.

Essential Duties: The Customer Service Sales Associate is responsible for retail sales in the assigned department. Customer Service sales associates are usually the first persons customers meet when they enter a store. They are expected to create and maintain a long-term relationship with the customers in order to achieve sales goals and represent the store in a positive manner while ensuring recurring business. They are also responsible for assisting customers with choices and help them locate products and provide information about the product in question. Customer Service Sales Associates operate cash registers once a sale has been made. Customer Service Sales Associates manage inventory, order stock and stock shelves. They are required to price products and update shelves when a new product comes in or if the price of any item changes. Customer Service Sales Associates work closely with customers to resolve their complaints in a satisfactory manner.

Knowledge, Skills and Abilities

Knowledge of sales techniques

Ability to learn detailed information regarding store products

Ability to effectively communicate verbally

Ability to operate a cash register

Ability to handle money

Education and Experience:

High school diploma and 2 years of customer sales experience

Competencies:

Competencies are a cluster of knowledge, skill sets or behaviors that are performed on the job. In reviewing the duties of the Customer Service Sales Associate duties above, the competencies the employer would be looking for to fill this position may include:

- Sales Ability and Persuasion
- Building Customer Loyalty
- Customer Focus
- Technical/Professional knowledge
- Planning and Organizing
- Effective Communication

Anticipating Questions:

A candidate who spends quality time reviewing the job description and looking for competencies, can anticipate the questions s/he may be asked. A candidate should put herself/himself in the position of the employer. What would an employer want to know about a candidate to determine if s/he is able to perform the duties of a Customer Service Sales Associate?

The panel may ask you questions regarding a successful experience, or an experience that didn't go as well as you would have liked. Both types of questions help the panel members assess your knowledge, skills and abilities for the position. Some examples of questions for two of the above competencies are shown below:

- Sales Ability and Persuasion

What kinds of sales situations were challenging to you? What approach did you take to seal the deal?

What is the most unusual sales approach you have used to make a sale?

How do you approach a new customer? What have you done to persuade the customer to purchase the company's product?

- Building Customer Loyalty

What steps have you taken to address a customer's needs or concerns?

Can you describe a time when you didn't meet a customer's needs? Describe the situation and how you handled it.

Responding to the questions:

It is understandable that interviewing causes some people to get nervous, especially when facing several unknown panel members. Candidates should understand that panel members want them to succeed. Here are some key tips for responding to interview questions:

- Listen carefully to the questions and make sure to respond fully. If a question is composed of multiple parts, be sure to answer every part. If a candidate forgets a part of the question or wants to ensure s/he has answered it fully, it is okay to ask the panel member to repeat the question.
- Avoid vague or general responses. Panel members are trying to understand how the candidate handled a situation. They are interested in understanding the situation, the tasks that were performed by the candidate, the actions taken by

the candidate and the results. An easy acronym for this is to provide a “STAR” for every question (Situation, Task, Action, Results).

SITUATION/TASK: What occurred or what was the assignment?

- Clearly and concisely describe the situation so that the interviewers can place themselves in your place and understand the event, the circumstances surrounding the event, and the people involved.
- What tasks did you perform? Tell the interviewers about the plan you created to handle the problem, making sure that it adequately accounts for the details in the situation you described.

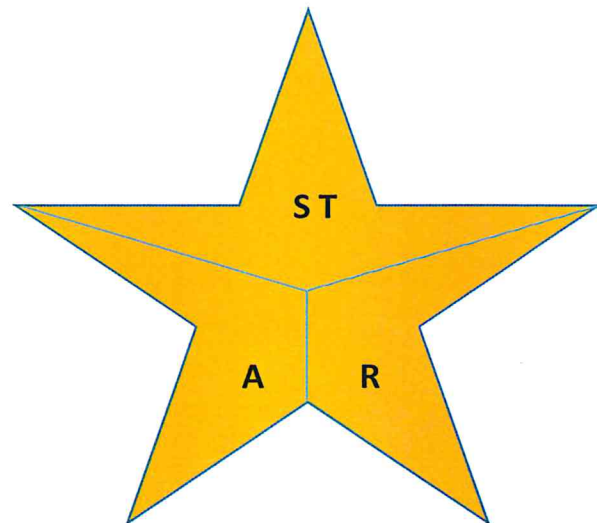
ACTION: How did you implement your strategy?

- After describing your plan, tell the interviewers the specific actions you took to resolve the problem.

RESULTS: What was the outcome?

- Describe the results of your actions. Make sure to highlight the specific outcome(s) so the interviewers fully comprehend what you accomplished. If things did not turn out as you planned, focus on the positive by telling the interviewers what you learned from the experience and what you would do differently next time. This lets the interviewers know that you see mistakes or failures as opportunities for growth.

- Past experiences are the best indicators of future actions
- Listen carefully to the question and provide a specific example; the “usually”, “normally” or other theoretical answers are not helpful
- Provide a complete story, or STAR
- Information that is current or from the recent past is generally more relevant than information from the distant past
- Information not on your application and not shared in the interview is information not known to the interviewer.



Situation/Task: The background or context in which you acted

Action: What you did in the situation

Result: The effects of your actions

- Panel members may ask clarifying and follow-up questions based on your responses and/or your application.
- Candidates should differentiate between their individual efforts and the efforts of a team. Panel members will want to know what you have done; how much time and how your efforts contributed to the success of the project. Also, how was your contribution different than what the team was responsible for? If a candidate does not distinguish between his/her efforts and that of the team, it may be assumed that s/he is claiming total credit for the achievement.
- Oral Board Examinations are timed and candidates must be concise in their responses. Adding too much information may appear as rambling and may not add to the quality of the response.
- Expect that panel members will be taking notes while you are talking. The panel will use these notes when evaluating you.
- Each panel member has received a copy of the candidate's application to help him/her become more familiar with the candidate's background. This may help them ask clarifying questions to better ascertain a candidate's readiness for the position. Although panel members have received a copy of each candidate's application, the application itself has no bearing on examination scores. Scores are based on the Oral Board Examination – that is, the information and responses provided to the panel members' questions.
- It is possible that a candidate may have previously met a panel member, has a panel member with whom the candidate has previously worked or knows the panel member in some other way. A candidate should not leave out important details during the interview with the assumption that the panel member knows their work history. Candidates should respond as if everyone on the Oral Board Panel has no knowledge of their work history/performance.
- Candidates may be nervous about providing information about a negative work experience. While it is understandable that no one enjoys sharing a negative experience with a prospective employer, every panel member recognizes that *EVERYONE* makes mistakes. A situation that did not go as positively as one would like, may have provided a learning opportunity for the candidate. How a candidate responded to a situation may demonstrate a candidate's ability to think

on her/his feet, adjust, or make necessary changes to achieve a positive outcome.

- Candidates may also prepare for an Oral Board examination by practicing giving responses to hypothetical questions. Speaking responses out loud allows the candidate to hear himself/herself. Saying words out loud is very different than just thinking them. It helps to overcome bad habits, such as using awkward phrases (i.e.: “uhm”, “you know” etc.).

Concluding the Oral Board Examination:

Typically, if time has not been exhausted, there is an opportunity at the end of the Oral Board examination to provide any additional information a candidate wants to add about his/her experience. This provides an opportunity for the candidate to emphasize the strengths that s/he would bring to the position. Candidates should be prepared to provide a summary statement.

Next steps:

Once all Oral Board Examinations are concluded, if there are no other examinations scheduled, successful candidates are ranked and placed on an eligible list. An eligible list may remain in effect for one (1) year unless extended by the Director of Human Resources, exhausted or abolished by the Director of Human Resources. Successful candidates are notified when their name has been referred (certified) to a hiring manager. If a candidate’s name is certified to a department, the candidate will be contacted for a hiring interview.

Additional Helpful Tips:

- Wear appropriate attire
 - If you are attending a performance test, wear neat and clean clothing appropriate for the job to which you applied
 - If attending an Oral Board Panel interview, wear appropriate business attire.
- Be on time.

Resources:

www.jobsatsolanocounty.com

References:

Solano County Civil Service Rules