Interview like a Pro

An Employer's Guide to Competency-Based Interview Techniques

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Introduction

Competency based interviews are used successfully throughout almost every sector of business when recruiting new staff. They are preferred because they show the potential employer how the candidate will perform in a job or function, by giving them suggested scenarios. This benefits over traditional interview techniques in that it enables the employer to assess how adequately qualified the candidate will be in all areas of the prospective role.

Within this e-book, we will discuss:

What is competency?

What is the difference between competency-based interviews and traditional interviews?

And finally, provide you with over 50 tried and tested example questions, for you to try out for yourself in your own business.

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Chapter 1

What is competency?

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What is competency?

The definition of competency is a group of related abilities, knowledge and skills which enable a person to carry out a job or role effectively. It indicates whether the person in question has sufficient experience to enable them to act in a wide range of situations, which may occur within the business environment.

Competency based interviews are also known as a behavioural or situational interviews and this style of interviewing, is a means of evaluating how a candidate may behave, rather than simply measuring their technical ability. Qualifications are good as a means of seeing whether a person has expertise, but they do not show how they perform on a day-to-day basis when faced with deadlines or targets.

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So what does an interview such as this consist of?

Initially, candidates are asked questions regarding their behaviour in a specific environment. This is then backed up with an example from their previous career roles. When you carry out these interviews, it is important to look out for situational examples. This then enables you to see how the prospective employee demonstrated these skills in real situations. It can be quite difficult in some instances, as candidates will often have examples to hand, which they come prepared with in anticipation. But further questioning usually weeds these made up scenarios out.

An example of a competency based question will begin with:

'Describe a time when you...'
'Give me an example of when you...'
'Describe a situation when you...'
'How would you react to...?'
'How would you overcome...?'

What you finish these questions with will be determined By what characteristics you are seeking for in the candidate And the job role you are interviewing for.

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The two types of competency

A competency can be divided into two distinct levels: technical and behavioural.

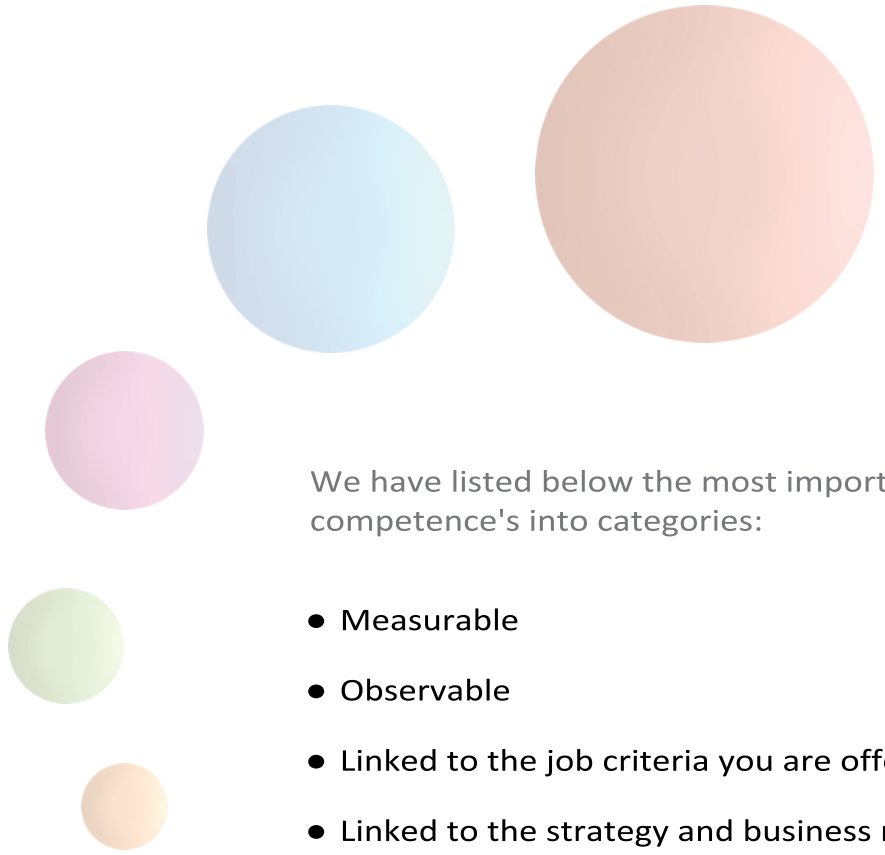
The technical competency is often much easy to measure within a candidate, as it can be backed up by a qualification, such as an accountancy MAAT qualification. These competencies are also much easier to train and develop.

A behavioural competency is harder to evaluate, as it's a great deal more subjective in nature.

Examples of behavioural competencies are skills such as *'working in a team'*, *'the ability to work under pressure'*, *'decision making'* or *time management'*.

These are harder to assess and are often deeply entrenched within a person's character and history.

You will be pleased to learn, however, that there are a number of reliable performance indicators from which you can measure such traits.



We have listed below the most important competence's into categories:

- Measurable
- Observable
- Linked to the job criteria you are offering
- Linked to the strategy and business needs of your company
- Future-oriented
- Based on strong and real performance on behalf of the candidate.

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Chapter 2

What is the difference between traditional and competency based interviews?

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What is the difference between traditional and competency based interviews?

Traditional interviews have often concentrated on looking through a person's education, schooling, and qualifications; as well as the previous job roles within their CV. Whilst these are still relevant in most jobs, especially ones of a professional nature.

Focusing solely on this criteria does not necessarily give you an idea of how a candidate will perform within a specific situation.

Consequently, the traditional interview technique isn't the most effective means of helping you as an employer predict how a person will behave in the role you have to offer.

To back this up, here are some statistics to bear in mind. Competency based interviews tend to achieve an accuracy of around 80% compared with traditional interviews, which only score 20%.

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Chapter 2

What is the difference between traditional and competency based interviews?

The Basic Principle:

So why are competency based interviews the preferred method of recruitment?

It's simple really. This basic principle applies:

'the best indicator of how a prospective employee will perform in the future is how well they performed in the past'

To add to this; the more recent the experience the better the example; as it gives greater predictive power. The longer the person has carried out this behaviour for will also be a good indicator of future conduct.

By grasping all of this, it is easy to see why the majority of businesses are choosing this approach over the traditional techniques.

As an interview tool, it is extremely powerful.

By concentrating on past performance, an employer can gain insight into an individual's preferred style of working, their personality, their weaknesses and strengths and how they will fit into an already established team.

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Chapter 3

Examples of
competency-based questions

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Examples of competency based interview questions

Here is a list of questions which, have been tried and tested within competency based interviews.

They are not the be-all-and-end-all, but they do provide you with a starting point for how to form your own questions.

The examples have been split into categories, which look at the candidate's differing skill-sets.

1. *Individual Competencies*
2. *Managerial Competencies*
3. *Analytical Competencies*
4. *Interpersonal Competencies*
5. *Motivational Competencies*

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Chapter 3

Examples of competency-based questions

1. Individual Competencies

These types of question will ideally focus on the candidate's initiative and ability to manage their daily tasks and time. They show whether a person works well on their own, is good at time keeping, hits their targets, able to multi-task and prioritise.

Questions:

Working Alone

How do you usually plan your day and prioritise your duties?

Describe to me a time when you used your own initiative.

Give me an example of when you went above and beyond your role to go that extra mile for a customer.

How do you manage stress in your current role?

Tell me a time you worked on a project alone.

- Were you asked to do it alone, or did you take the initiative?
- Why did you believe this was the best option?
- Was the project successful?
- What would you do differently or change next time if you had to do the same thing again?

Time Management

Give me an example when you have had to work extra hard to meet a deadline.

- What approach did you take?
- Did you set your own targets and objectives or were they set for you?
- How did you prioritise what to do first?
- Did you multi-task, or did you handle one objective at a time?
- What was the outcome and what would you do different next time?

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Questions:

Multi-tasking

Tell me about a time when you were given a number of tasks to do at the same time.

- How did you prioritise and organise them?
- What did you find most challenging about this scenario?
- How did you overcome this challenge?
- What was the result and would you change anything next time?

Give me an example of when a project you undertook was outside of your job description or you introduced something new to the workplace.

Knowledge of your Industry

What do you enjoy most about working within your industry?

At this point is may be a great opportunity to address whether the prospective employee has done their research.

Tell me 3 facts about this company?

What do you think you can contribute to this company?

You could even bring in a question here, regarding a recent industry update or piece of news, and then ask the candidate how they feel about this; or what their opinion is. By doing so, you can ascertain whether they are keeping up-to-date with current affairs and showing they are enthusiastic about their chosen profession.

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Questions:

Adaptability

Adaptability is the way in which a person adjusts to changing environments, whilst still hitting targets and maintaining optimum effectiveness.

Tell me a time when you had to adapt your way of working in order to meet a deadline.

- How did you do this?
- What were the effects?
- Did you meet the deadline?

Tell me about a situation when you have had to change your own priorities to meet other's expectations?

What would be your reaction, if a project you were working on was later assigned to someone else?

Describe a time when you have had to adapt to a change within a company or your personal life?

- How did you do this?
- What was your greatest difficulty?
- How did you overcome it?

Which change of job did you find the most difficult to make?

Flexibility

How flexible a candidate is affects their approach in achieving a goal. It also shows how open they are to changes in core business processes or working environments. This helps you to understand how quickly a candidate will be able to learn new things and cope with unexpected obstacles

Describe a situation where you have had to change the way you work halfway through a project.

- How did you feel about this?
- How did you overcome your frustrations?

Describe a situation where you started off thinking that your approach was the best, but needed to alter your course during the implementation process.

Describe a situation where you were asked to do something completely new to you.

Give me an example of a situation where your first attempt failed, so you had to change tack and try again.

If we gave you a new project to manage, how would you approach it?

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Questions:

Persuasiveness/influencing

Persuasiveness demonstrates the ability to both influence and involve others.

Give me a time when you were able to influence a person into your way of thinking.

Give me an example of when you had to challenge a manager's authority.

- How did you handle it?
- Were your ideas implemented by the manager or dismissed?

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2. Managerial Competencies

Questions:

Developing others

Developing others is the ability to the gain the respect of staff that your employee may need to manage in the future. This competency demonstrates proven management skills with the capability to motivate and support a team.

Describe a time you provided feedback to your staff about their performance and targets.

Describe a time when you were able to help develop a colleague's skill to improve their performance.

Describe a time when you had to discipline a member of your team for their behaviour or poor performance.

Delegation

Delegating is a key skill to have in any employee; it shows they can use their knowledge to make best use of staff as well as providing appropriate support.

Tell me about a time when you have had to delegate your own work.

Give me an example of a project you have successfully delegated amongst your team.

Think if a time when you have delegated incorrectly or given the wrong task to the wrong team member.

- What was the outcome?
- How did you overcome the fall out and rectify the situation?

How do you cope when having to leave the office for long periods of time (e.g. holidays). How would you delegate responsibilities in this scenario?

Questions:

Leadership

Leadership shows an ability to lead a team through change and pressure. A good team will always have a good team leader. He or she will possess both the skills to take charge, achieve objectives, as well as being able to act as a role model.

Describe a time when you have successfully motivated your staff to attain a collective goal.

Describe a time when your team made you aware of a problem. How did you deal with it?

Tell me about a situation when you had to get a team to improve its poor performance.

- What were the problems?
- How did you address them?

Describe a situation where you had to deliver a team through a period of change.

Describe a project or situation where you had to use different leadership styles to reach your goal.

Describe a time when you have successfully encouraged every person to work well as part of a team.

Strategic thinking

Strategic thinking shows the ability to think unconventionally; questioning the reasoning behind actions and processes, which, may have been in place for years. Like creativity it is about thinking in a slicker and better way to attain the end goal.

Describe a problem that you have identified and how you overcame it by creating a better solution to the one already in place.

Describe a time when you used your industry expertise in order to understand a specific business problem.

Questions:

Conflict management

The ability to resolve conflict in the workplace is an essential skill for any manager or team leader. However, creative tension can often produce unexpected positive results, which is why it is important to keep in mind.

If there was an argument amongst your team, how would you resolve it?

Tell me about a time when you felt that conflict or differences were a positive driving force in your organisation.

Give me an example when you were unable to deal with a difficult member of your team; what did you do regarding this particular member of staff?

Influencing

The ability to influence and convince others to your own point of view is a great career skill to have, and would be beneficial to any company.

Describe a situation where you were able to use your influence over others in order to force an important issue.

- What approaches or strategies did you use?

Describe a situation where you needed to influence different stakeholders who had different agendas.

- What approaches or strategies did you use?

Tell me about your worst selling experience.

Questions:

Sensitivity to others

A manager or supervisor should be aware of their work environment and be able to take into account other people's feelings and needs.

What problems have your colleagues brought to you recently?

How did you assist them?

How do you deal with "procrastinators"?

When is was the last time you had an argument in the workplace?

- What was the outcome?

What steps do you take to overcome any clashes of personality within your team?

Compliance

Compliancy is the way a manager is able to make sure policies and procedures are followed correctly within the business.

In the past how have you dealt with policies relating to compliancy?

Has there ever been a time when you have purposefully gone against company policy?

- Why did you do it?
- How did you justify it?

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3. Analytical Competencies

Questions:

Problem solving

A major area of any business professional's repertoire is the ability to solve often difficult and diverse problems. This can involve creating initiatives to manage actions and avoid problems.

Tell me about a time when you had to solve a complex problem.

Tell me about a time when you had to look at an underlying issue in order solve a problem.

Tell me about a time when you have been faced with a problem you failed to solve initially. Before trying again.

- What did you do differently?

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4. Interpersonal Competencies

Questions:

Teamwork

As most companies have teams within their framework; the ability to work well within one is an essential skill to have in any future employee. Your candidate should therefore, be supportive, collaborative and show good listening skills.

What do you think is your greatest strength that you can bring to a team?

Tell me about the most difficult person you have worked with. How do you cope with the people you do not like on a personal level?

Describe a time when your views were in conflict with another team member.

- How did it turn out?

Give me an example when you have worked well as part of a team.

Tell me about a time when you last helped a team member.

Relationship building

Relationship building is all about the ability to build and maintain new and existing relationships and is considered a core business skill to have.

Tell me about a time when you relied on a relationship you have developed with a client or stakeholder to complete a task.

Give me an example of a relationship you have developed with a client, and how you tried to build a rapport with them.

Give me an example of a time when you have had to work alongside others on a close level.

- What was your involvement?
- What were the challenges?
- How did you approach it?
- What was the outcome?
- How would you improve the way your group worked in a similar scenario in the future?

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Questions:

Communication

Communication is a key skill in any business and is essential for effective team work. It is therefore important to make sure any potential manage has the right skill set and behaviours to be able to communicate successfully.

What do you think are the three most important things about communication?

Give an example of a sensitive or difficult situation that you have had to deal with which required you to use extensive communication.

Tell me about a time when you were successful in getting crucial information from somebody.

Give me an example of a complex business problem you had to explain to staff in a different department.

- How did you approach it?
- What was the outcome?
- How has it changed the way this group of people work?
- What would you do differently in the future?

Describe a talk or presentation you had to give recently. How did the audience react?
Tell me about a time when your communication skills made a huge difference to a situation.
Describe a time when you had to win someone over who was reluctant to your way of thinking.
Describe a situation where you had to explain something complex to a colleague or a client.

- What sort of problems did you encounter?
- How did you deal with them?

How do you prepare for an important meeting?

Tell me about a situation when you failed to communicate appropriately.
Demonstrate how you vary your communication approach, according to the audience that you are addressing.
For example; towards industry professionals compared with potential customers.
Describe a situation when you had to communicate a message to someone, knowing that you were right and that they were wrong and they were reluctant to accept your point of view.

Questions:

Listening skills

Give me an example where your listening skills proved essential to an outcome.

Tell me about a time when you were asked to summarise a difficult scenario.

Name a time when you had to be empathetic towards a colleague.

- How did you deal with the situation?
- How was it resolved?

Written communication

What writing have you done in a previous jobs?

How would you describe your writing style?

Have you been given any accreditations for your writing?

How do you feel about writing reports?

How do you plan out the writing of a report?

Have you ever been criticised for your writing?

- If so why?
- How did you resolve it?

Questions:

Resilience and tenacity

Resilience expresses a way to deal with pressure effectively within a position. A candidate who is able to remain positive and overcome adversity will be able to recover more easily from setbacks and reach solutions to business problems and issues in a speedier manner.

Tell me about a time at work when you have had to overcome a serious setback to a project or task.

Describe a time when you have completed a project despite the odds being stacked against you. How did you cope with the pressure it entailed?

Give an example of a time in which you failed to meet a target.

- How did it make you feel?
- How did you approach your next target?

How do you deal with stress?

Give me an example of a situation where you have worked under pressure.

- What was the situation?
- How did you organise yourself and others?
- Did you manage to resolve any issues?

When was the last time you lost your temper in the workplace?

What is the one area that frustrates you the most in the workplace?

What is the biggest issue you've faced in your career so far?

- How did deal with it?

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5. Motivational Competencies

Questions:

Personal objectives

Personal motivation shows you, the employer, your candidate's ability to follow their own objectives and ambitions; including how responsive they are to new knowledge, growth, training and development.

Where do you see yourself in five years time?

What are your career goals?

What motivates you?

Why do you want this position?

Tell me about a time you were especially motivated.

What motivates you to work hard?

What de-motivates you?

Results

Examples of where a candidate has attained results in the workplace show, how they fulfilled goals and achieved objectives. These questions also indicate whether the prospective employee has a hard-working attitude.

Give me an example of a goal you set yourself and how you achieved it.

Give an example of when you felt the greatest sense of achievement after completing a task.

- Why was it satisfying?

What elements of your current role do you find most satisfying?

Give me an example of a time when you did a particularly good job.

What is the greatest contribution you have made to a business you have worked within?

- What were your motivations?
- What actions did you take?
- What was the outcome?

Tell me about a time you exceeded a target or project that was set for you.

- How did you exceed it?

Questions:

Customer focus

Customer focus shows that a candidate has a customer-centric approach. Examples of previous endeavour gives you an understanding of how they view the importance of excellent customer service and client care.

Describe a time when you went that extra mile for a customer.

- What was their reaction?
- How did it make you feel?
- Did you have to spend longer than anticipated on them?
- How did your boss react to this?

Give me an example of a time when you have had to deal with a demanding client.

- What did you do to placate them?
- What was the outcome?

Describe a time when you have improved customer service within your department.

- This may have involved changing an existing process or dealing with an issue in a new and innovative way.

Who are the customers in your current role?

- How do you ascertain their needs?
- How have you improved the service offered to them?

Give me an example of a customer relationship-building task you have undertaken recently.

- How did you build up that relationship?

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Chapter 4

Before the Interview

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Before the interview

The questions listed in this e-book are extensive but not exhaustive. It is up to you as a manager and a company to decide which questions best suit the role and candidate you are looking for.

The examples given will, however, provide you with an excellent starting point, from which you can then proceed.

So, start off by devising a list of questions determined by your requirements and the competencies then set them out on a sheet of paper or spreadsheet and then create a scoring system.

Scoring can be difficult as you are dealing with a subjective response oppose to an objective one. So framing the questions, so that they read, *'describe a situation where you provided excellent customer service?'* rather than *'what is good customer service?'* will help you determine whether the response from the candidate can be measured appropriately.

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Chapter 4

Before the Interview

You will of course need to take notes during the interview and score the answers accordingly.
For a question such as *'describe a situation where you were able to work under pressure to achieve a target?'*
The scoring could go as follows:

Positive Indicator	Negative Indicator
Candidate was able to work under pressure with a positive attitude	Negative attitude; the conversation took a negative tone
Achieved target in time scale	Did not deliver the target without good reason
Was able to deal with set-backs	Sees challenges as problems and does not seek solutions quickly
Involved other team members where possible	Tried to deal with the problem alone and did not ask for help, when help was at hand
Changed the plan of action where necessary in order to achieve the goal, i.e. was flexible in their approach	Is able to adapt to a change in plans i.e. inflexible tried to deal with the problem alone and did not ask for help, when help was at hand
Communicated well within the team and with the customer to ensure good service	Did not communicate with the client, thus providing poor customer service
Recognises own limitations	Unable to recognise limitations
Was able to compromise	Unable to compromise

In some cases you may want to divide the negative indicators into two further sections including:
- Minor negative indicators (i.e. those which are negative but aren't as important
- And major negative indicators (i.e. those which are essential to your role, such as listening skills)

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Chapter 5

During the Interview

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During the interview

Whilst carrying out the interview you will need to mark, and make notes on each question as you go along. The mark itself will depend on the extent to which the candidate matches your pre-determined indicator, as listed in the table on the next page.

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Chapter 5

During the Interview

An example of a marking template:		
Score	**Reason for Score**	**Overall Assessment**
0	No evidence reported.	**No evidence**
1	Little evidence provided and mostly negative indicators.	**Poor**
2	Very few positive indicators with negative indicators far out-weighing the positive.	**Un-satisfactory**
3	Satisfactory use of positive indicators.	**Satisfactory**
4	Strong display of positive indicators and examples given in full detail.	**Good/excellent**

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After the interview

Decision making

After all the prospective candidates have been interviewed, it's then time for you to collate the marks and look through the notes you have taken. Then comes the decision making process.

Each of your candidates should be discussed individually in great detail looking through not only their qualifications but their skills, experience, the examples they gave and how their overall attitude fitted the competencies you laid out. Decisions should be made upon the facts given.

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Evaluation

Once you have made your decisions, feedback should be given to each of the individual candidates in order to evaluate the whole interview process without delay. There are always areas where improvements can be made:

Begin with the competencies – Were they relevant? And did the behavioural indicators help you to find the right person?

Your job vacancy – Did you word it in the right way so that the right type of candidate applied? Could this be improved in the future given the responses you were given?
Did the questions provide the answers you required? Were they too easy or too difficult?

The interview – did the questions work out well? Do your interviewers need more training? Do you need to add or amend any future questions? Finally, how did the candidates react to the whole interview process? How long did it take, could it be shortened or streamlined? Did the candidates have enough time to give their examples in full? What impression did they get from your business? And would they apply for another position in your company if the opportunity arose?

And finally...

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If you would like to ask any questions regarding the issues raised or would like to contacts us regarding any of your recruitment needs then please give our friendly team a call on 01507 311161.

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