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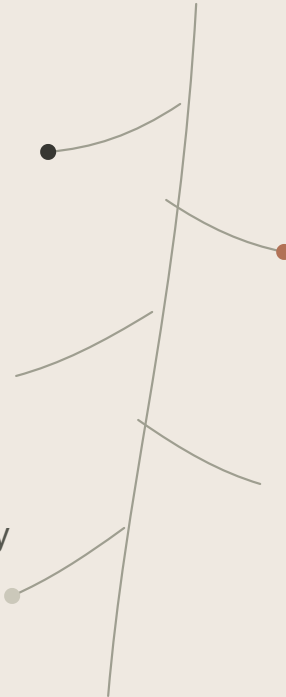


FOR FOUNDERS AND HIRING MANAGERS

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# The Structured Interview System

A practical system for evaluating people consistently  
without turning hiring into bureaucracy.



Developed by Terra Talent, April 2023.

[TERRATALENT.COM](https://terratalent.com)



01



## Define success before interviewing

Before speaking to candidates, write down what this person must have accomplished twelve months after joining.

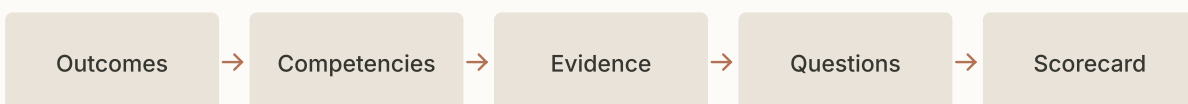
If you cannot describe success, you are not ready to evaluate somebody against it.

Everything else should derive from this:

### KEY PRINCIPLE

Outcomes → competencies → evidence  
→ interview questions → scorecard

Not the other way around.



Everything derives in this direction.

Not the other way around.

### How the system derives

Success is defined first. Everything downstream follows from it.

02



## Build the competencies

Competencies are the small number of capabilities that genuinely determine success.

Four to six is usually enough.

They must be observable.

"Strong communicator" is not useful.

Better:

Can explain a technical trade-off to a non-technical executive clearly enough for them to make a decision.

Likewise:

"Strategic" is weak.

Better:

Can turn an ambiguous company objective into a sequence of technical decisions and explicitly describe the trade-offs.

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## Build the scorecard

Map each competency deliberately across the interview loop.

Not every interviewer needs to assess everything.

In fact, they should not.

Assign ownership so that:

- ☐ every important dimension is evaluated
- ☐ interviewers know what evidence they are responsible for collecting
- ☐ candidates do not answer the same questions five times
- ☐ feedback is comparable

Terra's existing Competency Scorecard should sit alongside this guide as the working tool.

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## Recruiter screen

The recruiter screen has two jobs:

Give the candidate real information

Explain:

- ☐ the role
- ☐ the team
- ☐ the company stage
- ☐ the mission
- ☐ the hiring process
- ☐ what the first year actually requires

Establish baseline alignment

Confirm:

- ☐ motivation
- ☐ relevant career context
- ☐ compensation expectations
- ☐ location/travel constraints
- ☐ timing
- ☐ anything likely to prevent the process from working

This is not a lightweight “culture screen”.

It should prevent avoidable surprises later.

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## Technical or hiring- manager screen

The next conversation should test the capabilities that cannot credibly be evaluated by recruiting.

Use structured questions derived from the competency model.

The objective is not:

Do I like talking to this person?

It is:

Do I have enough evidence that they should proceed to the expensive part of the process?

For technical roles, test both knowledge and judgment.

Knowing an answer and knowing what to do when the answer is unclear are different capabilities.

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## Work sample

A well-designed work sample is one of the highest-signal stages in a hiring process.

It is also easy to design badly.

### A GOOD PROMPT

- ☐ mirrors work the candidate could reasonably do in the role
- ☐ specifies the format
- ☐ defines the problem clearly
- ☐ gives explicit constraints
- ☐ states a maximum amount of preparation time
- ☐ allows more than one defensible answer
- ☐ gives the interviewers something substantive to question

### DO NOT USE CANDIDATES FOR FREE WORK

The problem should be adjacent to your company's work, not a live deliverable your company needs. If the candidate produces something you would otherwise pay an employee or consultant to produce, the exercise has crossed a line.

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## Structured interviews

After the work sample, use targeted one-to-one or two-to-one interviews.

Each interviewer should have:

- ☐ defined competencies
- ☐ two or three core questions
- ☐ follow-up prompts
- ☐ access to the relevant evidence
- ☐ a clear requirement to submit written feedback

A panel does not become structured merely because several people attend it.

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## Written evidence before discussion

This is one of the highest-leverage rules in the entire system:

### KEY PRINCIPLE

Every interviewer records their  
score and evidence before  
seeing anyone else's feedback.

Otherwise the first senior or confident voice becomes the anchor. Then the  
interview is being evaluated socially rather than independently.

Require:

- ☐ a score
- ☐ evidence
- ☐ positive findings
- ☐ concerns
- ☐ an explicit hiring position

Reject:

"Not a culture fit."

unless the interviewer can explain what observable behaviour or requirement the candidate failed against.

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## Decision meeting

The objective is not consensus.

Consensus often produces the safest candidate rather than the strongest one.

What matters is explicit judgment supported by evidence.

Terra decision rubric

Each interviewer records one position:

### 01 **+2 Champion**

I strongly support the hire and will actively advocate for them.

### 02 **+1 Advocate**

I support the hire.

### 03 **0 Neutral**

I do not have enough evidence to materially support or oppose.

### 04 **-1 Soft no**

I have meaningful concerns and would not hire without those being resolved.

### 05 **-2 Hard no**

I believe the evidence argues against hiring.

With a five-person panel, Terra's existing methodology uses the total as a forcing function:

- ☐ 3 or below: generally no hire
- ☐ 4: possible hire requiring discussion
- ☐ 5 or above: hire territory

The hiring manager remains the decision-maker.

The number does not make the decision. Its purpose is to prevent people hiding behind vague language.

One credible hard no on an essential competency can matter more than the arithmetic.

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## References

Run references as a substantive evaluation stage, not an administrative exercise after the decision is already made.

Use the Engineering Leadership Reference Guide for leadership and technical hires.

The output should contribute to both:

- ☐ final hiring judgment
- ☐ onboarding

If a reference materially contradicts the interview evidence, investigate the contradiction rather than averaging it away.

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## Offer and close

Once the decision is made, speed and coordination matter.

The recruiter should own the offer conversation.

The hiring team should reinforce it.

Useful actions include:

- ☐ direct follow-up from interviewers
- ☐ a clear explanation of why the candidate was chosen
- ☐ rapid resolution of outstanding questions
- ☐ conversations with relevant founders, executives, investors or board members where genuinely useful
- ☐ introducing key future colleagues
- ☐ beginning the relationship before the start date

Closing is not pressure.

It is removing uncertainty.

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## Measure whether the process works

A structured process is only valuable if it predicts good hires.

Track:

- ☐ time from role opening to qualified shortlist
- ☐ time in each interview stage
- ☐ candidate dropout by stage
- ☐ reasons candidates withdraw
- ☐ offer acceptance
- ☐ reasons offers are declined
- ☐ interviewer score spread
- ☐ candidate experience
- ☐ quality and retention of hires at twelve months
- ☐ whether strong and weak hires were predicted correctly by the scorecard

The final measure is not whether the process was followed.

It is whether the process helps the company make better decisions.



## Working toolkit

This guide should ship with:

**01 Competency Scorecard**

Editable working spreadsheet.

**02 Interview Question Bank**

Structured prompts mapped to competencies.

**03 Work Sample Brief**

Template for creating role-relevant exercises.

**04 Hiring Decision Sheet**

Independent feedback and the +2 to -2 decision rubric.

**05 Engineering Leadership Reference Guide**

Reference system for senior technical and leadership hires.

Together, these form a lightweight hiring operating system rather than another presentation about interviewing.

**THE WORKING TOOLKIT**

Editable working documents, not exports. Use them as they are or adapt them to your process.

### Competency Scorecard

XLSX

Maps each competency deliberately across the interview loop so every dimension is owned and no candidate answers the same question five times.

**What it helps you do.** Decide who assesses what before the loop starts, so every dimension has an owner and no candidate answers the same question five times.

### Interview Question Bank

XLSX

Structured prompts mapped to competencies, with the follow-ups that turn an opinion into evidence.

**What it helps you do.** Walk into an interview with questions that produce evidence, and know what a strong answer sounds like before you hear one.

### Work Sample Brief

DOCX

A reusable template for role-relevant exercises, with the free-work test as a hard check before the brief can be issued.

**What it helps you do.** Set an exercise a candidate can actually complete, and prove to yourself it is not unpaid work before you send it.

### Hiring Decision Sheet

XLSX

Independent written feedback captured before any group discussion, then the +2 to -2 rubric totalled automatically.

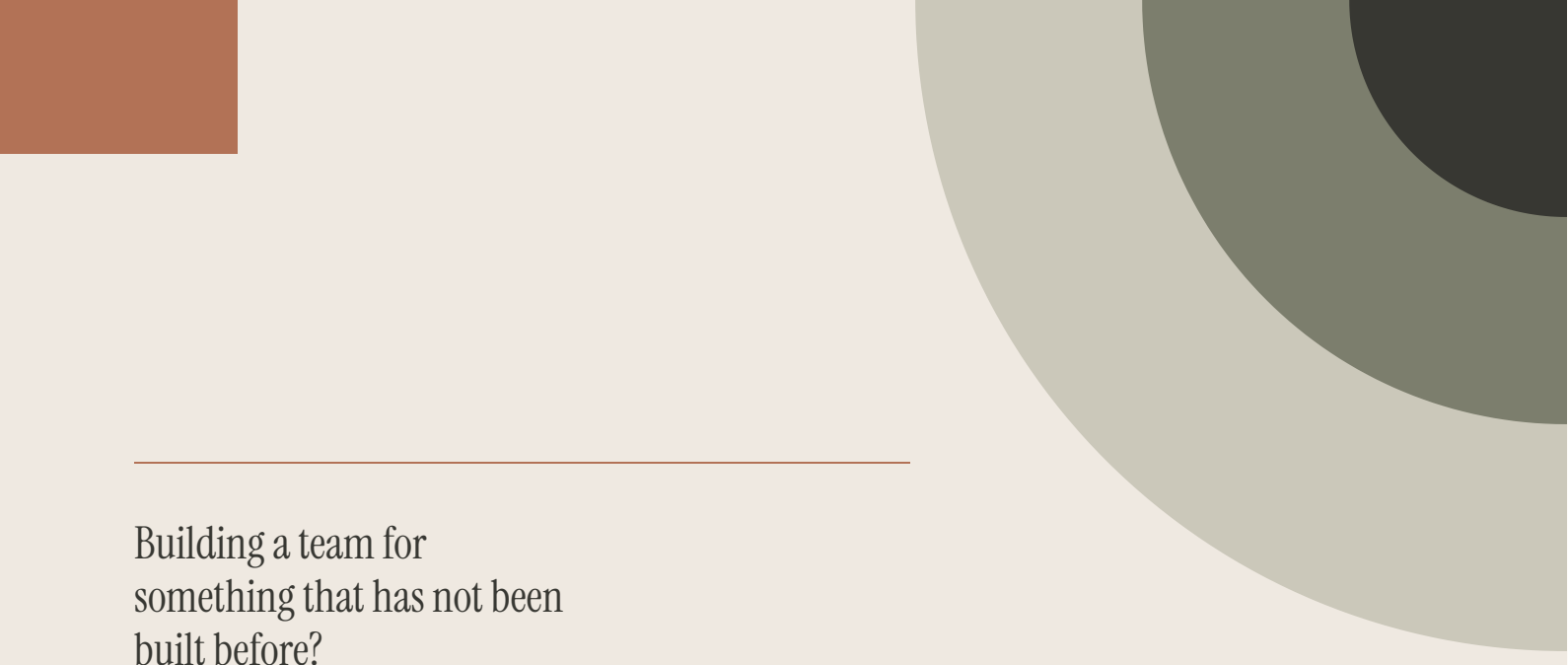
**What it helps you do.** Run a debrief on written evidence rather than on whoever speaks first, and see where the panel actually stands.

### Reference Synthesis Scorecard

XLSX

The same eleven dimensions recorded for every reference, so the strongest anecdote does not become the whole decision.

**What it helps you do.** Compare references on the same dimensions, so one vivid anecdote does not quietly become the whole decision.



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Building a team for  
something that has not been  
built before?

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Developed by Terra Talent, April 2023.



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