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Behavioral Interviewing Strategies for Job-Seekers

The premise behind behavioral interviewing is that the most accurate predictor of future performance is past performance in similar situations. Behavioral interviewing, in fact, is said to be 55 percent predictive of future on-the-job behavior, while traditional interviewing is only 10 percent predictive.

Behavioral - based interviewing is touted as providing a more objective set of facts to make employment decisions than other interviewing methods. Traditional interview questions ask you general questions such as “tell me about yourself”. The process of behavioral interviewing is much more probing and works very differently.

In a traditional job interview, you can usually get away with telling the interviewer what he or she wants to hear, even if you are fudging a bit on the truth. Even if you are asked situational questions that start out, “How would you handle XYZ situation?” you have minimal accountability. How does the interviewer know, after all, if you would really react in a given situation the way you say you would? In a behavioral interview, however, it’s much more difficult to give responses that are untrue to your character. When you start to tell a behavioral story, the behavioral interviewer typically will pull it apart to try to get the specific behavior(s). The interviewer will probe further for more depth or detail such as “What were you thinking at that point?” or “Tell me more about your meeting with that person,” or “Lead me through your decision process.” If you’ve told a story that’s anything but totally honest, your response will not hold up through the barrage of probing questions.

Employers use the behavioral interview techniques to evaluate a candidate’s experiences and behaviors so they can determine the applicant’s potential for success. The interviewer identifies job-related experience, behaviors, knowledge, skills, and abilities that the company has decided are desirable in a particular position.

The employer then structures very pointed questions to elicit detailed responses aimed at determining if the candidate possesses the desired characteristics. Questions (often not even framed as a question) typically start out: “Tell about a time...” or “Describe a situation...” Many employers use a rating system to evaluate selected criteria during the interview.

As a candidate, you should be equipped to answer the questions thoroughly. Obviously, you can prepare better for this type of interview if you know which skills that the employer has predetermined to be necessary for the job you seek. Researching the company and talking to people who work there will enable you to zero in on the kinds of behaviors the company wants.

In the interview, your response needs to be specific and detailed. Candidates who tell the interviewer about particular situations that relate to each question will be far more effective and successful than those who respond in general terms.

Ideally, you should briefly describe the situation, what specific action you took to have an effect on the situation and the positive result or outcome. Frame it in a three-step process, usually called an S-A-R statement: situation (or task, problem), 2. Action, 3. Result/outcome.

Behavioral Interviewing Story

One strategy for preparing for behavioral interviews is to use the STAR technique.

Sample STAR story:

Situation or Task (S T):

Advertising revenue was falling off for my college newspaper, the University News, and large numbers of long-term advertisers were not renewing contracts.

Action (A):

I designed a new promotional packet to go with the rate sheet and compared the benefits of University News circulation with other ad media in the area. I also set-up a special training session for the account executives with a School of Business Administration professor who discussed competitive selling strategies.

Result (R):

We signed contracts with 15 former advertisers for daily ads and five for special supplements. We increased our new advertisers by 20 percent (note: quantities are always good to include) over the same period last year.

It's also helpful to think of your responses as stories. Become a great storyteller in your interviews, but be careful not to ramble.

S ituation or T ask	Describe the situation that you were in or the task that you needed to accomplish. You must describe a specific event or situation, not a generalized description of what you have done in the past. Be sure to give enough detail for the interviewer to understand. This situation can be from a previous job, form a volunteer experience, or any relevant event.
A ction you took	Describe the action you took and be sure to keep the focus on you. Even if you are discussing a group project or effort, describe what you did – not the efforts of the team. Don't tell what you might do, tell what you did.
R esults you achieved	What happened? How did the event end? What did you accomplish? What did you learn?

Sample Behavioral Interview Questions

One of the keys to success in interviewing is practice, so you are encouraged to take the time to work out answers to these questions using the STAR technique. Be sure not to memorize answers; the key to interviewing success is simply being prepared for the questions and having a mental outline to follow in responding to each question.

- Describe a situation in which you were able to use persuasion to successfully convince someone to see things your way.
- Describe a time when you were faced with a stressful situation that demonstrated your coping skills
- Give me a specific example of a time when you used good judgment and logic in solving a problem.
- Give me an example of a time when you set a goal and were able to meet or achieve it.
- Tell me about a time when you had to use your presentation skills to influence someone's opinion.
- Give me a specific example of a time when you had to conform to a policy with which you did not agree.
- Please discuss an important written document you were required to complete.
- Tell me about a time when you had too many things to do and you were required to prioritize your tasks.
- Give me an example of a time when you had to make a split second decision.
- What is your typical way of dealing with conflict? Give me an example.
- Tell me about a time you were able to successfully deal with another person even when that individual may not have personally liked you (or vice versa).
- Tell me about a difficult decision you've made in the last year.
- Give me an example of a time when something you tried to accomplish had failed.
- Give me an example of when you showed initiative and took the lead.
- Tell me about a recent situation in which you had to deal with a very upset customer or co-worker.
- Give me an example of a time when you motivated others.
- Tell me about a time when you delegated a project effectively.
- Give me an example of a time when you used your fact-finding skills to solve a problem.
- Tell me about a time when you missed an obvious solution to a problem.
- Describe a time when you anticipated potential problems and developed preventative measures.
- Tell me about a time when you were forced to make an unpopular decision.
- Describe a time when you set your sights too high (or too low).

Desired Employee Behaviors

Employers are asking you behavioral interview questions because they want to see if you possess certain traits characteristics and values that the company has identified as important.

Typical desired behaviors that employer might be trying to get at from job-seekers:

Adaptability	Participative	Judgment
Attention to detail	Organizing	Negotiation
Energy	Delegation	Management
Initiative	Impact	Presentation skills
Leadership	Integrity	Process operation
Planning	Motivation	Safety awareness
Communication	Sensitivity	Rapport building
Decisiveness	Practical learning	Resilience
Flexibility	Development of subordinates	Sales ability
Innovation	Fact finding	Persuasiveness
Listening	Independence	Risk taking

How to Prepare for Behavior Based Interviews

There are a huge number and variety of possible behavioral questions that you might be asked. The best way to prepare is to arm yourself with a small arsenal of example stories that can be adapted to many behavioral questions. Knowing what kinds of questions might be asked will help you prepare an effective selection of samples.

Use example from internships, classes and school projects, activities, team participation, community services, hobbies and work experience as examples of you past behavior. In addition, you may use examples of special accomplishments, whether personal or professional, such as a highlight in a sport you play, being elected president of a club, winning a prize, raising money for charity. Wherever possible, quantify your results. Numbers always impress employers.

Remember that many behavioral questions try to get a how you responded to negative situations; you'll need to have examples of negative experiences ready, but try to choose negative experiences that you made the best of or, better yet, those that had positive outcomes.

- Identify six to eight examples from your past experience where you demonstrated top behaviors and skills that employers typically seek. Think in terms of examples that will exploit your top selling points.
- Half your examples should be totally positive, such as accomplishments or meeting goals.

- The other half should be situations that started out negatively but either ended positively or you made the best of the outcome.
- Vary your examples; don't make them all from just one area of your life.
- Use fairly recent examples; if you're a college student, examples from high school may be too long ago. Try to use examples within the last year.
- Try to describe examples in story form or STAR

In the interview, listen carefully to each question, and pull an example out of your bag of tricks that provides an appropriate description of how you demonstrated the desired behavior. With practice, you can learn to tailor a relatively small set of examples to respond to a number of different behavioral questions.

Once you've snagged the job, keep a record of achievements and accomplishments so you'll be ready with more great examples the next time you go on an interview!

