

Behavioral Interviewing Strategies for Job-Seekers (*condensed version*)

By Katharine Hansen, Ph.D.

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% predictive of future on-the-job behavior, while traditional interviewing is only 10% 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 pick it apart to try to get at 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 technique to evaluate a candidate’s experiences and behaviors so they can determine the applicant’s potential for success. The interviewer identifies job-related experiences, 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 response 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. Here is a list of typical behaviors that employers might be trying to get at in a behavior-based interview:

- Adaptability
- Communication – Oral
- Communication – Written
- Control
- Analysis
- Attention to Detail
- Decisiveness
- Delegation
- Development of Subordinates
- Energy
- Entrepreneurial
- Equipment Operation
- Insight
- Fact Finding – Oral
- Financial Analytical
- Flexibility
- Impact
- Independence
- Initiative
- Innovation
- Integrity
- Judgment
- Leadership / Influence
- Listening
- Motivation
- Negotiation
- Organizational
- Participative
- Sensitivity
- Management
- Planning and Organizing
- Practical Learning
- Presentation Skills
- Process Operation
- Rapport Building
- Resilience
- Risk Taking
- Safety Awareness
- Sales Ability / Persuasiveness
- Sensitivity
- Strategic Analysis
- Teamwork
- Technical / Professional Knowledge
- Technical / Professional Proficiency
- Tenacity
- Training
- Work Standards

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, P-A-R, or S-T-A-R statement:

1. Situation

2. Action

3. Result/Outcome

Situation (S):

Advertising revenue was falling off for my newspaper, The Daily Reporter, 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 Reporter circulation with other ad media in the area. I also set up a special training session for the account executives with a Business Administration Consultant who discussed competitive selling strategies.

Result (R):

We signed contracts with 25 former advertisers for daily ads and 5 for special supplements. We increased our new advertisers by 20% [quantities are always good] 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.

It's difficult to prepare for a behavior-based interview because of the huge number and variety of possible behavioral questions 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.

Despite the many possible behavioral questions, you can get some idea of what to expect by looking at Web sites that feature behavioral questions. Here are a few sample questions to get you started:

- 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 to go above and beyond the call of duty in order to get a job done.
- 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 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 preventive measures.
- Tell me about a time when you were forced to make an unpopular decision.
- Please tell me about a time you had to fire a friend.
- Describe a time when you set your sights too high (or too low).

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

Here's a good way to prepare for behavior-based interviews:

- Identify 6-8 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 situation that started out negatively but either ended positively or you made the best of the outcome.
- Vary your examples; don't take 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. Accenture, in fact, specifies that candidates give example of behaviors demonstrated within the last year.
- Try to describe examples in story form and/or PAR/SAR/STAR.

To cram for a behavioral interview right before you're interviewed, review your resume. Seeing your achievements in print will jog your memory.

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 accomplishments so you'll be ready with more great examples the next time you go on a behavior interview.