

Acing the Behavioral Interview

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"The most accurate predictor of future performance is past performance in a similar situation." This is the premise behind behavioral interviewing, an interviewing technique created in the 1970's by industrial psychologists that's becoming popular with employers. For those of you unfamiliar with this interviewing style, a behavioral interview can be a challenging experience.

Unlike traditional interviewing which requires opinion-based answers to questions (Tell me about yourself. What are your strengths and weaknesses? Why do you want to work for this company?), behavioral interviewing requires job candidates to relate stories about their past employment behaviors. These stories are prompted by questions directly related to the skill sets the company has determined are required for a position.

So, if a particular job requires strong communication and team-building skills, then, in a behavioral interview, candidates would be asked to recount past accomplishments in those areas. Behavioral interview questions often start with phrases like, "Tell me about a time when..." or "Describe a situation in which..." or "Give me an example of..."

The challenge with the behavioral interviewing style is that, while your skills and experiences could be a perfect match for a position you are seeking, an interviewer could discount your candidacy if you are unprepared for, or struggle with, the behavioral interview format.

So, how do you prepare for a behavioral interview? First, you'll want to put yourself in the shoes of the potential employer and imagine what the ideal candidate for the position you are considering would look like from their perspective. Then, take some time to thoroughly review the job posting and job description (if you can get it) and research the company and its culture. Look for cues as to which skills are necessary for the job and which are highly valued by the organization. Then, based on your research, identify what skills the successful candidate would have and which behavioral-based questions would correlate to those skills and might be asked in an interview.

Examples of skill sets and some associated behavioral-based questions include:

DECISION MAKING AND PROBLEM SOLVING

- Describe a situation in which you used good judgment and logic in solving a problem.
- Give me an example of a time when you had to be quick in coming to a decision.

LEADERSHIP

- Have you ever had trouble getting others to agree with your ideas? How did you deal with the situation and were you successful?
- Describe the most challenging group from which you've had to gain cooperation.

MOTIVATION

- Tell me about a time when you went above and beyond the call of duty.
- Give me an example of a situation in which you positively influenced the actions of others.

COMMUNICATION

-Describe a situation in which you were able to successfully communicate with another individual who did not personally like you (or vice versa).

-Give me an example of a time you had to use written communication to convey an important argument or idea.

INTERPERSONAL SKILLS

-Give me examples of what you've done in the past to contribute to a teamwork environment.

-Give an example of an unpopular decision you've made, what the result was, and how you managed it.

PLANNING AND ORGANIZATION

-When scheduling your time, what is your method for deciding which items are priorities?

-Describe how you've handled a sudden interruption to your schedule.

Once you've determined which behavioral-based questions you might be asked during an interview, look back on your past experiences and develop stories to answer those questions. Your stories should be detailed, yet succinct, and should always include the following three elements:

- A description of a specific, real-life situation or challenge you encountered.

- A description of the tasks and actions you took to overcome that challenge.

- A summary of the results of those actions. (Try to quantify these results whenever possible.)

Here is a sample answer to a behavioral interview question that incorporates each of these elements:

Question: Give an example of a goal you reached and tell me how you achieved it.

"Due to cuts in funding to our adult continuing education program, we faced the daunting goal of drastically reducing our promotional budget without sacrificing our media presence in the community. As Program Coordinator, I researched alternatives to the effective yet costly course brochure the program produced and distributed biannually to an average of 60,000 residents in our service region. I was able to successfully negotiate with two local newspapers to produce and distribute a new course brochure that increased distribution by 33% to 80,000 residents and decreased costs by 50%."

Familiarizing yourself with the behavioral interview style, crafting and practicing your stories, and doing some homework on the position you are seeking will ensure that you won't be caught off guard should you encounter a behavioral interview.

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