

CAREER CORNER

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Are You Ready For A Behavioral Interview?

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The behavioral interview is based on the premise that a person's past behavior is the best predictor of his or her future performance on the job. Here's how it works and how you can prepare.

What is a Behavioral Interview?

Today, preparing for traditional interviews may not be enough. There is a good possibility that your next job interview will be a behavioral one. This style of interviewing is gaining wide acceptance among many public and private organizations of all sizes. The behavioral interview is based on the premise that a person's past behavior is the best predictor of his or her future performance on the job. In a behavioral job interview, employers ask for information about your prior work experiences and behaviors to ascertain how you might function on the job and assimilate into the culture of the organization.

Employers who use this technique to screen candidates believe that the behaviors demonstrated in previous positions will most likely be repeated. For example, if you willingly took on new projects in the past, you would be likely to maintain that initiative in the future. Thus, in addition to identifying your knowledge and technical skills, a behavioral interview is also designed to reveal past performance patterns that reflect your attitudes, abilities, and other personality traits employers consider equally essential to successful job performance.

How Does It Work?

Prior to the behavioral interview, employers analyze the target position and determine the important skills and characteristics that are needed for success on the job. Based on the job components and required competencies, a set of questions is developed that will help determine if the candidate will meet the established profile.

The behavioral interview is designed to get beyond generalities and examine specific actions. The interview format is highly structured and systematic. You will be asked very pointed questions about your past experiences. These inquiries are aimed at eliciting detailed responses that will determine if you possess the required competencies for the job.

Many employers also may use a rating system during the interview to evaluate essential job-related criteria that was predetermined for the job you are seeking. Generally, employers are assessing your responses to see if you have the following important skills: leadership, communication, decision-making, human relations, coping, problem analysis, teamwork, time management, goal setting, flexibility, assertiveness, etc.

Organizations that use the behavioral method of interviewing are seeking both the best person for the job and a cost-effective staffing process that will hopefully result in efficient transitions and low turnover rates. The behavioral interviewing style affords employers the ability to base their hiring decisions on actual job-related experiences and behaviors instead of potential scenarios for success.

Behavioral versus Traditional Interviewing

Unlike traditional interviews that allow you to expound on what you would or should do in a given situation, the behavioral interview focuses on your past actions only, illustrating how you did behave under particular circumstances. You may be accustomed to the broad-based questions in typical traditional interviews, such as "What are your strengths and weaknesses?" or "Why would you be the best person for this job?" These traditional inquiries allow candidates to outline their views on how they expect to meet future goals. The interviewer must then rely on his/her judgment of the candidate's responses and experience delineated on the resume.

In a behavioral interview more specific probing questions are the norm, such as "Can you tell me about a time this past year when you had to persuade someone to accept your idea or proposal?" "What were the results?" Questions are often framed in the form of a request such as, "Lead me through your decision process in that situation." After the initial inquiry, several follow-up questions will be posed to explore all aspects of a given experience and probe for consistency in your responses.

Although the depth and scope of behavioral interview questions may seem challenging, they can truly provide you with the opportunity to shine. As adults, you have amassed a variety of extensive educational, vocational, and avocational experiences that you can draw upon when answering behavioral interview inquiries.

In addition to your work history and educational endeavors, you may also have many volunteer, military, and community activities that have served to shape and strengthen your skills and behaviors over the years. Taking the time to review and assess these experiences will help you to prepare for a behavioral interview.

How Do You Prepare?

Here are several things to consider when preparing for a behavioral interview:

- Be familiar with the job for which you are interviewing. Review the job description and determine what skills are required.
- Assess yourself; identify your skills and experience related to the job objectives.
- Know your resume. It may be the springboard for many questions.
- Recall recent situations that reflect positive behaviors or actions. Draw from a variety of experiences.
- Prepare brief scenarios/descriptions of these situations. Focus on details surrounding your behaviors in the situation. Identify the outcomes/results.
- Be prepared to describe negative situations you have encountered as well. Employers recognize that we have all had missteps; try to choose an example where you made the best of the situation or effected a favorable outcome.
- Identify your selling points. Choose at least three attributes and mention them during the interview.
- Be honest. Don't omit or embellish your answers.
- Listen carefully before answering the questions. Give specific, detailed responses.

Mostly, you will not be told ahead of time that an interview will be a behavioral one. You may also be asked a combination of traditional and behavioral questions. The best way for job candidates to approach any interview is to include the ideals of a behavioral interview in their preparation process. Identifying examples of past actions and situations that positively describe what you can do for the employer will give you a great advantage over candidates that did not anticipate behavioral questions.

Of course, whatever interview technique you come across in your job search, it is also important to remember to employ the basics of interview etiquette; arrive on time, be positive, use a firm handshake, make eye contact, be yourself, and write thank you notes to each person that interviewed you.

Job interviewing can be a challenging endeavor. With adequate preparation for all interviewing styles, you can make the process less stressful and embrace the encounter with confidence. Once you do get the job, be sure to maintain a list of your important experiences and accomplishments. That way, you will be well prepared for the next time you have a behavioral interview.

Sample Behavioral Interview Questions

Below are examples of typical behavioral questions that prospective employers might ask. The competencies these questions attempt to assess are in parentheses.

- Tell me about a time when you had to persuade other people to take action. Were you successful? (leadership skills)
- Describe a specific problem you solved for your employer. How did you approach the problem? What was the outcome? (decision-making skills)
- Give me an example of a time when you set a goal and were able to achieve it. (goal-setting skills)
- What is your typical way of dealing with conflict? Give me an example. (coping and communication skills).
- Describe a time when you were involved in a project where the others involved were difficult to get along with. How did you approach the situation? What was the outcome? (teamwork skills)
- Tell me about a time when you failed to meet a deadline. What were the repercussions? What did you learn? (time management skills)
- Tell me about a time when you had to deal with a difficult person. How did you handle the situation? (human relations skills)

*Adapted from Sample Behavioral Interview Questions — www.quintcareers.com and *How Do You Behave In A Behavioral Interview?* Job Choices 2000, NACE.

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