

# Behavioral Interview Reference



The following is a general reference on a commonly used interview technique called behavioral interviewing. This reference is a supplement to the guide published by the Center for Career Development on Interviewing.

## **What is a behavioral interview?**

A behavioral interview is an interview that focuses on your past actions, behavior and experiences and less on future events, which tend to be hypothetical. Is rooted in the concept that past behavior is the best indicator of future performance.

This technique is becoming increasingly more popular because it allows the interviewer to gather the information needed to make effective evaluations of a candidate. From an interviewer's perspective, the hiring process is significantly more complex than just finding the individual who *can* do the job; it requires finding the person who can do the work and will be the right fit for the organization. The most effective way to determine the right fit in an interview is to ask questions that probe the interviewee's past behavior. A behavioral question requires a candidate to describe a situation in which he/she used a specific skill critical to his/her success in the position he/she is applying for.

Traditional interviewing, still a valuable tool, tends to focus on the candidate's experience and skills, and less on how they behave, or think they would behave, in different situations.

Behavioral interviewing:

- Reduces misunderstandings about candidate's past experience;
- Takes some of the pressure off the candidates to make a "good impression."
- There are no "correct" answers to a behavioral question, which allows the interview to be a more comfortable environment for the interviewee;
- Reduces the interviewer's tendency to ask hypothetical questions, which naturally elicit hypothetical answers;
- Substantiates the candidates experience, knowledge, and skills. Because the information is based on specific examples and situations, a candidate's competency will be more accurately represented
- Allows the interviewer to be more objective in their evaluation of a candidate.

## How do I prepare for a Behavioral Interview?

In many ways, preparing for a Behavioral Interview is harder than preparing for a traditional one. It requires that you think of your experiences beyond the skills you gained. The most straightforward way to think about your answers is by using the STAR technique:

**Situation:** describe the situation you were in, or an event that gives a good example to answer the interviewer's question;

**Task:** describe your role in the situation;

**Actions:** describe your actions, how you handled the situation;

**Results:** outcome as related to the actions you took.

The interviewer will likely guide you with follow-up questions. For example:  
Tell me about a situation where you had to accomplish a task for which you were not properly equipped. How did you handle it? What did you learn from this experience? Have you used what you have learned in another similar situation?

The next step is to practice your answers. It is important that you hear yourself responding to the questions and that you get used to this process. If possible, go through a mock interview.

Appendix A of this document provides a list of sample questions. Don't expect to have an example for *every* question. The best way to prepare for a behavioral interview is to think of 4-10 situations that you can use that will speak to your:

- Intellectual competence
- Problem solving skills
- Motivation and work ethic
- Team/Interpersonal skills
- Adaptability and flexibility
- Leadership skills
- Organizational and administrative skills
- Technical expertise (if applicable)
- Ability to balance work and personal life.

Your examples should be complex and rich enough to satisfactorily answer the question and allow the interviewer to ask additional questions. That said, you want to be able to describe the situations in a fairly concise fashion. Although you can use examples from work, research, school, and other activities, you want to keep the conversation professional, so avoid examples that are more personal in nature.

The more experienced your interviewer, the more this process will feel like a conversation and less like an interview. Never forget that it is an evaluation process. It is still an interview that requires that you are prepared, well-informed about the organization, able to maintain eye contact, and all the other interview skills that will make you a more accessible candidate.

This interviewing technique does pose a hurdle for interviewers. Particularly for those less experienced, the seemingly more casual nature of these interviews can lead the interviewer to ask inappropriate questions related to race, marital status, religious beliefs, sexual orientation, and national origin. Here are some examples of questions that are inappropriate, paired with a more appropriate version.

*Inappropriate:* Where are you from? Are you a U.S. citizen?

*Appropriate:* Are you authorized to work in the U.S.?

*Inappropriate:* Do you have any children? Does your spouse work?

*Appropriate:* This position requires a fair amount of travel. Does that pose a problem for you?

As the interviewee, there are four primary ways to respond. Which response you choose depends on the situation and your comfort-level. Here are the different approaches in terms of severity.

- Answer the question. If you think the question was asked naturally as part of the conversation and the interviewer is probably unaware that he/she asked an inappropriate question, you may feel comfortable answer the question.  
*Benefit:* keeps the conversation moving and allows the more informal rapport to continue.  
*Drawback:* the interviewer is unaware and you may get asked another inappropriate question.
- Answer the *intent* of the question, if you know it. For example: I notice you are engaged. What does your fiancée do? Answer: I assume you are wondering if my marital status will interfere with my ability to travel. I fully understand the travel commitments of this job, and I am enthusiastic about a career in consulting.  
*Benefit:* effective, less forceful way to alert the interviewer that he/she is asking something inappropriate.  
*Drawback:* interviewer may become defensive, but they will likely get over it very quickly because they will realize that they crossed the line.
- Ask what the intent of the question is. For example: I notice you are engaged. What does your fiancée do? Answer: are you concerned that my marital status will affect my ability to be successful as a consultant? This is appropriate if the intent of the question is not clear, you think the intent is benign, but you want the interviewer to be aware that they are asking an illegal question.

- Don't answer the question. If you choose this option, it is important to do so in a professional fashion. For example: answer: You may be unaware of this, but that question is inappropriate and not legal because it has no bearing on this position or my ability to perform the work.  
*Benefit:* this is an efficient way to keep the conversation professional and more formal. An experienced interviewer will likely apologize and rephrase the question.  
*Drawback:* interviewer may become defensive and find your approach overly aggressive. The less experienced interviewer may stumble a little, but will eventually rephrase the question or move on to the next one.

## **What else do I need to know?**

It is appropriate to use the STAR approach in answering most interview questions, including more traditional ones. The benefit is that you come across as thoughtful and thorough, and the interviewer walks away with more concrete answers. For example, what are your career plan and goals for the next 3-5 years? Answer: In the past, when I have made career decisions such as these (e.g., selecting a major, selecting a graduate school, advisor or thesis topic), I have taken xyz into consideration. At present, I see my career heading in ... direction. Be aware that the interviewer is likely trying to make sure that your interests are in line with what they are looking for.

If you get a question that throws you off, take your time. Don't let the silence rush you. If you don't have an example, simply say so.

Many behavioral interview questions will focus on situations that challenged you in some way. Be truthful in your responses. Remain as objective and non-defensive as possible – which may not be easy in situations that don't put you in the best light.

When selecting the examples for your responses, use both the most appropriate and most timely situations. Typically, more recent examples are best.

Even though a behavioral interview is somewhat less formal, core interviewing skills remain important. More information about these skills are available in the Center for Career Development's interviewing guides.

- Be on time, be prepared;
- Dress appropriately;
- Do your homework on the company: review internet and other material they make available, talk to alums that work there, look for "inside scoop" from sites such as Vault.com
- Ask questions during or at the end of the interview. This is both informative for you and demonstrates interest to the interviewer.

## **Appendix A: Sample Behavioral Interview Questions**

### *Intellectual Competence:*

- Can you describe a project or assignment you recently completed which required you to make sense out of a mass of complex or ambiguous information? How did you approach the assignment? How did it turn out?
- Tell me about the most difficult professional decision you've made and the process you used to reach it.
- Give me some examples of projects and/or tasks where you postponed immediate action. Why?
- Can you think of a situation you had to handle in which old solutions didn't work? What did you do to handle it?
- Describe the last situation in which you were required to think on your feet. What did you decide to do? How satisfied were you with the results? What would you change if you could?

### *Leadership Skills:*

- What was the best idea you ever sold to a group of people in order to get them to take action? How did you convince them? What was the result?
- Walk me through the project that was toughest for you to lead; tell me what you did to keep it on track? Was it successful?
- Describe the situation that best demonstrates your ability to get things done through others.
- Describe the last time you were unsuccessful in getting someone to follow your lead. What have you learned from that experience? Tell me how you have applied that knowledge in other similar situations.
- Tell me about the time you met the most resistance when proposing a plan of action. How did you handle the situation?
- Tell me about a time when you assumed a leadership role. How did you motivate others? How did you resolve conflicts? What was the outcome? What did you learn?

### *Team & Interpersonal Skills*

- We've all had to work with someone who is very difficult to get along with; give me an example of when this happened to you. What did you do? What was the result?
- Give me an example of dealing with another when you pushed too hard. Why? How did you determine when you should back off. What was the outcome?
- Tell me about a time when you had to resolve a conflict in a team. What was the outcome?

- Tell me about your most recent team project. What was the project? What was your role? Did you enjoy your role?

### *Adjustment & Flexibility*

- Describe the most frustrating group project you worked on in which the group had difficulty accomplishing its objectives. What was frustrating for you? How did you cope? What did you do to resolve the issues? Did it work?
- Describe a situation which you initially thought you could easily handle alone, and soon realized you were in over your head. What did you do?
- Which bosses/peers have you worked most effectively for/with? Why?
- Which bosses/peers have been the hardest to work for/with? Why?
- Tell me about some situations in which you had to abruptly change what you were doing. What did you do? How did it affect you?
- All of us become “edgy” at times; tell me about a time you felt that way. What did you do about it?
- Tell me about the last time someone criticized your work. How did you react?

### *Motivation*

- Tell me about the last time you went the ‘extra mile’ to do something because it needed to be done, even though it wasn’t your responsibility.
- Sometimes it’s necessary to work on things when the directions are unclear. Can you think of a recent situation where you were assigned to a task or a project and weren’t especially clear about what to do or how to proceed?
- Tell me about times when you weren’t very pleased with your performance. What did you do about it?
- Have you been in a situation where you knew you had to do something, but you didn’t really want to do it? How did you motivate yourself to complete the task? What was the outcome?
- Tell me about a time when you had to go above and beyond the call of duty to get a job done.
- Describe a situation in which you were too persistent. What happened? How could you have improved the outcome?
- All jobs have their frustrations and problems. Describe examples of specific job conditions, tasks, or assignments that have been dissatisfying to you. Exactly why were they dissatisfying?
- Tell me about a goal you set for yourself. Did you achieve it? How?

### *Communication Skills*

- Can you tell me about a job experience in which you had to speak up in order to be sure that other people knew what you thought or felt?

- Give me an example of a time when you were able to successfully communicate with another person, even when that individual may not have personally liked you.
- Describe a recent time that you were unexpectedly in a position, orally promoting or defending something. How convincing were you? How dogmatic or inflexible were you? What arguments did you spontaneously think of during the discussion? How did it turn out?
- What are some of the most difficult writing assignments you have been given or have taken on yourself?

### *Administrative & Organizational Skills*

- Can you tell me about a very hectic time when you worked on a project or assignment and had to deal with competing demands?
- Can you recall a recent situation where you had several things to accomplish in a short amount of time? Tell me how you accomplished these things.
- What deadlines are you working toward now which you have imposed on yourself? Tell me how you set that deadline and planned to meet it. How far ahead or behind schedule are you?
- Tell me about a time when your workload was most hectic. What competing demands did you have to deal with? What did you do to handle the situation? How did you schedule your time? How did it turn out?
- What has been your biggest challenge in making effective use of your time? Give me an example of a time when that was a problem for you. What did you do to deal with that problem?
- Tell me about a time when you had to meet an aggressive deadline.
- Tell me about a time when you, or someone on your team, caused a major deadline to be missed. How did you address the issue? What was the outcome?

### *Technical Skills*

- In what areas do you have special expertise?
- How did you develop that expertise? How have you used that expertise?
- What do you do to keep up to date in your field?
- Give me some examples of the most complex assignments and/or projects you have had. What was your role? How did it work out?

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