Competency Based Behavioral Interviewing

Behavioral Interviewing is the most common method for conducting interviews and evaluating job candidates. The technique originated in the mid-late 1990’s and quickly became the method of choice of almost all employers, and for good reason – it works! You almost assuredly will participate in Behavioral Interviews during your career search.

Definition of Behavioral Interviewing

Interview technique in which job candidates are asked to give specific examples of how they have performed in the past in certain job related (competency) situations.

Theory of Behavioral Interviewing

A person’s behavior does not fundamentally change over the course of their adult life. The manner in which they have performed in the past in certain job related areas is a good indicator of how they will probably perform in similar situations in the future.

Core Competencies

Behavioral Interviews are structured around “core competencies”. Core competencies are key, essential job duties that must be performed in a highly satisfactory manner by the person(s) performing the job.

Core competencies will vary from job to job. For example, one of the core competencies for a sales position will be “sales and persuasion skills”, but that will probably not be a core competency for an engineering position. “Leadership” will be a core competency for a management position, but probably not for an entry-level job. The following are just a few of the common core competencies for different jobs:

- Sales and persuasion
- Customer service and conflict resolution
- Multi-tasking abilities
- Analytical skills
- Organizational skills
- Teamwork skills
- Work ethic
- Flexibility
- Dependability
- Goal-oriented and results-driven
- Leadership skills

And the list goes on and on. What the core competencies are for a particular job you apply for will depend upon the job responsibilities and duties. You can get a better idea of what core competencies will be probed by carefully studying the job description.

Behavioral Questions

In behavioral interviewing, the interviewer will ask questions about how you have performed in the past. They will not ask simple “yes” or “no” questions and they are usually not interested in your
theories or how you feel about a particular topic. They want to know how you have performed in that area in the past. They will probably also ask “follow-up” questions to get a clearer and more detailed picture of your past performance.

Here’s an example of a behavioral question probing the core competency, “customer service abilities”, along with follow-up questions:

“Tell me about a time you dealt with an angry customer.”
- “Was the complaint legitimate?”
- “Were you empowered to take steps to resolve the situation?”
- “What actions did you take?”
- “What was the result?”
- “What was the customer’s demeanor and attitude afterwards?”
- “What did you do later to follow-up and ensure the customer was happy?”

Behavioral questions will almost always begin with:
- “Tell me about a time…”
- “Give me an example of…”
- “Describe a situation in which…”

When you hear questions being phrased this way, you are participating in a behavioral interview.

How to Answer Behavioral Questions

There are two key elements in successfully answering behavioral questions:

1. Give specific answers

The interviewer is not looking for vague, general answers – they want very specific details.

2. Give successful answers

Interviewers are not looking for examples of failure – regardless of how specific – they want to know that you have successfully dealt with the situation in the past. Remember, past performance is a good indicator of future behavior. If you have successfully dealt with the competencies being probed in the past, you’ll probably be able to do it well in the future.

Use the C.A.R. Method

A tool you may find helpful in answering behavioral questions is the C.A.R. method:

C = Circumstance – Describe the specific circumstances of the situation

A = Action – Describe the action you took to deal with the situation

R = Result – Describe the result of your action

One last thing about answering questions – keep your answers short, on topic and succinct. Interviewers lose interest if you give long, rambling answers, plus the longer your answer, the more likely you’ll wander off topic.

Give your Best Example

When asked a behavioral question (or any question for that matter) don’t think you have to just blurt out the first thing that comes to mind! Some of these questions are difficult, and you should
think before answering. If it’s a particularly difficult question say, “that’s a great question, let me think about it for a moment”. Now pause, gather your thoughts, think of your best example, and respond.

Lack Experience?

Many students and recent graduates do not have an extensive amount of experience in the field they are pursuing. Giving work-related examples of how you have performed in the past may be difficult. Don’t box yourself in! You may not have a lot of work experience, but most of you already have a lot of life experience. The interviewer wants to know how you have performed in a specific area in the past, but sometimes you’ve done these things in non-work related settings. They will usually be receptive to non-work related examples, as long as they are on topic and fit the question. While in college, there are many things you can do to gain valuable experience in your chosen field and use as examples when answering behavioral interview questions. Some of these things include:

- Internships
- Student Organization involvement (especially in leadership roles)
- Classroom projects (especially team projects)
- Athletics participation (especially team sports)
- Volunteer work
- Part-time Jobs

Remember that although work-related examples are always best, experience gained in other areas or activities can be substituted.

Preparing for a Behavioral Interview

The most important element of conducting a successful interview is to be well prepared. Read and study the job description closely, and identify the “core competencies”. The competencies will often appear in the job description like this example:

“Ideal candidates will possess excellent multi-tasking skills”

If you see this in a job description, you will be asked behavioral questions about how you have multi-tasked in the past. So once you have identified the “core competencies”, think of two or three great examples of times you have successfully dealt with that particular competency. When the interviewer asks you to give an example, you will be prepared ahead of time to answer.

Conclusion

The key to conducting a successful behavioral interview is preparation. Research the company and the job extensively, and study the job description carefully. The more you know about the position, the better you’ll understand the core competencies that will be probed, and this will help you anticipate and be prepared for the questions you’re likely to receive.

Although giving specific, successful and on-topic answers is important, keep in mind that interviewing is much more than just answering questions! If you are to be successful, you need to be prepared and perform well in all areas of the interview. The following are some other aspects of interviewing that are also critical to success:

- Research – have an abundant knowledge of the company and job.
- Professional dress and appearance (the majority of any interview is visual)
- Verbal communication – speak clearly and enthusiastically.
- Non-verbal communication – especially smiling, firm handshake, eye contact and posture
- Ask positive questions of the interviewer and enthusiastically tell them you want the job.
Follow-up – be sure and send a “thank you” note after the interview.

Remember too that interviewing is highly competitive. It’s not enough to do well, you must do better than the others that are also interviewing for the job.

Good luck and let us know if we can help in any way!

www.utsa.edu/careercenter