



Behavior-Based Interviewing Resource

BBI: Past Behavior Predicts Future Behavior

Interviewing is a key component of the selection process, and it is important to make it as accurate and reliable as possible. This is a difficult proposition, given that impressions gathered during a brief exchange can be fairly subjective, unless a controlled process is followed. Behavioral interviewing, also known as behavior-based interviewing (BBI) is a scientific approach to assessing candidates. It is rooted in industrial psychology and on the principle that past behavior is the best predictor of future behavior.

The BBI process is primarily comprised of:

1. The use of open ended questions very specifically crafted to focus on certain competencies critically important for success in the target position, and
2. The careful capture and analysis of detailed examples provided by candidates in order to determine if the candidate has a required level of demonstrated competency in the criteria for successful job performance.

In some studies, behavioral interviewing was seen to be over 50 percent predictive of future on-the-job behavior, while traditional interviewing was 15 percent or less predictive. The scale of the difference is enormous, and can make interviewing more reliable and objective as a selection tool. While Traditional interviewing (“Do you like to work alone, or in a team?”) and Situational interviewing (“How would you handle an irate client?”) both rely heavily on the interpretation, imagination and integrity of the candidate, Behavioral interviewing uses open ended questions to draw out information on a candidate’s specific examples of past experiences. The behavioral interview technique is now a widely trusted and used mode of job interviewing used by employers to evaluate a candidate’s experiences and behaviors in order to determine their potential for success. In this technique, the interviewer first identifies skills and behaviors – also called competencies – required for the position, and then constructs open-ended questions designed to draw out detailed responses. Using a rating scale, candidate-responses are evaluated during the interview process to see if they meet expectations, and can also be used to compare with responses of other candidates. Candidates may share complete examples from past experiences drawn from employment or from volunteering, school, community activity, memberships in organizations, etc.

Behavioral vs. Traditional and Situational Interviewing

Traditional interviewing relies on generally unsubstantiated responses to questions such as “Do you deal well with difficult people?” In a traditional job-interview, candidates have an option to tell interviewers what they may want to hear. With situational questions such as “How would you deal with a difficult person?” candidates may be tempted to share a text-book or hypothetical version of ideal behavior. Behavioral questions are much more probing and experience-specific.



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To compare and contrast traditional, situational and behavioral questions, review the following:

- Traditional: How well do you work with people? Do you prefer working alone or in teams?
- Situational: How would you deal with someone who was not cooperative or collaborative?
- Behavioral: Tell me about a time when you had to deal with someone who was difficult, not collaborative or cooperative. How did you handle that?

To the traditional question, most candidates may typically respond, very briefly, with “I work very well with people” and “I prefer working in teams” since that is what most employers would want to hear. To answer the situational question, most candidates may try to present a textbook response, including strategies that they know to be effective but have not actually used because they may not have the skills to do so. To answer the behavioral question, however, candidates will need to refer to actual experiences in the past and respond in an open ended format, which will reveal substantially more about their judgment, personality and approach.

It may be ethically easier for candidates to embellish and/or fabricate responses to traditional or situational questions since they have not been specifically asked to describe a real event in the past. Using follow-up questions, a behavioral interviewer is able to pick a response apart to try to get at a specific behavior. Additional depth and details can be gleaned using follow-up questions such as “Why did you select that approach?” or “Why did your co-worker not contribute to your project?” or “How many delegates attended the conference?” If a candidate has been less than forthright, their responses, demeanor or body language generally offer clues.

Traditional questions are still included in most interviews to gather certain information such as technical or scientific skill-level, language fluency, academic preparation, and knowledge of and interest in the organization, especially in early pre-screening stages. While these are valid questions, they do not probe competencies as deeply as do behavioral questions. Behavioral questions require a candidate to provide detailed and specific examples from their past to illustrate how they have dealt with certain situations.

Based on the position, behavioral questions may cover such competencies as teamwork, conflict resolution, cultural diversity, customer service, time management, and leadership.

Competencies are successful demonstrations of behavior that apply knowledge, skills and attributes required for successful performance. Intelligence, knowledge and aptitude, along with intrinsic characteristics such as interpersonal skills, motivation, access to networks, confidence, their environment and autonomy, all contribute to the success of an individual in delivering high performance in any role or situation.

Competencies for jobs within an organization are defined through a process called *competency modeling* which determines the characteristic of high performance (and low performance) and success (and failure) in any given job. This is a resource-intensive process that requires professional support, but in the meantime, smaller organizations with limited resources could get a head start by looking at models described at [AmericanJobCenter](#) and [CareerOneStop](#) for comparable jobs in organizations operating in similar industries. (See Competencies Resource – 2B)



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A complete answer to a behavior-based question explains the *Situation* for which the candidate was responsible, the specific *Behavior* demonstrated in the strategies adopted and the actions taken, and the *Outcome* of the behavior. The complete answer contains all of these S-B-O components.

The following is an example of the minimum level of detail you should accept in a behavioral response. If the response is sketchier, use follow-up questions to flesh it out. You need as much information as possible in order to rate an example accurately!

Question: Describe a complex problem you've recently been asked to solve. What did you do?

- **Situation:** Last July, at my job at the Hospital, I was given responsibility for managing a mailing to patients to follow up on previous treatment and interest them in a new study. The existing mailing list had approximately 6,000 names.
- **Behavior:** I saw that the list had not been updated for a while, and was told that in the previous year, two out of ten mailed packets came back undeliverable. I wanted to update the information to reduce the volume of undeliverable mail. I worked closely with a database manager who ran a new report from the system which had the latest addresses. I imported this report into Access, and was able to create a new mailing list from a query that matched the names from the old list, and added updated addresses from the new list.
- **Outcome:** When the mailing went out, I tracked the returned mail, and it was less than half a percent! My supervisor and co-workers commended me on this achievement.

EXAMPLES OF BEHAVIORAL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Time and project management:

- Describe a time when you faced a particularly demanding deadline (emergency, rush, etc.). How did you deal with it?
- Describe a time when you had to handle multiple tasks at one time. What strategy did you follow?
- Talk about a time when you had several tasks to accomplish and there were deadlines coming up. How did you set priorities on the order of what needed to be completed first?
- Have you ever had to delay a decision to give some additional consideration to a problem? Please describe the circumstances. Was your final decision different from your initial one?
- There are times when everything cannot be completed on time. Talk about a time when this happened, and how you handled it.

Team:

- Describe a time when you needed to collaborate with someone who was unfriendly and uncooperative. How did you handle the situation?
- Give an example of a team decision in which you were involved in recently. What did you do to help the team reach the decision?



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- Have you ever been in a team in which a member was not contributing to its success? What did you do about it?
- Tell me about a time when you used your skills to resolve a workplace conflict.
- Working with people with different backgrounds or cultures can require special approaches. In your experience, how have you handled this situation?
- Have you had to make a decision that went against the general opinion of your team? What was it, and what was the outcome?

Motivational Fit

- What are some of the things that cause you stress at work? How do you deal with them?

Integrity:

- Describe a time when you faced an ethical or value conflict at work? How did you resolve it?
- Talk about a time when you observed someone at work do something that you considered illegal or against policy. How did you handle it?

Functional skills:

- Give an example of a project you have worked on that shows your expertise in _____. What skill area do you see as needing further development?
- Give an example of a time when you went above and beyond the requirement of your job.

Communication:

- Please share a recent example that demonstrates your communication skills.
- Please talk about a time when you had to communicate a complex and important situation to a client/coworker. What did you do to make certain that the information was understood?
- Talk about a time when your listening skills helped you accomplish a goal.
- Describe the most challenging written communication that you had to compose. Why was it challenging? What did you do to develop it?

Problem-solving

- Please talk about a time when you saw a potential or a real problem. How did you address it?
- Sometimes a problem may not have a viable solution. Describe a problem that you tried unsuccessfully to resolve.
- To understand or assess a problem, sometimes you have to ask a number of questions. Talk about a time when you had to gather information and make a recommendation.

Leadership and Decision-making:

- Describe the most complex decision you have had to make. What are the factors that you considered? What was the outcome?
- Share an example of a time when you demonstrated true leadership in a task or situation.
- Has your leadership ever been challenged by a team member? What did you do to resolve it?