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The Behavioral Interview

There are basically five types of questions that will be asked at an interview:

Credential questions

This type of question includes "What was your GPA?" and "How long did you work at Wal-Mart." Its purpose is to place objective measurements on features of your background.

Experience questions

This type of question includes "What did you learn in that class?" and "What were your responsibilities in that position?" Its purpose is to subjectively evaluate features of your background.

Opinion questions

This type of question includes "What would you do in this situation?" and "What are your strengths and weaknesses?" Its purpose is to subjectively analyze how you would respond in a series of scenarios.

Dumb questions

This type of question includes "What kind of animal would you like to be?" or "How many ping pong balls could fit in a Volkswagen?" Its purpose is to get past your pre-programmed answers to find out if you are capable of an original thought. There is not necessarily a right or wrong answer, since it is used primarily as a test of your ability to think on your feet.

Behavioral questions

This type of question includes "Can you give me a specific example of how you did that?", "What were the steps you followed to accomplish that task?" and "Tell me about a time when you were on a team, and one of the members wasn't carrying his or her weight." Its purpose is to anticipate future responses based upon past behaviors. Behavioral interviewing is gaining greater acceptance by trained interviewers because past performance is the most reliable indicator of future results.

Behavioral interviewing is designed to minimize personal impressions that can affect the hiring decision. By focusing on the applicant's actions and behaviors, rather than subjective impressions that can sometimes be misleading, interviewers can make more accurate hiring decisions.

Behavioral vs. Traditional Interviews

If you have training or experience with traditional interviewing techniques, you may find the behavioral interview quite different in several ways:

- Instead of asking how you would behave in a particular situation, the interviewer will ask you to describe how you did behave.
- Expect the interviewer to question and probe (think of "peeling the layers from an onion").
- The interviewer will ask you to provide details, and will not allow you to theorize or generalize about several events.
- The interview will be a more structured process that will concentrate on areas that are important to the interviewer, rather than allowing you to concentrate on areas that you may feel are important.
- You may not get a chance to deliver any prepared stories.
- Most interviewers will be taking copious notes throughout the interview.

Continued on Reverse

The behavioral interviewer has been trained to objectively collect and evaluate information, and works from a profile of desired behaviors that are needed for success on the job. Because the behaviors a candidate has demonstrated in previous similar positions are likely to be repeated, you will be asked to share situations in which you may or may not have exhibited these behaviors. Your answers will be tested for accuracy and consistency. If you are an entry-level candidate with no previous related experience, the interviewer will look for behaviors in situations similar to those of the target position:

- "Describe a major problem you have faced and how you dealt with it."
- "Give an example of when you had to work on a team project."
- "What class did you like the most? What did you like about it?"

Follow-up questions will test for consistency and determine if you exhibited the desired behavior in that situation:

- "Can you give me an example?"
- "What did you do (or say)?"
- "What was your role?"
- "What was the result?"

You will notice an absence of such questions as: "Tell me about yourself" or "Tell me about your strengths and weaknesses."

How to Prepare for a Behavioral Interview

- Review the job description as the behaviors they may ask you to discuss are frequently imbedded in the position description or qualifications.
- Recall recent situations that show favorable behaviors or actions, especially involving course work, work experience, leadership, teamwork, initiative, planning, and customer service.
- Prepare short descriptions of each situation; be ready to give details if asked.
- Be sure each story has a beginning, middle, and end. Be ready to describe the situation, your action, and the outcome or result.
- Be sure the outcome or result reflects positively on you (even if the result itself was not favorable).
- Be honest. Don't embellish or omit any part of the story. The interviewer will find out if your story is built on a weak foundation.
- Be specific. Don't generalize about several events; give a detailed accounting of one event.

A possible response for the question, "Tell me about a time when you were on a team and a member wasn't pulling his or her weight" might go as follows:

"I had been assigned to a team to build a canoe out of concrete. One of our team members wasn't showing up for our lab sessions or doing his assignments. I finally met with him in private, explained the frustration of the rest of the team, and asked if there was anything I could do to help. He told me he was preoccupied with another class that he wasn't passing, so I found someone to help him with the other course. He not only was able to spend more time on our project, but he was also grateful to me for helping him out. We finished our project on time, and got a 'B' on it."

The interviewer might then probe: "How did you feel when you confronted this person?" "Exactly what was the nature of the project?" "What was his responsibility as a team member?" "What was your role?" "At what point did you take it upon yourself to confront him?" You can see it is important that you not make up or "shade" information, and why you should have a clear memory of the entire incident.

Don't Forget the Basics

Instead of feeling anxious or threatened by the prospect of a behavioral interview, remember the essential difference between the traditional interview and the behavioral interview: The traditional interviewer may allow you to project what you might or should do in a given situation, whereas the behavioral interviewer is looking for past actions only. It will always be important to put your best foot forward and make a good impression on the interviewer with appropriate attire, good grooming, a firm handshake and direct eye contact. There is no substitute for promptness, courtesy, preparation, enthusiasm, and a positive attitude.

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