

How to Answer Behavioral Interview Questions

By Alison Green September 26, 2011



More and more often, job interviewers are jettisoning traditional interview questions in favor of behavioral questions. Job seekers who aren't prepared for these questions will often flub the interview entirely, so it's crucial to know that they're coming and to be prepared to answer them.

But let's start at the beginning: What *are* behavioral interview questions and why are employers using them?

Behavioral interview questions probe into what you've done in the past, not what you say you'd do in the future. More traditional interviews tend to rely heavily on hypothetical questions: How would you handle it if a customer did X? How do you think we should approach Y? What would you do if you were in danger of missing a deadline? It's not too hard to come up with good answers to these sorts of questions, even for people who don't perform well when they're actually on the job—which means that they're not of much real benefit to employers.

In contrast, behavioral interview questions don't ask you to speculate on how you might approach something. Instead, they ask you to describe how you really *did* approach something. They tend to start out with "tell me about a time when..." or "give me an example of how you..." For instance:

- Tell me about a time when you had to take initiative.
- Tell me about a time when you had to deal with a difficult customer.
- * Give me an example of a challenge you faced in your current job and how you solved it.
- Tell me about a time you faced an unreasonable deadline and how you handled it.

Give me an example of a new approach you developed for tackling a problem.

These types of questions are often followed by probing follow-ups to dig more deeply. Your interview might ask: What did you do then? What happened after that? What was the result? How did you handle X? *

In other words, the interviewer doesn't want to hear about what you claim you'll do in the future, or your thoughts on how you'd approach an abstract situation. They want to hear about what you've done already. This makes sense, since how you operated in the past can give a lot of insight into how you're likely to operate in the future. After all, if you can't come up with one

example of how you solved a problem or juggled a high workload, what reason do they have to think you'll excel at those things when working for them?

Of course, it's a lot harder to bluff your way through an interview like this—and that's the idea.

But no matter how much your past experiences line up with the job, it can be tough to come up with some of those examples on the spot, so it's **key to prepare in advance**. Here are four key steps to before your next interview:

1. First, go through the job description line by line, and **picture yourself doing the job**. What will the person in the role be responsible for? What are the likely challenges?
2. For each responsibility or challenge, think about what examples from your past you can point to as "supporting evidence" that you'd excel at the job, and write them down.

Keep in mind that **don't need to be direct one-for-one matches**. For instance, if you're applying for a sales job without any actual sales experience, you might talk about how you made fundraising calls to alumni when you were in college. Or if you're applying for a manager job and haven't formally managed anyone, you might talk about how you were the **go-to person for training new employees in your last job, managed numerous group projects**, and were known as a **diplomatic problem-solver**. And if you don't have a lot of work experience to draw on, you can use **examples from school, volunteering, and hobbies**.

3. Once you've written out your examples, turn them into answers that have this structure: problem/response/ outcome. In other words, start by talking about why the situation was challenging. Then express what you did in response, and finally, explain what the outcome was.

4. Now, make yourself practice your answers out loud. You might feel foolish talking to yourself, but doing this will make these answers more easily retrievable to you when you're sitting in that interview chair.

And lastly, don't look at these questions as something to dread. Look at them as a chance to really show why you're a strong candidate who would be great at the job. That's what they're designed to ferret out, in the end.

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