

Critical Behavior Interviewing (CBI) Strategies for Candidates & Recruiters

by Gary L. Melling, adapted from an article by Katharine Hansen.

Behavioral interviewing is a relatively new mode of job interviewing. Employers such as AT&T and Accenture (the former Andersen Consulting) have been using behavioral interviewing for about 15 years now, and because increasing numbers of employers are using behavior-based methods to screen job candidates, understanding how to excel in this interview environment is becoming a crucial job-hunting and interviewing skill.

The premise behind behavioral interviewing is that the most accurate predictor of future performance is past performance in similar situations. Behavioral interviewing, in fact, is said to be 55 percent predictive of future on-the-job behavior, while traditional interviewing is only 10 percent predictive.

Behavioral-based interviewing is touted as providing a more objective set of facts to make employment decisions than other interviewing methods. Traditional interview questions ask you general questions such as “Tell me about yourself.” The process of behavioral interviewing is much more probing and works very differently.

In a traditional job-interview, you can usually get away with telling the interviewer what he or she wants to hear, even if you are fudging a bit on the truth. Even if you are asked situational questions that start out “How would you handle XYZ situation?” you have minimal accountability.

How does the interviewer know, after all, if you would really react in a given situation the way you say you would? In a behavioral interview, however, it’s much more difficult to give responses that are untrue to your character. When you start to tell a behavioral story, the behavioral interviewer typically will pick it apart to try to get at the specific behavior(s). The interviewer will probe further for more depth or detail such as “What were you thinking at that point?” or “Tell me more about your meeting with that person,” or “Lead me through your decision process.” If you’ve told a story that’s anything but totally honest, your response will not hold up through the barrage of probing questions.

Employers use the behavioral interview technique to evaluate a candidate’s experiences and behaviors so they can determine the applicant’s potential for success. The interviewer identifies job-related experiences, behaviors, knowledge, skills and abilities that the company has decided are desirable in a particular position. For example, some of the characteristics that Accenture looks for include:

- Critical thinking
- Being a self-starter
- Willingness to learn
- Willingness to travel
- Self-confidence
- Teamwork
- Professionalism

The employer or recruiter then structures very pointed questions to elicit detailed responses aimed at determining if the candidate possesses the desired characteristics. Questions (often not even framed as a question) typically start out: "Tell about a time..." or "Describe a situation..." Many employers use a rating system to evaluate selected criteria during the interview.

As a candidate, you should be equipped to answer the questions thoroughly. Obviously, you can prepare better for this type of interview if you know which skills that the employer has predetermined to be necessary for the job you seek. Researching the company and talking to people who work there will enable you to zero in on the kinds of behaviors the company wants.

In the interview, your response needs to be specific and detailed. Candidates who tell the interviewer about particular situations that relate to each question will be far more effective and successful than those who respond in general terms. It is also important to note that whether the employer or recruiter conducting a CBI has typically a pre-scheduled a fixed amount of time. Within that allotted time, the employer or recruiter is trying to extract information from you that clearly and concisely captures whether you potentially are (or are not) a good candidate; more specifically candidate responses to CBI questions are scored according to "Rules of Evidence" and other, exacting criteria. If the candidate provides specific responses that address all of the considerations the Interviewer is trying to capture then it is quite likely that the interview will start and end on time with few interruptions from the employer or recruiter. If, on the other hand, candidates appear to going off on tangents it is quite likely the interviewer will be required to politely interrupt the candidate in order to get them back on track. Given these interviews are time-bound, it is important to give the candidate an opportunity to answer all of the questions directly but at the same time if the interviewer has to work too hard to keep the candidate on track, it is not difficult to see that soon the interviewer will realize that the candidate, in fact, is not likely a good potential employee for their organization. As a candidate, if you find your interviewer starts to interrupt you it is important to recognize that a red flare has just gone off – take a moment to ask the interviewer if they could repeat the question and once you have provided your more direct response, ask if you have answered the questions directly – remember, help the interviewer extract the information they need quickly by being a good interviewee. Whether you are an "easy interview" or not, it is quite likely that the interview will end on time – it has to in order to accommodate the other steps in the CBI Process.

A seasoned CBI interviewer will understand that many candidates may not have been through this kind of rigorous (some might say even invasive) interview process and will start the CBI interview process by helping you understand the activities that will occur within the interview, the time allocated for each and their role in extracting responses that can be easily scored, therefore giving you the opportunity to present yourself in the best light possible. Remember, the premise of CBI interviews is that the most accurate predictor of future performance is past performance in similar situations. Behavioral interviewing, in fact, is said to be 55 percent predictive of future on-the-job behavior, while traditional interviewing is only 10 percent predictive – use this as an opportunity to put your past experience truthfully in the spotlight but do it in a way that helps the interviewer extract what they need in the time allocated to your interview.

Ideally, you should briefly describe the situation, what specific action you took to have an effect on the situation, and the positive result or outcome. Frame it in a three-step process, usually called a S-A-R, P-A-R, or S-T-A-R statement:

1. Situation (or task, problem), 2. Action, 3. Result/outcome.

It's also helpful to think of your responses as stories. Become a great storyteller in your interviews, but be careful not to ramble.

- It's difficult to prepare for a behavior-based interview because of the huge number and variety of possible behavioral questions you might be asked. The best way to prepare is to arm yourself with a small arsenal of example stories that can be adapted to many behavioral questions. Despite the many possible behavioral questions, you can get some idea of what to expect by looking at Web sites that feature behavioral questions.

Knowing what kinds of questions might be asked will help you prepare an effective selection of examples.

Use examples from internships, classes and school projects, activities, team participation, community service, hobbies and work experience -- anything really -- as examples of your past behavior. In addition, you may use examples of special accomplishments, whether personal or professional, such as scoring the winning touchdown, being elected president of your Greek organization, winning a prize for your artwork, surfing a big wave, or raising money for charity. Wherever possible, quantify your results. Numbers always impress employers.

Remember that many behavioral questions try to get at how you responded to negative situations; you'll need to have examples of negative experiences ready, but try to choose negative experiences that you made the best of or -- better yet, those that had positive outcomes.

Here's a good way to prepare for behavior-based interviews:

- Identify six to eight examples from your past experience where you demonstrated top behaviors and skills that employers typically seek. Think in terms of examples that will exploit your top selling points.
- Half your examples should be totally positive, such as accomplishments or meeting goals.
- The other half should be situations that started out negatively but either ended positively or you made the best of the outcome.
- Vary your examples; don't take them all from just one area of your life.
- Use fairly recent examples. If you're a college student, examples from high school may be too long ago. Accenture, in fact, specifies that candidates give examples of behaviors demonstrated within the last year.
- Try to describe examples in story form and/or PAR/SAR/STAR.

To cram for a behavioral interview right before you're interviewed, review your resume. Seeing your achievements in print will jog your memory.

In the interview, listen carefully to each question, and pull an example out of your bag of tricks that provides an appropriate description of how you demonstrated the desired behavior. With practice, you can learn to tailor a relatively small set of examples to respond to a number of different behavioral questions. In fact, it is not uncommon for a candidate to use the same situation to address a couple of critical behaviors, but be careful here, as stated earlier, it is important to have several examples of previous experiences in your back pocket. If a candidate makes reference to only one or two historical work scenarios that candidate may actually be inadvertently telling the interviewer that they really may not have the depth of experience the company or recruiter is looking for and without that interviewers will likely feel that they just don't have enough information to be able to predict how successful you will be and make a decision to put a polite end to the candidates interview process.

Once you've snagged the job, keep a record of achievements and accomplishments so you'll be ready with more great examples the next time you go on a behavior interview.

Print resources about behavioral Interviewing:

Byham, William C., Ph.D., with Debra Pickett, *Landing the Job You Want: How to Have the Best*

Job Interview of Your Life, 1999: Three Rivers Press.

Green, Paul C., Ph.D., *Get Hired: Winning Strategies to Ace the Interview*, 1996: Bard Press.

Janz, Tom, Lowell Hellervik, and David C. Gilmore, *Behavior Description Interviewing*, 1986: Allyn & Bacon.