



Is Your Job Future Dictated by the Past?

Behavioral Interviewing looks for more than skills

By **David G. Jensen**
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THE INTERVIEWING PROCESS CAN sometimes be analyzed as if it were a living, breathing thing. One aspect of this “organic” nature to the interviewing process is that it is under constant flux. Companies want to keep interviews fresh and worthwhile, but most of all they want to eliminate the cost of bad hires. It costs a small fortune to make a hiring mistake . . . Therefore, the interviewing process itself is always under scrutiny.

Many of the changes in a company’s interviewing style begin in the Human Resources department and then get filtered into the company and the new methods become standard. One of these modern methods of interviewing involves a lot more detail about your personal behavior and actions on the job. Are you familiar with the term “Behavioral Interviewing”?

If this is a new phrase to you, I’d suggest that you read this column thoroughly and then do some follow-up research of your own. Behavioral interviewing is coming your way—someday soon you will sit across from an interviewer who wants to know more about your actions with certain people and events than he does about your thesis topic or last project. Once again, despite what you are told at school, good science will not win the day. Your responses to tough interviewing situations will!

How Scientists Typically Deal With Behavioral Questions

“I was totally baffled by the interviewer’s seemingly strong interest in my relationship with the difficult people in my life,” one scientist told me recently. “I had been prepared to answer any question that she wanted to ask about my research work and the technical challenges that I had overcome in getting to this point in my life.” This fellow was just getting out of his first two-year stint in pharmaceuticals, and had been targeting the biotech industry. I asked him whether or not he had expected questions about him or whether he had been expecting only technical questions:

“Of course, I was not so naive as to expect an interview that was totally focused on my science. I’d done a lot of personal introspection into the ways that I can assist this firm. I was

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ready to do a little selling on my own behalf. But these questions really threw me off track. Basically, I was stunned.” He went on to detail many of the questions that he had been asked. (Some of these are listed below).

Of course this is a shock for many people. Let’s face it—your entire education has focused you on developing, maintaining and improving upon a set of technical qualifications. Even in the first year or two of work, your employer seems most happy when you are using those technical skills and “sharpening the saw.” It is frustrating indeed to find that these matters are not as important in getting a job as you had thought they would be. (I’m not diminishing the value of staying up-to-date in your field of expertise, as no company wants to hire someone who isn’t in the top 10%!) However, while specific questions related to your technical training will be asked, many companies are now inserting at least some of the questions developed by psychologists who study interpersonal dynamics in the work environment. Most likely, questions like these will come at you during your time with the Human Resources department.

Here’s what one HR manager told me about this trend: “The emphasis on asking behavioral questions in the interview makes a lot of sense for our industry. There is so much technical talent available, and we use so many sources to find those applicants, that we need to find those who really have the ability to be promotable. It will then be up to our interviewers to determine which of these candidates fits best within our company culture. This is a critical element of the decision to hire,” she said. And then this woman used the rallying cry of the behavioral interviewer: “Past performance equals future behavior.” This line is straight out of the business bibles that teach interviewing skills for the manager.

“It is my belief,” she said, “that the best way to determine future actions is to ask about past performance—in very specific terms.”

A Variety of Behavioral Questions

How specific is this? Take a look at the common list of behavioral questions that follow:

- Talk about the most difficult person you’ve ever worked with? What made that person so difficult? How did you deal with it? Describe a specific situation you encountered with that (former boss, former workmate, etc.) and how you handled it?
- Give an instance where you used your problem-solving skills to resolve a problem with your co-workers.
- Describe an error that you had made that adversely affected the team and how you handled that situation.
- Give two examples of personal conflicts on the job and how

you handled them? Is there a certain type of person whom you consistently don't get along well with?

- Describe two people whom you like and respect. What do you like about them? Describe two people whom you have trouble dealing with. Why is this?
- What makes you feel content at the end of a typical day? Describe a time when you were in your comfort zone and then got rudely shocked out of it by circumstances or by people on the job. How did you handle this?
- What excites you the most about your work? Give an example of a time when you were at your highest level of excitement about your work—your greatest moment.
- Are you an independent decision-maker? Give an example of a time when you made a decision that had to be defended and how did you proceed?
- Are you a 'Team Player'? Describe a project team in which you played a key role.

How To Be Prepared for Behavioral Questions

It is clear by the list of questions above that the company wants to know as much about the "real you" as possible.

I read a book recently by a popular job-search author, Mr. Jeff Allen, called *Win the Job*. Frankly, I was shocked at the blatant recommendations for the use of canned responses to interview questions. Mr. Allen gives the reader "word-for-word" answers to rattle back off to the company. This is akin to putting your name on someone else's work!

Reading books about these tough interview questions and then spouting off prepared answers (someone *else's* prepared answers) is not the way to succeed. While in some cases "textbook interviewers" will get the job, it is usually not to their advantage to have talked their way past the guardian of the company culture. Somewhere down the road (and earlier rather than later), it will be obvious that a mismatch has occurred.

The best way to answer these questions is to be aware that they are coming, and then to do some self-analysis in

The STAR Interview

ANYONE WHO IS IN THE JOB market today is subjected to a variety of questions that don't compare to the toughie interviewings of the past. While old-school managers may still ask the old standby, "Where would you like to be in five years?" it is most often a different type of question that will come up. These new questions take the concept of "open-ended" vs. "closed-ended" interviews to the furthest extreme.

Even the greenest supervisor will know better than to ask a series of closed-ended questions, by which I mean the kind that can be answered with a simple "yes" or "no," or something that is equally abrupt. (For example, "Do you enjoy your job as a QA Supervisor?" or "How many years have you been practicing QA?"). Instead, interviewers will focus on asking you about your experiences in a manner that can only be described as "nit-picking." When you describe a problem or accomplishment, this behavioral interviewer asks more and more detail of you. "What did you do next?" or "How did you feel about your exchange with that person?" Just like peeling away the layers of an onion, the goal is to go further and further into the questioning until the "real you" begins to show.

While you really can't adequately prepare for this kind of interview, you can remember a formula that I have always found to be a help. Remember the acronym S-T-A-R, which stands for Situation-Task-Action-Result. Be prepared to describe the SITUATION you were in (or the problem you faced), the TASK that you were asked to accomplish, what ACTION you took, and then what the RESULT was. If you get all four pieces in, there is a strong likelihood that the interviewer will not go further.

advance that will assist you in showing pieces of the real you. What kind of self-analysis? As you can tell by the examples above, these are questions that deal with your responses to people. Think long and hard about the folks you have worked with and the interactions you've had, both good and bad. Be prepared in your meetings to discuss what you like and what you dislike about various types of people—all the while remembering that companies are looking for a person with flexibility in this department.

The behavioral interview can go in many different directions. It is unlike the interview in which common questions are asked (i.e., "Where do you want to be in five years?" or "What is your greatest weakness?"). Therefore, it frustrates many in our industry because they are unable to adequately prepare.

Remember: this interviewing style differs from the norm much like the difference between two tests—one on an academic subject you have studied many times over and know the answers to, and the other a generalized test like an IQ test. In the new "behavioral interview," the process of cramming doesn't make any sense. ■

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