

Preparing for a Behavioral Interview

Behavioral interviews are increasingly used by employers and recruiters to reveal how you act under certain situations. Here are tips to help you prepare for this challenging interview technique.

Behavioral interviews are increasingly used by employers to reveal how you act under certain situations. The goal of a behavioral interview is to determine how you will perform in a position. These techniques are designed to improve hiring decisions by minimizing an interviewer's subjective impressions about you.

Identifying a Behavioral Interview

A behavioral interview is very different from a traditional interview. You can tell you're being interviewed using behavioral techniques by the kinds of questions that are being asked.

Instead of describing a situation and asking how you would handle it, the interviewer will ask about a project you've worked on. Then the interviewer will probe to find the kinds of problems that always arise in business projects. The difference is subtle, but telling.

"Tell me about a time when" ... or ... "Describe how you handled this situation ..."

You'll be asked to describe the problem in some detail and how you handled it. You'll be asked about interpersonal difficulties with members of your team or members of other departments. And you'll be asked how you smoothed over any difficulties. The interviewer will want specific details of these situations and how you behaved, not theories or broad generalizations.

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Often, behavioral interviews are more formal and structured than in a traditional interview. The interviewer will maintain control of the process, and ask most or all of the questions. You may have little chance to discuss topics that are important to you.

You are likely to be asked a series of probing questions. A well-trained interviewer will probe to make sure that your answers are consistent from one question to the next. The interviewer is actually testing to see if you exhibit behaviors that the employer believes are required for your success in the position.

Answering Behavioral Interview Questions

As soon as you realize the interviewer is using behavioral techniques, you need to adjust your strategy.

When asked about a specific project, make sure the actions and behaviors you describe highlight your strengths. Depending on the position, the interviewer might be trying to reveal your leadership or teamwork skills.

Don't expect to be asked about your strengths and weaknesses. You'll need to highlight your strengths by the choices you make when asked about specific projects and situations.

Your goal in a behavioral interview is identical to a traditional interview. You want to put your best foot forward. To do that, you need to prepare examples describing how you've acted under several different scenarios. Make sure those behaviors cast you in the best light.

To plan ahead, think of projects that have turned out well, and prepare short descriptions of each. Be prepared to talk about the challenges you faced and how you handled them. You'll want these descriptions to take the form of a story, with a beginning, a middle, and an end. Describe the outcome and result. It is more important to highlight favorable behavior rather than describing the results of a successful project.

Be brief and be specific. The interviewer will probe if necessary.

It's best to be as factual as possible, because a good interviewer will uncover inconsistent or misleading answers.