

First Encounters With Behavioral Interviewing

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The interviewing process can sometimes be analyzed as if it were a living, breathing thing. One aspect of its "live" nature is that it is in 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.) This means the interviewing process itself is always under scrutiny.

Many of the changes in a company's interviewing style begin in the Human Resources (HR) department and then filter into the company until the new methods become standard practice. One of these new methods asks you to share a lot of details about your personal behavior and actions on the job. Have you heard the term "behavioral interviewing" before?

If this is new 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 interactions with certain people and events than he does about your thesis or research experience. Once again, despite what you are told in academia, good science will not win the day. Instead, your responses to tough interviewing situations will!

Why Behavioral Questions Are Uncomfortable for Scientists

"I was totally baffled by the interviewer's seemingly strong interest in my relationship with the difficult people in my life," one young 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 postdoc and had been targeting industry. I asked him whether he had expected questions about *him* or whether he had been expecting only technical questions:

"Of course, I was not so naïve as to expect an interview that was totally focused on my science. I'd done a lot of personal introspective into the ways that I can assist this firm. I was 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. (A few of these are in the box 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. It is frustrating indeed to find that these matters are not as important in getting a job as you had thought they would be. Although specific questions related to your technical training will be asked, many companies are also asking questions developed by psychologists who study interpersonal dynamics in the work environment. You will most likely encounter these questions during your time with the HR 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 the biotech world. There is so much technical talent available, and with the exception of a small piece of our future hiring, we'll have no trouble finding the half-dozen or so final candidates for a job. 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."

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

A Variety of Behavioral Questions

- Tell me about the most difficult person you've ever worked with. What made that person so difficult? How did you deal with it? Tell me about a specific situation you encountered with that (former boss, former workmate, etc.) and how you handled it.
- Give me an instance where you used your problem-solving skills to resolve a problem with your co-workers.
- Describe an error you made that adversely affected the team and how you handled that situation.
- Give me two examples of personal conflicts on the job and how you handled them. Is there a certain type of person with whom you consistently don't get along well?
- Describe two people whom you like and respect. What do you like about them? Describe two people with whom you have trouble dealing. Why is this?
- What makes you feel content at the end of a typical day? Tell me about 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 me 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 me an example of a time when you made a decision that had to be defended and how you proceeded.
- Are you a "team player"? Describe a project team in which you played a key role.

How to Be Prepared for and Deal With 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, Jeff Allen, who wrote *Jeff Allen's Best: Win the Job*. Frankly, I was shocked at the blatant recommendations to use canned responses to interview questions. Jeff gives you "word for word" answers to rattle back to the interviewer. 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. Although in some cases a "textbook interviewee" will get the job, it is usually not to their advantage to have talked their way past the guardian of the company culture. Somewhere shortly down the road it will be obvious that a mismatch has occurred.

The best way to answer these questions is to know that they will be asked, and do some self-analysis in advance that will help you show pieces of the real you. What kind of self-analysis? As you can tell by the examples above, these behavioral questions 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 5 years?" or "What is your greatest weakness?"). Therefore, it frustrates scientists because they are unable to prepare adequately. In closing, remember that this new interviewing style differs from the "normal" interview much like the difference between two types of tests—a test on an academic subject you have studied and a generalized intelligence test like an IQ test. Cramming for a behavioral interview doesn't make any sense.