

Behavioural Questions

Behavioural interviews (also known as competency based interviews) are becoming increasingly popular in the contemporary recruitment process. They are regularly used by Multinationals and the public sector and are seen to be a good predictor of future employee success. As many “traditional” interviews have also started incorporating behavioural questions into their structure, it is important to be fully prepared for this style of questioning - to both understand what is being asked and how best to present your answers.

What is a behavioural/competency based interview?

Behavioural interviews are used to assess “competencies” or behavioural skills which are central to the job you have applied to. The thinking behind this technique is that the best indicator of how you will perform in the future is how you have already performed in the past. The emphasis is focused on identifying and analysing previous examples of effective performance on the job.

What competencies will the employer assess?

An employer who is using this method of interviewing will typically follow a very structured recruitment methodology by preparing a detailed job specification outlining all the competencies and skills which are central to the role.

The job advertisement will usually contain phrases such as “you must be able to analyse, interpret and resolve complex problems to successful conclusion.” Another example could be “you should have the ability to work within a team, demonstrate initiative and customer focus and work to timescales with a flexible approach.”

These are the competencies that will be focused on during the course of the interview.

How will I recognise a competency based questions?

Behavioural questions typically ask you to describe a situation where you have demonstrated a particular competency. This will followed up with further questions seeking more detail and clarification. They often start with “describe a time when” or “give me an example of where”.

An example of a competency based question to assess your influencing skills might be:

- Describe a time where you influenced a group of people to accept your point of view despite initial resistance.
- What approach did you take?
- What obstacles did you face?
- How did you overcome these obstacles?
- What was the outcome?
- What did you learn from this experience and how would you handle it differently next the time?

How to answer a competency based question:

When answering such questions you need to keep your responses concise and well structured. The following framework (**SAR**) is very useful in answering competency questions: – breaking the answer down into three distinct sections – situation, action and result.

In outlining the **situation**, give a concise background ensuring that you avoid unnecessary detail. When describing the **action** you took; focus on skills you used and the problems you solved. When highlighting the **result**, it is more powerful if you can quantify your outcome eg. “We got the project completed one week before deadline” or “as a result of the actions we took, sales increased by 20%.”

Bear in mind that the interviewer wants to know what *you personally* did in the situation you are describing, not what the team did or what you think you could have done. When drawing on examples, make sure you focus on the recent past – ideally giving examples from the past four to five years. Have a few examples up your sleeve as it shows a greater breadth of experience. If you constantly go back to the same example, you will give the impression that your experience is limited.

Conclusion

If you have done your preparation well, you should do extremely well at this kind of interview. Be ready with specific and relevant examples to demonstrate your skills in the competencies highlighted for the role. Anticipate the likely questions to be asked, and when you get to the interview, select the most relevant example you can to answer each question. Be clear and to the point in your replies - remember you will only have a specific amount of time allocated to you, so make sure every moment counts.

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