

Behavioural Questions

Interviewing, like any other facet of life is subject to trends and fashion. With this in mind, I carried out a survey earlier this year with over one thousand Human Resource Managers to find out how interviews were conducted in 21st century Ireland. The most striking finding was the popularity of behavioural questions - with almost 80% of respondents reporting that they used these questions as part of their interview process. My curiosity was immediately piqued.....were job seekers aware of this new trend? I immediately conducted a survey of over one thousand job seekers and discovered that three quarters of all respondents were unfamiliar with this style of questioning and did not understand what the interviewer was looking for.

What is a behavioural interview?

Behavioural interviews are where you are asked to describe past work related behaviour, on the assumption that it will be a good indicator of future job performance. This type of interview is designed to identify the competencies and skills that are of value to the organisation; the interview is based on finding examples of behaviours which are relevant to the job being filled.

Behavioural interviews (also known as competency based interviews) are seen as being a very fair and objective way of interviewing. All candidates are rated in an identical way and are assessed against the same competencies using the same questions.

How will I know which competencies will be assessed?

Typically an employer will outline the competencies or skills which are central to the job in the recruitment advertisement or job specification. This will usually contain phrases such as “the successful candidate will demonstrate good interpersonal skills/ calmness under pressure/ the ability to multi-task/determination/ excellent influencing skills...” .

How will I recognise a behavioural question?

In behavioural questions you will be asked 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 communication skills might be:

- Tell me about a time where you had to influence somebody to your way of thinking.
- 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?

(For a further list of sample competency based questions look at our website www.interviewtechniques.ie)

How should I answer a behavioural 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. “by planning the project well from the outset and delegating effectively, I completed the project to deadline and we came in below the projected cost.”

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

Behavioural interviews are in many ways more predictable than traditional interview and if you have done your preparation you should do extremely well. Practice your answers out loud and make sure that your responses are clear and concise.

By positioning yourself in the 25% of job seekers who understand behavioural questions, you are automatically putting yourself in a much stronger position to secure that job offer!

About the Author

Laura McGrath is the owner of [Interview Techniques](http://www.interviewtechniques.ie), a leading provider of interview coaching services. She has spent the last 15 years in staffing and recruitment and is a regular contributor with *Recruit Ireland* and the *Sunday Business Post*.

Go to: www.interviewtechniques.ie
Email: info@interviewtechniques.ie
Call: 01 231 3003