Behavioral Interview Techniques – The STAR Approach

Situation or **Task**	Describe the situation that you were in or the task that you needed to accomplish. You must describe a specific event or situation, not a generalized description of what you have done in the past. Be sure to give enough detail for the interviewer to understand. This situation can be from a previous job, from a volunteer experience, or any relevant event.
Action you took	Describe the action you took and be sure to keep the focus on you. Even if you are discussing a group project or effort, describe what you did -- not the efforts of the team. Don't tell what you might do, tell what you did.
Results you achieved	What happened? How did the event end? What did you accomplish? What did you learn?

Use examples from internships, classes and school projects, activities, team participation, community service, hobbies and work experience -- anything really -- as examples of your past behavior. In addition, you may use examples of special accomplishments, whether personal or professional, such as scoring the winning touchdown, being elected president of your Greek organization, winning a prize for your artwork, surfing a big wave, or raising money for charity. Wherever possible, quantify your results. Numbers always impress employers.

Remember that many behavioral questions try to get at how you responded to *negative* situations; you'll need to have examples of negative experiences ready, but try to choose negative experiences that you made the best of or -- better yet, those that had positive outcomes.

Here's a good way to prepare for behavior-based interviews:

- Identify six to eight examples from your past experience where you demonstrated top behaviors and skills that employers typically seek. Think in terms of examples that will exploit your top selling points.
- Half your examples should be totally positive, such as accomplishments or meeting goals.
- The other half should be situations that started out negatively but either ended positively or you made the best of the outcome.
- Vary your examples; don't take them all from just one area of your life.
- Use fairly recent examples. If you're a college student, examples from high school may be too long ago. Accenture, in fact, specifies that candidates give examples of behaviors demonstrated within the last year.
- Try to describe examples in story form and/or PAR/SAR/STAR.

To cram for a behavioral interview right before you're interviewed, review your resume. Seeing your achievements in print will jog your memory.
In the interview, listen carefully to each question, and pull an example out of your bag of tricks that provides an appropriate description of how you demonstrated the desired behavior. With practice, you can learn to tailor a relatively small set of examples to respond to a number of different behavioral questions.

How to Behave in a Behavior-Based Interview

Lombardi, who earned a master's degree in industrial organizational psychology from West Chester University, wrote his thesis on behavior-based interviewing. Now he's a college relations specialist at Kulicke & Soffa Industries Inc., based in Willow Grove, Pennsylvania, and he says his background has helped him understand an interviewing technique that has become increasingly popular and, according to both his research and popular opinion, more effective than traditional techniques.

"It seemed like the more structure and the more thought that was put into an interview, the better it was," he says.

Lombardi says behavior-based questions are generally designed to determine if a candidate possesses certain "key competencies."

"When I start any behavioral interview, I explain the process," Lombardi says. "I say, 'I'm going to be asking you for specific examples. I will be asking you for details, including names of people, dates, and outcomes.' I really like talking to people about lengthy projects they've had to do--how their role evolved, how they handled time deadlines, pressures, and unexpected situations, and especially how they handled any adversity...Everyone's got that kind of experience."

Lombardi says that the best way for students and new graduates to prepare for a behavior-based interview is to dig up old research papers, to think hard about any difficulties encountered in summer and part-time jobs, and to recount the steps it took to successfully complete school projects and projects that were part of internships or co-ops.

"What I would recommend is for them to just kind of think through situations that have occurred, projects they've worked on, specific experiences they've had," he says. "They should be able to talk about that in detail and be very specific. They should reread that term paper...A lot of it is just common sense."

Following is a list of typical behavior-based questions, courtesy of Lombardi and *The Ultimate Job Search Kit* by Damir Joseph Stimac. Competencies sought by the interviewer are listed in parentheses:

1. Describe a situation in which you had to use reference materials to write a research paper. What was the topic? What journals did you read? (research/written communication)
2. Give me a specific example of a time when a co-worker or classmate criticized your work in front of others. How did you respond? How has that event shaped the way you communicate with others? (oral communication.
3. Give me a specific example of a time when you sold your supervisor or professor on an idea or concept. How did you proceed? What was the result? (assertiveness)
4. Describe the system you use for keeping track of multiple projects. How do you track your progress so that you can meet deadlines? How do you stay focused? (commitment to task)
5. Tell me about a time when you came up with an innovative solution to a challenge your company or class was facing. What was the challenge? What role did others play? (creativity and imagination)
6. Describe a specific problem you solved for your employer or professor. How did you approach the problem? What role did others play? What was the outcome? (decision making)
7. Describe a time when you got co-workers or classmates who dislike each other to work together. How did you accomplish this? What was the outcome? (teamwork)
8. Tell me about a time when you failed to meet a deadline. What things did you fail to do? What were the repercussions? What did you learn? (time management)
9. Describe a time when you put your needs aside to help a co-worker or classmate understand a task. How did you assist them? What was the result? (flexibility)
10. Describe two specific goals you set for yourself and how successful you were in meeting them. What factors led to your success in meeting your goals? (goal setting)

How do I prepare for a behavioral interview?

Companies that employ behavioral interviewing have predetermined the skill sets they require for a particular position. These skill sets could include: decision making and problem solving, leadership, motivation, communication, interpersonal skills, planning and organization, critical thinking skills, team building and the ability to influence others. The company determines the skill sets by doing a detailed analysis of the position they are seeking to fill. Job seekers also must go through this same process. To conduct a job analysis the job seeker should ask questions such as:

1. What are the necessary skills to do this job?

2. What makes a successful candidate?

3. What would make an unsuccessful candidate?

4. Why have people left this position previously?

5. What is the most difficult part of this job?

Once you have landed the interview, keep in mind the following points.
Be detailed and specific. You should have developed three stories that illustrate your past performance. Remember that the interviewer will be operating under the premise that "past performance in a similar setting is the best predictor of future performance."

The best way to accomplish this is to use the three-step STAR process or
1. Situation or Task
2. Action
3. Result or outcome

For example, you might recount a time when communication within your work group had broken down (situation). To resolve the problem, you organized informal lunch meetings for people to discuss relevant issues (action). Morale then improved, as did the lines of communication (result). Using this three step STAR process is a powerful way for you to frame your experiences and accomplishments for the interviewer.

· Limit rambling and tangents. While you can't control what is asked, you can control what you say.
· Listen carefully to each question. If you are unsure, rephrase the question and ask for clarification. When you respond, be sure to recall your past accomplishments in detail.
· Practice your behavioral stories using real-life examples. It is very difficult to make up behavioral stories, which is why behavioral interviewing is becoming more popular. By practicing, you will be able to recall with confidence your past accomplishments.

Communication

- Give me a specific example of a time when a co-worker critized your work in front of others. How did you respond? How has that event shaped the way you communicate with others?
- How do you ensure that someone understands what you are saying?
- Tell me about a time when you had to present complex information.

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- Tell me about a time in which you had to use your written communication skills in order to get across an important point.

Decision Making

- Give me an example of a time you had to make a difficult decision.
- Describe a specific problem you solved for your employer. How did you approach the problem? What role did others play? What was the outcome?
- Give me an example of when taking your time to make a decision paid off.

Initiative

- What did you do to prepare for this interview?
- Give me an example of a situation that could not have happened successfully without you being there.

Planning and Organization

- Describe a situation when you had many projects due at the same time. What steps did you take to get them all done?
- How do you determine priorities in scheduling your time? Give me an example.

Flexibility

- Describe a time where you were faced with problems or stresses that tested your coping skills.
- Describe a time when you put your needs aside to help a co-worker understand a task. How did you assist them? What was the result?

Leadership

- Tell me about a time when you influenced the outcome of a project by taking a leadership role.
- Give me an example of when you involved others in making a decision.

Time Management

- Tell me about a time when you failed to meet a deadline. What things did you fail to do? What were the repercussions? What did you learn?
- Tell me about a time when you were particularly effective on prioritizing tasks and completing a project on schedule.

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