

Navigating a Behavioral-Based Interview

(By Melinda Pittman)

How do you prepare for an interview? Most likely, you ready yourself to answer the most basic of questions pertaining to your qualifications and abilities, perhaps even a few more advanced questions that delve into other specific skills.

But what if you're asked questions you're not prepared for, questions you've never been asked during an interview, questions that are very detailed and that reference specific instances from your work or life history? Are you now being evaluated by a different set of criteria and will that evaluation play a large role in whether or not you get the job? Chances are that's exactly what is happening.

Like everything else in today's job market, the screening, interviewing, and hiring process has evolved and become more refined and targeted. In essence, it's become more effective, and you should be aware of the techniques being employed in order to weed out the pretenders from the contenders. One such technique is the **behavioral-based interview**.

Not your father's interview

You know what you've accomplished as an employee (or as a student). You might even suspect what you're capable of accomplishing in the future. But do you know **why** you have these capacities? Perhaps this isn't even a question you've asked yourself before. If not, ask it now, because your next opportunity could hinge upon your answer.

Okay, first for the bad news. Behavioral-based interviews are more difficult to prepare for than traditional interviews, mainly because the number and type of questions you might be asked is nearly endless. It all depends on the company conducting the interview. The good news, however, is that if you know how to navigate this type of interview, you can use this knowledge to your advantage.

This is how it works: the company is attempting to evaluate your past behaviors and experiences in order to predict how successful you'll be if you work for them. In essence, you're being evaluated based upon certain job-related **characteristics** as opposed to cut-and-dried talent or skills. These characteristics include, but aren't limited to, self-confidence, willingness to learn, and the capacity to show initiative and be a self-starter.

The questions you're asked during a behavioral-based interview will be linked to those characteristics. In fact, many of them might not be questions at all, but directives such as "Describe for me a situation" The interviewer wants to know about a challenge or task you tackled, the specific action you took to address the situation, and the ultimate outcome. If you're prepared, you can use the nature of this type of interview to your benefit and seize upon the opportunity to "sell yourself" in a big way.

What the interviewer is looking for is a story, a small story, to be sure, but a story just the same. The key is to be concise while being specific at the same time. The interviewer is seeking examples of past behaviors that they can apply to their open position, and those behaviors are based in the characteristics described above, among which are self-confidence, adaptability, flexibility, ability to think on your feet, willingness to learn, etc. What it boils down to is this: they want to find out *who you are* just as much as they want to know *what you can do*.

Your to-do list

So—what specific steps can you take to prepare for a behavioral-based interview? Start with the following:

- Speak with anyone you know who has interviewed with the company recently. They might be able to tell you if they were given a behavioral-based interview.
- Research the company. While you should do this before an interview regardless of the type of questions you're asked, you're seeking different information for a behavioral-based interview. Specifically, you're looking for clues regarding the characteristics the company seeks in its employees.
- Speak with somebody who currently works for the company, if you have access to such an individual. They'll be able to shed even more light on the type of behaviors the company values.
- Prepare six to eight stories that highlight past accomplishments and behaviors. Make them flexible enough to be applied to a variety of questions, but specific enough to showcase the characteristics and behaviors that make you a valuable hire. These stories can include a variety of situations, from internships to school projects to community service.
- Practice your storytelling skills. If you don't believe you're a particularly good storyteller, hone your skills with the help of a friend or colleague. Remember, you're selling yourself. You want the story, not to mention the interview, to have a happy ending.

Knowing how to navigate a behavioral-based interview gives you a distinct advantage over candidates who don't know how to do so or don't even know what such an interview is. It also helps you to take another step toward building the type of career you've always wanted.

Next month, we'll discuss some of the specific behavioral-based questions typically asked during these interviews, and how to look into your background and experience to pull your "story" together.

If you have any questions about this topic, or any job search-related topic, please send me an email at Melinda@ThePittmanGroup.com.