

Preparing for an Interview

When the time comes for a job interview, most candidates are bound to get butterflies. It's only natural, no matter how prepared you are. However, one way to feel more in control during the interview process is by slightly turning the tables. This starts with serious preparation, and continues with conducting an interview of your own. While being nervous is part of the process for most interviewees, below are a few ways to reduce some of that anxiety, and to ensure that you've found a job worth having.

Do Your Homework

Your interviewer obviously has your résumé, and has probably spoken to your supervisor. Entering an interview armed with departmental or position information immediately proves to your interviewer that you've taken time to prepare, so consider researching the departments:

- Key leaders
- Culture
- Typical work day

Meditate on Your Past Successes

Whether or not an interviewer asks a direct question about successful projects you've worked on, it's important to compile a list of your greatest accomplishments. The idea isn't to list out your successes; that would come across as arrogant. However, having examples top of mind allows you to insert them into answers, which can go a long way toward showing your experience. Specific examples will illustrate your real-world expertise more effectively. To prepare accordingly, make a list of:

- Strengths found on past performance reviews
- Awards or special recognitions received
- Successful projects or initiatives you were involved in
- Any leadership positions you've held

Ask Questions of Your Own

It's important to remember that an interview goes both ways. While a supervisor/manager might be vetting you, it's important to view the interview process as a way to vet them, too. Asking the right questions can help you determine if a job will be the right fit for you. A few potential questions you can ask include:

Can you describe the department's culture?

What are the specific requirements for this role?

If hired, what would my short-term goals be? Long-term goals?

What type of candidate do you think would be the perfect fit for this position?

Ultimately, Evaluation Is a Two-Way Street

Often job seekers are looking for a new job to increase pay or to escape a job they don't enjoy. Unfortunately, these two reasons can lead to desperation, which is always a bad motivation when you start the interview process. By being prepared for an interview you'll have more confidence and have a strong chance of impressing your interview panel. While the interview process is designed for a potential supervisor/manager to evaluate you, never forget that you should be evaluating them, too. The more you learn, the less likely you are to take a position you might regret.

Interview Preparation Sample Questions

1. What do you do when your time schedule or plan for the day is upset by unforeseen circumstances? Give example.
2. Give me a specific example of a time when you were not able to complete a task asked of you. How, if at all, did your behavior and organizational skills change after to ensure this situation never occurred again?
3. Tell us about a problem that you solved in a unique or unusual way. What was the outcome?
4. Describe a time you had to change your approach to a customer because your initial attempts were unsuccessful.
5. Tell me about a supervisor that you did not like. What was it about his/her style that you didn't like?

THE STAR METHOD

The STAR method is a structured manner of responding to a behavioral-based interview question by discussing the specific **s**ituation, **t**ask, **a**ction, and **r**esult of the situation you are describing.

Situation: 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.

Task: What goal were you working toward?

Action: Describe the actions you took to address the situation with an appropriate amount of detail and keep the focus on YOU. What specific steps did you take and what was your particular contribution? Be careful that you don't describe what the team or group did when talking about a project, but what you actually did. Use the word "I," not "we" when describing actions.

Result: Describe the outcome of your actions and don't be shy about taking credit for your behavior. What happened? How did the event end? What did you accomplish? What did you learn? Make sure your answer contains multiple positive results.

Make sure that you follow all parts of the STAR method. Be as specific as possible at all times, without rambling or including too much information. Oftentimes students have to be prompted to include their results, so try to include that without being asked. Also, eliminate any examples that do not paint you in a positive light. However, keep in mind that some examples that have a negative result (such as "lost the game") can highlight your strengths in the face of adversity.

SAMPLE STAR RESPONSE:

Situation (S): Advertising revenue was falling off for my college newspaper, *The Review*, and large numbers of long-term advertisers were not renewing contracts.

Task (T): My goal was to generate new ideas, materials and incentives that would result in at least a 15% increase in advertisers from the year before.

Action (A): I designed a new promotional packet to go with the rate sheet and compared the benefits of *The Review* circulation with other ad media in the area. I also set-up a special training session for the account executives with a School of Business Administration professor who discussed competitive selling strategies.

Result (R): We signed contracts with 15 former advertisers for daily ads and five for special supplements. We increased our new advertisers by 20 percent over the same period last year.

HOW TO PREPARE FOR A BEHAVIORAL INTERVIEW

- Recall recent situations that show favorable behaviors or actions, especially involving course work, work experience, leadership, teamwork, initiative, planning, and customer service.
- Prepare short descriptions of each situation; be ready to give details if asked.
- Be sure each story has a beginning, middle, and an end, i.e., be ready to describe the situation, including the task at hand, your action, and the outcome or result.
- Be sure the outcome or result reflects positively on you (even if the result itself was not favorable).
- Be honest. Don't embellish or omit any part of the story. The interviewer will find out if your story is built on a weak foundation.
- Be specific. Don't generalize about several events; give a detailed accounting of one event.
- Vary your examples; don't take them all from just one area of your life.

SAMPLE BEHAVIORAL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Practice using the STAR Method on these common behavioral interviewing questions:

- Describe a situation in which you were able to use persuasion to successfully convince someone to see things your way.
- Describe a time when you were faced with a stressful situation that demonstrated your coping skills.
- Give me a specific example of a time when you used good judgment and logic in solving a problem.
- Give me an example of a time when you set a goal and were able to meet or achieve it.
- Tell me about a time when you had to use your presentation skills to influence someone's opinion.
- Give me a specific example of a time when you had to conform to a policy with which you did not agree.
- Please discuss an important written document you were required to complete.
- Tell me about a time when you had to go above and beyond the call of duty in order to get a job done.
- Tell me about a time when you had too many things to do and you were required to prioritize your tasks.
- Give me an example of a time when you had to make a split second decision.
- What is your typical way of dealing with conflict? Give me an example.
- Tell me about a time you were able to successfully deal with another person even when that individual may not have personally liked you (or vice versa).
- Tell me about a difficult decision you've made in the last year.
- Give me an example of a time when something you tried to accomplish and failed.
- Give me an example of when you showed initiative and took the lead.
- Tell me about a recent situation in which you had to deal with a very upset customer or co-worker.
- Give me an example of a time when you motivated others.
- Tell me about a time when you delegated a project effectively.
- Give me an example of a time when you used your fact-finding skills to solve a problem.
- Tell me about a time when you missed an obvious solution to a problem.
- Describe a time when you anticipated potential problems and developed preventive measures.
- Tell me about a time when you were forced to make an unpopular decision.
- Please tell me about a time you had to fire a friend.
- Describe a time when you set your sights too high (or too low).

Answers to Behavioral Interview Questions

All answers to behavioral interview questions should be structured around 3 components. The situation or task in which you displayed the behavior in question, the actions you took and the results of these actions. The interviewer is asking you to provide a real-life example of how you have previously used or demonstrated the required job behavior or competency.

The situation or task is the background or context in which you took action. Common situations in which candidates are required to take action include a change in job responsibilities, demands made by managers, colleagues and customers and challenges in meeting job requirements.

The actions are what the candidates did or said in response to the situation and how they did it. Actions commonly include steps taken to complete a task or project, solving a problem or overcoming a challenge, making a decision and interacting with managers and customers.

The results are the effects or outcomes of the candidate actions. The changes, consequences and differences the actions made and if the actions were effective and appropriate.

See what the interviewer is looking for in answers to behavioral questions that explore the competency or behavior. Use the answer guidelines to determine appropriate past situations where you have used or demonstrated the behavior. Prepare and structure your behavioral example to provide the information the interviewer wants.

Planning and Organizing

The examples you present in answers to behavioral questions that determine your ability to plan and organize should include the following actions - establishing clear and realistic objectives, scheduling activities and time parameters to get the job done, setting priorities, knowing which resources are needed and making the best use of these, monitoring your progress and adjusting your activity where necessary.

Decision Making

Your answers to behavioral interview questions about using your judgment and making decisions should include the following steps in the decision making process - gathering the necessary information and facts, using this information to work out possible courses of action to take, considering alternative courses of action, considering the implications and consequences of different courses of action and carrying out the most appropriate course of action. Involving the necessary stake-holders in the decision-making process is another important aspect of decision making.

Problem Solving

Use past examples that demonstrate the following key elements to successful problem analysis and problem solving - finding and gathering all the relevant information from the right sources, organizing and sorting the information to identify the reasons for the problem, coming up with possible solutions to the problem.

Adaptability

Behavioral examples that you use in answers to behavioral interview questions that explore your adaptability should contain these elements - adjusting your behavior, communication style and your approach to match changing tasks, work demands or different people, adjusting priorities to meet new deadlines and information, adjusting activities and attitude to work effectively in a new environment, willing to try new approaches for changed situations, attempting to understand and embrace change positively.

Initiative

Your choice of behavioral examples to demonstrate the use of initiative should show you to be a person who is able to be proactive and seek out new opportunities, to capitalize on opportunities and come up with new ideas. The interviewer is looking for an individual who is able to solve problems without being asked, come up with new ways to apply existing information and knowledge, to anticipate problems and challenges rather than just reacting to them, to work independently and who is willing to look for ways to improve oneself and one's work environment.

Teamwork

Answers to behavioral interview questions that explore your ability to work as part of a team should focus on examples that show how you exchange information freely and openly and offer information and ideas to other team members. Highlight how you were able to listen to and acknowledge the input of others, use empathy in dealing with team members, ask for and encourage feedback and help, support team actions and decisions and put the team objectives ahead of your own goals.

Work Standards

Examples of past behavior that indicate high work standards should include these elements - setting high goals and standards for performance, imposing standards of excellence on oneself, not being satisfied with average performance, assuming responsibility and accountability for one's own successful performance and work outputs.

Communication

Answers to behavioral interview questions that center on your communication skills require a behavioral example that demonstrates the ability to listen with empathy and respect, avoid interrupting and hearing the person out, receiving the right message by asking appropriate questions and clarifying details, expressing oneself effectively and clearly, using the appropriate language and communication style to match the individual/s you are communicating with.

Creativity

Creativity is not just about making music or art or coming up with a great advertising campaign. It is about generating new ideas, approaching tasks and processes differently, coming up with non-traditional solutions to problems. It is a highly valued competency and employers are more and more aware of the need for creativity in their workforce in order to be competitive and successful.

What is the interviewer not looking for in answers to behavioral interview questions?

The interviewer wants an actual example from your past. What he or she does not want in answers to behavioral interview questions are the following:

Vague responses - these include generalizations that do not provide a specific situation.

Avoid using phrases such as "*Most of the time...*", "*Usually...*", "*Sometimes...*"

Opinions - The interviewer is not asking for your opinion. He or she wants a real-life, factual example of what you did in a certain situation.

Avoid phrases such as "*I believe...*", "*I think...*", "*In my opinion...*"

Theoretical responses - these answers indicate what you would do rather than what you did do.

Avoid phrases such as "*If I had*", "*I would have...*", "*I might..*"

Criticism of former colleagues, managers and companies - it is important to provide a straight forward account of what you did in your behavioral example. Bad mouthing other people in your answer will only detract from its validity.

Be prepared with convincing answers to behavioral interview questions.