

Building Interview Skills: What to Tell Students about the Behavioral Interview

by Patricia White

Career services staff are always on the lookout for ways to help students improve their interview skills. Your students will have a distinct advantage when interviewing if you familiarize them with the purpose of — and how to prepare for — the “behavioral interview.” This interviewing technique has been used effectively in the business world by such diverse companies as Wachovia, Accenture, Tweeter Home Entertainment, and Teradyne for some time, and a number of law firm interviewers are now recognizing the benefits of behavioral interviewing.

What is a behavioral interview and why do employers use this method?

Behavioral interviewing is based upon the premise that the best predictor of future behavior and performance is past behavior and performance in a similar situation. Given the extremely high cost of recruiting, hiring, training, and mentoring new associates, law firms want to do all they can to ensure that their new hires will be stable, productive, successful lawyers. The behavioral interview technique utilizes a questioning style quite different from the standard, “Tell me about yourself,” or “What are your three greatest strengths?”

Behavioral interview questions often begin with phrases such as, “Tell me about a time...” or “describe a situation when...” These types of questions can be quite daunting for the student who is unfamiliar with the style and who doesn’t understand the interviewer’s purpose in asking such questions. Ida Abbott, in her book *Lawyers’ Professional Development*, writes that “law firms are taking a more strategic approach to hiring by establishing hiring criteria” beyond the achievements reflected in résumés. Abbott says that

these “criteria target the characteristics of lawyers needed to build and sustain the firm, and they make the recruiting process more precise and effective.” To maximize the value of behavioral interviews, those who use them have identified the characteristics and behaviors of their most successful associates and have designed questions to elicit whether the candidates being interviewed have exhibited those traits and actions in their previous work experience.

An example of a characteristic firm’s value is “motivation.” As Carolyn Wehmann points out in her October 2003 *NALP Bulletin* article, “Using Behavioral Interviewing to Target Talent,” once criteria are defined, it is helpful for employers to develop specific descriptions of how those criteria are demonstrated. A description of how a motivated lawyer behaves might include, “takes initiative, seeks additional responsibility, responds to criticism, organizes time and work.”

With this definition of motivation, an interviewer will be looking for descriptions of specific past performance that demonstrate that the student has behaved in the desired way in the past. Thus a student may be asked, “Tell me about a time when you went beyond the call of duty and performed beyond what was expected,” or “How do you motivate yourself to do a task that you really don’t want to do?”

Students must be prepared to discuss specific examples of behavior that demonstrate the qualities they claim to have. They cannot fall back on their laundry lists of admirable traits such as being “hard working,” “dedicated,” or “detail-oriented.”

Help them prepare

Many career counselors organize their career planning advice around a series of steps that begin with self-assessment and researching employers. We often meet with student resistance to the concept of self-assessment, but never is it more important that a student have completed this exercise than in the behavioral interview situation. Because of the probing nature of behavioral interview questions, it is especially important that students engage in significant introspection so that they understand such things as:

- Why they have made the life decisions they have made (this reflects their values, talents, and motivation); and
- How to provide specific examples of behavior that demonstrates they have the proficiencies and traits an employer seeks. (This is where a student's research skills come into play.)

If a student is responding to a specific job description or an OCI posting, it may be easy to determine what characteristics are sought. Many firms clearly state the qualities they value on their web site or NALP listing. However, even when a student cannot access this type of information for a particular employer, they can prepare by considering those characteristics that employers commonly value and seek out in their employees; then, through their self-assessment, students can identify the behaviors that show they have demonstrated those traits.

Four characteristics/behaviors that legal employers find desirable

Some key competencies and patterns of behavior that law firms recognize as important to lawyers' success are decision-making and problem-solving skills, motivation, communication and interpersonal skills, and planning and organization. Here are some sample questions that interviewers often use to elicit descriptions of these behaviors:

- **Decision making and problem solving.** Give an example of a time when you had to be quick in coming to a decision. Tell me about a difficult decision you had to make within the last year. Give me an example of a time when you used good judgment and logic in solving a problem. 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 anticipated potential problems and developed preventive measures. Tell me about a time when you failed to spot an obvious solution to a problem.
- **Motivation.** Describe a time when you set your sights too high (or too low). What have you done that demonstrates initiative? How did your former supervisor get your best performance from you? What type of work environment do you need to function most productively? Tell me about a time when you failed to meet your expectations.
- **Communication and interpersonal skills.** Tell me about a time when you had to persuade a coworker or colleague to accomplish a task or to see your point of view. Describe an unpopular decision you have made and how you dealt with the result. Tell me about a time you had to deal with an individual you did not like, or who did not like you. Tell me about a time when you had to work with a person who did things very differently from you.
- **Planning and organization.** Tell me about a time when you had too many things to do and had to prioritize your tasks. What method do you use to schedule your time? Give me an example of how you handle interruptions to your schedule. Everyone has had an experience when they just could not complete a project on time — when has this happened to you? How do you determine what is critical and what is not? Tell me about a time when you created a plan to accomplish a long-range project or goal.

Tools students can use to prepare

Two tools will assist your students in preparing for behavioral interviews: their résumé and a three-step process for organizing their answers. Using their résumé as a guide, students should thoughtfully consider the projects, tasks, and interactions represented by their previous employment. It may have been some time since they thought about a particular job, and their résumé will help refresh memories about specific job performances. Students should try to identify particularly challenging and difficult, as well as especially rewarding, experiences. They can use the sample questions listed above to practice describing work-related experiences that demonstrate the behaviors being sought.

Students need a method of organizing their answers so that their responses do not become rambling and unfocused. A common format career planning experts suggest is the STAR method. When using this technique the interviewee should:

- Briefly describe the Situation or Task;
- Explain the Action that he or she took; and
- Describe the Results of the action.

Using this organizational strategy will help students keep their answers concise and specific.

Student FAQs

Some students will feel intimidated by the prospect of encountering the behavioral interview style because they either have had no pre-law school work experience or they consider their work experiences irrelevant. In these cases, students can call upon academic experiences (organizing assignments, prioritizing tasks, working in a study group or other collaborative project). Reflecting upon their non-law related work experiences, volunteer activities, competitive sports involvement, and other areas of interest can yield examples of behaviors that can be used to answer these interview questions as well.

Behavioral interview questions are sometimes framed in the negative, such as, “Tell me about a time when your work was criticized.” Here the information sought is a description of the candidate’s faults as well as how he or she handles criticism. A student would be wise to respond with a description of a poor idea rather than a poor work product, which might unnecessarily focus negative attention on performance. Discussing a poor idea also offers a better opportunity to describe what was gained from the experience, which is the goal anytime questions about negative experiences are asked. In this example a student could discuss an employer’s criticism of his or her idea about how to approach a research problem, what he or she gained or learned from that criticism, and how he or she then proceeded. The outcome or Result of the Situation then becomes positive.

Even with the most thorough self-assessment, research, and preparation, students will be asked questions they feel they don’t know how to answer. First of all, students should understand that it is perfectly acceptable to ask for clarification of a question by saying, “I’m not sure what kind of information you’d like me to provide here. Can you be more specific?” Students should also feel free to thoughtfully reflect upon a question before answering. Rather than feeling compelled to answer immediately, students should maintain control of their responses by saying something like, “Do you mind if I take a moment to think about that?” And, if nothing comes to mind, an acceptable answer is, “Although I’ve never actually missed a deadline, I’ve come close and have had to reprioritize my tasks.”

“Do I have to tell them everything?” Students should keep in mind that a job interview is not “True Confessions.” Although career services professionals counsel students to be scrupulously truthful in their application materials, that does not mean that they must volunteer negative information unless they are directly asked the question. As Martha Neil notes in her article “Asked (Sort Of) and Answered” in the September 2004 issue of the *ABA Journal*, candidates should keep their answers simple and not offer

information that reflects poorly on them. When a truthful answer to a direct question requires a negative response, students should be prepared to provide the honest answer, together with a brief explanation for the deficiency and their plan for improvement.

“What if it doesn’t seem like a behavioral interview but just an effort to make conversation?” Sometimes questions that don’t seem to fall into the pattern of behavioral interview questions are aimed at uncovering behaviors that are important to the employer. A question like “What kinds of activities do you enjoy when you’re not studying or working?” may be designed to elicit whether a student is a team player or a loner, highly competitive or unmotivated, civic-minded or self-centered. Students need to think about what may be behind a question being asked.

Conclusion

Understanding and preparing for behavioral interviews give students one more way to hone their interviewing skills. Regardless of whether they encounter this technique, the self-assessment, employer research, and thoughtful reflection upon their work experiences and other activities will prepare students to excel in the interview room.

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