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What You Need to Know About Behavioral Interviewing

By Linda Tancs

Do you think that behavioral-based interviewing applies only to middle managers in “Corporate America?” Well, think again.

So what exactly is “behavioral-based interviewing?” It’s an approach that synthesizes your responses to the typical series of questions focusing on your technical skills and experience with a solicitation to describe the application of your background to a particular problem you encountered. Here’s a typical question:

Give me a specific example of a time when you overcame an obstacle and how you dealt with it.

Rest assured, the interviewer is not particularly interested in how you overcame your fear of elevators. To survive a

behavioral-based interview, you must successfully demonstrate to the interviewer that you possess both the technical and behavioral characteristics required to perform well within the organization.

It's no wonder that behavioral interviewing is taking on increased importance in the hiring process. Let's face it—descriptions in a resume such as "supported clients in a wide variety of transactional matters" do little to inform a potential employer of how you have used your experience to perform in a way that has met the needs of your clients. So using our sample question above, let's consider the actions you need to take to meet the challenges of this increasingly popular hiring model.

Your first task is to review the job advertisement, Web site and other available materials for key attributes of the target's organizational culture. Some examples are phrases such as "demonstrated ability to work creatively in a fast-paced environment" and "ability to work independently with minimal supervision."

Next, consider your current working environment and how it relates to the cultural attributes you've unearthed. For instance, if an employer prizes individuals who can work in a fast-paced environment, then analyze how closely your current employer functions in that manner. If you work in a generally slow-paced, informal environment but prefer something more deadline-driven, then determine what aspect of your background will highlight that ability to your potential employer.

Further, consider your clientele and take some time to refresh your recollection of key responsibilities and achievements. Pay particular attention to *how* your duties have benefited your employer or client. Maybe you streamlined a process that resulted in a quicker turnaround for a client, or created a program for exit interviews of

employees out of a patchwork of different policies and procedures, or devised a manner of dispute resolution for a client and a problem customer. In each case, you will uncover a context that presented a challenge that you addressed in a way that landed results for your client. This is the essence of a competency-based interview response.

Another useful step is to seek the input of former colleagues as to your competencies. And if you have written evaluations or recommendations from school or employment, review those assessments for insights into competencies that meet your target's expectations.

Finally, be sure to practice your responses with a friend or advisor. Don't be fooled into thinking that you can parlay your rote memorization of your work history and achievements on the spot into a well-reasoned application of your skills to the target's culture. Behavioral-based questioning does not lend itself to textbook responses, and it's unlikely you'll know in advance whether the technique will be employed. Better safe than sorry, as the saying goes.

Behavioral interviewing can best be understood as an equation combining the "what" and "how" of an interview process. The "what" in this equation are your skills, accomplishments and experience. The "how" is the application of these elements to the competencies sought after by the employer. Use this model to determine if you really are the right fit for your target organization.