



Behavioural Interviews

At interviews you'll often be asked what are known as 'behavioural questions', particularly if you're applying for graduate recruitment programs, public sector positions and jobs in health, welfare, professional associations and educational institutions.

The behavioural interview is becoming increasingly popular as a recruitment method. It's cost effective in comparison to assessment centres and considered to be a more accurate predictor of appropriate candidate choice than an interview not requiring specific examples of candidate competencies.

Behavioural questions relate specifically to a role's selection criteria such as communication skills, team work, customer focus and time management. An example of a behavioural question is 'Tell me about a time when you've had to deal with conflicting priorities.'

This is one of six handouts on interviews. For further information on the interview process see the handouts Interview Preparation and Practice, Case Study Interviews and Assessment Centres.

The idea behind behavioural questions is that past behaviour is a fairly accurate indicator of future performance.

If you have demonstrated a particular skill in one context, there's a possibility that this skill is transferable into another context - the job you're applying for. This means that skills gained in your studies, through your interests, extra-curricular activities or in the workplace could be very relevant to the vacancy.

Behavioural questions ask you to provide an example of a genuine past situation involving a specific behaviour. You need to state what your task was in that situation, how you performed that task, and the positive results of your actions in performing the task. If you then link your answer with one of the job requirements, that's even better! At first glance this might present a challenge, particularly if you're sitting in an interview and haven't prepared for behavioural questions. This handout will give you some ideas on how to effectively meet this challenge. Interview practice is very important, and you'll need appropriate examples on which to base your answers.

What are the features of behavioural interview questions?

They often start with:

- Tell me/us about a time when...
- Can you think of a time where...?
- Describe a situation where...

The following questions are examples of behavioural questions from graduate employers:

Initiative

- Give an example of an instance where you had to show initiative.

Teamwork

- Give an example of when you experienced poor group work. How did you handle the situation?
- Give an example of when you were let down in a group, and what you did.

Time management

- Describe a time when you were under pressure. What strategies did you use to get organised and achieve the required task/s?

Personal attributes

- Give an example of when you persuaded someone over to your point of view. What was the method and what was the outcome?
- Give an example of a goal you achieved. How did you ensure achievement of this goal?

As you see, some questions contain more than one part, so listen very carefully and ensure you've answered each section. For example, you might be asked the question 'Tell me about a difficult problem you've solved.' You might then be asked some of the following: 'What was the situation?' 'What did you have to do?' 'How did you solve the problem?' 'What was the result?' It's okay to ask 'Is there anything else you'd like to know?' or something similar if you think you've neglected to answer one of the parts.

How do I answer behavioural interview questions?

The STAR formula is a useful method for answering behavioural interview questions, 'STAR' being an acronym for Situation, Task, Action and Result. This formula will also help you to address selection criteria in job applications, so it's a useful formula to remember. For information on addressing selection criteria in job applications see the handout Selection Criteria.

Here's an example of a behavioural question and answer using the STAR formula:

Question: Tell me about a specific time when your verbal communication skills were on display.

Answer: Three months ago I became a member of a public speaking club to improve my presentation skills (S), and soon after was required to make my first short speech (T). I chose the topic 'water conservation'. I knew that other club members wanted to hear more about this topic because they'd been asking me about my Environmental Science studies degree and what I'd learned about water conservation. I made sure my talk had a clear beginning, middle and end and took along some photos to pass around. Although I was nervous, I maintained eye contact with my audience, spoke without notes and finished right on the five-minute time limit (A). The feedback I received was very encouraging; I've since made several longer speeches and am feeling a lot more confident about speaking in front of a group (R). That's why I'm confident that I'd be able to make presentations as part of this job.

To practise answering behavioural questions, make a list of the selection criteria for the job and reflect on examples of achievements for each criterion, as follows:

Criterion – initiative

Example – improving a workplace procedure; suggesting an alternative assignment topic

Criterion – adding value

Example – exceeding sales targets; demonstrating excellent customer service to encourage repeat business

Criterion – making a contribution

Example – voluntary work with a local charity

Criterion – time management

Example – managing full-time work and part-time study

Behavioural vs non-behavioural interview questions

Behavioural questions are different from hypothetical questions, which focus on what you would do if a particular situation occurred. A question such as 'What would you do if you had to give a presentation and left your notes at home?' doesn't ask you to provide a specific example of when that happened and what you actually did.

Behavioural questions are also different from some other commonly asked questions. A question such as 'What management style do you best respond to?' doesn't ask you to provide a specific example of when you've responded well to a particular management style.

Even so, employers appreciate examples, as these can provide evidence that you meet the selection criteria for the job. Even if a question isn't what you'd call a behavioural question, providing a credible example for each answer is good practice.

Some behavioural questions can sound a little negative, in that they can ask about possible failures or conflicts you've experienced. For instance, you could be asked for an example of when you failed to meet a deadline or had conflict with a team member. Don't take the tone or content of these questions personally. They're often asked to determine whether you can learn from unfortunate situations and improve your skills. Workplaces need people who are willing to learn from their mistakes and as a result improve their own and the organisation's performance. Be prepared for this type of question and remember that in the workplace things don't go well all the time.

The key is to provide a credible example with a positive result in terms of what you've learned and/or improved. For example, you may have failed to meet an assignment deadline because you had several due at the same time, were required to work extra hours at your workplace and spent time coaching your brother for his half-yearly exams. This is a good example if you have a positive result such as creating and sticking to an improved study timetable, handing in the rest of your assignments early or on time and perhaps even improving your results! Examples must be your own and have some kind of 'happy ending', so if there isn't a happy ending, choose another example.