BEHAVIORAL-BASED INTERVIEWING:

Taking the Guesswork out of Interviewing

By Sue Keever

Behavioral-based interviewing (BBI) can help managers make better hiring decisions and improve retention rates. Today, more than 70 percent of Fortune 500 companies use BBI—and colleges and universities offer training sessions to prepare their students for this type of interview.

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I served as a manager for more than 10 years before I ever heard of behavioral-based interviewing (BBI). In truth, I always dreaded the interview and so did my counterparts. Now that I train on the topic, I understand that each of my fellow managers and I made one of the following mistakes:

Joan: She loved everyone—equally. She felt it was her job to make every candidate feel comfortable and to help him or her successfully navigate through the interview. She made new friends but lousy hires.

David: He loved to find candidates that he had something in common with. If they went to his university, played golf, or read Steven Covey—they were in. David ended up hiring a really nice guy that improved his handicap—on company time.

Brian: His favorite line was "I know within five minutes whether or not I'm going to hire them." Brian passed up a lot of highly qualified candidates when he could have used his intuition to ask better questions.

Sarah: While Joan loved everyone, Sarah was committed to "survival of the fittest." She felt it was her job to "weed" out candidates through trick questions and intimidation. Sarah made a lot of candidates feel bad and one of them remembered Sarah when she came to pitch his business.

Me: I interviewed like Barbara Walters—"If you were a fruit, what would you be? "Where do you want to be in 10 years?" "Describe the perfect job." I never got my own talk show, but I did make some poor hires.

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These are common mistakes. Interviewing is not intuitive—it takes time and practice to understand what questions to ask and how to secure meaningful answers.

That's where behavioral-based interviewing comes in. The premise behind BBI is that the best predictor of future behavior is past behavior. According to Katharine Hansen, creative director and associate publisher of Quintessential Careers, BBI is 55 percent predictive of future on-the-job behavior while traditional interviewing is only 10 percent predictive.[1] According to Tony Simons, a professor of management and organizational behavior, using a typical interview process is only 3 percent better than pulling names out of a hat.[2]

Today, more than 70 percent of Fortune 500 companies use BBI. And, universities offer training sessions for their students so that they are prepared for this type of interview. Last year, I was asked to present BBI to M.B.A. students at Texas Christian University, and I've been training hiring managers and HR professions on BBI for more than 12 years. Following is a description of the premise.

Step 1: Identify the Critical Requirements Of the Job

Start with the job description. Read it (or create it) and identify the skills (hard, technical skills), knowledge (training, education, and/or certification) and attributes (behaviors) that are required for the job. Most companies hire students with specific degrees each year; therefore, it may only be necessary to go through this process one time.

To be certain that the requirements are well thought out and accurate, sit down with the hiring manager and brainstorm around the critical requirements of the job. If you don't understand the attributes of a successful hire, your interview questions won't help you. Let me explain. Have you ever worked at a company with an individual that was brilliant and wonderful at his/her job but was a failure because of a behavioral problem? Think about the bully or the poor communicator or the temperamental employee that had all the right skills, but whose personal attributes always held him back. At the end of the day, if the candidate is qualified (which is usually verifiable via the resume, transcripts, or references), then the most important thing you can find out is if the candidate has the attributes necessary to succeed in the job.

Step 2: Clarify the Required Attributes

Step 1 helps you understand the attributes necessary for the job.

Figure 1: Job Attributes and Behaviors

Job Title	Job Description	Attributes	Behaviors
Customer Service Rep	Work directly with customers to resolve problems, sell new features, and develop strong, lasting relationships.	Strong communicator	• Good listener • Able to identify opportunities and needs in conversation • Empathetic • Helpful • Resourceful • Able to resolve and articulate problems with the least amount of disruption to the client • Demonstrates a caring attitude and tone

Step 2 will help you take each of the required attributes and clarify specifically what you mean. For example, one company may look for strong communicators; however, the organization's definition of a strong communicator is someone who can communicate in a team environment. Another company may be looking for strong communicators to work directly with clients. These two companies are looking for slightly different attributes. Step 2 will help you define exactly what you're looking for.

Take each attribute and write a list of four to six behaviors that would demonstrate that the candidate has the attribute you're looking for. (See Figure 1.)

Go through this process by identifying the behaviors required for each attribute. Now you're ready to begin developing BBI interview questions.

Step 3: Developing Behavioral-Based Interview Questions

There are several types of questions that you can ask candidates during an interview. For example, you may ask credential questions to confirm easily verifiable areas such as GPA, degree, or coursework. Similarly, experience questions will allow you to identify facts about work responsibilities during an internship or what leadership role a student had while a member of the National Society of Black Engineers.

Some interviewers ask *opinion* questions such as "What type of supervisor do you like to work for?" The problem with these questions is that they aren't helpful and they leave room for candidate interpretation (the candidate will tell you what he or she thinks you want to hear).

Hypothetical questions are also asked during interviews. They typically begin with "What would you do…" Some recruiters spend the majority of the interview asking hypothetical questions about how a student would handle a certain situation. If I were asked how I was going to handle a certain situation, I could come up with a strong answer, but it doesn't mean that's what I would actually do if the situation arose in real life. That's where behavioral-based interviewing comes in.

Behavioral-based interview questions require a student to think of a specific example to demonstrate that he or she

Figure 2: How to Seek Contrary Evidence

Attribute	Behaviors	Questions	Contrary Evidence
Strong work ethic	Adheres to an appropriate and effective set of core values and beliefs during both good and bad times; acts in line with those values; rewards the right values and disapproves of others; practices what he or she preaches.	Can you tell me about a time when you felt you had to make an unpopular decision based on your beliefs and values?	Describe a situation where you went against core values to get something accomplished. What did you learn?
Compassion/ ability to treat others well	Genuinely cares about people; is concerned about others' problems; is ready to help; is sympathetic to the plight of others less fortunate; demonstrates real empathy with the joys and pains of others.	Can you remember a situation where you demonstrated real compassion to a teammate when it would have been easier not to? Tell me about a time when you put your own work aside to help someone else.	Describe a time when you did not take the feelings of others into account when making a decision. What did you learn?
Team player	Able to create strong morale and spirit in his or her team; shares wins and successes; fosters open dialogue; lets people finish and be responsible for their work; defines success in terms of the whole team; creates a feeling of belonging in the team; broadly shares both responsibility and accountability; fosters an environment in which people want to do their best; can quickly find common ground and solve problems for the good of all; can represent own interests while being fair to the group.	Tell me about a time when you were able to find common ground when working in a team to achieve a result. Think back on a time when you were able to motivate a team to achieve results. Describe a time when working in a team when you were able to make each team member feel important and valuable. Tell me about a time when you were able to gain the trust and support of fellow team members to achieve a goal. Describe a situation where you were able to comfortably delegate an important task to another team member.	Can tell me about a situation where you were unable to motivate a team to achieve a goal? What did you learn? Tell me about a time when you were more concerned about personal success than the success of the whole team. What did you learn? Tell me about a situation when you were unable to find common ground and did not achieve the results desired. What did you learn?
Driven	Can be counted on to exceed goals successfully; is constantly and consistently one of the top performers; very bottom-line oriented; steadfastly pushes self and others for results; takes initiative; doesn't wait for others to start on project; communicates and genuinely feels passion for a company/project or idea.	Can you describe a time when you successfully pushed yourself and others to achieve a goal? Can you tell me about a time when you exceeded a goal you set for yourself? Tell me about a situation where your focus on the bottom line helped you achieve the desired results. Tell me about a situation where your passion for a project or idea was contagious.	Tell me about a situation where you pushed yourself and others too hard to achieve a goal. What did you learn? Tell me about a time when you were unable to achieve a goal you set for yourself. What did you learn? Tell me about a time when your focus on the bottom line had a negative impact. What did you learn?
Creative	Comes up with new and unique ideas; easily makes connections among previously unrelated notions; tends to be seen as original and value-added in brainstorming sessions; able to bring the creative ideas of self and others to market; has good judgment about which creative ideas and suggestions will work.	Describe a situation where you came up with a new and unique idea that paid off. Tell me about a time when you used good judgment to determine what creative ideas would be successful. Tell me about a time when you looked beyond the obvious to find an unusual solution.	Can you tell me about a time when you were unable to come up with a creative way to solve a problem? What did you learn? Tell me about a situation where you felt unable to produce a unique idea for the team. What did you learn?

Figure 2: How to Seek Contrary Evidence

Attribute	Behaviors	Questions	Contrary Evidence
Professional	Behaves and dresses in a professionally appropriate manner; understands how to get things done through formal channels and informal networks; practices strong time-management skills; uses logic and methods to solve difficult work problems with effective solutions; is able to effectively communicate in a business environment.	(Observe dress, voice, eye-contact, and mannerisms during interview for professionalism.) Describe a time when you used your informal networks to gain insight into a problem or achieve results. Tell me about a situation where you were able to eliminate a roadblock to get an important project done. Tell me about a time when you took an unpopular stand to achieve a result. Think back on your busiest day this last year—how did you organize your time to ensure that you met your deadlines? Tell me about the most difficult communication challenge you've had and how you overcame it.	Can you describe a situation when you were unable to eliminate a roadblock to get important work done? What did you learn? Can you tell me about a time when you felt your time-management skills were compromised? What did you learn?
Honest, trustworthy, and demonstrates integrity	Is widely trusted; is seen as a direct, truthful individual; can present the unvarnished truth in an appropriate and helpful manner; keeps confidences; admits mistakes; doesn't misrepresent her/himself for personal gain.	Describe a time when you told the truth when it would have been easier not to. Can you tell me about a situation where you admitted a mistake and it paid off? Tell me about a time when you were acknowledged for your integrity.	Tell me about a time when you didn't admit to a mistake. What did you learn? Tell me about a time when your integrity was brought into question. What did you learn?
Committed to excellence and providing high-value products and/or services	Is dedicated to providing the highest quality products and services that meet the needs and requirements of internal and external customers; is committed to continuous improvement; is open to suggestions for continuous improvement; is committed to ongoing learning to better serve customers; gets firsthand customer information and uses it to make improvements in products and services; maintains effective relationships with customers to gain their trust and respect.	Can you tell me about a time when you felt that you exceeded the needs of a professor, supervisor, or team? Tell me about a time when your commitment to quality paid off.	Tell me about a time when you had to sacrifice quality to achieve a result. What did you learn? Describe a situation when you felt that you over-promised and under-delivered. What did you learn?
Safety conscious	Consistently uses safe practices on the job; encourages others to adhere to safety standards; brings to light safety violations and potential safety hazards.	(This may be a difficult concept for students as safety is not typically stressed at this age.) Can you tell me about a time when you identified a potential safety hazard? Describe a time when you adhered to safety standards when it would have been easier not to?	Describe a time when you ignored safety standards to achieve a result. What did you learn?
Community involvement	Look for this information on a resume.		
Consistent	Is reliable; consistently delivers what is promised; meets deadlines with regularity; considered the "go to" person because he or she is trustworthy, dependable, and steadfast.	Can you tell me about a time when you felt you were rewarded for your dependability and consistency? Describe a situation where your reliability benefited the team.	Think back on a time when you felt you were unable to achieve a goal due to a lack of consistency. What did you learn? Tell me about a situation where you felt you could have been more reliable.
Entrepreneurial	Can anticipate future consequences and trends accurately; is future-oriented; creates breakthrough strategies; is willing to be the only champion for an idea or position; is willing to take calculated risks; is action-oriented and full of energy; is not fearful of acting with a minimum of planning; seizes more opportunities than others.	Tell me about a time when you took a calculated risk to achieve a goal. Can you tell me about a time when you served as the lone champion for an idea or concept? Describe a situation when you seized an opportunity with a minimum of planning.	Tell me about a time when you took a calculated risk to achieve a goal, but were unsuccessful. What did you learn? Tell me about a time when you championed an idea, but failed to convince others? What did you learn?

has the attribute you're looking for. Questions typically begin with "Tell me about a time that…" or "Can you think of a situation where…"

It isn't enough to develop a strong BBI question; you have to be certain that the student provides you with a meaningful answer. Let's say that I asked a student the following question, "Tell me about a time you had to deliver difficult information to your intern supervisor."

- **Situation:** It is important for the response to include a detailed account of the situation. What was happening, who was involved?
- **Action:** Many students are very comfortable working in teams so it isn't unlikely that a student will answer your question with "we." You need to probe to find out what the student (alone) did in the situation. What was his or her role, what did he or she do?
- **Outcome:** Now that you know what the situation was and what the student did, now you need to understand what happened. Was the problem/issue resolved? Did it require further follow up? Was the supervisor pleased?
- **Learning:** To take full advantage of your question, you may want to ask what the student learned from the situation. Has he or she modified his or her behavior based on the experience?

Unless the student's answer reveals the situation, action, and outcome, you will not have the information you need to evaluate. Asking the students behavioral-based interview questions requires probing at first and taking notes so that you capture all of the relevant data.

Step 4: Seeking Contrary Evidence

Remember Brian, my co-worker who said, "I can tell within five minutes whether or not I'm going to hire them"? Brian had a gut feeling about people. There's nothing wrong with having a gut feeling unless you let it guide all of your hiring decisions. Gut feelings are important, but they can also lead to poor hiring decisions. If, for example, you feel that the candidate you're interviewing is arrogant, there are questions that you can ask to test your theory. For example:

"John, tell me about a time when your confidence served you well during a recent internship."

Don't stop there, seek contrary evidence:

"Okay, John, tell me about a time when your confidence hampered your success."

This is called seeking contrary evidence. You never want to get a one-sided picture of a candidate. Be sure to incorporate questions to balance both the positive with the negative. Each time you ask a question that may reveal something negative; ask the student "What did you learn from that?" (See Figure 2 for information to better understand attributes, BBI questions, and contrary evidence.)

Step 5: Maintain Control Of the Interview

Equip your recruiters with pre-written and prepared questions. (See Figure 2.) In addition, use or create an evaluation form that lists each of the attributes along with an area for the recruiter to rate each of the student's responses.

Walking into an interview with a list of prepared questions is the best way to maintain control of the interview. Following are some tips to help you:

- Be certain that all answers contain situation, action, outcome, and learning.
- Seek contrary evidence.
- Use silence (answering a BBI question takes time, don't try to fill the space, let the student think).
- If the student rambles, interrupt and tell the student that you'd like to continue on with your questions so that you don't run out of time.
- If the student avoids direct answers or is silent for an extended period of time, you may move to closed questions and return to open-ended questions once he or she has regained composure.
- If the student offers EEO-sensitive information, put down your pen or pencil, interrupt, and state that you'd like to stay focused on the job requirements.

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Perhaps one of the most compelling reasons to use behavioral-based interviewing (other than its ability to help your organization make better hiring decisions) is that the students have come to expect it. If your recruiting team comes on campus unprepared and untrained in interviewing, the students will know. Besides, candidates would rather get a job with a company that truly evaluated them, rather than a company that simply "liked" them.

Endnotes

[1] Hansen, Katharine. Behavioral interviewing strategies for job seekers. www.quintcareers.com/behavioral_interviewing.html.

[2] Simons, Tony. "Interviewing job applicants—How to get beyond first impressions." *Cornell Hotel and Restaurant Administration Quarterly*, 36(6), 1995, pp. 21-27.