UNCSA HUMAN RESOURCES

Behavioral-Based Interviewing

Introduction

The purpose of this guide is to describe Behavioral-Based Interviewing. Although similar to traditional interviewing techniques, a structured Behavioral-Based Interviewing process employs some elements that make it more legally defensible and useful to employers in identifying qualified candidates.

All interview processes seek to: provide the candidate with an accurate view of the position; gather information about the candidate's competencies (knowledge, skills, abilities, and workplace behaviors) not previously assessed in the screening process; and, evaluate the candidate in light of the position and organizational culture.

Interview styles range from highly intuitive processes to those that are strictly fact-based. While no technique is perfect, Behavioral-Based Interviewing can alleviate some of the common problems associated with other interview methods. Common errors include:

- Lack of a clear purpose;
- Inadequate preparation;
- Lack of structure;
- Failure to utilize job analysis;
- Personal bias; and,
- Premature decisions.

Done well, structured Behavioral-Based Interviewing increase the likelihood of receiving honest and revealing responses to structured, job-related questions. The information obtained may be used to gauge candidates' job-related competencies and assist employers in determining which candidate is most qualified for a position.

This guide contains:

- A definition of Behavioral-Based Interviewing
- How to develop a Behavioral-Based Interview
- Tips for conducting a Behavioral-Based Interview
- Examples of Behavioral-Based Interviewing questions

Definition of Behavioral-Based Interviewing

Behavioral-Based Interviewing *is founded on the notion that the best predictor of a candidate's future performance is his or her past performance.* Therefore, structured Behavioral-Based Interviewing questions are built around specific incidents that have happened rather than hypothetical situations. The questions ask candidates to describe things that they have actually done, as opposed to what they would do in a given situation. Therefore, this interview approach is most useful for higher level positions; however, modifications may be made to suit the needs of any position. You may also create an interview that includes different types of questions (i.e., situational, behavioral, and job knowledge-based).

Answers to Behavioral-Based Interviewing questions should provide verifiable, concrete evidence as to how a candidate has dealt with issues in the past. This information often reveals a candidate's level of experience and his or her potential to handle similar situations in your organization. The information may also be highly useful in conducting final reference checks, as one may verify that the candidate actually did what he or she has claimed.

For an interview to be most effective, it should:

- Be based on a recently updated description of the position resulting from a job analysis;
- Follow a pre-determined rating guide with which interview panel members are familiar; and,
- Include sufficient, factual documentation regarding the candidates' responses.

This will provide a more accurate basis for selection, as well as documentation of a logical, objective, and legally defensible selection procedure.

How to Develop a Behavioral-Based Interview

Following is a description of the process used to create structured behavioral interview questions. We recommend that a group of people highly familiar with the position perform the steps together to promote objective and balanced thinking, and to generate more thorough information.

Step 1. Identify what you are looking for by completing a job analysis and/or reviewing a recently updated position description.

Behavioral-Based Interview questions should be based on a current position description resulting from job analysis. The information about the position should include the work performed, as well as the competencies necessary to successfully complete the most important work.

From the competencies listed as critical, identify those which are required upon entry to the position. Interview questions should only assess those competencies which will not be learned on the job during a probations/training period.

Step #2. Write behavioral questions to gather information.

For each key competency, create a question by describing a job-related scenario in which the competency is demonstrated. This may be done by describing in detail actual events that have occurred on the job (referred to as critical incidents), or by describing in more general terms situations that routinely happen on the job. The method chosen will often depend on the competency, the level of the position, and whether you wish to measure specific behaviors demonstrated, results, or both.

For example, if one of the position's key competencies is "ability to mediate disputes," you may seek to know the associated behaviors a candidate has demonstrated. You may ask a question such as:

"This position serves as a facilitator or coordinator of special projects and committees. In this role, you need to resolve differences of opinion among committee members regarding project issues. Please describe a situation in which you faced a similar challenge. Include the type of project and the differences of opinion. Be specific about the actions you took and what you said when resolving those differences."

This type of question should elicit detailed statements about behaviors the candidate has demonstrated when mediating disputes. You can then compare those behaviors with those you value most.

Alternatively, if a key competency is "ability to manage multiple priorities," you may seek to know generally whether or not a candidate possesses that competency at the proficiency necessary for the position. You may be looking for specific actions and reasoning behind those actions, and the final outcome of the scenario you describe. (Only measure outcomes if the candidate had control over the end result.) You may ask:

"Tell us about a time when you were required to complete multiple assignments in the same time period. How did you handle the situation? Please be specific about the number of assignments, the actions you took, the reasons for those actions, and the result."

This type of question should elicit enough detail to give you a good indication of the candidate's ability to manage multiple priorities. It will also provide you with information about the level of difficulty or complexity the candidate has handled, which may be compared to that of your position.

No matter the method you choose, the questions should ask candidates to provide details about times when they demonstrated the competency you are trying to measure. Avoid the temptation to bundle up too many questions in one, as candidates may overlook part of the question if it is too long or complex. If a question does have multiple parts, you may make this explicit by stating the various parts separately (e.g., This question has three parts. The first part…). Examples of behavioral questions and the competencies they measure may be found near the end of this guide at Examples of Behavioral-Based Interviewing Questions.

Step #3. Identify what constitutes successful demonstration of the competency.

Rating or scoring criteria is essential to a structured behavioral interview. Instead of relying solely on subjective and vague terminology such as “poor response,” “average response” and “excellent response,” the rating guide for structured interview questions should contain the specific behaviors, proficiency levels and/or criteria of an appropriate response.

For each question, identify the key behaviors or criteria that separate an excellent performance of the competency from a poor one. These statements will be used by interviewers to rate candidates’ responses, so the language should be clear, simple, and straightforward. Using the mediation example from Step 2, the group may decide (based on the actual job) that behaviors which indicate excellent performance of the competency would include:

- Directed discussion toward identifying common interests and possible solutions;
- Involved all parties in development of alternatives that fulfilled their interests and needs;
- Helped all parties understand the key issues from others’ perspectives; and,
- Resolved the differences in a way that each person felt his or her concerns were respected and addressed.

The group should also identify behaviors and proficiency levels which indicate adequate and inadequate performance of the competency. This allows interviewers to match candidate responses to a full range of behaviors.

The managing multiple priorities example from Step 2 may have very different rating criteria. For this competency, the criteria that demonstrate proficiency may include:

- Worked concurrently on four or more assignments;
- Most or all of the assignments were of a complex nature and required thought and diligence to handle appropriately;
- All of the assignments were completed on time;
- Candidate employed sound rationale for the actions taken and for the method used to prioritize assignments; and,
- All parties involved (supervisor, customer, co-worker) were satisfied with the results.

In this example, the interviewers are looking for signs that the candidate has successfully managed multiple priorities in a situation very similar to that encountered in the vacant position. It differs from the previous rating criteria in that the specific actions and rationale are not spelled out for the interviewers.

This is one way that the rating information may vary from question to question to meet your particular needs. The key is to have clear, relevant statements describing what you seek to use to measure the competency. The statements will allow interviewers to anchor the responses and assign scores.

Tips for Conducting a Behavioral-Based Interview

1. Conduct the interviews in a private setting in which candidates can feel relatively comfortable. Do what you can to put candidates at ease, including the offer of water and a comfortable chair.
2. Consider providing a list of the questions for candidates to look at during the interview. The list allows candidates to review questions as they answer, and increases the likelihood that they will provide complete responses. You may tape the list to the table to make sure candidates do not accidentally take it with them when they leave.
3. Short and simple interview questions are better than long and complex ones. Also, candidates typically know less about the job than you do, and they will not likely "read between the lines" when answering questions. Make sure your questions are clear, easy to understand, and ask for all the details you wish candidates to provide.
4. Consider having some of the more complex questions be pre-exposed. By allowing candidates time (15 – 30 minutes) to think about the questions, you are likely to receive more thorough responses.
5. Keep comments and gestures neutral. Saying "thank you" and nodding is more appropriate than saying "that's great!" or frowning. This maintains objectivity and reduces the likelihood of leading (or misleading) candidates to feel or think a certain way.
6. If a candidate gives a generalized answer such as, "I have to prioritize my assignments every day," you may choose to restate the question to elicit a more specific response: "Do you recall a particular situation of this type?" Panel members will find it easier to evaluate responses if the candidates provide details. Similarly, if a candidate gives an incomplete response, such as leaving out the result, you may ask, "How did that turn out?" We recommend limiting clarifying questions because they can reduce the reliability of the interview process if only certain candidates are asked extra questions. You may wish to have a pre-determined set of follow-up questions to ask candidates as necessary.
7. Each panel member should take notes regarding the candidates' responses. These notes should be factual in nature: Candidate chose to finish typing report before acknowledging customer, but customer was satisfied with the service. Personal judgments made by the panel members, physical descriptions, and comparisons between candidates should not be part of the notes.
8. Each response should be scored independently of all other responses made by the candidate, and should be based upon the rating criteria for that question.
9. After each interview, panel members should first discuss what they heard the candidate say. They should then go over the ratings given to each response and discuss significant differences in score (perhaps those of more than one point). While consensus is preferred, panel members are entitled to their individual decisions and should not be required to change a rating. They may, however, choose to do so as a result of the discussion.
10. Allow sufficient time between interviews so that the process isn't rushed. Sitting through hours of non-stop interviews can cause panel members to lose focus and grow tired. Better decisions are usually made by interviewers who are not exhausted by the process.
11. Be sure to give candidates the opportunity to ask questions of you. Also tell them approximately when they may expect to be informed of your decision.

Examples of Behavioral-Based Interviewing Questions

Competency: Critical and Analytical Thinking - Ability to look at situations from multiple perspectives. Breaks problems into component parts. Tendency or ability of individual to do something or create something new. Considers and organizes parts in a systematic way. Creates solutions to problems using novel methods and processes. Looks for underlying causes or thinks through the consequences of different courses of action.

- **Question:** Describe a situation in which you developed a brand new idea for a product or service that your organization offered to its clients. What was unusual or innovative about this idea? What resistance, if any, did you encounter as you attempted to "sell" your idea to your colleagues or customers, and how did you overcome it?
- **Question:** Describe a situation in your career in which you were asked to develop a product or service that no one had ever thought of before. This should be something that really had no previous "blueprint" from which you could build your idea. What was the product or service? Describe how you took things from the "concept phase" to the "reality phase."

Competency: Customer Focus - Degree to which an employee attempts to, or meets customer expectations. Concern with performing work to a level, which satisfies customer needs. Includes appropriately reacting to customer demands. Creates an atmosphere in which timely and high quality information flows smoothly between self and customer. Encourages open, honest and constructive expression of ideas and opinions. Demonstrates active listening skills. Uses appropriate body language. Seeks to understand others' viewpoint. Analyzes the customer needs and adjusts to the perspective of the customer, when appropriate.

- **Question:** Describe a situation in which a customer had an unusual business need, and you were tasked with finding a way to meet that need. This might have been either a large-scale revamping of your organization's business process, or a response to a one-time need. In either case, please be specific in describing the need and what you did to meet the customer's expectations.

Competency: Integrity, Honesty and Ethics - Degree to which an individual can be trusted. Operates in an ethical manner. Degree of trustworthiness and ethical behavior of an individual with consideration for the knowledge one has of the impact and consequences when making a decision or taking action.

- **Question:** Describe a time in your career in which someone asked you to perform a task you thought was unethical. Without naming names, what position did this person hold (for example, supervisor, colleague, customer), and how did you respond to this person? We are interested in how you handled the situation in general terms.

- **Competency: Fiscal Accountability and Budget:** Apply fiscal management knowledge, principles and practices to obtain, utilize, manage financial resources in the workplace to meet program, project or business requirements. Involves maintaining available resources, making resource decisions based on need and availability, and developing and implementing strategies to make rational and well thought-out decisions related to organizational resources. Includes the ability to provide guidance, formulate a budget plan, defend a budget plan, assess budget performance, advocate budget and alternative scenarios and execute a budget plan. Requires knowledge of policies and

practices related to Federal, State, Agency and Installation accounting, and internal business information systems.

- **Question:** Using examples from positions you have held in the past, describe your experience managing budgets. How did you make decisions when allocating resources? What unique problems or resistance did you encounter? Please include any rules or stipulations you had to follow in order to receive funding.

Competency: Conflict Management and Mediation: Ability to effectively resolve disputes among others. Manages disagreements. Methods and style of dealing with disagreements. Requires the ability to remain impartial and unbiased. Help others resolve complex or sensitive disagreements and conflicts. Effectively lead a rational process of illuminating issues, enhancing understanding of divergent interests, and identifying common grounds for a workable solution.

- **Question:** This position serves as a facilitator or coordinator of special projects and committees. In this role, you need to resolve differences of opinion among committee members regarding project issues. Please describe a situation in which you faced a similar challenge. Include the type of project and the differences of opinion. Be specific about the actions you took and what you said when resolving those differences.

Competency: Building Consensus and Negotiation Transforms thought into productive action. Creates successful outcomes by sharing knowledge and information within the work unit and across organizational lines. This includes mentoring others, building relationships key to success by establishing trust, credibility and rapport with key players and customers. Uses awareness of the organization (i.e. structure, centers of authority, decision-making roles) and knowledge of the different roles and power positions within the organization to positively affect results. (This competency is closely tied to global or organizational effectiveness rather than one-on-one, personal contacts and business relationships as described under personal effectiveness cluster family.)

- **Question:** This position must negotiate, execute, and manage several contracts. Please describe a contract you have negotiated in which the parties had a difficult time coming to agreement. Be specific about the nature of the disagreement(s), how you helped the parties work through the problems, and the end result. We are particularly interested in your negotiation style and techniques, so we would like to know specifically what actions you took and what you said in the negotiation process.

Competency: Project/Program Management - Effectively direct and integrate all aspects of a project or program, ensuring that work progresses toward achieving goals and objectives.

- **Question:** Describe a situation in which you needed to assess the work-related skills of your employees to determine the distribution of assignments to complete a project. What method did you use to assess their skills, and what were the most obvious successes (and failures, if any) of your method?

Competency: Collecting, Planning, Organizing and Analysis of Information - Effectively identify, collect, organize, and document data and information in ways that make the information most useful for subsequent assessment, analysis, and investigation.

- **Question:** The person in this position must be able to identify, obtain, and evaluate information critical to the organization's business needs. Describe an experience in which you sensed that your organization needed additional information before it could develop an effective business plan. What type of information did you need, what methods did you use to collect this information, and how did you analyze or evaluate this information?

Competency: Problem Solving - The identification of various types of problems along with the creating of workable solutions. Requires the identification and analysis of problems, evaluation of alternatives, and provision of solutions.

- **Question:** Describe a situation in your career in which you recognized a problem and then devised a solution to it. Be specific about the nature of the problem, the solution you devised, the most difficult obstacle to overcome in the process, and what you did to ensure the successful implementation of the solution.

Competency: Initiative/Results Orientation - Level of concern for own effort and initiative. Refers to effort an employee will display during a particular task. Also implies that an individual will work and take action without specific direction and without being monitored.

- **Question:** Describe a situation in your career in which a goal or objective was delayed or thwarted. What was the specific goal? What were the obstacles in your path, and what specifically did you do to overcome them?

Competency: Coaching, Counseling and Mentoring - Overall concern for the developmental level of an individual or group of peers, clients, or superiors. Takes steps to explain and provide guidance because it is needed in contrast to training somebody as a formal responsibility. Sending people to required training is not included.

- **Question:** Describe a time in which you used a special or unusual method of teaching someone a job-related skill. We are most interested in finding out how your teaching style was effective for a particular situation when more conventional teaching styles might not have worked as well.

Competency: Team Leadership and Relationship Building - Ability to effectively manage and guide group efforts. Includes providing appropriate level of feedback concerning group progress. Leading and supporting a team to achieve results. Builds short- and long-term relationships with people critical to work and project success. Relationships involve all those encountered at work. Is respected as a valid resource through consistent actions and behaviors. Builds relationships by bringing conflicts and disagreements into the open, as appropriate. Makes appropriate or acceptable compromises in order to meet goals and to gain cooperation from others.

- **Question:** Please describe a situation in your career in which you built a team using members from separate workgroups. Be specific about the groups with which you worked, your common goal, the specific role you played in bringing everything together, and the outcome of the situation.

Competency: Resource Management - Effectively organize multiple assignments, sometimes of a complex nature or involving competing priorities, to produce work products that are

accurate, thorough, and on time. Ability to appropriately allocate a variety of resources, which may include, materials, money, facilities, and equipment. Requires the ability to assess needs and track progress for multiple customers.

- Question: It is common for our customers, both internal and external, to make simultaneous work requests of you. Please describe a complex or difficult situation of this type that you have faced. Be specific about the nature and number of the requests, and how you prioritized them. Also describe whether or not the customers' expectations were met.