Students better be on their best behavior: How to prepare for the most common job interviewing technique

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Course: Undergraduate Interviewing and/or Business Communication

Objectives: Students will engage in a mock selection interview where they will experience one of the most common selection interviewing techniques: the behavioral-based interview

Rationale

Nearly every student we encounter in our classes will go through the selection interview process to obtain a job in his or her future vocation. Regardless of the major of the student or the profession which they will pursue, the selection interview remains a constant. Tengler and Jablin (1983) recounted that despite a long history of research on the selection interview, none of it “directed attention to the most basic attribute of the interview: the question and answer process” (p. 245). Several years later, Jablin and Miller (1990) shed light on the fact that there remained a dearth of research in the area of the selection interview’s “questions or the questioning process” (p. 51), and noted their surprise at the scarcity of research in this area. They echoed the calls of past research “for increased attention to interviewers’ questions . . .” (p. 52). Apparently, that call fell primarily on deaf ears as there remains a scant amount of research on the questions within the selection interview.

There has been some attention paid to the validity of the selection interview (McDaniel, Whetzel, Schmidt, & Mauer, 1994), and personality constructs for employee selection (Raymark, Schmit, & Guion, 1997), but there remains a gap in the literature concerning the interviewer’s “questions or the questioning process” (Jablin & Miller, 1990, p. 51). Traditional interviews were based more on hypothetical questions that allowed candidates the opportunity to give the “right” answers.
without being completely honest. Bowers and Kleiner (2005) noted the ineffectiveness of the traditional interviews leading to successful hires. To remedy this problem, the behavioral interview was created. Bowers and Kleiner stated this questioning process emphasized “the systematic use of job-related, open-ended questions to help measure a candidate’s skills for a particular job” (2005, p. 107). Behavioral interviewing is based on the premise that the best predictor of future performance is past behavior (Cunningham, 2009). Stewart and Cash (2008) also noted additional principles that underlie the behavioral interviewing technique including “behavior that is not seen must be probed for” (p. 185), suggesting the need for specific information the interviewer must strive to find in order to verify the applicant’s responses.

There have been several brief looks at the behavioral interview method (Bowers & Kleiner, 2005; Oliphant, Hansen, & Oliphant, 2008), but it remains understudied when considering the sweeping trend toward behavioral interviewing being used in the corporate world. In a study of 214 companies, Cunningham (2009) found that 81% (174) indicated they currently ask behavioral questions during the interview. Moreover, 41% (88) of the organizations responded that ALL of their questions were behavioral in nature. Of the 19% of the organizations that replied they were not currently using the technique, only 6% (13) said they had no plans of incorporating this questioning strategy in the future. These findings indicate the importance for job seekers to prepare for and know how to answer these questions.

**Activity**

Instructors should assign each member of the class the task of filling out a position description form consisting of an organization for which they would like to work, the position they will be applying for, the duties and responsibilities for that position, and the skills, abilities, and personality characteristics that the ideal candidate would need to possess to be successful in the position. We allow the students to have one week upon assigning this part of the activity, so that they will take the time to undergo their own research. This amount of time enables the students to find out pertinent information about the company they should know prior to an interview, as well as enabling them to speak with competence about their desired role in the organization.

Upon completion, the instructor should collect all of these and attempt to match up students that have similar interests. Each student is then handed the position description form of one of their fellow students and must formulate an interview question schedule for that individual based on his or her potential vocation. We ask students to prepare five questions all based on the interviewee’s skills, abilities, and personal characteristics (SAPs). Thus, while the interviewee will know what they had originally listed, they will not know the questions derived from that list. This is very similar to a “real” behavioral interview, where students should be able to anticipate and prepare for possible behavioral questions based on the SAPs they have identified from their research on the position for which they are applying.
Each of the students will have the opportunity to be the interviewer and the interviewee, so that they can maximize the learning potential from this activity. The positive consequences of this task are that if one student has a similar interest to another regarding future occupation, the benefit of the activity increases as a student places him/herself in the shoes of the recruiter. Consequently, it would help in their preparation as an interviewee. In order to ensure that students understand the concept of behavioral interviewing, the activity will necessitate the instructor covering the concept of behavioral interviews and the correct way to respond to this line of questioning. However, before looking at how to correctly respond to these questions, it is helpful to provide examples to students of what behavioral questions may look like. Below is a sample of five common behavioral questions that probe into students’ leadership, teamwork, and organizational skills, as well as their motivation and initiative. While these may not be the exact questions they will face, it is certain that there will be similar questions around these topical areas:

(1) Tell me about a time you demonstrated your leadership skills.
(2) Describe a time you worked as part of a team.
(3) Give me an example of a time you used your organizational skills.
(4) Tell me about a time when you had to motivate someone. What steps did you take?
(5) Describe a time you had to show your initiative.

When seeking the best way to respond to behavioral interview questions, Cunningham (2009) emphasizes the STAR method, which means interviewees should be specific in highlighting the Situation/Task, the Action, and the Result. There are several areas in which candidates should focus their responses and the questions below may help them in their preparation:

(1) Thoroughly explain the Situation/Task.
   Describe the background of the situation (i.e. the events that took place before you became involved).
   What was the setting?
   Where did it occur?
   When did it occur?
   Who else was involved?
   What exactly happened that made you demonstrate the action?

(2) Specifically describe the Action.
   What did you do?
   How did you do it?
   What steps did you take?
   Include specific dialogue whenever possible from all parties involved.
(3) Detail the Result.
What happened as a result of your actions?
Describe the outcome(s).

The goal for the interviewee should be to give sufficient depth and specificity to the interviewer since the goal of behavioral questions is to overcome the ambiguity that is associated with the traditional questions. For example, a traditional question may ask: “Tell me three attributes that a good leader possesses?” The problem is that the job candidate could supply the interviewer with three attributes that sound good but may not be attributes actually possessed by the job candidate. Rather, a behavioral-based question would ask for a specific example from the interviewee such as “Tell me about a specific time in which you have exemplified leadership.”

**Preparation**

Questions are developed by the students based primarily on the skills and personality characteristics listed on their Position Description Forms (located in the Appendix), and after the instructor pairs up partners, interview times are established. We encourage instructors to make the interview experience as authentic as they can, despite the constraints of a classroom, by having students dress in the same professional attire they would wear for a formal interview. Instructors should communicate that once the interviewer meets the interviewee at the door, his/her interview has begun and the instructor should be ignored. We tell the students that a typical interview timeframe they should plan on is 10 minutes. We also encourage the interviews to be filmed, if possible, as it is one thing to convey to students issues that you see during their interview, but it is more meaningful when they see them for themselves. Therefore, an instructor should attempt to secure a video camera prior to the interviews.

**Debriefing**

If the interview was filmed, the instructor should certainly encourage the students to view and critique their effort. Regardless, instructors should meet and discuss the interview with the students. Typically, there is a noticeable weight lifted from the shoulders of the students as soon as the interview concludes. This reaction reminds us of how stressful the interview setting can be (even a mock one such as this!). Students are anxious for feedback, so we have provided a few brief questions to help facilitate the discussion and prompt constructive feedback:

(1) What are your initial thoughts as you reflect back and provide some self-critique?
(2) How would you assess your ability in providing depth and specificity in your responses?
(3) (For the interviewer) How would you assess your listening skills? Were you able to ask any probing, secondary questions based on his/her responses?

Appraisal

We believe this activity is one of the most rewarding activities that we have the opportunity of doing because of the fact that this type of inquiry will better prepare the students for what they almost certainly will face when it comes to interview. Again, with nearly 80% of companies asking at least some behavioral questions (Cunningham, 2009), it is crucial that we prepare our students in this way. Both researchers have received numerous “thank-you” cards as a result of this activity. We regularly hear from former students about their “real life” interviews. Their stories consistently focus on the behavioral-based questions they were asked and how they would have never been prepared for these questions were it not for their in-class mock interview. It is impossible to prepare students for every question that they may be asked, but, through this important activity, we can help them gain confidence. We know the importance of experiential learning and this activity provides them a “dry-run” at what will perhaps be the most important day of their lives. It offers the chance to gain a skill-set, such as using the STAR method, that makes them realize that a reply of “I’ve been a leader my whole life,” will not be sufficient and that their responses mandate specificity and depth.

It is apparent in a real interview setting how important this behavioral-based questioning becomes, as it enables the interviewer to have a much clearer picture of who the interviewee truly is, based upon their responses. As instructors, we are tasked with something of equal importance and that is preparing our students and equipping them with the best possible knowledge. To meet this challenge, we highly recommend that all instructors integrate the behavioral-based interview activity into their teaching plans.

References


### Appendix Position Description Form

**Organization:**

Name of the organization:

Location where you would like to work/attend school:

Products or services the organization provides:

**Position:**

Position title:

Duties and responsibilities:

Salary and benefits

Advancement opportunities

Skills and abilities necessary to be successful in the job (list 6–8):

Personality characteristics necessary to be successful in the job (list 6–8):