

Behavioral Interviewing Guide

Behavioral questions, or situation based questions, are becoming increasingly common in interviews (especially if someone from HR is attending the interview). These questions are designed to allow the interviewer to decide how you will act in a future role based on your past behaviour.

The key to successfully answering a behavioural question is to be very specific and give an example. Don't answer the question in general terms.

The second thing to consider is the structure of your response. The classic answer structure for behavioral questions is the SAO response:

S(ituation) – draw the interviewer a excellent picture of the situation.

A(ction) – talk about how the actions you took in response to that situation

O(utcome) - summarise the outcome having taken your actions

Generally the interviewer is looking for an example from your work life however you might also be able to use scenarios you've encountered outside the workplace – perhaps at university or even in your personal life.

Most behavioral questions tend to touch on a few “hot button” issues (see below). It's worth even giving some thought to a few situations where you've dealt with these issues before, so you've got some answers to draw on rather than trying to rack your brain when you're in an interview.

An example of the SAO Response

Let's start off with a classic behavioral question: ***“Tell me about a time when you had to make a difficult decision.”*** We answered the question using the SAO technique.

S(ituation) – start your answer by drawing an excellent picture of the situation.

“When I was working over at Acme worth, there were only the four of us in the IT department – the IT Manager, two junior Helpdeskers, and myself, a Systems Engineer. The IT Manager was letting me run a fairly substantial hardware refresh. We were rolling out new PCs across the business, and I'd scheduled the new screens to be installed late one Friday. The Friday came around, and the IT Manager called in sick. He still wanted me to tackle the rollout though – he thought between the helpdeskers and myself we still had enough sets of hands, and the business had been pushing hard for the new PCs for a long time. We'd also already told everyone to shut down their systems at 4pm to give us easy access.”

Early that afternoon, one of the servers crashed, meaning all our email systems were down. I realized pretty quickly it wasn't going to be a simple fix, and I'd need to be working on it for a few hours. I didn't feel the two junior guys could handle the PC rollout themselves, so I either had to leave the server down while I went and helped them, or cancel the rollout and fix the server, probably annoying hell out of the business in the process".

There's a lot of detail there, but that's what you want. It gives an excellent, comprehensive overview of the situation, and it's very specific.

A(ction) – now you talk about how the actions you took in response to that situation.

"I decided it was far more important to the business that we had email up and running again as soon as possible – we rely on email very heavily, even over the weekend. So I called the General Manager to let her know I was cancelling the PC rollout that day, and why I'd made that decision. I also left a voicemail for my IT manager so he knew about it. Then I was able to fully focus on the problem at hand, and was able to get stuck in and fix mail server back up and on line."

It's really important at this point to be saying "I did this and I did that", not "we did this and we did that".

O(utcome) – summarise the outcome of the situation.

"I was able to get the email systems back up on line within a few hours. And on Monday, the IT Manager was really happy with not only the decision to make getting email back up the priority, but the fact that I'd kept the business in the loop by contacting the GM and managed their expectations"

Examples of Behavioural Questions:

Customer Service

- Have you ever had a very angry or difficult customer? How did you deal with them?
- Have you ever had a client with unrealistic expectations?
- Tell me about a time you had to say no?

Interpersonal/Conflict

- Have you ever had a manager you disliked? Why did you dislike them? Was anything done to resolve the situation?
- Tell me about a group situation in which there were problems. How did you handle the situation?
- Have you ever had a conflict with a colleague?
- Describe the best team you've been a part of? What made it great?

Problem Solving

- Tell me about a difficult technical problem and how you dealt with it?

- Tell me about a decision you've made that carried an element of risk?
- Describe an occasion when you've had to make a decision even though you did not have enough information.

Dealing with Pressure

- Tell me about a time you made a mistake? How did you recover?
- Tell me about a time you were faced with a challenging deadline? How did you deal with the situation?
- Has there been an instance where you've had too much work to do? How did you prioritise?

Attitude

- Have you ever had to go above and beyond the scope of your normal duties?
- Tell me about a time you had to show some initiative?
- Describe a time you had to do something you didn't entirely support?

Motivation

- Describe a work experience and tell me why it was satisfying?
- Describe three things you've done in the last year to further your career? Book? Courses? Etc
- Tell me about a time you volunteered for a task.

Leadership

- Have you ever had to make an unpopular decision?
- Tell me about a time you were leading a project that wasn't on schedule?
- Have you ever had to performance manager a team member?