

HR Spotlight

Behavior-based Interviewing—Does it Still Work?

Written by Jim Kennedy

Interviewers today are in a bind. Behavior-based interviewing that relies on “give me an example” questions is in jeopardy. A number of factors — including an ongoing talent shortage, increasing diversity, savvy candidates, and declining authenticity — threaten the continued effectiveness of this form of interviewing.

Behavior-based interviewing uses the recognized principle that past and present behavior is the best predictor of future performance. However, more and more of today’s candidates either have difficulty relating to traditional questioning techniques or have learned how to co-opt the behavior-based interview altogether.

Here’s a look at some of the factors that are challenging the traditional interview and what you can do about them.

1. The Challenge: *Talent Shortage*

Economic downturn or not, talent will remain in short supply. Unemployment rates reflect a demographic-based trend that won’t fundamentally change in spite of periodic swings in market sectors.

In fact, the McKinsey consulting firm predicts that the number of workers in the 35-44 age bracket - the key sourcing ground for upper level managers - will decline one percent per year over the next 15 years. At the same time, demand for these workers will soar. On top of this, many businesses face

new competition from companies outside their industry who may be vying for the same people they are.

What you can do: *Modify your interview practices*

In today’s market, you may not always find a candidate with the exact skills and qualities you seek. That’s why your interviews should focus on revealing every competency a candidate possesses - not just the ones you are told to probe for on a short list. To hire the best people these days, you need to look deeper and discover *everything* a candidate might bring to the job.

Furthermore, sharp candidates are turned off when they’re asked the same predictable questions by several interviewers or made to sit through an endless and tightly scripted interview. It’s important that candidates feel challenged, not bored, by the interview process.

And keep in mind that today’s candidates have new attitudes about jobs and careers. The right interview questions can uncover their true

motivations and help you develop a sales pitch that really works.

2. The Challenge: *More Diverse Candidates*

Interviewers increasingly face candidates from cultures with different values and new ways of communicating. And this trend is likely to continue with the recent doubling in the number of H-1B visas. According to *Workforce 2020*, minorities will account for more than half of new entrants into the workforce in the coming years. Many, with technical backgrounds or degrees, will come from “high-context” cultures such as Asian, Hispanic or Latino, and Middle Eastern.

What you can do: *Understand the impact of diversity on interviewing*

Our experience shows that candidates from high-context cultures (and sometimes women) struggle with “give me an example” questions that probe for evidence of past behavior. Many are uncomfortable focusing on and promoting themselves. Instead, they talk about the group effort and team accomplishment. This modesty may obscure their own unique qualities or competencies. That’s why it’s important to learn an interviewing style that is effective with a more diverse workforce. Reframe any initial negative reaction into one that is neutral to keep yourself objective longer. Then, base your assessment on the entire interview not just first impressions or the answer to a specific question.

3. The Challenge: *More Savvy Candidates*

In his newest book, *Winning the*

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Talent Wars, Bruce Tulgan says:

“Interviews are not as reliable as they used to be because so many people are learning how to give the “right” answers in job interviews - the kinds of answers interviewers want to hear.”

Indeed. And it's no coincidence that candidates have become a lot wiser since the proliferation of the Internet. In fact, information on how to prepare for traditional behavior-based interviews abounds in cyberspace. And it's not just “underground” sites that are responsible. Companies often unwittingly promote the behavioral competencies they seek at their own Websites.

Many college and graduate schools are also getting into the act, with special courses and coaching sessions on behavioral interviewing. The Kellogg School of Business at Northwestern University, for example, advises students to develop at least five examples of each competency they claim. Then, if an interviewer asks for more than one example, or other interviewers ask the same question, the student can produce five different examples of a specific behavior.

What you can do: *Prepare for savvy candidates*

Be ready for today's well-prepared candidates by avoiding rigid, highly-structured interviews that limit your ability to spontaneously follow up on what a candidate says. Inflexible interviews make it hard to move away from candidates' prepared statements or pat answers and drill down to discover the real person.

When interviewing prepared candidates learn about past behavior without prompting or asking directly for specific examples. Try probing with “how and

why” questions to find out what is behind the candidate's experiences in terms of their competencies. For example, “How were you able to . . . ?” or “What qualities did you draw on to . . . ?” This reduces the likelihood of telegraphing what you're looking for and inviting prepared answers.

4. The Challenge: *Declining Authenticity*

Most candidates generalize, many exaggerate, and some, unfortunately, completely fabricate stories and examples of their behavior. In other words, they tell the interviewer what they think he or she wants to hear, even though that may have little relation to the truth. When this happens, the very foundation for predicting future behavior from the interview collapses.

Hiring candidates who lack candor makes it difficult to build future relationships and establish trust. This becomes even more significant as the pace of business quickens, there are fewer constraints on decision making, and judgment becomes more dependent on personal integrity.

What you can do: *Prepare for declining authenticity*

Use a process of discovery where you follow up with questions driven by your curiosity, probing deeper until you feel satisfied the truth has been disclosed. This method reveals behavioral evidence from the candidate without relying on predictable, structured questions to request specific examples of behavior.

There is a belief that competencies that emerge naturally from the interview are more powerful and believable than requested examples.

Finally, seek repeated evidence that yields a pattern of behavior, which is stronger than a single requested example. If necessary, use a series of questions to drill down in cases where you suspect a candidate isn't being truthful or forthright.

Traditional behavior-based interviewing techniques may no longer yield useful or authentic information. In today's market, do you want your interviewers to be thorough in their probing or simply ask assigned and predictable questions?