



Behavioral vs. Situational Interviews

There are two approaches to asking interview questions: behavioral and situational. Behavioral interviewing asks the candidate to describe how they handled a past experience. In contrast, situational interviewing asks the candidate to make a choice among several options presented. A behavioral question or request tends to start with “Tell me about a time where you (faced a certain problem)”. A situational question tends to resemble “What would you do if you (had to choose between option A and option B)?”

Behavioral interviews are more effective because past history is the best predictor of future behavior. When presented with a situational question, a person who is good at interviewing will often be able to guess what the question is driving at and will give you the response you wanted to hear. For example, “Tell me about a time where you faced an unreasonable deadline” will provide good insight into how the candidate handles pressure. In contrast, “What would you do if you had to work late to meet a deadline?” usually results in the candidate responding that they’ll just suck it up and work longer hours. Clearly, behavioral interviews produce a more accurate picture of how a candidate will behave.

Also, behavioral interviewing is more effective when the interviewer asks multiple follow-on questions after the candidate responds to the initial question or request. Striving to understand low-level details about the situation the candidate describes often uncovers important insights. Failing to drill down to low-level detail allows a savvy candidate to “spin” a previous situation to appear more attractive. Driving to very low levels of detail in your questioning and observing the candidate’s response (both verbal and in terms of body language) reveals a more accurate picture of the candidate’s strengths and weaknesses. The questions below tend to draw out important details that clarify your understanding of the candidate’s past behavior and skills:

- So what did you do next?
- What exactly was your response when that happened?
- How did they respond to what you said?
- How did you feel about that?
- How did you handle that situation?
- Who did you talk to about that and what did you say?
- Looking back in hindsight, what do you think you could have done better in that situation?