

Waltzing through the behavioral job interview

By Carol A. Tuttas, MSN, RN, NE-BC

OVER THE COURSE of your career, you're likely to encounter various interview styles and formats. Employment-related interviews occur in an array of settings—job-seeking situations, coaching sessions, promotional candidate selection, and annual performance evaluations. With the current emphasis on patient safety, the ongoing nursing shortage, staff turnover, employee satisfaction concerns, and efforts to build effective and high-performing nursing teams, managers have more reason than ever to use the interview process with the best chance of finding the best candidate for the position.

The behavioral interview has steadily gained popularity over the traditional interview style. Also called the competency-based or behavior-based interview, it differs from the traditional interview by probing for specifics that reveal a candidate's probable compatibility—not only with the job's clinical and technical skill requirements

What you need to know to ace this nontraditional interview style

and ethical tendencies, informatics, and other skills that affect performance quality. Managers seek to learn not just what you can do but

who you really are and whether you would add to or take away from an existing team's potential to achieve optimal patient outcomes.

Besides probing your repertoire of clinical skills and experience, the behavioral interview aims to explore and evaluate your attitudes, values, and other personal qualities. The interviewer's ultimate goal is to help build cohesive teams, enhance team performance to yield optimal patient outcomes, and minimize staff turnover caused by personnel mismatches with the organizational and team culture. (See *Is the job right for you?*)

Anticipate the questions

Anyone who has applied for a job is familiar with the standard questions of a traditional interview, such as:

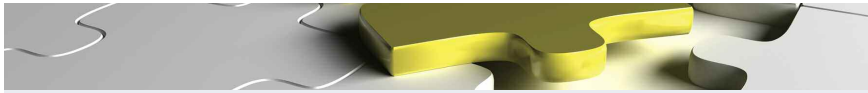
- How would you describe yourself?
- How would those you've worked with or reported to describe you?
- What are your strengths and weaknesses?
- Where would you like to be in 5 years?

In contrast, the behavioral interview is based on the premise that past success is a good predictor of future success, and past behavior is the best predictor of future behavior. So the interviewer's questions seek to explore what real-life situations the candidate has encountered and responded to relative to critical competencies of the available position.

For example, rather than asking a general question about how you handle stress (as in a traditional interview), the behavioral interviewer may ask you to recount a time when you had to do a task or complete a project while under pressure. Your response helps the interviewer interpret how you measure and respond to levels of perceived stress, as well as how innovative and resilient you are in challenging situations. When you answer, you have a chance to describe how you've functioned under pressure in real life and the favorable outcomes you've achieved in such circumstances. Had you been asked simply how you handle stress, the interviewer may have come away without enough meaningful input to contribute toward a hiring decision.

but also with the culture of the healthcare team and the organizational philosophy. The interviewer is trained to conduct a structured interview that stresses key critical competencies, such as interpersonal skills, behavioral





Is the job right for you?

Before you apply or interview for a position, do some soul-searching to determine if that position truly has the characteristics most important to you. Ask to see the job description so you can identify the critical competencies and expectations for the role. Explore the facility's website to learn about the organization's history, what services it offers, and its mission, vision, values, and its culture.

Your due diligence in preparation will guide you to draw conclusions as to whether the position and the organization offer what you seek from the four pathways that have been identified as leading to joy in the workplace:

- connectedness
- the work itself
- opportunity for achievement
- venues for recognition.

Regardless of the interview style you encounter, always prepare for it. Anticipate some common traditional inquiries, such as "What are your strengths and weaknesses?" For most people, it's harder to identify weaknesses than strengths. So be aware that you have weaknesses, and identify in advance what they are. Whenever possible, choose to describe one that isn't linked directly to a competency critical to the position you're interviewing for. Before the interview, take the time to reflect on your own practice and experiences so you can draw on them with ease when responding to questions.

Turn the tables

Be prepared to pose pertinent questions to the interviewer, if appropriate. Think about what's meaningful to you in your professional role; ask questions about these aspects of the role if the interviewer hasn't covered the information sufficiently (or at all). Arriving to an interview prepared with your own insightful questions shows your intellectual curiosity.

Seize the chance to stand out

The behavioral interviewer also might ask you to describe a time you came up with an idea within your role to improve the unit where you worked. Your response gives you the opportunity to stand out as a problem solver, even if your idea wasn't accepted or implemented. What's more, if you structure your response based on the nursing process, you'll show you have a methodical, scientific problem-solving approach. If you include an evidence-based rationale as the foundation of your idea for improvement, your response will be that much more appealing.

Some behavioral interview questions are intended specifically to assess your interpersonal skills. For instance, the interviewer might ask you to describe a time when your communication skills and style helped improve less-than-ideal team dynamics or when you made extra efforts to put an anxious patient or family member at ease.

An interviewer interested in your motivational drive, planning skills, and implementation ability might ask you to describe your career goals, your plan to achieve them, and the actions you've taken toward achieving them.

This question requires a more prescriptive and thoughtful response than its counterpart in the traditional interview, which asks where you see yourself in 5 to 10 years. It allows you to describe your professional career development action plan—one way to make your career aspirations known. After all, future opportunities could be brewing even at the time of your interview.

Some questions may prompt you to detail a communication breakdown and explain how you corrected it and what you learned from it. You may be asked to describe an incident where something you said was misinterpreted, leading to a negative outcome—and what you did to mitigate the damage and what you might do now to avoid a repeat.

Showcase your critical-thinking skills

The behavioral interview can be a great way to showcase your critical-thinking skills. In fact, some interview questions are designed to evaluate just that. Stay alert for opportunities to detail how you would assess a patient, identify the patient's clinical problem based on your assessment, prioritize that problem, and manage it effectively.

Include all appropriate interventions and rationales for actions taken, and describe how you'd prepare for a physician callback, including what physician orders you'd expect to receive. Also be prepared to describe how you'd work with a patient's significant other or interdisciplinary healthcare team members in challenging circumstances.

Wherever you encounter the behavioral interview, see it as a chance for you to shine. By understanding what this type of interview is and why it's used, you can better display your skills, experience, and personality traits to match the key competencies required. ★

Selected references

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