

# Career Employment Services Guide to Behavior-Based Interviews

How to Prepare for the Behavior-Based Interview



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Division of Missouri ACTE

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Summer 2004 and Fall 2004

# Tell Me About a Time When...

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As soon as you hear the words, “Tell me about a time when...,” you should be aware that your interviewer is probably using a behavioral technique.

This technique uses your past experiences and behaviors as an indicator of your future success. In other words, if you can demonstrate through examples that you accomplished something before, there is a tendency for the interviewer to believe you may do it again.

For example, if you saved your company money by streamlining a process, and you relate that experience to the interviewer, he will become interested because there is a strong possibility you could save his company money, too.

## Be Specific

Sometimes it is difficult to come up with a specific illustration, because the situation, such as managing multiple tasks at once, occurs regularly in your line of work.

For example, a candidate had worked in the publishing business for seven years. When she was asked, “Tell me about a time when you had to juggle priorities to meet a deadline,” she almost laughed out loud.

“Juggling priorities are a way of life in the publishing business,” she answered. “There’s not a day when I don’t have to work under that kind of pressure.”

Her interviewer persisted, asking specific examples of this type of demand.

“I could tell you five incidents that happened this week alone,” the candidate replied. “I had one person on the phone, received three emails with project changes, and I had two deadlines to meet. And that was only on Monday.”

In this scenario, the interviewer is seeking information about how the candidate handles priorities and deadlines, how she works under pressure, and how flexible she is.

Since this candidate had a lot of experience in these areas, she would have satisfied the interview questions by telling about a specific time when she demonstrated those organizational skills. She could have shown how she gets things done no matter what it takes, by saying, “There was an incident last month when I received a frantic phone call from one of the managers, and I had to drop everything to get a change processed. What he asked was almost impossible, but with some help from my team and working extra hours, I was able to accomplish the goal. The department manager commended me for pulling off the changes and meeting the tight deadline.”

## Your Stories

Preparing your stories is one of the most beneficial exercises you can do to become focused before you interview. If you say you’re good at something, prove it with a story. ***You should be able to back up anything you say on your résumé or in an interview with a story or an example of how you have soared in a sticky situation.***

## Why Behavior-Based Interviews?

- What an applicant has done is a better indicator of future job success than what the applicant believes, feels, thinks, or knows.
- The more similar the past situation and the future situation, the more accurate the prediction should be.
- Contemporary research also suggests that behavior within the interview may be used to predict future behavior. Questions about past work situations may be used to predict future performances on the job.
- Conducted appropriately, Behavior-based interviews are legally defensible.

**A good interview** is a valid interview. It gains information regarding only a candidate's ability to do a job.

**A valid interview** is legally defensible. Behavior questions are designed only to establish job-related skills. Because the burden of proof in a discrimination case will shift to the employer, notes that reflect job appropriate questions and answers provide a solid defense.

**A legally defensible interview** is a good interview. Court decisions typically focus on professionally meaningful ways of conducting interviews. Attention is given to job analysis, standard treatment, questions asked, selection criteria, notes, and evidence of bias.

Who Uses Them????

City of Springfield  
City Utilities  
Commerce Bank  
Department of State  
Empire Bank  
Federal Express  
Office of Personnel Management  
Transportation Security Management

Just to name a few.



# Behavior-Based Interviews

## Behavior-Based Interviews

- Job applicants are asked to demonstrate knowledge, skills, and abilities, or “competencies”, by answering interview questions with specific examples of their past work experience.
- “Past performance is the best predictor of future performance.”
- The questions are based on certain competencies that the position needs.
- Rather than tell an interviewer what you **WOULD** do in a given situation, you will tell what you **HAVE DONE** in the past.

This method is used because it gives the interviewer a clearer picture of the skills the applicant has already developed.

## During the Interview

- DO NOT ASSUME ANYTHING - One of the biggest mistakes an applicant can make is to assume that the interviewer understands “phrases” and jargon of the interviewee. If you are describing a situation or action and you use acronyms or technical jargon, be sure to explain what that means to the interviewer. Example: KSA’s = Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities.
- Applicants will answer the questions drawing from their prior knowledge, skills, and abilities. If an applicant doesn’t have any related past experience then **admit it**. DO NOT try to make up a situation or answer with a situational response like, “If I was in that situation, I would do....”

## Factors to be aware of

- Behavior-based interview (BBI) questions are usually rather lengthy. It is important to ask the interviewer to repeat the question if you do not hear or understand the entire question.
- This type of interview style is designed to make the interviewee think. It is OK in most interviews to tell the panel that you need a minute to reflect on your past experiences to pick the best example.
- Typically, this style of interview is used in conjunction with a structured selection process; as a result, there will probably be very little eye contact with the interviewers. Please NOTE: BBI’s are not always performed in a structured environment; at times there will be follow-up questions for clarification.
- Oral communication is typically a dimension that is being evaluated in a BBI. Oral communications are both verbal and nonverbal actions. Be sure to avoid any bad habits (such as clicking a pin) during the interview process.

# Behavior vs. Trait

## **Behavior**

A behavior is anything a person does that can be observed or measured. The focus in behavior theory is to PREDICT rather than to understand behavior.

1. Behavior descriptions discourage labeling, stereotyping, or snap judgments.
2. Prediction is directly related to data.
3. It is difficult for candidates to “fake” excellence.
4. Candidates with varying levels of skills are identified.

The behavior approach attempts to objectively describe behavior and minimize interpretation of it. The emphasis is on PREDICTING behavior. In a short interview period, an interviewer cannot hope to gain sufficient insight to thoroughly understand another person.

## **Trait (the “gut feeling” approach)**

Trait is a word used to summarize a person’s characteristics. The focus in trait theory is to look within the individual to UNDERSTAND why people behave the way they do.

1. Traits become labels.
2. There is a weak link between data and prediction.
3. It is easy for candidates to “fake” excellence.
4. All candidates can form their answers to say what sounds good.



## Preparing for the Behavior-Based Interview

### What do you know? Who do you know? How can you find out?

- Be able to summarize your relevant career experience to date.
- What makes you the best candidate for the position? (If you don't know –how can you convince someone else?)
- Familiarize yourself with the job description and every single thing you know about the position.
- Relate (write it down) your experiences to the job description.

**Elements:** Competencies the hiring manager has determined are essential to the job. The questions will be based on the elements.

#### *Examples:*

- Describe a time when you took initiative rather than waiting to be told what to do.
- Tell me about a time when you were especially creative in solving a problem.
- Tell me about a time when you were effective in giving a presentation or demonstration.

You know the job you are interested in. If you were the hiring manager, what competencies would you find important?

What questions would you ask to find out if applicants could do the job?



## EXAMPLE QUESTIONS

Question	Element
Many work situations require fast thinking to make a decision. Give us an example of a time when you were especially skillful in making a decision quickly, and the outcome.	Decisiveness
This job will require you to spend a large amount of time talking to others. When have you had to work in this kind of situation and how did it affect you?	Spoken Communication
Some situations require us to express ideas/opinions in a very tactful and careful way. Tell me about a time when you were successful with this particular skill.	Assertiveness
Tell me about your experience in documenting your work activities in a written form. Be specific.	Policy & Procedure
Give me an example of any specific time in which you found it necessary to work more than your normally scheduled hours to get a job done.	Commitment to Task
Give an example of a time when you were able to take meaningful action in solving a practical problem.	Problem Solving

The following questions are also useful in getting applicants to discuss work realities rather than notions or suppositions:

1. Tell me how you increased teamwork among a previous group with whom you worked.
2. Describe what you liked and disliked about how you were managed in previous positions.
3. Recall a time when you made what you consider a mistake or bad decision on the job. How did you handle the situation?
4. In your past work life, what kind of coworkers or clients rubbed you the wrong way? How did you respond?
5. Tell me about a time when you set specific work goals for yourself. How did things turn out?
6. Describe a time when you had to criticize or discipline the performance for someone who worked with you or for you. How did you handle the situation? What was the result?

7. Walk me through the major highlights of your career so far and tell me where you want to go next.
8. Tell me about a work emergency or crisis of some kind in which you were involved. What was your role? What did you do?
9. We've all felt stress in our work lives. Tell me about work-related situations that cause stress for you. How do you typically handle such stress?
10. In your most recent position, what did you learn? How did you apply this learning?
11. Tell me about a challenge you faced in a previous work situation. How did you respond?
12. Every manager has to learn to delegate well. Describe a work situation in which you delegated responsibility successfully. Then tell me about a time when your delegation of responsibility did not work out well. How did you handle that situation?
13. What approaches worked best for you in the past in communicating with your boss? With your co-workers? With your subordinates?
14. Tell me about a time when you took charge as a leader in a work situation without being formally assigned to that role by your boss.
15. What experience have you had working with people of different ethnicities, age, or physical ability levels?
16. In the past have you had a preference for working mainly with men or women? Explain your answer.
17. Tell me about a time when you felt you went beyond the call of duty in helping a client.

### **Useful Probes for Interviewing**

Although probing for more extensive answers from candidates is not allowed in strictly structured interviewing environments, the practice is still widely used. It can be applied fairly if each candidate is given the advantage of approximately the same degree of probing by interviewers.

1. Please clarify what you mean by ...
2. How did you feel when that happened?
3. Why do you think you reacted as you did?
4. Did you consider other options at the time?
5. Please give me more details about ...
6. How do you think others felt about your actions at the time?
7. Looking back on the experiences, how do you see things now?
8. What was going through your mind when you took that action?
9. Did the outcome of your action satisfy you?



## EXAMPLE ELEMENTS

**Team Orientation:** Illustrates an understanding of working within a group environment. Understands and demonstrates the ability to modify own work style to respond to the needs of others. Shows an understanding of group accomplishment rather than individual accomplishment.

**Oral Communication:** Speaks in a clear, understandable manner. Clearly presents information and is persuasive and effective in getting his/her point of view across. Listens to what individuals have to say and elicits information from others. Uses correct grammar, vocabulary and sentence structure.

**Customer Service Orientation:** Demonstrates a positive attitude toward dealing and helping customers/citizens. Able to maintain mature problem solving attitudes when dealing with angry customers, hostility, and interpersonal conflict.

**Handling Pressure:** Able to handle pressure and stress involved in high volume customer areas as well as a heavy work load environment in a calm and professional manner. Able to meet deadline constraints successfully without feeling unduly overwhelmed. Has a mechanism for dealing with pressure and stress.

**Safety/Alertness:** Demonstrates an ability to be attentive and cautious regarding aspects of the environment related to safety issues. Monitors environment during routine activities to ensure safe working habits.

**Supervising/Directing the Work of Others:** Level and length of experience directing the work of others; able to effectively schedule, direct, monitor the work of crew or employees; provides direction and guidance to crew; has the appropriate interpersonal skills to motivate and evaluate crew's performance.

**Initiative:** Active attempts to influence events to achieve goals; self-starter rather than passively accepting. Taking action to achieve goals beyond what is necessarily called for; originating action.

**Alertness:** Able to be attentive to all aspects of the environment while working. To monitor environment during routine activity.

**Decision Making and Problem Solving:** Able to take action in solving problems while exhibiting sound judgment and a realistic understanding of the issues involved.

**Commitment to Task:** Able to start and persist with specific courses of action while exhibiting high motivation and a sense of urgency.

**JOB DESCRIPTION  
CITY OF SPRINGFIELD, MO**

**HUMAN RESOURCES DEPARTMENT**  
**EMPLOYMENT**  
**COMPENSATION DIVISION**

Job Title	<u>Firefighter</u>
Sch & Grade	<u>FPS-1</u>
Class Code	<u>DCO5</u>
FLSA Status	<u>Non-exempt</u>
Bargain Unit Elig	<u>IAFF</u>
OCC. Group	<u>Fire</u>

**PRIMARY PURPOSE:**

Performs firefighting, fire prevention, emergency medical services and rescue work, maintains and cleans fire department buildings, grounds, and equipment.

**SUPERVISION:**

Works under direct supervision of a Fire Captain.

**DESCRIPTION OF WORK:**

**ESSENTIAL FUNCTIONS:**

1. Responds to alarm for fires, hazardous chemical and emergency medical incidents.
2. Lays and connects hose to hydrants and fire apparatus, attaches, and changes nozzles, aims, and directs water streams.
3. Uses hand and power tools to fight fires, gain entry, extricate victims, and ventilate buildings.
4. Utilizes various portable extinguishers, wet and dry chemicals, solvents and absorbents to fight fires and contain spills.
5. Performs salvage and overhaul activities including protecting building contents, cleaning, securing and preserving fire scenes.
6. Removes firefighting equipment from trucks; lifts and carries items; sets up and uses ladders and equipment as necessary.
7. Climbs ground and serial ladders; scales walls and rappels using rope and harness; maneuvers under, over and around obstacles.
8. Searches smoked filled buildings using self-contained breathing apparatus looking for location of fires, occupants or victims.
9. Performs prolonged running, walking or standing while conducting inspections, pre-fire tours and emergency scene operations.
10. Responds to emergency and non-emergency medical assist calls.
11. Cares for injured and administers basic emergency medical aid.
12. Operates vehicles and fire apparatus as required.
13. Performs routine and preventive maintenance on equipment and assists in periodic inspections or certification tests.
14. Reads, studies and interprets department procedures, technical manuals, and building plans.
15. Participates in in-service training, televised training, and drills to maintain required level of knowledge and skills proficiency.
16. Performs pre-fire planning activities including touring and studying businesses for physical layout, possible hazards, location of water sources, potential life loss, etc.
17. Prepares and delivers public education programs, regarding fire prevention and safety and conducts tours of the fire station.
18. Assists in fire safety inspections of public and private buildings or property.
19. Maintains and cleans fire department buildings and grounds.

**IMPORTANT FUNCTIONS:**

1. Identifies and reports maintenance needs of assigned equipment.
2. Participates in an ongoing physical fitness training program designed and/or approved by department administration.

*Performs related work as required.*

**QUALIFICATIONS REQUIRED:**

Any combination of training or experience providing the following knowledge, skills and abilities:

**Knowledge**

Entry level position, no specific subject matter knowledge required.

**Abilities**

Successfully complete an intensive training program including, but not limited to, the principles and methodologies of firefighting, emergency medical services and rescue work; follow oral and written instructions; read and interpret building construction plans, technical manuals, and procedural guidelines; independently view, learn and apply applicable televised technical training; communicate effectively both verbally and in writing; exercise sound, independent judgment; react appropriately, quickly and calmly under stress, deal effectively and courteously with associates and the general public; possess a high degree in integrity and strong work ethic with the ability to detect and avoid conflicts of interest; must be able to ascend and work at heights required in emergency operations which may involve the tallest man-made structure or natural formation responded to by the Springfield Fire Department; performs effectively as a member of the team in carrying out the city's stated mission and philosophy; perform the essential functions of the job without posing a direct threat to the health and safety of others.

**Experience, Education, and Training**

Must be a high school graduate or have G.E.D.

**Physical Requirements**

Visual defects cannot exceed 20/100 in both eyes and vision must be corrected to 20/30 in both eyes; successful long-term soft contact lens wearers shall not be subject to the uncorrected criterion; must be able to distinguish primary colors; must be able to pass a post offer medical examination including a hearing test; must be able to run, walk, crawl, jump, climb ladders and stairways, and sit and stand for long periods of time; must be able to lift, carry, push or pull weight up to 125 pounds; must be able to bend, squat, kneel, twist and reach overhead; and must be able to hold and grip objects.

**Working Environment**

Both indoor and outdoor environments; susceptible to a variety of extreme weather conditions; exposed to life threatening conditions and situations associated with firefighting, hazardous chemical incidents; and emergency medical situations such as toxic chemicals, fumes, smoke, falls, danger from collapsing walls, ceilings or roofs, and possible exposure to contagious diseases; subject to poor visibility and ventilation and working in cramped spaces.

**Licensing/Certification**

Must possess a valid Missouri Motor Vehicle Operator’s License; must possess Emergency Medical Technician – B and Firefighter I and II certifications before being invited to the second interview; certifications must be maintained throughout the appointment.

**Miscellaneous Requirements**

Must be at least 18 years of age; must pass a background investigation; must pass post-offer drug test; shift and station assignment may vary depending on department requirements.

**Last** June 2004  
**Revision:**

**GENERAL ORDINANCE NO. 2282**

**Comments:** Update Abilities

**Date:** May

**I have read the following job description in its entirety and understand its contents. I can perform the essential functions outlined with or without reasonable accommodation under the Americans with Disabilities Act.**

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_



## Preparing for the Interview

Successful applicants will be able to:

- Assess current skills and identify goals for future skill development.
- Effectively use the job description when applying for a new position.
- Demonstrate an effective method of successfully answering questions in a behavioral interview.

Students Should “**Know Thysel**”

- **Aptitude** – This is your natural ability to do something (i.e. math, writing, mechanics, constructing).
- **Skills** – There are two basic kinds of skills a potential employee has to offer an employer. They are broken down into specific categories, but generally you will have several skills that are considered soft and hard.
  - **Hard skills** can be trained and learned. Examples include typing, computer operation, equipment operation, carpentry, and mechanics.
  - **Soft skills** are transferable, innate skills that come naturally. Examples include honesty, good attitude, personable with customers and co-workers, and punctuality.
- **Interests** – Where do you derive enjoyment? If you are good at math, but HATE IT, you’re much better off being a carpenter if you derive more pleasure from carpentry. There will also be less stress.
- **Personality** – Do you prefer to work with people? Do you prefer to not work with people or in teams? What suits you?
- **Goals** – Are you working toward a plan? Have you ever actually sat down and written out some of your goals and spent a significant amount of time/effort to work, monitor and achieve them?

**Why is this important?** You have to **KNOW YOURSELF** before you can begin to explain your skills to an employer. It seems very easy to say, “Well, I know what I can do,” but do you really? Can you really remember **EVERYTHING** you’ve done in your career? Probably not.

Two things typically happen:

1. You will have such varied professional experiences that it will be difficult to really remember and effectively relate those skills unless you sit down and think them out into reasonable descriptions.
2. You will have done the same type of job for a long time and begun to take your knowledge, skills and abilities for granted. Then it’s difficult to separate what you know from what you think EVERYBODY should know because it seems to come so naturally to you. Those are skills!

### **Effective Answers:**

Specific answers are required for the BBI process. It is important that answers contain enough specific detail for the interviewers to get a good gauge of the applicant's skills and abilities. To assist in developing responses candidates should remember the **STAR** technique.

**ST= Situation or Task** – This is the background information that sets up the question. What were the specifics of the situation or the task that you were required to do? This will provide the interviewer with information regarding the complexity of the situation and the factors that were involved.

**A= Action** – What was your specific role or what action did you take? Based on the situation what did you do or what task did you perform?

**R= Result** – What was the final outcome of the situation or the task?

By following this technique, candidates can easily outline their response and be sure that they address the question fully.

### **Interview Responses:**

Tell me about a time when you exceeded a customer's expectations?

1. Well, I do that everyday. I think the customer is the most important person to the organization. I think it is vital to always make sure the customer is happy. If the customer is not happy then the company could lose money and will end up getting a bad reputation. I will always try to accommodate the customer's needs.
2. Well, there was a time when a customer came in with a defective item. The item was purchased at a store in another state. It is company policy that we do not do returns from out of state stores. However, the customer bought the item on vacation and would not be returning to the store where she bought the item. So I called my manager and asked if we could replace the item for the customer. He said yes, so I checked the store and it turns out we didn't have the item in stock and we wouldn't for two weeks. I called the store across town and they had one more of the item in stock. I had the store associate pull the item and told them the customer would be on their way to pick up the item. In the end, the customer wrote my manager thanking me for going out of my way to find and replace her defective item.

Of the two examples above, which do you think is an appropriate response?

**Example one:** This example is too vague. Skirts around the question and focuses on the importance of customer service. The interviewee never gives an example of a time when she exceeded a customer's expectations. In the end this candidate would have failed this question due to a lack of a direct response.

**Example two:** Follows the **STAR** technique. The interviewee sets up the situation and describes what actions she specifically took to address the customer's concerns. She concluded the question with an explanation of the results of her actions.

Again, it is important to stay away from generalities. Try to answer the question to the best of your abilities. If you can't provide an example, say so. **Do NOT answer with a situational response**, indicating what you would do. This will lead the interviewer to think that you are only saying what you think they want to hear.

## **S.T.A.R.**

Describe a situation where you suggested and/or implemented an idea that made your job easier or more efficient.

**S** \_\_\_\_\_

**T** \_\_\_\_\_

**A** \_\_\_\_\_

**R** \_\_\_\_\_

## **“On Your Own”**

Come up with your own Behavior-based interview questions and answer them. Have a peer review your responses and make sure they are in the format addressed in this guide.

## **RESOURCES**

Society for Human Resources Management (SHRM) [www.shrm.org](http://www.shrm.org)

World at Work [www.worldatwork.org](http://www.worldatwork.org)

International Public Management Association – Human Resources [www.ipma-hr.org](http://www.ipma-hr.org)

US. Department of Labor [www.dol.gov](http://www.dol.gov)

Bureau of Labor Statistics [www.bls.gov](http://www.bls.gov)

Equal Employment Opportunity Commission [www.eeoc.gov](http://www.eeoc.gov)

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