



Preparing for Behavioral Interviews

A recent trend among legal employers is the integration of behavioral questions into their interviews. These questions – often taking the form of “Tell me about a time when . . .” – ask the interviewee to relay a specific story about past experiences or actions to predict positive future performance. Indeed, the theory behind behavioral interviewing is that past practice speaks to how the interviewee will handle similar situations in the future. For instance, to understand how you might work as part of a team if hired by the employer, you might be asked to talk about a time when you led a team to a successful outcome.

It is true that behavioral questions present some challenges – notably the need to think of a specific experience and then connect it to the skill (perhaps also referred to as a trait, competency, or quality) that the employer is interested in learning about. But this type of question also presents an opportunity to engage in a rich, detailed discussion of how your experiences will make you a good fit for the employer.

These steps will help you prepare to respond to behavioral questions:

- 1) Research.** Before your interview, know what skills or experiences the employer values. Review the job posting, consult their website, and talk to others who may have worked for that employer to understand the competencies that the employer hopes to see in a candidate. (*See below for a table of questions that addresses specific competencies.*) Jot down the three or four skills or qualities that seem to be most important for success in the position.
- 2) Reflect.** Think about how you have demonstrated these key skills or qualities. Refer back to your Workplace Skills assessment (in the *Compass* or [here](#)) and complete the Interview Preparation Exercise to come up with experiences and anecdotes. Use your resume as a guide as well. Past professional experience (summer, term-, or full-time) may be where you turn for your examples; but you can also answer behavioral questions by discussing academic or extra-curricular activities (volunteer, athletic, etc.). *Tips:*
 - A good strategy is to select an experience or achievement that demonstrates your possession of a range of skills; that anecdote could be used in response to several questions.
 - Look for anecdotes that reflect growth and maturity.
 - If you do not have a directly relevant experience, select something analogous.
- 3) Relax.** When asked the question, listen carefully and take a moment before you answer. You are being evaluated in part on your composure and the thoughtfulness of your response. It is permissible to pause – or even ask for a few seconds to think – before beginning your answer. A strong answer is relevant and detailed rather than quick and overly polished.

4) Rehearse. Learn and practice the START method to ensure that you are walking the employer through your past experience in a way that answers the question and highlights your abilities:

Situation – Situate the story, set the stage for your narrative. Tell the interviewer where you were working, which sports team you were on, etc.

Task – Describe the task before you in that experience, including any challenges you faced, and the desired outcome.

Action – Use “I” statements to describe your specific course of action. Tell the interviewer the steps that you took and why you took them.

Result – What was the outcome? What did you learn? How did you grow? What did you accomplish or not?

Transferability – Indicate how the experience impacts your future conduct. You can mention how you responded similarly/differently when faced with a similar issue down the line, or describe any growth or change that occurred after the experience.

Example: “Tell me about a time when you had to disagree with a superior.”

Situation – A clear example of that took place while I was a section chief of my college newspaper and my managing editor and I disagreed about the content of a feature that we were running.

Task – My job was to make sure that the reporting on the event in question was strong, and that the writing was clear and accurate. My managing editor had to ensure that the feature was newsworthy in comparison to other articles in the paper. I believed strongly in the feature’s quality and newsworthiness, but my managing editor was deeply skeptical.

Action – I knew that to make my case I had to present evidence that showed why the feature was so compelling to me, and how I thought it might impact the campus community. I asked the reporter on the story to send me the emails she had received in the course of her investigation, indicating the strong reactions to this issue. Also, I consulted with other section chiefs on a draft of the feature – each agreed that the piece was important. So as not to ambush my managing editor, I asked for a meeting with only three people: her, my reporter, and myself. We talked about the recent stories in the paper, I laid out my case for the feature’s significance, tried to address concerns that she expressed, and asked the reporter to give a flavor of the experience she had in reporting the story. I noted too the quality of the writing.

Result – The feature ran in the paper, though in three parts instead of four. The meeting generated some helpful feedback about where we could streamline the story. The reporter received many compliments for the piece, and even used it as a writing sample for her post-graduate job applications. We received a lot of hits on the web link as well.

Transferability – I learned about how to make a case in a firm but non-threatening way, and to appreciate how others might see issues differently. I anticipated objections and did my best to have information that would address them before meeting with my superior. In the end the experience strengthened the working and personal relationship between me and my managing editor.

Competency/Skill/Trait	Sample Behavioral Question
Ownership of assignments/projects	Talk about a time when you made a mistake and how you recovered from it.
Team orientation	<p>Discuss a situation in which you were on a team and disagreed with the team leader.</p> <p>Describe a time when you put your needs aside to help a co-worker or classmate accomplish an organization's goal. How did you assist him or her? What was the result?</p> <p>Describe a time when you had to accomplish a project when not all of the contributing co-workers or classmates demonstrated equal commitment. How did you negotiate this?</p>
Integrity/ethics/transparency	Describe a time when your own ethical boundaries were tested.
Clear communication	<p>Tell us about a time when you received an assignment or directive that you did not fully understand.</p> <p>Tell us about a time when someone misunderstood your instructions.</p> <p>Tell me about a time when you had to think on your feet to answer an unexpected question from a professor, supervisor or client.</p> <p>Can you describe a time when you were asked to research a legal question or issue and were unable to find an answer – what did you do? How did you communicate your findings to the assigning attorney?</p>
Problem-solving	What did you do the last time things did not go according to plan?
Interpersonal skills	<p>Describe a time when you worked with someone with whom you did not get along.</p> <p>When was the last time you went to a cocktail party alone and how did you handle it?</p> <p>How do you get involved when you join a new association?</p>
Leadership	Discuss a time when you served as a team leader.
Client development/networking	Describe how you have built relationships in the past.
Ability to prioritize	Tell us about a time when you had multiple high-importance projects and competing deadlines.
Attention to detail	Describe a situation in which a detail you thought to be unimportant turned out to be very important.
Follow-through	<p>Discuss how you have managed long-term or ongoing projects in the past.</p> <p>Tell me about a time when you had to go above and beyond the call of duty in order to get a job done.</p>
Ability to handle stress	Tell us about a stressful situation you encountered and how you coped with it.
Motivation/ambition	Describe a work or school situation where your efforts had a direct impact.
Judgment	<p>Describe a time when you anticipated potential problems or raised questions beyond the scope of a project.</p> <p>Describe a situation in which you were assigned a project by a supervisor and were unsure what was sought. How did you seek to clarify the purpose of the project and expected work product?</p> <p>Describe a situation in which you did not think you would be able to complete an assignment by the deadline.</p>
Time management	<p>Describe a system you developed for keeping track of and managing multiple projects with competing deadlines. How did you track your progress so that you could meet deadlines?</p>
Creativity/flexibility	<p>Give me an example of a time when you completed an assignment and then the parameters of the project changed at the last minute. What did you do? Was this an exciting or frustrating experience?</p> <p>Give me an example of a time you thought about solving a problem in a novel way or identified relevant issues not already raised.</p>
Crisis management	Tell me about a recent situation in which you had to deal with a very upset customer, classmate, or co-worker.

Additional Considerations

In addition to the above skills and competencies, employers may place a premium on the following:

- *Commitment to the mission (especially public interest)*
- *Background of working with the population or issue (especially public interest)*
- *Ability to deal with many clients*
- *Passion*
- *Cultural awareness/sensitivity*
- *Ability to follow protocol (especially government)*
- *Ability to work independently*
- *Grace under fire*

Above taken in part from “Behavioral Interviews – Preparing Students to Tell Their Stories,” and “How and Why Legal Employers Should Use Behavioral Interviewing.” *NALP Bulletin*.