

*(This article was published by HR.com in Nov. 2002)*

## **Why is Interviewing So Damn Hard?**

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### **Interviewing is a tough job**

To most of us in the position of hiring people, the selection interview is a necessary evil. No one is comfortable hiring someone without having a conversation with that person, and almost no one is entirely comfortable having that conversation. Often, the job interview is an experience dreaded by both parties.

Certainly the skill of the interviewer is important, but the truth is that most people who interview don't do it very often, and consequently, don't do it very well. Interviewer training helps, but it's over in a day and old habits die hard. Most people fumble their way through a hiring interview, and breathe a sigh of relief when it's done.

What can be done to make the interview a more productive exercise? Well, frequent practice and role-play can increase one's confidence and familiarity with the role of interviewing, but perhaps more important is the **structure of the interview** itself. The **types of questions** that are asked and the **content of those questions** have everything to do with gathering the information needed to determine if the candidate is well-suited for the job in question. All too often an interviewer will talk with a candidate for an hour, the candidate leaves, and the interviewer only has a vague notion of what that candidate's strengths, weaknesses, goals, and achievements really are, and how that candidate stacks up against the other candidates competing for the position.

### **A System Is Needed**

Over 30 years of research continues to support the superiority of **behavioral interviewing** as the best interviewing technique available. "Behavioral interviewing" is simply a method of questioning that draws upon the candidate's past experience to predict his or her future behavior. A behavioral interview question starts with the wording,

*"Tell me about a time when . . ."*

*"Describe a situation in which you . . ."*

In this way, the interviewer gets the candidate to talk about what he/she has **actually done** on the job, rather than what he/she wants to do, thinks about doing, or even likes to do. The trick to writing good behavioral interview

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questions is to know the job in question REALLY WELL; behavioral questions that are too broad, or generic – that is, would fit any job – lose the behavioral benefit because the content of the candidate’s answer becomes watered-down to the point of meaninglessness.

### **Example of a “Generic” vs. Specific Interview Question**

Let’s suppose we were interviewing for a Financial Analyst and we wanted to know about analytical skills. We could ask a generic behavioral question like this:

*“Describe an analytical project you worked on recently.”*

Or we could ask a job-specific, targeted behavioral question like this:

*“Describe a specific business opportunity you analyzed for potential revenue, or profitability. What did you consider, and how did you present your findings?”*

The first question can be answered any number of ways, and could very well be unrelated to success on the job. The second question targets much more specific issues and activities and is likely to yield valuable information about the candidate’s skills in this area.

Bill Byham, of DDI, sums it up this way:

*“Productive interview questions are narrowly defined and well-crafted. They focus on probing for the specific behavioral attributes that define successful employees. And they’re designed to elicit actual experiences rather than hopes and dreams -- not what people say they would do in the future but what they have done in the past.”<sup>1</sup>*

### **What’s the Bottom-line?**

The questions you ask during the interview are much more important than your polish, style, and finesse. Take the time to assemble a list of job-specific, behavioral questions you can use in your interview. Have more questions than you will need – that way you can be somewhat flexible and ask some questions and not others, depending on what you learn from the candidate during the interview itself. Targeted behavioral questions that are planned in advance pay-off big when it comes to the expensive “guessing game” of hiring people.

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<sup>1</sup> Bill Byham, Development Dimensions, Inc. (DDI), as quoted in Fast Company, 4, p. 80.