

Behavior-based interviewing

By Terry McKenna

Without question, the success of any company depends upon choosing the right people for your team. Hiring affects profits in more ways than most companies realize. A Harvard Business School study determined that more than 75 percent of turnover could be traced back to poor hiring practices. The leading contributor to turnover is often not what happens after the employee is hired, but rather the process leading up to it.

Behavior-based interviewing is based on the premise that past behavior is the best predictor of future behavior. Thus, how someone has acted or responded in the past is probably how they will handle themselves in the future. Behavior-based questions require the applicant to tell you stories about how they handled specific situations in the past; situations that are comparable to those they will face in the position you're interviewing them for. Through targeted questions about work history and behavior in a variety of settings, the interviewer elicits information about real-life situations from the applicant. This systematic approach helps reduce employee turnover by selecting people whose demonstrated competencies, skills, and motivations match the key competencies, skills, and abilities required for success. Just because a person can give you the right answer doesn't mean they'll behave that way on the job. Asking what the applicant would do provides information about what they know to be the right thing to do, but not necessarily what they've done in practice. You want the applicant to tell you about their real-life experiences. The objective is to pin the applicant down for specific instances of the qualities and behaviors you're looking for. Even though skill assessment is important, it is not the most important factor. Because skills are only enablers and are not motivators, they do not guarantee any specific level of performance. Skills and motivation are separate issues and

should be assessed separately. Some skilled employees may lack motivation, while some unskilled or under-skilled employees may be highly-motivated. Distinguishing between skills and motivation is important. An example of this would be an applicant who normally only provides average customer service, but who chooses to talk about an isolated example when he gave exceptional service. The interviewer may rate the applicant high and hire him based on this. Once hired, the applicant is more likely to continue providing mostly average service. Hiring decisions based on infrequent behavior increase the chances of a bad hire.

Behavior-based questions are open-ended, thus avoiding yes/no responses. Behavior-based questions allow you to avoid hypothetical questions like: "How would you handle _____?" You want to know exactly how they've handled such situations. You always want to avoid the use of leading questions. Phrases such as "I assume that..." or "Don't you agree that..." clue the applicant how to answer the question appropriately and they will generally respond with what they think you want to hear. Do however apply active listening to get the applicant to open up. Nodding your head to show you understand, good eye contact, repeating the word "yes" to demonstrate your understanding of what they are saying, along with an occasional "I see" and "Tell me more," in addition to paraphrasing can work wonders as the applicant may open up and flood you with additional relevant information. Good active listeners on a whole, maintain eye contact 80 percent of the time. Ask short, clear questions, then listen. Ask follow-up questions by probing deeper into the applicant's initial response, then listen some more. The best talkers are not the best interviewers; the best listeners are the best interviewers. In advance develop a written set of core questions that you will ask every applicant. You can't really

listen to an applicant's answer to one question if you're trying to think up the next question at the same time. Most of your questions should come from a direct follow-up to a previously asked question. Following up applicant responses with probing questions is crucial since you're responding directly to something the applicant said. Probing questions are a lot like digging for diamonds in a diamond mine; the deeper you dig, the higher quality diamonds you'll find. The deeper you dig with your probing questions, the higher quality information you will receive from the applicant, which will make your hiring decision a whole lot easier.

One of the best interviewing techniques is the use of silence. Most interviewers feel the need to jump in and fill any gaps of silence between questions. Be disciplined and allow the technique of silence to be your ally. Silence in a conversation between two people never feels comfortable; it creates a degree of guilt, whereby one party feels obligated to close the gap by saying something (anything). Since it is the interviewer who is in control of the interview, seize the opportunity and say nothing. The silence gap will create that uncomfortable moment, resulting in guilt by the applicant to jump in and fill the silence. Once the applicant realizes the interviewer is not going to fill the silence gap, they will, because no one likes that uncomfortable feeling. The information that follows could be priceless, and could very well be the factor that determines whether you hire or reject the applicant. Silence is a key interviewing technique; use it to your advantage.

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