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How to handle behavioral interview questions

Why use behavioral questions in interviews Behavioral questions (also known as STAR behavioral interview questions or behavior based interview questions) can reveal how candidates behaved in past work situations. These behaviors can give you insight into how people will react in similar situations at your company. Here's what we'll cover: What is a behavioral interview? Hiring decisions shouldn't just be made on first impressions or hard skills. With behavior based interview questions, recruiters and hiring managers can identify candidates who look good on paper, but who may lack essential qualities for the job. Ask behavioral questions during interviews to assess one or more of these qualities based on candidates past work experiences: These questions will show how candidates react in a given situation, how they collaborate on a team and how they interact with clients. A behavioral interview will help you evaluate and choose between candidates who, at first glance, may seem equally qualified for the position. Structure your behavioral interviewing to include questions that test both your company's core values and role-specific qualities. For example, behavioral interview questions for managers or other senior roles will measure candidates' leadership skills. If you're hiring salespeople, test their reactions toward client complaints. Or, if a role involves meeting tight deadlines and working under pressure, include behavior based questions that assess how candidates handle stressful situations. To make well-rounded hiring decisions, combine the best behavioral questions with other types of interview questions, such as culture fit and situational interview questions. Here are some sample behavioral interview questions to ask candidates during your hiring process: Behavioral interview questions examples Tell me about a time you had to deliver bad news to a manager or team member. How did you do it? What was the other person's reaction? Tell me about a time you had to deal with a difficult colleague. How did you communicate with the colleague effectively? How would you explain this industry term, 'X', to someone from a different discipline? How would you react if a team leader encouraged competition between team members instead of collaboration? Give me an example of a time you made a process more efficient. How did you do it? Have you ever missed a deadline? What happened? What would you do differently next time? How do you prioritize work when there are multiple projects going on at the same time? What's the most stressful or difficult situation you've faced at your previous job? How did you handle it? What happened when you disagreed with a colleague about how you should approach a project or deal with a problem at work? Describe a time you had to handle complaints from a client. What happened and how did you manage to remain calm? Tell me about a time your team didn't meet a goal. How did you give feedback to your team members and how did you present the situation to your manager? Have you ever been assigned with a task you were not familiar with? How did you handle it: did you ask for help or did you try to find a solution by yourself? Behavioral interview questions and answers: How to evaluate candidates Behavioral interview questions can be hard to answer. Make sure you give your candidates enough time to reflect. Rushing an answer could have the opposite effect; they might get anxious and make something up, just to avoid an awkward silence. For candidates who struggle to answer your behavioral questions, think of alternatives. For example, if they can't think of a time they had to deal with a difficult coworker, ask them to give you an example of an exceptional collaboration. How was that situation different from others? And what was their role in communicating effectively? Some candidates mightn't be familiar with behavioral interviewing. To better evaluate their answers, ask follow-up questions until they've fully described their behavior in a specific situation. If you're interviewing a recent graduate or a candidate with little professional experience, they might struggle to describe a work situation. Encourage them to use an example from a non-professional environment (e.g. study group, athletic team or volunteer work) and assess their qualities based on that. Pay attention to the kinds of examples your candidates choose. From their answers, you'll see how they define a challenging situation, a difficult client or a demanding work environment. Past behaviors can give you an idea of how people think and react, but you shouldn't rely only on them to predict future behaviors. Consider other factors, as well. For example, candidates who describe past experiences of handling client complaints poorly could have learned from their mistakes and become better salespeople. Red flags Canned answers. Candidates are usually prepared to answer common interview questions, but when they can't base their arguments on personal examples they might be simply trying to make a good impression by saying the "right" thing. Keep an eye out for candidates who are able to include specific details and answer any additional questions. Generalized or hypothetical responses. Candidates' answers should relate to real experiences, even if they come from non-professional situations. The point of behavioral interview questions is to gauge how people actually acted in a real situation, not to describe ideal reactions. No answer. A candidate who can't think of examples might not pay a lot of attention to qualities that are important for the role they're applying for. For example, a customer service agent who can't provide a specific example of a time they helped a client may not be very enthusiastic about their job. Great personality, but lacking substance. Interviewers should focus on results. For example, when hiring a salesperson, you might expect a talkative candidate. However, a candidate who demonstrates quiet, steady behavior could achieve great quotas. Relate candidates' past behaviors to performance to find your best fit. Don't miss: The best interview questions to ask candidates. Click the link below to download the behavioral interview questions pdf list. Before pursuing a career in psychology and preventative medicine, Patty was the manager of an award-winning McDonald's unit in the Midwest.Arm Yourself Against Illegal Interview QuestionsBe prepared for your job interviews by knowing and understanding that there are certain questions that you do not have to answer.In fact, certain questions are illegal.To avoid hiring particular persons because of the following types of information is legally discriminatory. It is illegal. While the following list may not include every single possibility of illegal information, generally these alternatives within certain questions are illegal to question (this article was updated in 2013):Name: Interviewers cannot ask a woman for a maiden name. They may not ask anyone whether they would prefer Mr., Miss, Mrs., or Ms. as a form of address (trick question). An interviewer may not ask, "What does your name mean?" This includes your first, last, and middle names. Age, unless you are under 18 and an employer does not/cannot hire minors. This disallowed date includes your date of graduation from high school and your birth date. After hiring, you will be required to furnish this information. National Origin, unless you are an illegal/undocumented immigrant. An employer may be able to help you with the immigration and naturalization process. Where were your parents born? Your name is interesting - what nationality is it? What is your native language? How did you learn languages besides English? Birthplace (yours) US Citizenship (Interviewers may only ask whether you can prove your eligibility to work in the USA). After you are hired, you must present proof of eligibility to work in America. A form must be completed, called the I-9 Form. Additional federal forms and documents may be required from non-US citizens at the time of hire. Residence: An interviewer cannot ask you with whom you live or whether you live alone or with relatives or friends, or whomever. Race Ethnicity Skin Color Personal Information: How tall are you? How much do you weigh? (Note: Don't scoff: I have been asked both of these questions as a young adult.)What are your clothing sizes and/or measurements? (No, not even for a uniform, until you are hired)Gender/Sex (male, female, or Intersex/hermaphrodite) Sexual Orientation (gay, lesbian, bisexual, transsexual, asexual, transvestite, questioning; any orientation at all) Photographs (Interviewers cannot ask for one until you until you are hired, except in the case of some government positions.) Questions suggesting sexual harassment Interviewers are not permitted to ask you to define sexual harassment, to talk about witnessing or experiencing it, or anything about it at all.Religion, Faith, or Atheism, unless the employer is a legally organized church illegal: What do you do on Sunday? What holidays do you observe? Do you have any dietary restrictions? Do you pray at work are hinged)Illness and Health Status An interviewer is not allowed to ask you if you have chronic health problems or how your health is generally - not even about eyeglasses.Disability (physical or psychological, including the use of drugs and alcohol) Past Workers Compensation Claims Illness or Disability of Relatives Emergency Contact Information until after you are hired. An interviewer cannot legally ask for the name, relationship, or address of any person to be notified in case you have an emergency, until after you are hired.Marital Status Family Status (children, childcare, pregnancies, caring for aged parents, etc.) Interviewers are not to ask anything about family at all. They cannot ask you until after you have any relatives working for the company.Legal Record, except for crimes specifically related to the job duties. (An interviewer cannot just ask, "Have you ever been arrested?") Legal Record of Family Members (Interviewers should not ASK you about family records, but perform a background check on you alone.) Military Service (An interviewer can ask you only what type of training you may have had in any military time that you served. They may not ask what branch or what type of discharge.) Financial Status and Debts Club or Association Memberships, especially those that include any of the above categories. How to Handle an Illegal Question in an InterviewI really like to keep my personal life and professional life separate. I make it my policy not to discuss my personal life at work. Why do you ask? If you are worried, I am fully authorized to work in the USA. I am sure that I can handle all of the job duties of this position. After you hire me, I will be glad to inform you of my age. (Age) Do I appear older to you than you expected? (Children) Are you concerned that I will be taking a lot of time off? I will be glad to discuss my marital status with you after you hire me. Some illegal questions may come cloaked in verbal smoke screens and ephemeral, hard to discern. Be on guard, public domain Be prepared for your job interviews by knowing and understanding that there are certain questions that you do not have to answer. What to Do if You're Asked an Illegal QuestionThere are very few exceptions that allow exclusion from employment and deny an applicant a job for any of the reasons represented in the categories listed above. In the USA, a possible exception is a legally organized church that may require employees to be of the same faith and rules of conduct.If you feel that you have experienced an employment interview that was discriminatory, you have recourse through the United States Equal Opportunity Commission at can file a claim for illegal discrimination at you file a claim, seek the advice of an attorney specializing in employment concerns. In order to have a legal case for illegal employment discrimination, it must be in violation of a specific state or federal law or regulation. If an employment interviewer does not like your personality, then that is not illegal discrimination. However, if that same interviewer rejects you only because of a disability that you possess, then that is illegal discrimination if the disability does not prevent you from being able to do all the tasks of the job.What to Do:First of all, do not volunteer information about yourself that might be contained in any of the categories listed above. Once you volunteer such protected information, the interviewer can feel free to ask you related questions that will possibly reveal additional subtle means for discrimination in hiring practices. However, while it is illegal to ask the above questions, it is not illegal to answer them if you choose to do so. If you do choose to answer them, remember, that once you have opened up an area listed above that can be discriminatory, there is no going back. You may be discriminated against and you may or may not, then, have a legal case if you are denied employment (check with your local attorney). Therefore, you can answer the questions if they do not disturb you, but you need to understand the consequences of answering. You can also refuse to answer any illegal questions. Make every attempt to state assertively and politely that it is not an appropriate job-related question you have been asked. Also, state that you feel very uncomfortable being asked this question and feel, in good conscience, that you cannot answer it. It may be wise to avoid using the term illegal in these statements, but use your best judgment about applying that word. Avoid becoming caught in the tangled dance of tricky and downright illegal employment interview questions. This article is accurate and true to the best of the author's knowledge. Content is for informational or entertainment purposes only and does not substitute for personal counsel or professional advice in business, financial, legal, or technical matters. © 2007 Patty Inglish MS (author) from USA and Asgardia, the First Space Nation on February 02, 2017:That question is still not legal in the United States. The potential employer certainly cannot require proof like medical records if you state that you have NO such conditions - HIPAA prevents that.I remember applying for a job very long ago and the application included a full page of questions about all my and all family members' health conditions going back generations. I was not hired because a great-unt had a condition that COULD have been cancerous and was never conclusively diagnosed as such. I NEVER answered those questions on any other future application, or I simply put "No" to each suggested condition/disease.Me on February 02, 2017:Every job I apply for now has a page asking me, "If I have a disability" or not. HOW in the heck is THIS legal?The list of disabilities include: depression, missing limbs, etc. WHY would I even consider indicating I suffer from depression, if I think they will hold that against me.My husband says they can't, but I'm not stupid enough to think that.JLRussell on January 27, 2015:Thank you, Patty!Patty Inglish MS (author) from USA and Asgardia, the First Space Nation on January 27, 2015:You have a very interesting background and some vital topics of importance just now. Thanks for sharing your experiences.JLRussell on January 27, 2015:Thank you! I recently wrote a short article for the ABA Health Law eSource (November, 2014) special edition on healthcare workers and Ebola; my first published writing. Currently, I am the 2015 Editor/Chair for a professional newsletter so I'm always looking for possible topics and articles that I can legally write about. I've been consulting or health care professionals who may be in the midst of a job/career transition. Even after 15 years in the nursing profession, and now law, I was caught quite off guard in a recent interview when I was asked a few very inappropriate questions. The topic applies to job-seekers at any point in their career!Patty Inglish MS (author) from USA and Asgardia, the First Space Nation on January 27, 2015:I will look forward to reading anything you write on this topic, or a related topic. Welcome to HubPages!!JLRussell on January 27, 2015:Fabulous!No, I will not copy or publish your article but will direct readers to your Hub link as requested should I write on this topic. I'm still undecided. Thank you for pointing me the right direction. Also, thanks for a relevant, good read!Patty Inglish MS (author) from USA and Asgardia, the First Space Nation on January 26, 2015:GJL Russell - Thank you for reading this Hub and making comments. Please do not copy any of it and publish it elsewhere in any form, but share the link to his Hub with your friends and associates instead - Thank you! Since you live in the American Southwest, contact your local state or county EEO office and they can furnish you with an entire packet of free information about illegal interview questions.Best Success to you.JLRussell on January 23, 2015:I found this article very useful.How to request permissions re: content?BJC from Florida on May 12, 2012:This was a very good and informative hub. I have been asked several of these EEO questions at job interviews and thought it odd, now I know. After reading some of the comments it appears this is a common practice. Thanks for the very useful info.Cynthia Calhoun from Western NC on May 12, 2012:Lately, some employers are asking for Facebook passwords. Without citing any laws off the top of my head, it smacks of illegal prying - or something. I would NEVER work for a company that had the gaul to ask me for my FB or Twitter passwords. That is such an invasion. In any case, I'm glad I came across this hub. Well done - as always.Life Under Construction from Neverland on May 11, 2012:Very useful. I did once asked by the interviewer one or two illegal questions stated above..Voted Up!!amaudraleigh on May 11, 2012:I have never come across any of these while being interviewed for any position I went for within Wegmans food Markets. If I ever do, this will be in the back of my mind. Voted up for great info!Terre on April 29, 2012:New way for age is Oh we see your resume looks dated, or Well this job needs you move fast fast fast in mental process do you think you able to Handel that?Patty Inglish MS (author) from USA and Asgardia, the First Space Nation on October 27, 2011:That's certainly an in-depth background check, if it's going back to high school years; and does the government really pay for all these background checks before hiring anyone? I really wonder about that - are they cheaper in bulk? Yes, but not that cheap. Some job seekers may want to stay away from government jobs because of the insistence on personal information.Let us know what happens. TexasFines.TexasFines on October 26, 2011:I received a phone interview from a Recruiter with a US Govt backed company. I had to fill out an online application prior to our talk. It asked for the year I started and finished high school. I did the application but commented to my interviewer that I wondered when that question became legal to ask. She said it was always legal and the government has to ask so they can run a background check. I said that I was under the impression that background checks were only run after an offer of employment. She said the govt has to do it this way. I worked as a recruiter before and I never asked for that information. I believe my shot at this job is over, but I would love to hear other opinions.Patty Inglish MS (author) from USA and Asgardia, the First Space Nation on October 08, 2011:All these "illegals" are from the latest EEO training and regulations in 2009 and it is evident that more items are illegal to ask than in the past.RedElf - Canada is more restricted than US now; we can ask the pay range and dates of employment. Sometimes we can get a little more info if the employer feels ok about it, but not too often.Maren-Morgon M-T - I remember those days with a cringe. Sorry it happened or too!RebuildingJobs - I can understand why some people run out of interviews ASAP.MarieB - I know what you mean; the interviewer is sometimes not too friendly after that sort of assertiveness. A couple of folks I know tell interviewers that they will be happy to furnish such information after being hired.Maren Elizabeth Morgan from Pennsylvania on October 08, 2011:Back in the 1990's an interviewer said, "I see you you are married. Do you plan to have children?" I was SO angry. I snipped back, "Do you ask male candidates this question?" He laughed and we both kind of understood that I didn't have a snowball's chance in the microwave. I'm glad things have improved since those days.RebuildingJobs from USA on October 08, 2011:And to always turn focus back on your skills and qualifications. The real question, do you really want to work for someone who asks you illegal questions during an interview? That in itself should give you good cause to RUN out of the office. Just imagine what the work environment would be like. Whew!Marlene Bertrand from USA on October 08, 2011:It's sad that employers know they should not ask certain questions, yet they ask them anyway. It is good to know our rights in situations like these. Whenever I have been asked an illegal question, I have answered it with the "Why do you ask?" question. It works for getting out of answering the question, but it still leaves an uncomfortable feeling across the interview table. It kind of sets the tone for the rest of the interview. By the way, I never got the job where I didn't answer the question. HmMMM!RedElf from Canada on October 08, 2011: concur - this should be made into a hand-out for job-seekers, so they can formulate polite, neutral answers. Well done! It's pretty much the same in Canada, but so many employers try to pretend they don't understand the restrictions. As well, up here, potential employers, when checking references, are only LEGALLY allowed to ask if a prospect ever worked at that company - and that is all past employers are allowed to answer - Yes or No. - nothing about job performance, personality, reasons they left - only "Yes, they worked here," or "No, they did not work here."Dale Mazurek from Canada on October 08, 2011:If they asked all the illegal questions it sounds like it would be an interrogation instead of an interview. You always come up with such great hubs. As usual great work.DalePatty Inglish MS (author) from USA and Asgardia, the First Space Nation on October 08, 2011:A telephone screening with age as the priority question. Interviewing is sometimes adversarial, isn't it?An adult might answer politely, "I am over 18 and legally able to work in the United States." But the interviewer might not call back in that case, either. But then, once I was told I was too old for a management position in my early 20s. I asked the interviewer what age they wanted candidates and he said 19, so they could pay minimum wage to non-college educated people. I was not expecting that.Success to you on your next try, Lesleysherwood.Lesleysherwood on October 08, 2011:This is such good info. I phoned and applied for a job just last week and the first thing they asked was my age. They didn't call back. Had they seen me they might have noticed that I am a young forty nine year old. It wasn't until I put the phone down that I realized how naughty they were.LiMomma40 on October 06, 2011:Ok! Will do. Thank you!!Patty Inglish MS (author) from USA and Asgardia, the First Space Nation on October 03, 2011:Yes, I'd remove personal items, Lil. Once you reveal even one personal item, they can ask about anything.LiMomma40 on October 03, 2011:...so Patty, do you think it wise to just keep "personal" information to just that, personal? My portfolio actually will allude to my being married. Do you think that I should remove those items that would give away any personal information, (until I'm hired) and just keep it strictly, professionally, about me?Doris James MizBejabbers from Beautiful South on September 27, 2011:This hub needs to be made into a handout and given to anyone seeking employment. Superb job! I just wish these laws had been around years ago. When I was a young reporter, I was asked "did I have anyone to take care of my children?" so many times that I started to volunteer the information during job interviews. A friend of mine was told by a prospective news organization, "you won't get the job because you are short and you are a woman." Upper management looked beyond her "shortcomings" and hired her anyway. Discrimination toward women and minorities was unbelievable! It took us years to overcome. Apparently the fight isn't over yet. My thanks to you for pointing this out.demetria001 on August 07, 2011:Patty, I can't thank you enough for the time and research that it took to write such an informative and factual piece of material. This is a timeless issue that people can refer to, again and again. I pride myself in knowing Labor Law, but you certainly gave me some intricate insights into how a future employer will try to work around the law and also insightful tips on how to respond to illegal questions ask by a future employer. Excellent material and I will be a follower. Again,"I Thank You!"Linda Ann from Manchester Township, New Jersey on July 29, 2011:Very informative hub, Patty! I have been asked so many of those questions so many times and never even gave it a second thought! I never would have known they were illegal. Well, questions about clothing sizes and measurements would likely have me telling the interviewer to go pound sand, but otherwise none of the questions "seem" to be invasive or overly personal. But I can see what you mean about once the subject has opened up, they can delve deeper into it. For goodness sake, why can't things just be simpler! And government regulations and mandates? What a joke...I'm just sayin'! Voted up, useful, awesome, and interestingPatty Inglish MS (author) from USA and Asgardia, the First Space Nation on July 03, 2011:If the statement is true, then it may help you relax or to prepare for your next interview.If the statement is false, it may be a test of how you handle a challenge.If it is false and not a challenge test, then it is an insult, in which case I would not wish to work for that company.debdeb45 on July 03, 2011:Can an interviewer tell you that she finds you extremely timid and totally lacking any self confidence.Patty Inglish MS (author) from USA and Asgardia, the First Space Nation on June 06, 2011:I am glad to say that four major companies in my city were closed down from 2005 - 2008 for ignoring the regulations.Thone on June 05, 2011:If an interviewer asked me any of those "forbidden" questions (and some have), I would just answer them. If the place is going to discriminate against you, do you really want to work there? In my opinion, government regulations a bunch of rubbish. Equal opportunity and a humane workplace environment come from corporate culture, not government regulations. Firms that do not like the regulations simply ignore them, and almost always get away with it.SD Fin on May 26, 2011:Employers are still breaking these & other rules in their paper & online applications.And isn't them even putting the EEO on the application illegal? All of those questions are illegal. And I'm getting really tired of being forced w/ a yes/no question whether I'm "Hispanic or Latino". That has to w/ my job applicable skill set how?Patty Inglish MS (author) from USA and Asgardia, the First Space Nation on April 16, 2011:Odd and illegal in America - it's like the old illegal ploy of using a code system on applications during an interview for the HR person to indicate "Black, White, Young Female, Jewish", etc.Your face could have been used as a model for various types of eyeglass frames once it was scanned into a computer. It could have been used for a number of unsavory things. You never know I won't give out a picture to anyone, because people have attempted to use it on fake martial arts certificates and fake passports. I don't like cameras now.Jessica(n not real name) on April 15, 2011:Interesting article. One thing caught my attention. I was interviewed once by an eye doctor and after the interview he wanted a polaroid picture of me,he said he wanted it to place a face with my resume. I thought it was a little odd he wanted my picture.To note, I didn't get the job.Lori Colbo from United States on October 03, 2010:Great informative hub. There were surprises. I have never been asked in an interview most of those questions, but I have been on applications. Thanks for the information.roach on September 14, 2010:very very informativeBonnie McCrane on June 13, 2010:Unfortunately many companies feel that well trained HR managers/directors are just a burden on their companies. They feel that government regulations (EEOC, workers comp, ADA, etc) hinders their balance sheets. These same owners don't hire "real"/ trained HR managers and don't promote any kind of employee training at least until they have been sued. I was a Human Resources Director for over 20 years. When I moved to Florida in 2000 I was shocked that I had to educate my bosses about the FLSA laws (they couldn't fire just because, etc). This state used to list "we are a right to work state" in their employment ads when I moved here.Patty Inglish MS (author) from USA and Asgardia, the First Space Nation on February 11, 2010:Glad to be of some help. HR people really need to be trained to interview and increasing numbers of companies are providing that help.Julle Lussier from Canada on January 11, 2010:Nice hub.I don't know if it also applies in Canada, but I was not aware that it could be illegal to ask for the date of graduation from high school. I don't write it on my resume, as I think that it is not important (I have a bachelor's degree, so who cares about where and when I finished high school?..). Still, I've been asked that question in an interview for a teaching position in a college, and one of the interviewers (they were 4) strongly advised that I should write it on my resume, because it felt like I "had something to hide". What?!!?At the time, I thought his comment was somewhat inappropriate and your hub now confirms I was right in thinking so. (BTW, I never followed his advice...JCassandra Mantis from UK and Nerujenia on December 29, 2009:Wow, unusual hub! Interesting stuff!

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