

## INTERVIEWS:

# HOW TO ANSWER BEHAVIORAL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

### Takeaway Points

- To answer behavioral interview questions, prepare stories that support accomplishments you highlight in your resume and cover letter.
- Each story must accomplish three goals: Explain the situation or problem, describe the action you took, and clarify the results you achieved.
- After you answer a behavioral question, ask a follow-up question, such as “Is that the level of detail you were looking for?” This sends a clear message that you’re engaged in the discussion and you want to be thorough.

By: Team Pongo

Imagine yourself in a job interview. The hiring manager just told you some things about the organization and the job, and asked questions about your skills and background. Then, the questioning takes an unexpected turn. The hiring manager looks at you and says: “Tell me about a time you faced an unreasonable deadline.” Or, “Give me an example of how you resolved a conflict.”

You’ve just been asked a **behavioral interview question**. Hiring managers ask them to find out how you behaved in past workplace situations, so they can make an educated guess about how you might handle similar situations in the job you’re interviewing for. Past performance, after all, is widely considered to be the best predictor of future performance. Answer the questions clearly, confidently, and with sufficient detail, and you’ll strengthen your candidacy for the job. Stumble through your answers, and your chances can disappear.

#### Tell Your Story

The key to answering behavioral interview questions lies in your ability to **tell stories**. As part of your job search strategy, you should prepare at least one or two stories that directly support the accomplishments you highlight in your resume and cover letter. In addition, think about times you faced conflict or opposition, and prepare a story or two about how you overcame it.

Each story should accomplish three goals:

- Explain the **situation** or problem.
- Describe the **actions** you took to resolve it.
- Clarify the **results** you achieved.

Think about your resume for a minute. If a hiring manager asked you a behavioral question about one of the accomplishments you described, would you be able to clearly explain the situation, your actions, and the results?

#### Sample Behavioral Interview Questions and Answers

Here are three examples of behavioral interview questions a hiring manager might ask **based on a particular claim made** in a resume or cover letter, along with sample answers in the three-part story format.

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*“As part of your job search strategy, you should prepare at least one or two stories that directly support the accomplishments you highlight in your resume and cover letter.”*

| EXAMPLE 1              |   |
|------------------------|---|
| Your Accomplishment:   | Reduced travel expenses 25% after negotiating contract changes with preferred air carrier.  |
| Interviewer Might Ask: | <b>“How did you manage that as costs were going up across the airline industry? What was your negotiation strategy?”</b>  |
| Sample Answer:         | <p><b>Situation:</b> “We’d been noticing our travel expenses rising over the first two quarters of 2009.</p> <p><b>Action:</b> “I contacted the rep at our preferred air carrier and explained that their rising prices were forcing us to transfer our business to their competitor, who had a deep discount program. The rep and I reviewed our history, and she consulted her management team.</p> <p><b>Result:</b> “Then, we came up with a plan that actually beat the competitor’s discount, and my company saved over \$9,000 in the second half of that year.”</p> |

| EXAMPLE 2              |   |
|------------------------|---|
| Your Accomplishment:   | Executed migration of 1,000 end users to new desktop computing platforms one week ahead of deadline amid other duties.  |
| Interviewer Might Ask: | <b>“Sounds like you did a lot in a short time. Tell me how you organized your workload and took care of your other duties.”</b>   |
| Sample Answer:         | <p><b>Situation:</b> “I was evaluating mobile technology for our sales force while providing routine technical support. My challenge was to migrate end users at times that would be least invasive to their daily work activities.</p> <p><b>Action:</b> “I worked on the migration at times such as noon to 1:00, after 5:00, or when the users were out for the day. I fit in my other duties during peak usage times. I also pulled a few 12-hour days and relied on the IT assistant to keep up with some of the basic tasks.”</p> <p><b>Result:</b> “In the end, everything got done in the time allotted, and the users forgave the minor inconvenience when they saw how much faster their new systems were.”</p> |

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### Did you know?

Pongo's Interview Tips program can help you build the skills and knowledge you need to ace your interviews and land a great job.

| EXAMPLE 3              |  |
|------------------------|--|
| Your Accomplishment:   | Reorganized sales force to meet new revenue targets, resulting in 20% gross sales increase over two years.   |
| Interviewer Might Ask: | <b>"What kind of resistance did you face? How did you guide the sales force through this transition?"</b>  |
| Sample Answer:         | <p><b>Situation:</b> "About half the sales force had been at the company longer than I had. So, I knew change wasn't going to be easy, especially since I had been in the job less than a year.</p> <p><b>Action:</b> "I looked at how much each sales rep brought in over the previous two years, and from which clients. After meeting with each rep, I came up with a plan that let each rep keep their top clients, while the rest were redistributed to junior reps.</p> <p><b>Result:</b> "That allowed us to offer a greater degree of attention to our top clients. Within two years, sales had increased 20%, much of it from the existing customers, but a significant portion came from the junior reps, who were fired up to prove <i>themselves to the senior staff.</i>"</p> |

Behavioral interview questions are not limited to what you put on your resume and cover letter. A hiring manager might ask you to come up with examples of how you handle conflict or stress on the job, without relating it specifically to your resume.

So, be prepared to answer questions that ask, for example, how you:

- Dealt with a stressful situation.
- Put in extra effort to get a project done on time.
- Addressed an issue before it became a problem.
- Worked with a person you didn't get along with.
- Reorganized your work when priorities shifted.
- Handled something negative on your performance review.
- Met a tight deadline.

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### Preparing Your Stories

When you answer an interview question, especially the behavioral kind, be focused, honest, and well-prepared. If you're nervous or uninformed, experienced hiring managers will pick up on it. To ease your nerves, follow these five guidelines that will help you prepare for questions you might be asked:

- If you have a notable accomplishment, be sure you can **provide details** about how you achieved it, any obstacles you faced, and how it affected your role or those of your co-workers.
- **Think like a hiring manager.** What would *you* ask if you were in their shoes? Write down and revise your answers until you've created stories you'll be comfortable telling. (Tip: Save them in a document you can amend and edit for each new interview. At the end of this document, you'll find a worksheet you can use to draft your stories.)
- **Review your answers.** Rehearse your answers, preferably with the help of someone who can play the role of the hiring manager and give you feedback.
- **It's not just *what* you say, but *how* you say it.** Make good eye contact as you speak. If you're describing a mistake you made or an unfavorable result, don't try to deflect blame toward others.
- **Talk about any lessons you learned.** Did the experience teach you something about yourself or how to handle a similar situation in the future? Talking about what you learned can also help your chances.

Finally, *after* you tell a behavioral story, **ask the hiring manager a follow-up question**, such as "Is that what you were looking for?" or "Are those the kind of problem-solving skills you're looking for in the person who fills this role?" This sends a clear message that you're engaged in the discussion and you want to be thorough.

### Wrapping Up

If you make it to the interview stage, the employer already believes you have the skills and experience they're seeking. What they're trying to find out in the interview is if you'd be the best fit for the job and the company. And a good fit usually requires someone who's knowledgeable, trustworthy, and likable. Your answers to behavioral interview questions can reveal these traits and help them determine whether they'll offer the job to you or someone else.

[www.pongoresume.com](http://www.pongoresume.com)

**Pongo Resume** is a full-service online resource for job seekers. The Pongo Resume web site provides all the tools and support needed to write professional resumes and cover letters, ace tough interviews, and secure a great job. Pongo members generate over 100,000 resumes per month. Privately held and headquartered in Northborough, Massachusetts, Pongo Resume currently has more than 4 million registered members and averages over a half-million unique visitors per month. In 2009-2011, Pongo was named to the Inc. 5000 list of America's fastest-growing private companies.



## Behavioral Interview Story Worksheet

**Instructions:** Use this worksheet to outline stories that will help you answer behavioral interview questions. (For more information, and to see sample questions and answers, see the Pongo *Learning Center* article, **How to Answer Behavioral Interview Questions.**)

- Identify an **accomplishment** you highlighted in your resume or cover letter.
- Consider what an **interviewer might ask** about it.
- Craft an **answer** based on the situation-action-result story method.

|                               |   |
|-------------------------------|---|
| <b>STORY 1</b>                |   |
| <b>My Accomplishment:</b>     |   |
| <b>Interviewer Might Ask:</b> |   |
| <b>My Answer:</b>             | <b>Situation:</b><br><br><b>Action:</b><br><br><b>Result:</b> |
| <b>STORY 2</b>                |   |
| <b>My Accomplishment:</b>     |   |
| <b>Interviewer Might Ask:</b> |   |
| <b>My Answer:</b>             | <b>Situation:</b><br><br><b>Action:</b><br><br><b>Result:</b> |
| <b>STORY 3</b>                |   |
| <b>My Accomplishment:</b>     |   |
| <b>Interviewer Might Ask:</b> |   |
| <b>My Answer:</b>             | <b>Situation:</b><br><br><b>Action:</b><br><br><b>Result:</b> |