

Competency Assessment Through Behavioral Event Interviewing

Purpose

The goal of the behavioral event interview is to identify the competencies needed to do various jobs. Its nearest relative is the searching clinical interview, in which the goal is to identify the individual's chief characteristics that have led to maladjustment. In the behavioral event interview the focus is what it takes to do a given job well. Since individuals may adjust to a job idiosyncratically, it is necessary to interview several incumbents and try to determine what characterizes good performers as contrasted with poor performers. In isolating the competencies needed, the interviewer should keep in mind what is measurable. When the interviewer has formulated the competencies that are needed, he or she will test these judgments by finding measures of them and determine if those who perform the job well score higher on these measures than those who perform poorly. When these hypotheses about the competencies needed for a job are cross-validated in this way, the measures can be used to select better qualified people or to train people better for the job.

Techniques

One of the best methods of getting the information to assess the competencies needed for a job is to elicit very detailed behavioral descriptions of how a person goes about doing his or her work. Sometimes this may be done by asking a number of job incumbents to write out critical incidents, following a technique first popularized by Flanagan (1954). However, these incidents may not be detailed enough to figure out just what the person was thinking and doing. Therefore, it is usually better to interview a few incumbents in depth. This permits a more thorough exploration of each episode reported until all the relevant behaviors have been elicited. To distinguish this technique from Flanagan's well-known critical incident approach, it should be referred to as the behavioral event interview technique. The interviewer should realize at all times that the purpose of the interview is to get raw behavioral data which can be used to conceptualize the competencies that are required for doing the job well.

Above all, the interviewer must avoid being caught up in the interviewee's concepts of what it takes to do his or her job. Every person has some ideas about what he or she is like and how he or she does things. In some cases these ideas may be accurate but often they are not, and the interviewer must avoid asking questions that simply elicit the interviewee's concepts. The interviewer must keep pushing for the behaviors — the thoughts and actions — that the interviewee demonstrated on a given occasion.

Use of a tape recorder is recommended to save every detail of the interview for future uses, such as developing case materials and other learning aids. Its most immediate use is to help you reconstruct your interview notes when you do your summary writeup. However, there is no substitute for good note-taking, especially if you have a mechanical failure. Don't expect to use the recorder like a crutch and your notes will be all you will need to write up the interview, saving you the time you would ordinarily have to spend listening to the interview all over again.

How to Conduct the Interview

Step 1 Explanation

Everyone will want to know why he or she is being interviewed. Your explanation might go something like this:

"I've been asked to try to figure out what competencies it takes to do your job. The best approach seems to be to ask a person who is doing a job how he or she does it. You are the obvious expert in what it takes to be (whatever the person does). We're just going to talk for awhile about some examples of how you do your job".

Optional, depending on the interviewee's curiosity and/or your mandate:

"This is part of a program which should lead to better selection and training for the job. If we can identify the competencies needed for a job, we can select people who have those competencies needed for the job or train job incumbents to develop the necessary competencies to a fuller extent".

At this point you should get the permission of the interviewee for you to tape-record the interview. You can explain it this way:

"With your permission, I would like to record parts of this interview to help me with my notes. Everything you say will be kept confidential and will not be shared with anyone else in (interviewee's organization). But if there is anything you want to say off the record or don't want me to record, just let me know and I'll turn off the tape".

Step 2. Duties and Responsibilities

It is a good idea to break the ice by getting the interviewee talking about what he or she does in a general way, that is, about what his or her duties and responsibilities are.

"Let's begin by taking about what your responsibilities are in your job. I really know nothing about what it takes to be a good (policeman, naval officer, manager, etc.). What do you do? Where do you work? Whom do you work with? What are your hours? Whom do you report to? Who reports to you?"

The objective here is to get the interviewee talking in as free and relaxed a way as possible about his or her job. Sometimes interviewees have difficulty getting started, but most of them find it easy to talk about their work and they like telling others what they do. It is wise not to push the behavioral event approach on them too soon; lead into it gradually.

Often in the course of describing their work, interviewees will say things that puzzle you or that you want clarified. For example, a police captain may say, "Well, I supervise the lieutenants". Here he is simply quoting a job description to you and your problem is to find out what he means. So you say "Could you explain a little more what you mean by 'supervise'? Do they write reports for you to read? Do they come in to talk with you first thing in the morning, or when they leave? Do you observe them working with the patrolmen? What is the chance you would get to know they were doing something wrong or to give them some direction? It helps most if you can describe an actual case where you supervised someone".

Step 3. First Behavioral Event

Hopefully this questioning about duties will lead to a critical event which you can ask the interviewee to describe in detail so that you can get a better idea of how the job is done and what characteristics it takes to do it well. You may say something like:

“To get a better idea of what supervision consists of, can you think of an instance where you were able to help someone do his or her job better, or keep him or her from making a mistake? I need an example of just how you operate”.

It is hard to generalize about just how you will hit on the first incident since it should come up naturally in the course of discussing various responsibilities. But once you have got the interviewee talking about a particular event, you should push hard for behavioral detail.

“Now let me get the setting straight. Let’s begin at the beginning. Where were you? What time of day was it? What had you been doing when this came up? What was in your mind?”

You may want to ask what kind of day it was (raining?) or how the interviewee was feeling, to recreate the whole scenario. Here you become an investigative reporter, pushing to get clear in your mind just what happened. Asking for time, place and mood often helps the interviewee recall the episode, since all the person has left in his or her mind usually is some memory of how it all turned out which he or she told you first anyway. You should have in mind the following questions as the interviewee begins to tell the story:

What led up to the event?

What was the person thinking? (of the individual he or she was interacting with, of the situation,etc.)

What did the person do, and why?

What was the person feeling, wishing?

How did it all turn out?

You are interested in the interviewee’s:

- Perceptions of the people and the situation
- Thoughts
- Acts
- Feelings
- Conclusions for future reference

Try to get the interviewee to begin at the beginning and take you through the story as it unfolded. Otherwise you may get confused about what happened and who did what. This may be difficult because the interviewee will usually start by remembering the outcome of an event. Just say, “That’s exactly what I had in mind. Now let’s start at the beginning so that I can understand what happened”. As the interviewee tells you all this, you are learning things about him or her, and you should ask questions that will verify or double-check inferences you are beginning to draw about his or her competencies. In all questioning, however, be sure that you are giving the interviewee plenty of reinforcement for what he or she is telling you. You are not the FBI. You should laugh with the interviewee, tell stories of your own if necessary to keep the flow of talk informal and pleasant, constantly reinforce him or her for the help he or she is giving you in clarifying what goes on in this job.

Your objective is to get the interviewee to tell you little vignettes, scenarios of things that happened to him or her. Some people need a lot of encouragement and stimulation to really get into the process of telling a story.

Step 4. Further Behavioral Events

You may find it easy in talking about an event in the area of supervision to move on to an example of when things didn't go well:

"That helps me understand much better what supervision involves. Now, can you think of an instance in which you feel you didn't carry out supervision as well as you might have? That will help me also, because it will identify the characteristic one ought to show in such situations".

If the interviewee can't think of one, you can make a few suggestions ("Did you ever have to fire somebody?" "Did you ever have problems with any of your subordinates?") and if the interviewee still blocks (an unusual occurrence!) you can go to some other area ("Well, can you think of a time when things didn't go well on the job?"). Again, when the interviewee comes up with an event, ask first for time, place and setting, and then go into detail.

In all, it is best to try to get detailed descriptions of three events where the interviewee was effective and three events where the interviewee was ineffective. but there is nothing magical about these numbers. The crucial question is whether you are learning what it takes to do this job well.

Occasionally you will run into someone who blocks when you ask him or her for an example of something that went particularly well or poorly. The interviewee just can't seem to think of anything important. In that case, don't keep pressing him or her; your main goal of getting the interviewee to talk about how he or she performs on the job may only be interfered with as he or she gets more frustrated or annoyed about not being able to do what you want. Then you should use other approaches to get the interviewee to talk, such as asking the person to take you through what he or she did yesterday or probing in detail, or just how he or she goes about supervising someone through an example.

Remember, the goal is to get the interviewee to talk about the way he or she does the job.
A method of doing that is legitimate.

Step 5. Characteristics

It is often useful at the end of the interview to ask the interviewee what characteristics he or she thinks a person ought to have to do his or her job well. This serves the double purpose of establishing good relations by asking the interviewee's opinion and also of giving you some further insight into what he or she thinks is important. For example, if none of the good incumbents thinks to mention interpersonal skills, you may want to infer that incumbents in this job can get along without caring much about interpersonal relationships.

Step 6. Summary and Writing

After the interview is over it is a good plan to sit down quietly for an hour and summarize what you have learned. This may include a brief characterization of the person you have just interviewed. It also helps you define things about which you are still unclear. In other words, it is a time to make your budding hypotheses explicit so that you can check them in later interviews. If you have the time, this is the best point to write up the entire interview, while your memory is still fresh.

What to Avoid in Interviewing

1. Don't jump to conclusions for the interviewee by "reflecting" the way nondirective counselors do when they clarify what has just been said. You should certainly do this after the interview, but if you do it for the interviewee it establishes that you want him or her to make generalizations when in fact you just want the interviewee to go on talking about what he or she thinks and does on the job.

2. Don't phrase questions that call for general answers (except, of course, in the initial phase of the interview, or when you want to get the conversation flowing). Examples of what not to say:

"So, you usually"

"What do you do on a typical day?"

(If you want to take the interviewee through a day, choose yesterday, and ask him or her for such information as when he or she got up, how he or she got to work, what he or she was thinking about on the way to work, what door he or she when in by, what he or she said to the secretary, whom he or she first called on the telephone)

"How do you generally interview somebody?"

"What do you look for when selecting someone?"

"How do you deal with problems in the service area?"

"What is your usual approach in a sales meeting?"

"How do you discipline people?"

In every case you should be asking for a particular episode to illustrate supervising, or whatever.

3. Don't let the interviewee take charge of the interview. This is a problem particularly when talking to high pressure managers or people in sales who are used to structuring things their way. You must be alert to cues and be ready to interrupt. If he or she says, "We set up a meeting with the president," you should interrupt and ask such questions as, "Oh, you mean you phoned the president? How did you go about getting the president to agree to it?" In one case it was clear that each time the manager said "we" he was claiming credit for something someone else had done.

This could be important.

Many of the people you will interview are used to persuasively presenting a case. This may interest you as you observe them doing it to you, but you also want to find out other competencies they have by constantly probing and forcing them to give more behavioral detail.

What Competencies to Have in Mind

It is impossible to list all possible competencies, but it is obvious that an interviewer ought to start thinking in terms of some known competencies as he or she proceeds. This is one reason why it is preferable to have the interviewer do the conceptualization of the finding, because he or she can investigate the competencies that suggest themselves as the interview progresses. But it is also possible to have someone else do the competency analysis from transcripts of well-conducted interviews.

1. Types of competencies to consider:

Physical. Does the job require a rugged physique? Lots of physical energy? Motor skill? Police captains, for example, need to have a certain physical “command presence”.

Cognitive. Does the job require reading and digesting lots of information? Writing reports? Calculating or working with numbers? Planning carefully?

Social. Does the job require selling? Public speaking? Getting along with all types of people? Ability to direct others?

Motivational. Does the job seem to require a high need for achievement? Power? Affiliation? High self-discipline (activity inhibition)?

Attitudinal. Does the job require freedom from prejudice? Belief in the capitalist system? Strong loyalty to the organization, etc?

2. Try to think in terms of competencies that we already know how to measure. Do not force a competency into an already existing one if it really doesn't fit. You should always be prepared to invent new measures.

3. Try to determine at what level a competency exists. For example, you may feel that a job requires persistence, but there are several different kinds of persistence. Does it derive from a motivational need for power — the desire to influence people or be right? Or is it a kind of orderliness that insists on picking up loose ends? Or is it simply a liking for routine — doing things in a standard way? This kind of ‘deep’ analysis is absolutely essential to identify correct competencies.

4. Be sure to distinguish between minimal and optimal competencies. Optional competencies are those characteristics that are related to outstanding performance, while minimal competencies are required for basic performance levels, but do not differentiate the outstanding from the average performer. Too often in the past, psychologists have discovered an essential competency, like being able to read a transit schedule, and then have devised a test which gives credit to an individual who can read schedules quickly, when there was no evidence that speed in reading schedule was required for the job. On the other hand, it is easier to overlook a competency such as efficient use of time because it wasn't particularly obvious as a characteristic of typical job performers, even though the top performers might delegate scheduling tasks to a subordinate in order to have time for more important things.

5. Keep in mind the competencies already validated for related jobs because it may be that similar ones are needed here. For example, there is considerable overlap in the competencies needed for successful human service work (e/g., empathy, diagnostic skill) and for human resource consultants in various organizations.

COMPARISONS OF JOB ANALYSIS TECHNIQUES

Armchair Theory and Expert Panels

- Lack supporting empirical data on job-relatedness.
- Identify “truisms” not directly related to job performance.
- Do not generate data specific enough to be useful.

Job Task or Function Analysis

- Looks at task requirements, not at the person who does the tasks well.
- Generates task data too detailed to be practical.
- Does not identify the tasks most critical to good overall job performance.

Job Competence Assessment

- Gets underneath armchair theory to find out what good performers actually do.
- Focuses on the person in the context of the job.
- Generates data that are behaviorally specific and useful for assessment, training, etc.
- Identifies the competencies most critical to good performance.

COMMON INTERVIEW TECHNIQUES

Individuals frequently develop their own approaches to interviewing, some of which are effective while others are less effective. There is no single best interviewing technique: The choice of interviewing method depends upon the interviewer’s goals and the situation. As we will see, the Behavioral Event Interview (BEI) approach is designed for fairly specific situations.

One way of understanding how the BEI approach differs from other approaches is to review your own interviewing styles or the styles of those who have recently interviewed you.

Think of the last time you undertook an interview or were interviewed. Briefly answer the following questions.

1. What kind of information was being looked for?

2. What questions were you asked/did you ask?

FOUR COMMON INTERVIEWING STYLES

Theorist

- Tries to determine the interviewee's general approach to a job.
- Typical probe: "Why did you . . . ?"
- Problems: - too general, produces rationalizations
- not reflective of actual behavior

Fact Finder

- Tries to determine details of previous experiences and accomplishments.
- Typical probes: "How many . . . ?" "What type . . . ?" "How much . . . ?"
- Problems: - not reflective of actual behavior
- responses controlled by questions

Fortune Teller

- Tries to determine what the interviewee would do in situations he or she is likely to face.
- Typical probe: "What would you do if . . . ?"
- Problems: - too theoretical, not reflective of actual behavior
- induces a "desirable" response

Therapist

- Tries to determine underlying feelings, attitudes, and motives.
- Typical probes: "Tell me about yourself . . ." "So you felt (how) . . . ?"
- Problems: - yields vague, abstract information
- interviewer's interpretations may be wrong

FEATURES OF THE BEI TECHNIQUE

- It employs a structured and focused probe strategy, rather than merely a set of standard interview questions, to elicit the most critical job experiences as seen by the interviewee.
- It is investigative, not reflective as in consulting or counseling. The objective is to gather the most accurate performance data possible, not to collect people's ideas about what they "might have done" under similar circumstances.
- Interviewees are not allowed to draw their own conclusions about what it takes to do a job. Interviewers are thoroughly trained to press for actual behavior — thoughts and actions — of the interviewee.

ADVANTAGES OF THE BEI TECHNIQUE

- It gets behind espoused values, or what people think they do, compared with what they actually do: the motives, abilities, and knowledge people really have and use.
- It focuses on what people do that is most important for job success. By asking about critical incidents, the technique gets at the "10 percent of behaviors that make 90 percent of the difference".
- It determines social as well as technical knowledge and skill factors, which are important for job performance.
- It produces significantly better data than other techniques, allowing the manager to make more accurate human resource decisions.

OUTLINE OF THE PROCEDURE

1. Introduction and Explanation

Purpose: Set the stage, establish the purpose of the interview, and preview the interview process.

2. Duties and Responsibilities

Purpose: To get the interviewee talking about his or her job in a free, relaxed way, and to begin focusing on specific examples of performance.

3. First Behavioral Event

Purpose: To get the complete story of a specific time which the interviewee thinks was important, in as much behavioral detail as possible

4. Additional Behavioral Events

Purpose: To get specific information about a mix of “high points” and “low points” from the interviewee’s past job experience.

5. Performer Characteristics

Purpose: To close the interview by asking the interviewee to reflect on qualities that make a job performer successful, and to gather additional details about job performance.

COMPONENTS OF THE INTERVIEW

1. Introduction and Explanation

Objectives:

To establish an informal, friendly tone.

To establish confidence and trust in the confidentiality of the interview.

To establish understanding of the interview in context of the study or need.

To create understanding of the format of the interview and your role in facilitating the process.

Process:

Begin with small talk (weather, office, etc.).

How the information will be used.

Request permission to use tape recorder and take notes.

Start taking notes and recording.

“I need to talk to the real expert about the job and the kinds of situations you run into because . . .”

Establish the interview time frame.

Outline the components of the interview.

1.a Career Path (optional)

Objectives:

To form a picture of interviewee's career path and career goals and the critical steps in the process.

To focus the person on talking about himself or herself.

To transition into the present (or future) job.

Process:

Ask the interviewee for:

- Educational background.
- Major jobs held and responsibilities.
- Major transitions in the career.
- Key learning in different jobs.

Search for moderate detail, and focus on the specifics.

"Can we talk now about some specific situation from you past experience which you believe has been helpful to you in your present (or you future) job?"

2. Duties and Responsibilities

Objectives:

To get interviewee talking specifically about his or her job (and listen for incidents to which you can return later).

To be clear about how the person spends time and on what activities.

To train the person to focus on specifics.

To provide clear transition to the first incident.

Process:

Keep it brief (15-20 minutes).

Ask for present job title

"Who reports to you/to whom do you report?"

Ask for major responsibilities: "What do you do in a particular day or week?"

Search for moderate detail.

"Could you give me an example?"

Clarify buzz words; e.g., "supervising," "develop a sales plan".

"Can we talk now about some specific situation you've encountered on the job?"

3. First Behavioral Event

Objectives:

To provide guidelines for the kind of information sought (it can be technical or non-technical).

To get as clear, specific, detailed an account as possible.

To get a time sequence; to train the interviewee to “tell the story” in the greatest detail possible.

To encourage the interviewee to provide another event or situation.

Process:

“Can you think of a time or a situation on this job when
- things were particularly effective?”
- you felt it was a high point?”
- you were satisfied?”

Get the total situation:

- WHO was involved?
- WHAT did YOU think, feel, want to do?
- WHAT did you DO or SAY?
- WHAT was the OUTCOME:
HOW did you FEEL about the outcome?

“Could you walk me through this situation from the beginning?”

“What happened first?”

“That’s exactly what I’m looking for.”

“Can you think of another time or situation?”

4. Additional Behavioral Events

Objectives:

To get 2-3 “effective” and 2-3 “less effective” behavioral events.

As before, to get a clear, detailed, specific account of the events.

To form a transition to the end of the interview.

Process:

“Can you think of a time when
- you weren’t satisfied?”
- you wished things turned out differently?”
- things didn’t go so well?”
- you had some problems?”
- you were really frustrated?”

Ask questions to obtain a clear and complete understanding of the situation, including the time sequence.

“Can we wrap up now with one last question . . . ?”

5. Performer Characteristics

Objectives:

To obtain a list of skills, traits, knowledge that the interviewee feels are important to do his or her job.

To use this process to generate additional specific examples or events in areas which you may have previously overlooked.

Process:

“If you were hiring someone to do your job, what do YOU think he or she has to be able to do?”

“What skills, knowledge, or characteristics would you look for?”

“Can you give me an example of a time when having that knowledge/skill/ characteristic was particularly important to you?”

6. Summary and Interpretation

Objective:

To make a complete record of the interview, with additional information from you notes.

Process:

As soon as possible after the interview, use the Interview Form, and record crucial data.

INTERVIEW PROBLEMS AND HOW TO DEAL WITH THEM

1. Introduction and Explanation

Problem or concern:

Interviewee is nervous or uncertain about who he or she is being interviewed.

Possible strategies to help:

Say: "We're trying to understand what it takes to do jobs like yours. We'll be talking to a number of people, but we want to represent as many different experiences as we can."

"Only you are the expert at what it takes to do your job."

Interviewee is uncomfortable with the use of a tape recorder.

Say: "I just need it to help me with my notes."

"If there is anything you want off the record, I'll turn it off. It's really up to you. However, any thing you say will be kept in confidence."

2. Duties and Responsibilities

Problem or concern:

Interviewee begins listing too many responsibilities or tasks.

Possible strategies to help:

Ask the interviewee to choose one of the most important tasks or responsibilities and give a recent example of a time when he or she did it.

3. First Behavioral Event

Problem or concern:

INTERVIEWER asks questions that are too complicated, or has trouble thinking of the “right” questions to ask.

Possible strategies to help:

Keep your questions simple.

Say: “How?”

“When?”

“Who?”

“Then what happened?”

“What did you do?”

INTERVIEWER probes for detail too soon, or cannot seem to find a thread for a behavioral event.

First let the interviewee give you a broad picture of the whole story. Then probe for details around the key part of the event.

Interviewee is giving too much information, too fast or is diffuse and scattered in giving you information.

Say: “I’d like to slow you down a bit. Could you go back to . . .?”

“I’m not sure I understand that sequence, could you walk me through it?”

Interviewee says he or she can’t remember the actual words in a conversation.

Say: “Just give me the flavor of it. What sort of thing did you say?”

“Try to construct the dialogue right now to describe your memory of what happened. Make believe I’m the person you were talking to.”

4. Additional Behavioral Events

Problem or concern:

Interviewee cannot remember a specific incident.

Possible strategies to help:

Say: "Is there anything else you do on your job?"

"Was there anything else you did during that time?"

"Earlier you mentioned. . ."

Remain silent.

Tell about an experience of your own in behavioral event story form to illustrate the kind of material you want.

Reward the interviewee whenever he or she provides a good behavioral event.

Say: "That's exactly the kind of information I am looking for."

Ask for a specific example.

Say: "What did you actually say to him or her?"

"How did he or she respond/react to that?"

"What did you say then?"

Interviewee seems uncomfortable.

Vagueness (he or she talks of the philosophy of doing the job and remains abstract or discusses hypothetical situations).

Say: "I don't need any names. Just tell me what happened/"

"It's okay to disguise the organization and people's names: I'm only interested in what basically happened and your part in it."

Confidentiality: the interviewee is evasive or refuses to answer because he or she is concerned about revealing confidential material about himself, herself, or others.

Workitect helps organizations design and implement competency frameworks, models, and competency-based human resource applications.

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