Tell Me About A Time… Behavioral Based Interviewing

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We have all met the associate who "wowed" her interviewers with stories about what she *would* do in a tough situation, and who received reviews from interviewers that said they really "liked" her and could see her fitting into the firm. This reliance on subjective criteria along with an excellent academic record and a history at a similarly situated firm is not the kind of information that is going to indicate future performance, though it is what firms look at in evaluating lateral associate candidates. Firms need an effective selection process that identifies people who will excel at the firm over a period of time, because the selection of an associate is a major firm investment. Without an effective selection system, firms risk:

- Increased costs (a hiring mistake costs an estimated 40% of a person's total annual compensation);
- Low morale;
- Disrupted client service; and
- Unexpected openings that require partners to focus on filling positions, rather than representing their clients.

In an effort to help retention of associates, some firms have examined their selection process and made changes. Firms have started to follow client businesses and begun to use a technique called *Behavioral-Based Interviewing*. Behavioral Based Interviewing is a method that has long been used in the corporate world, but one that is relatively new to law firms. This technique relies on questions that elicit information about a candidate's past behavior in particular situations. Past behavior predicts future results, so interviewers must glean this information from interviews in order to effectively select associates that will succeed in the firm over a period of time. Interviewers learn about the situation in which a candidate acted, what he or she did, and the result of the actions. Interviewers must ask specific questions that will touch on qualities deemed to be essential to the new position and valuable to the firm. Using behavioral interview questions,

interviewers can see how attorneys might handle that sometimes stressful law firm environment, and even more, whether they can provide real world value to clients, beyond just providing a strong work product.

Behavioral Based Interviewing is much more effective than the tried and true "tell me about yourself" questions method, which we see law firm interviewers typically ask of associates. Behavioral questions eliminate misunderstandings about a candidate's experience. Because interviewers are being asked to evaluate based on job-related behavior, personal impressions, attitudes, feelings and hunches are not factored in to the evaluation, and rightfully so. Behavioral questioning also limits the possibility of a candidate "faking" responses with vague generalizations. It is hard for a candidate to shade information when you ask him/her to describe actual behavior – what they *actually* did in the past. This method is also much more effective than asking hypothetical questions, because hypos tend to be great for charming interviewers or successful for those who interview well. Behavior questions cause a candidate to look at a specific past situation, and discuss and elaborate on the experience.

Why is Behavioral Based Interviewing NOT the Norm?

Implementation of behavioral interviewing is the toughest part: it requires having attorneys take the time to learn something new. Even more difficult, it requires the admission that perhaps the way "we have always done it" is not the most effective way to interview. Typically, firms distribute a candidate's resume to potential interviewers with a time when the candidate will visit with the interviewer. The interviewer is instructed with little, other than to provide feedback after the interview. We have seen the pitfalls associated with this structure (or lack thereof):

- **Interviewers miss important information.** They only focus on the areas critical to job success, overlooking many others.
- **Interviewers tend to focus on the skill aspects of the job and overlook candidates' likes and dislikes.** Failure to determine job fit and organizational fit can lead to poor performance and early turnover.
- **Interviewer's coverage overlaps.** Although some overlap of coverage among interviews is desirable, too much overlap is a waste of valuable time. Consequently, candidates are asked and respond to the same questions repeatedly, while important areas are not covered. I consistently hear from candidates after a full round of interviews with a firm that each interviewer asked the same questions over and over: "Why are you leaving your firm?; Why our firm?, etc."

The key to making behavioral interviewing work is asking the *right* questions. The questions are informed by the desired behavior that a firm would like the candidate to demonstrate. Therefore, it is important first to determine what makes a successful associate, and, even more specifically, what makes a successful associate in a particular firm. Then, interviewers should ask the questions that will elicit examples of experience that help to (nor not to) gather the desired behavior the firm wants in a potential candidate.

Typically, firms look for the following qualities and associates they hire:

- **Composure** – Stays calm and maintains focus in turbulent, threatening emergency situations; makes rational decisions and continue to perform effectively under adverse conditions

An interviewer should ask: Give me an example of a time when, in a business setting, someone "pushed all your hot buttons" or "got on your nerves."

- **Client Service Potential** – Commits to meeting the expectations and requirements of internal and external stakeholders, acts with stakeholders in mind, values importance of providing high-quality customer service

An interviewer should ask: Walk me through how you established a relationship with a specific client.

- **Communication** – Clearly conveys information and ideas, through a variety of mediums, to individuals and/ or groups in a manner that engages the audience, and helps them understand and retain the message

An interviewer should ask: Tell me about a time you had to make a difficult or complex point understood in a business meeting. ***Or:*** Give me an example of a time you had to communicate a sensitive topic through an e-mail.

- **Dealing with Ambiguity** –Effectively copes with change and shift gears comfortably; isn't upset when things are up in the air; can comfortably handle risk and uncertainty

An interviewer should ask: Describe a time when you had a short deadline and had to begin working on a project before it was completely defined. ***Or:*** Describe a time you were in a crisis situation and had to think on your feet to solve a problem you hadn't faced before.

- **Decision Quality** – Makes good decisions based upon a mixture of analysis, wisdom, experience and judgment; most of his/her solutions and suggestions turn out to be

correct and accurate when judged over time; sought out by others for advice and solutions

An interviewer should ask: Describe a scenario when you had to make a quick decision without all the facts. ***Or:*** Please share a recent decision you made that had a significant impact on the organization.

- **Integrity and Trust** – Is widely trusted; seen as a direct, truthful individual; doesn't misrepresent him/herself for personal gain; admits mistakes and keeps confidences

An interviewer should ask: Tell me about a time you had a moral dilemma, for example someone confided in you revealing something they did wrong or illegal.

- **Interpersonal Skills** – Builds appropriate rapport, and constructive and effective relationships

An interviewer should ask: Describe a time you met someone new and how you built rapport and developed a relationship with that person.

How do you analyze the responses to the questions?

When gathering examples of behavior in an interview, the interviewer must make sure that they are getting the whole story – the situation in which the candidate acted, what he or she did, and the results of those actions. This is called the **STAR** method:

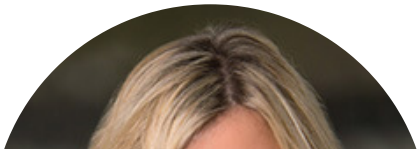
- **Situation/task** – why?
- **Action** – what done and how done?
- **Result** – effect or action?

The **situation or task** facing the candidate is the background or context in which the candidate took action. It explains why a candidate acted as he/she did. **Situations or tasks** are created by occurrences such as client demands or challenges in meeting a deadline.

The **actions** the candidate took are what the candidate said or did in response to a **situation or task** and how he or she said or did it. **Actions** are the most important element of the STAR, because they show us the candidate's behavior, which is exactly what we're after in behavioral interviews. Actions might include the steps taken to complete a work assignment, or what a candidate did to meet a tight deadline and avoid delays.

The **results** or changes caused by these **actions** are the effects of the candidate's **actions**. They tell us what changes or difference the person's actions made, and whether the actions were effective and appropriate.

Interviewing would be easy if every candidate responded to these behavioral questions according to the STAR method, however they do not. Sometimes candidates will tell you what they *would* do in a situation. Other times a candidate may not be specific about past behavior. Some candidates will give you textbook (theoretical) answers, because they honestly think that's what you're looking for in a response. Identifying these false STARs takes a little practice and training, but once interviewers are made aware of the difference, picking out answers that do not give detail about behavior becomes easier.

Firms have been forced to refocus in light of lessons learned through the recession, and interviewing for retention of associates is a significant one. With minimal focused training, interviewers can learn to hire associates who will be able to deliver client service on the first day of the job. Those attorneys will be the most successful at servicing clients and will be more likely look to stay with the firm, because of their professional success.

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