

## **Increasingly, job candidates are being asked to critique their own careers.**

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It used to be that preparing for a job interview was like studying for an exam. Armed with hard knowledge of all the pertinent facts (company history, products, stock performance, competitors), a candidate could face the interview with reasonable confidence.

Such a scenario may soon be a distant memory of a simpler time. As the job market has toughened up, so has the interview process. If an interview was once a fill-in-the-blank affair, it's increasingly become an exercise in brutal self-assessment.

The so-called behavioral interview is gaining in popularity in executive search. Compared with the traditional interview, it's a much deeper probing line of questioning. In a behavioral interview, an employer asks a job-seeker to describe past accomplishments specifically, and to illustrate how that experience applies to the job in question. Typically, a good deal of time is spent looking at how a candidate responded -- both tactically and emotionally -- to tough tasks and prickly situations.

The increased rigor is hardly surprising. Now that the talent war is over, companies can afford to be pickier, explains Richard Smith of executive-search firm Spencer Stuart. In addition, he says, many companies had bad experiences when the labor market was tight. Often, executives whose resumes looked good nevertheless proved incompatible with the company once they started working.

Old-school interviews did little to reveal more about the candidate. After all, everyone learned the "right" answers in business school or the jobs section of the local bookstore. "If you ask someone, 'Are you proactive or reactive?' who's going to say 'reactive?'" asks Smith. "People know what the right answer is. They learned it in management books."

On the other hand, persisting with questions about specific experiences leaves less room for pre-packaged answers. Questions like: "How did you approach the problem?" "Did you propose the solution? If not, who did?" "Did you delegate or dictate?" Alice Snell, VP of staffing consultancy iLogos Research, likens the process to "storytelling" because after a while, a kind of narrative starts to take shape.

Such questioning can also force people to be more honest about their achievements. As Snell points out, "Lots of people can claim they did things."

And yet, the traditional interview mold is so enmeshed in many executives' experiences that many, says Smith, have difficulty adjusting to behavioral interviewing. Even as the interviewer tries to lead them to give more detailed answers, many candidates inevitably revert to talking about vague concepts such as their "leadership approach" when it comes to "situations like this."

It may sound intimidating, but in fact, say experts, getting ready for the behavioral interview is more or less a matter of knowing what to expect. According to iLogos VP Alice Snell, interviewers are looking for three main things: a description of a challenging situation, what the candidate did about it, and measurable results.

Then, review your experience and prepare, prepare, prepare. Find specific achievements that would translate directly to the company's needs. Candidates that stand out truly understand a prospective employer's challenges and can find similarities between their experiences and the company's current situation. "Executives know they need to prepare for presentations," Snell points out. "A behavioral interview is a presentation."

Choose a selection of experiences from various periods in your career. Talking only about very recent jobs or jobs from 10 years ago can raise a red flag. Also, don't shy away from bringing up approaches to problems that didn't work out. Was there something especially valuable that you learned from the failure? "Sometimes people assume that discussing a negative experience will make them look bad," says Snell. Yet, depending on how you handled it, "it might actually make you look good."

Finally, the one thing experts can't emphasize enough is the importance of giving specifics. The best way to prepare? "Picture yourself in front of the interviewer," says Spencer Stuart's Smith. "and imagine the person saying, 'Give an example' -- no matter what you say."