The Comprehensive Interview

Uncovering the Real Candidate Behind the Interview Persona

Kelly Land
Janna Mansker

berke

888-220-7611

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When sitting across the table from a candidate during an interview, most hiring managers are focused on one thing: determining if this particular individual is a fit with the open position. If the manager has done a good job of preparing for the interview, he or she not only has a mental picture of the ideal candidate but also a concrete list of requirements. The manager asks questions, the candidate provides answers, and hopefully a clear picture begins to emerge of whether the person and the job are a good match.

Harder Than it Looks

Conducting a great interview sounds easy enough, but the entire process of asking questions and getting answers is full of potential pitfalls and missteps. Sometimes the manager asks questions that lead the candidate right into the desired answer ("Would you say solving customer problems is something you're good at doing?" or "Have you dealt with projects with really tight deadlines in the past?").

In other instances the candidate has anticipated what the manager will ask and prepared some responses to the most common questions ("My biggest weakness? Well, that's probably my perfectionism. I just have really high standards for myself and can't stand to miss the mark.").

Managers hear what they want to hear and ignore red flags, while candidates sell themselves in hopes of getting the job. All of these things increase the potential for a hiring mistake that will come back to haunt everyone involved after the fact.

The Strategy: Behavior Based Interviewing

While some people argue that making a good hire is largely a matter of luck, there are some things every manager can do to increase his or her chances for success. And one of the most important is mastering the art of ***Behavior Based Interviewing***.

Most managers have heard of this style of interviewing but aren't sure exactly why or how to do it. Simply put, the foundation of Behavior Based Interviewing is the belief that **past** behavior and performance are the most accurate predictors of **future** behavior and performance. While intention and desire can be beneficial, there's just no substitute for the "been there, done that" value of someone who's proven his or her success in using a particular skill, trait, or talent in the past.

For example, if you're interviewing a sales candidate that's successfully turned around underperforming product lines several times in previous jobs, the chances are in your favor that she could do this for your company as well. There's no guarantee, but if she's figured out how to do it before it's more likely she could and would do it again.

On the other hand, if you have a candidate that has a strong sales track record in previous jobs but has never had to deal with a poorly performing product, you have no way of knowing in advance if this individual has the skills or determination to handle this challenge in your organization. Maybe he does, maybe he doesn't, but you're taking a bigger risk if there's nothing in his history to demonstrate that he's done it successfully before.

Of course, having someone who has past experience increasing sales of a struggling line may not even be necessary. This is where knowing what you need comes in and why it's critical to define your requirements ahead of time. It's also helpful to separate your requirements into the "Need to Have" items and the "Nice to Have" ones. Doing this helps you clarify your priorities and identify where you can't compromise. For tips on how to effectively map out hiring requirements, check out our ***Ultimate Hiring Guide***.

Stop Asking, "What if?"

So how do you determine if a candidate's experiences and past performance are a good match for the future opportunities offered by your open position? By asking interview questions that are **historical, not hypothetical**.

Historical questions ask candidates to identify and talk about specific situations from their past. This differs greatly from hypothetical questions, which ask them to predict how they would handle certain scenarios if faced with them in the future. The former is based on facts; the latter on theory. That's why historical questions typically provide you with more reliable information. Consider the differences:

> ***Historical Question***: "Tell me about the most recent deal you negotiated for your company. What was your strategy? What was the outcome?"
>
> ***Hypothetical Question***: "If we were to ask you to negotiate pricing with our largest vendor, how would you go about it?"
>
> **- or -**
>
> ***Historical Question***: "What's the toughest customer service issue you've had to handle in your current job?"
>
> ***Hypothetical Question***: "If your biggest customer was upset about a missed delivery deadline, how would you handle it?"

Notice that the main difference between these two examples is that one asks candidates what they *did* do and the other asks what they *would* do. Unfortunately, what people tell you they would do is often misleading. They may think they'd handle a situation a certain way because they've seen other people do so or because they've been through training in the past that's instructed them to do it that way. However, should they find themselves in that same scenario, it's difficult to know if their actions would follow their intentions.

Asking primarily hypothetical questions is one of the biggest mistakes hiring managers make. If a candidate's answers sound good, the manager often makes a leap and thinks, "Great, so it looks like she'd know just how to do ________________." In reality, this may or may not be the case.

Incidentally, some managers become concerned when interviewing candidates with limited work experience that this approach won't be relevant. They fear these individuals may have little-to-no professional history to discuss. It's helpful to remember that candidates can draw from **any** experiences when answering behavior based questions. For example, recent graduates can be asked about situations, challenges, and/or activities related to part-time jobs, school projects, volunteer work, and clubs or organizations.

Opening Up the Conversation

Ultimately, an effective Behavior Based Interview involves more than just asking good historical questions. It's also important to create a relaxed interview setting where candidates feel comfortable letting down their defenses and talking openly about their past experiences. Plan to spend a few minutes at the beginning of the meeting building rapport and making a connection with interviewees by talking about non-threatening topics such as how their week is going, the weather, or any areas of common interest.

Another goal is to ensure the interview is a conversation, not an interrogation. The easiest way to do this is by introducing questions with phases such as, "What I'm really interested in hearing about is…." or "Something I'd like your thoughts on is…." These types of lead-ins make the candidate feel like you're genuinely curious about what they have to say and should encourage them to open up. It's also important to make eye contact, smile, nod, and lean forward when appropriate to let the other person know you're truly listening.

Last but not least, always keep in mind that good probing questions will yield even more information if you use them to dig for details. If you follow your initial question of "Tell me about a time when you were managing a project that got completely off track," with probes such as, "Looking back, what could you have done differently?" and "Why did you choose to handle it that way?" can give you additional insight.

The Method: A Comprehensive Interview Plan

Now that you've defined your strategy and are focused on incorporating Behavior Based Interviewing techniques into your process, you're ready to develop a step-by-step method for conducting the interview itself. That's where a Comprehensive Interview Plan comes in.

Once the screening process is complete, most managers have a sense of which candidates they'd like to bring back for a second look. The goal is to identify the 2-3 individuals you believe are potentially the best fit for the open position.

Narrowing your pool of candidates significantly is the key to being able to effectively perform the next step in the process—the Comprehensive Interview. This meeting should be much longer than your initial screening interview and will cover a lot more ground. How long should it last? Ideally, around three to four hours. "*Three to four hours*?!" people often exclaim when we mention this approach in our management training classes, "*I could **never** interview someone for three hours*!!"

This does sound like a lot of interview time until you realize most companies bring candidates back an average of 2-3 times for secondary interviews, which typically equals roughly 3 hours of interview time anyway. The problem is that multiple short interviews are not nearly as effective as one longer interview.

A Consolidated Effort is Best

Why is this the case? Because over the course of a 3-4 hour interview, the typical candidate usually becomes more and more comfortable with the interviewer. Spending time alone with someone who's showing a genuine interest in what you have to say is pretty enjoyable for most people. As rapport builds and the interviewer gets the candidate to feel comfortable opening up and talking at length about his or her accomplishments, experiences, preferences and goals for the future, the candidate stops trying to maintain his or her "interview persona" and often veers from prepared answers and sales pitches. The longer candidates talk, the more they reveal. As we often remind managers,

> ***"The more people tell you, the more they trust you. And the more they trust you, the more they tell you."***

Another benefit of a longer timeframe is a little something we call the "Fatigue Factor." While candidates often come into the interview full of energy and poised to sell themselves, over time this energy begins to ebb, and it becomes increasingly harder for them to stick to their script of prepared responses. Usually toward the middle or end of the second hour of a Comprehensive Interview, you'll notice candidates becoming tired, perhaps losing some steam. Often their answers will become more spontaneous, less thought-out. They'll say things they hadn't planned to say. They simply don't have the energy to be creative with their answers, so they become more candid and honest.

And this, of course, is exactly what you want. Over and over managers have told us that the third hour of the Comprehensive Interview was the most valuable in the whole process. This period usually offers the best opportunity to truly see a candidate's strengths, weaknesses and personality.

It's not uncommon toward the end to hear candidates preface statements with phases such as, "I can't believe I'm about to say this but…." or "I probably shouldn't admit this but……" Often their answers in the third and fourth hours confirm the profile of the candidate you have been establishing along the way, making you feel more confident you know what you would be getting if you hired the person.

Sometimes you learn new things about the candidate that wouldn't have appeared anywhere else. Most importantly, doubts you may have had regarding "red flags" that popped up earlier can emerge as full blown issues that are impossible to brush aside as "no big deal."

Regardless of what you learn about the person in this second interview, it's likely to be vital information that helps you really understand what the individual would or would not bring to the open position.

What About Other Interviewers?

One thing many hiring managers like to do is have other people interview their candidates and provide feedback as part of the hiring process. Done correctly, this step can yield valuable input and sometimes even uncover information the hiring manager missed. However, done incorrectly it can be a big waste of time that adds little or no value to the process.

To get the most out of having other managers or team members interview your candidate, the first thing to consider is why you want each individual's feedback. Is this person a much more experienced interviewer whose judgment you trust? Maybe she has more expertise in a certain area than you and might be able to more effectively assess your candidate's skills or knowledge. Or perhaps he interacts closely with the position you're trying to fill, and you'd like his opinion on working alongside your candidate.

Next, be sure your interviewers know what you're looking for. Go over your Hiring Profile with each person before he or she meets with your candidate and be certain you're on the same page regarding what makes a "great fit." You also want to strategize what each interviewer is going to ask to ensure your candidate isn't being bombarded with the same questions over and over. And you definitely want to avoid bundling all your interviewers together into a panel and forcing your candidate to meet with all of them at once. This may seem like a timesaver, but panel interviews almost always make people very uncomfortable and don't typically garner much useful information since candidates usually feel outnumbered and on the hot seat.

Finally, get the timing right for bringing in your other interviewers. Set aside time at the **beginning** of your comprehensive interview for others to meet with your candidate and then plan to conduct your portion **after** they've finished. This may add an additional hour or two to the process on top of your 3-4 hour timeframe, but it can be well worth the investment.

The Interview Plan

Once managers commit to getting the benefits of a longer secondary interview, their concern usually shifts to how to structure such a big block of time. We recommend dividing the timeframe into three distinct sections:

Step 1 – Review of any assessment profile results.

Step 2 – Deeper investigation of the candidate's job and personal histories.

Step 3 – Future-oriented questions to determine what the candidate it truly looking for in his or her next job, manager and company.

An important point to remember: If at any time during the interview you determine the candidate is not a good fit with your open position, **you can exit the individual without proceeding to the next step**. It's not necessary to keep forging ahead if you know you're not going to hire the person and, in fact, it would be a waste of time for both parties.

Step 1 – Sharing the Assessment Results

Assuming you've used an assessment tool to take a deeper look at your candidates, you'll start the interview by going over the results with your candidate. You don't need to review the entire profile; just the highlights. The key is to use the statements from the assessment report to get candidates talking about how they have used specific personality traits and talents in the past.

For example, if the profile indicates your candidate has strong problem solving skills, ask her to tell you about the most recent problem she faced in her job and walk you though how she resolved it. Make her go into detail so you really get a sense of how she uses this talent. If the profile rates your candidate high in sociability, ask him to tell you about how he regularly interacts with peers, customers and team members in other departments. Again, dig for details, and keep asking questions until you feel the key points in the profile have been validated as "true" by the candidate through his examples and stories. Plan on spending about an hour going over your assessment results.

For a detailed look at how this works, check out a sample Berke Interview Guide at https://BerkeAssessment.com/features/reports .

Step 2 – Revisiting History

The second section of the interview typically begins with a revisit of the candidate's job history, only now you have the time for a more in-depth discussion. In the screening interview you likely spent a little time on each of the person's most recent jobs and briefly discussed the individual's primary responsibilities in each one. Now you can get a much higher level of information by asking candidates to:

- Walk you through a typical day in that job
- Explain step-by-step how they executed certain tasks (e.g. how they resolved a customer complaint, how they put together a department budget, how they developed a new system, etc.)
- Tell you about the managers they worked for, particularly what they enjoyed about their relationship with each person and what they would have changed if they'd had the opportunity
- Describe their biggest contribution to the position
- Talk about the one thing they wished they'd been able to do but couldn't
- Describe how their responsibilities changed over time in the position

Use this in-depth information to continue to evaluate what your candidates have done in the past against what you would be asking them to do for you.

Another beneficial point to cover in this portion of the interview is the candidate's **personal history**. This is different from job history in that it encourages individuals to tell you about the factors that have influenced them **outside of work**. You can open up the discussion with a question like this:

"It's really been interesting to hear about how you've gotten where you are today professionally. I always think it's helpful to understand the things that have had a big impact on people and their career progression. Now I'd like to hear about something a little different. Think back over your past and tell me about some of the events, challenges, or people you've encountered outside of work that have influenced you the most."

What's great about this question is that it's usually unique enough that few, if any, candidates will have anticipated it and prepared a response. This ensures you get more candid answers and, consequently, gain insight into aspects of the person you haven't seen before in the interview.

What kinds of things do candidates talk about when asked this question? You may hear about:

- Experiences that led them to develop an interest in something at an early age ("I took apart my first computer when I was 6 years old and was immediately hooked….")
- Lessons they've learned from challenges or setbacks they've faced ("*Both my parents had to work long hours to support our family, so as the oldest child I learned a lot about responsibility and leadership since I had to take care of my younger siblings…*:)
- People who taught them lessons that shaped their ideas and character ("*I'll always remember one of my high school teachers who really pushed me…..*")
- Events that made an impact on them ("*I traveled to South America by myself the summer before my senior year of college and will never forget…")*

You never know what people will talk about when you ask this question. But managers who use it often tell me they always learn something about the candidate they didn't know, and it's usually information they wouldn't have been able to get from sticking to "standard" interview questions.

Step 3 – Looking Into the Future

Once you feel you have thoroughly explored the candidate's assessment profile and his or her history, the final third of the interview can focus on "what's next" for the candidate. This is the one portion of the interview process where it makes sense to deviate from Behavior Based questioning. Why? Because your goal is to determine if your opportunity is what the individual wants going forward. In order to find this out, ask candidates to:

- Describe their "wish lists" for their next position
- Identify the activities where they'd like to spend the bulk of their time
- Explain where they would like to use their talents
- Discuss where they would like to personally learn and grow
- Describe the type of manager they want to work for and the relationship they would like to have with this individual
- Outline what's important to them in finding a company that's a good fit for them (What would the culture be like? What kind of vision and values would it have? What would the day-to-day work environment be like?)

While your candidate is answering, listen very carefully. Then ask yourself a simple yet crucial question:

> *"How does what this person's describing fit with what we have to offer?"*

Your honest answer has everything to do with whether or not you will be able to meet this person's needs, and whether the individual is truly a viable candidate.

Decision Time

At this point, you should have a clear picture of who each of your candidates really is, especially their strengths, weaknesses, goals and preferences. You know each person's work history—what they have been either successful or unsuccessful doing in the past, which is a key predictor of what they will likely do in the future. You have insight into your candidates' personalities traits and talents, where they are predisposed to both excel and struggle. You've had multiple opportunities to evaluate their styles and get a sense of what they would be like to work alongside on a daily basis, how they will fit with the rest of your team. Most importantly, you can evaluate what each individual has to offer against your other top candidates and what he or she might bring to the table. And with this wealth of knowledge, you are ready for the last step in the process—choosing your top candidate and making an offer.

Final Thoughts

Most managers hone their interview skills through repetition and practice, so it makes sense that your first attempts at Behavior Based Interviewing and conducting a Comprehensive Interview may feel awkward if you've largely relied on other techniques in the past. But once you get comfortable incorporating even a handful of these elements, you'll probably find it becomes increasingly easier and more natural every time you use them.

When you experience what it's like to get to the end of an interview and feel like you really **know** a candidate, you'll likely appreciate why investing time and energy in a new approach is worth the effort. Best of all, having the ability to make every new hire a great hire may be all the incentive you need.

Thank you for reading!

If you enjoyed the Comprehensive Interview Guide be sure to check out our other guide, the Ultimate Hiring Guide at https://BerkeAssessment.com/Guides