Behavioural Event Interview: Overview and Technique

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What is a Behavioural Event Interview (BEI)?

A Behavioural Event Interview (BEI) is a structured interview that is used to collect information about past behaviour. It is an interview technique based on the premise that **the best predictor of future behaviour is the past behaviour** thus a BEI attempts to uncover the past performance by asking open-ended questions that require the interviewee to describe in detail past experiences which demonstrate their ability to perform the job. Each question helps the interviewer learn about interviewee’s past performance in a key competency area that is critical to success in the position. The interview is conducted face-to-face as far as possible. The hypothesis of BEI is that superior performers demonstrate more of the characteristic than do average performers and/or that average performers demonstrate more of the characteristic than do poor performers.

The Behavioural Event Interview is the heart of the **Job Competency Assessment** process. BEI data are the richest source of hypotheses about competencies that predict superior or effective job performance. The basic principle why it is used for competency assessment is that **what people think or say about their motives or skills is not credible**. Only what they actually do, in the most critical incidents they have faced, is to be believed. The purpose of the BEI method is to get behind what people say they do to find out what they **really** do. This is accomplished by asking people to describe how they actually behaved in specific incidents.

BEI when conducted with an objective to identify the competencies required for a position, it is much like **Critical Incidents Technique** which is used to systematically identifying very detailed behavioural descriptions that contribute to success or failure of individuals in specific situations encountered in performing the job.

In **BEI** the respondent is asked to describe three incidents in which he or she felt effective in the job and three incidents in which he or she felt ineffective in the job. The format for the interview is similar to a journalistic inquiry. The interviewer attempts to obtain as accurate an account of the incident as possible by asking probing yet nondirective questions and requesting specificity, clarification, and examples whenever possible. The interviewer’s job is to keep pushing for complete stories that describe the specific behaviours, thoughts, and actions the interviewee has shown in actual situations. Most interviewers have been using traditional approaches in interviewing and when asked to conduct BEI it may be very difficult as interviewing habits can be hard to break.
Behavioural vs. Traditional Interviews:

Traditional Interviews is the most common type of interview. The interview consists of a series of questions that may or may not be standardized. In addition to responding to questions, interviewer would be expected to ask articulate, well-formed questions. Traditional interviewing methods do not work well to identify competencies primarily for two reasons:

First, most people don’t know what their competencies, strengths and weaknesses, really are. Harvard psychologist Chris Argyris has shown that people’s “espoused theories of action” (what they say they do) bear no relation to their “theories in use” (what they actually do). Second, people may not reveal their real motives and abilities. Most interview questions are “leading” and most people can give the “socially desirable” answer: what they think the interviewer wants to hear. As a result, people’s self-reports of background, strengths, and preferences do not provide reliable information about their competencies.

Behavioural interview is quite different in several ways from traditional interviewing techniques and are one of the most effective way to Job competency Assessment:

- Instead of asking how you would behave in a particular situation, the interviewer will ask you to describe how you did behave and interpret the competencies involved.

- Interviewer will question and probe (think of “peeling the layers from an onion”) and will ask you to provide details which will not allow you to theorize or generalize so as to pinpoint critical competencies.

- The behavioural interviewer is fact-finding and will focus on your actual past actions, not what you “should” or “would” have done. Some interviewers, however, will follow-up with questions such as, "Looking back on this experience, what would you do differently?"

- You may not get a chance to deliver any prepared stories. The behavioural interviewer is more interactive with you and will continue probing with follow-up questions or refocusing in order to get the information needed.

- The behavioural interview may be longer and the interviewer will likely be taking copious notes.
Why BEI the most preferred method?

BEI has certain limitations even then it is one of the most preferred and widely used competency assessment method. The method of thematic analysis can overcome most of these limitations mentioned above through searching for and identifying patterns in the person’s detailed recollections. These patterns, or themes, may reflect a disposition or an underlying characteristic of which even the respondent is unaware. Major reasons for popularity of BEI can be summarised as:

- BEI has been the most effective assessment method in identifying skill level. It does not tend to generate information about specialized knowledge used in job performance situations but to determine other levels of competencies (i.e., motives, traits, self image, or social roles), the analyst of these interviews would have to infer the competencies from the events described.

- Further, it is one of the most effective techniques for assessing managerial behaviour as provides information on aspects of managerial behaviour that would not be directly observable.

- The BEI represents a sampling of a person’s behaviour in that it results in information about six critical incidents in the person’s recent job activity. This allows for documentation of a pattern of demonstrating specific competencies. If such a sampling were not obtained, a single demonstration of an action could be evidence of a unique event rather than of a competency that the person possesses.

- It can be considered a content valid assessment method as it obtains a sample of the person’s actual behaviour in the job.

- It is more cost effective than many other methods.

Preparing for a Behavioural Interview - Interviewee:

Instruction for Interviewee in BEI:

- With each question asked, think through what information is being sought - and provide an example from your own experience.

- Don’t talk just to fill up dead air - take a minute to collect your thoughts and organize your answer before replying.

- Provide a short, concise overview of the situation.

- Be specific about your role in each situation.

- Stay away from using ‘we’ too often - the interviewer wants to know what ‘you’ accomplished specifically.
• Be sure each story has a beginning, a middle, and an end, i.e., be ready to describe the situation, your action and the outcome or result.

• Be honest. Don’t embellish or omit any part of the story.

• Be specific. Don’t generalize about several events; give a detailed accounting of one event.

• Explain what you learned from each experience.

• Ask the interviewer if he/she would like more detail.

• Listen carefully, and feel free to ask for clarification before answering a question.

• Take a moment to formulate your answers before you speak.

• Be honest while focusing on communicating your professional achievements.

• Bring a notepad and a pen.

• Do not chew gum, swear, or use slang.

Preparing for a Behavioural Interview - Interviewer:

Interviewer needs to learn how to

• Customise a behavioural interview to meet specific needs of identifying competencies.

• Develop key interviewing skills and strategies to conduct competency-based interviewing

• Probe to determine the reliability of the answers.

• Interpret the answers.

• Use effective note-taking to document interview proceedings for future analysis.

Interviewer needs a solid understanding of

• What functional Job Competency Assessment is all about.

• What job competencies are and how they relate to behavioural interviewing.

• How to conduct Competencies analysis for each job for which BEI is to be conducted.
• How to select the job dimensions especially tasks involved that need to be assessed for identifying competencies needed.

• How to develop questions that reflect the principles of behavioural interviewing to accurately assess the Job Competency.

• Using the “STAR” Technique in a behavioural interview.
  o What was the Situation in which you were involved?
  o What was the Task you needed to accomplish?
  o What Action(s) did you take?
  o What Results did you achieve?

**Interviewer needs to be prepared with**

• Knowing the interviewee.
  o Name, Division/Department, Location and Designation of the persons to be interviewed.
  o Job description that includes detailed roles & responsibilities and accountabilities.
  o Interviewers sound not, however, know whether the person they are interviewing is rated as a superior or average performer. This can bias the interview.

• Selection of the venue.
  o No interruption during the interview from the telephone or visitors.
  o Others can’t overhear the interview.
  o Dedicated slots of 1½ - 2 hours for each interview.

• Equipments to Record the Interview.
  o Whenever possible, tape-recording and making transcriptions of a BEI is highly advisable as it not only reduces work for the interviewer but also captures invaluable information of the exact nuances of interviewee’s motives and thought processes.
  o Alternative is taking constant notes of the proceedings by the interviewer or a stenographer. Such notes often miss rich details that can help identify competencies.
Standard questions and prompts.

- Develop good standard questions by researching the position for which BEIs are being conducted.
- Write key questions on a notepad which you carry with you to the interview.
- Prepare a prompt to remind you of what you should say at every step during the interview.

**Standard Steps involved in a BEI:**

Generally a BEI conducted for Job Competency Assessment contains five steps. The steps are as follows:

I. Introduction and Explanation –

- The real purpose of this step in the BEI is to establish a sense of mutual trust and good will between interviewer and the interviewee so that he or she is relaxed, open, and ready to talk.

- Introduction of the interviewer/s to put the interviewee at ease and develop trust.

- Explaining the purpose of the interview (Job Competency Assessment as the case here) because interviewee may be curious to know why he/she is being interviewed and what the responses will be used for and who would be using these responses, etc.

- Detailed format of the interview to get response and participation.

- Explain how the data will be used and who will see it with due emphasis on the confidentiality of the Responses.

- If Tape-Recording, inform and take a formal permission. NEVER tape-record secretly. Re-explain what the responses are going to be used for and re-emphasise on confidentiality.

- Keep this part of the interview brief of about 5-10 minutes.

- A major part of this discussion can be given to the employees to be interviewed in writing before the interview and during the interview if they have any query it can be answered.

- Alternatively, the interviewer team may take a joint session for all the employees selected for BEI and introduce themselves and explain to them the purpose of the BEI in the organisation.
• These methods can save considerable amount of time therefore either or both the
techniques can very well be used.

• Possible problems and dealing with them
  o The interviewee is nervous or concerned about why he or she was “singled out”
to be interviewed.

  To deal with this, repeat the purpose of the interview, emphasizing that it is to get
data about the job, not to evaluate the interviewee personally. Reassure the
person that he or she is only one of many people being interviewed.

  o The interviewee is worried about confidentiality or is uncomfortable with the use
of a tape recorder.

  To deal with this, repeat the promise of confidentiality and what will be done with
data from the interview. Emphasize that the tape recorder is only to help you take
notes. Offer to turn it off if the interviewee requests.

II. Job Description (Roles & Responsibilities and Accountabilities) –

• The purpose of this step in the BEI is to get the interviewee to describe his or her
most important job tasks, responsibilities and desired output.

• Information like the Job Title, Reporting Pattern, Span of Control, etc. can be
obtained by the interviewers prior to the interview.

• “What are your major tasks or responsibilities? What do you actually do? What do
you do in a given day, week, or month?” could be possible questions to be asked.

• Listen for possible incidents when the interviewee is describing his/her
responsibilities as this may lead you to critical incidents. Use the interviewee’s
description of job tasks and responsibilities to provide a “natural” transition to
describing a critical incident.

• Not more than 10 to 15 minutes should be spent on this part of the interview.

III. Behavioural Events –

• The purpose of this step in the BEI is to get the interviewee to describe complete
stories of critical incidents. This section should take up the bulk of the interview time
and should provide specific details.

• “STAR technique” is you should use in any critical incident:
SITUATION

- “What was the situation? What events led up to it?” “Who was involved?”

TASK

- “What did you (the interviewee) want to do in the situation?” “What did you think or feel about others?”
  - What did the person want to do - what motivated him or her in the situation (e.g., to do something better, to impress the boss)?
  - How was the person thinking about others (e.g., positively or negatively?) or about the situation (e.g., problem-solving thoughts?)?
  - What was the person feeling (e.g., scared, confident, excited?)?

ACTION

- “What did you actually do or say?”

RESULT

- “What was the outcome? What happened?”

Key points – Do’s:

- Begin BEI with a Positive Event - Most people find it easier to tell about their high points or successes, times they felt they were most effective.

- Narration of Incident in a time Sequence - Try to get the interviewee to begin the story at the beginning and take you through the story as it unfolded. If the story is not going in a sequence, fill in all the gaps in the narrative by asking for the data you need to get a complete story. When the interviewee identifies a critical sub incident, continue by asking the BEI questions: “What led up to that situation...” and so on.

- Discuss Actual Situation - Focus the interviewee on real past occurrences rather than on hypothetical responses, philosophising or espoused behaviours. Always probe espoused and hypothetical responses by asking for a specific example.

- Use Probes for specifics - In doing a BEI, be an investigative reporter, continuously probing for facts. Keep your probes short - not more than 6 to 10 words - and in the past tense and emphasise on “Who, Where, How, What” of a situation. Try to zero-in on to “I” as far as possible rather than on “we” by asking “Who, specifically?”
- Use Probes to uncover “Coverts” behind Actions - Probe for thought processes and feelings in technical problem solving, pattern recognition, strategic planning. Good competency research identifies these algorithms.

- Manage Interviewee’s emotions - Be appreciative of good incidents. Some people need a lot of encouragement and stimulation to really get into the process of telling a good story. You can nod and simile, continually say, “um, hum” or “That’s exactly the kind of incident or detail I’m looking for”. Talking about critical successes - and particularly failures - may arouse strong feelings in a person. If the person is becoming emotionally involved, you may need to stop probing and sympathize with or just listen respectfully until the interviewee calms down.

• Key points – Don’ts:

  o Don’t use Questions that lead to Abstractions - Hypothetical responses, philosophising, and espoused theories do not serve the purpose of the BEI. Present, future, and conditional tense questions are particularly dangerous.

  For example:

  - Present tense: “Why do you do that?”
    Change it to: “What was going through your mind when you did that?”

  - Hypothetical: “What could you have done?”
    Change it to: “What did you do?”

  - Espoused: “What do you usually do?”
    Change it to: “What did you actually do? Kindly give me details of the situation with actual examples.”

  o Don’t Use Leading Questions - Don’t put your words in the interviewee’s mouth. Your leading probe may bias the interview data by introducing a competency the interviewee doesn’t really have. Similarly, don’t jump to a conclusion. Stick to facts. When in doubt probe!

  o Don’t Probe with narrow questions - In Job Competency Assessment where the BEI is used to identify competencies important to doing a job, it is better to cast the widest net possible. What an interviewee considers “critical” is actually “critical” and is an important clue to their competencies. Often superior and average interviewees’ choice of critical incidents is so different it sounds as if they were in different jobs.

• Tactically get additional Behavioural Events. Make the transition to the second incident by reinforcing the person for the story he or she has just told. You can say, “That’s exactly the kind of incident I’m looking for.... Can you think of another time or situation on the job when things went particularly well or were particularly difficult?” When the interviewee comes up with a specific event, using the key probes you try to get the complete story.
• Don’t jump from one situation to another without finishing one at a time. Don’t let the interviewee change the topic or go on to a new incident until you have a complete the present behavioural event.

• Always be in lookout for themes and Patterns in the stories. As the interviewee tells you additional incidents, you are learning about his or her actions. You should ask questions that will verify or double-check inferences you are beginning to draw about his or her competencies.

• Possible problems and dealing with them
  o The interviewee can’t think of a Specific Event.

    To deal with this, tell about an experience of your own in behavioural event story to illustrate the kind of material you want. Give an example of a good behavioural event from someone else you have interviewed but be careful not to lead the interviewee.

  o The interviewee’s answers are Vague.

    To deal with this, you must shift the interviewee out of abstraction and get him or her to focus on and tell you about a concrete event with specificity of situation, time, people involved, incidents, etc.

  o The interviewee is concerned about Confidentiality.

    To deal with this, reassure the interviewee and provide him or her with a way to continue telling the incident without loss of crucial details but also without violating confidentiality concerns. You may ask him or her that you don’t need any names but you are only interested in what basically happened and his or her part in it.

  o The Interviewee starts dominating and directing the Interview.

    To deal with this, interrupt the interviewee. Be very direct about what you want. Keep interrupting (nicely) until the interviewee focuses on a single incident.

  o The Interviewee asks you for Advice.

    Don’t get moved. Try to turn the interviewee’s question back into another incident.

IV. Characteristics Needed to do the Job –

• The purpose of this step in the BEI is to get additional critical incidents in areas that may have been overlooked by asking interviewees what characteristics, knowledge, skills, or abilities they think are needed to do their job. If they were hiring or training someone to do their job, what would they look for?
• This question may appear very hypothesising that the BEI method tries to avoid. In fact, it is a strategy to get additional critical incidents that may shed light on some of the organisation’s espoused or folklore values.

• If the Interviewee can’t think of any knowledge or skill characteristics needed to do the job and the interviewer has enough incidents, terminate the interview at this point. If not, continue to probe by encouraging the interviewee.

V. Conclusion and Summary –

• Conclude the interview by thanking the interviewee for his or her time and the “valuable information”. If required, you may need to “cool out” the interviewee by sympathising with his or her situation.

• After the interview is over it is a good idea to sit down quietly for an hour and summarise what you have learned. If there is time, this is the best point to write up the entire interview, while your memory is still fresh. Note any hypotheses you may have about competencies needed to do the job, so that you can check them in later interviews.

• Summary should be prepared in a particular format and an attempt is to be made on your part to make sure that nothing has been left out.

Limitations of BEI:

• Since the interview method relies on the recall of the respondent, only information that the respondent happens or chooses to remember is presented in the interview. This can result in self-serving, biased information.

• A second limitation arises from the fact that the interviewer asks for decisions, actions, thoughts, and feelings, but not for knowledge or specific information that was the basis for decisions, thoughts, or actions. Therefore, the interviews are not considered adequate sources for determining the specialised knowledge needed by managers to perform their functions.

• Finally, the interpretation and pattern finding from the answers solely reside on the interviewer who may or may not be an expert in Behavioural interview. This may lead to guess work and personal judgment of the interviewer.