

S.T.A.R. Performance: A Quantitative Exploration of Behavioral Responses
in Simulated Selection Interviews

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Prospective employers primarily utilize the traditional job interview format to screen and hire new employees (Kwon, Powell, & Chalmers, 2013; Posthuma, Moregeson, & Campion, 2002; Young & Kacmar, 1998). Thus, the employment interview has been the focus of extensive research. Topics have included the predictive value of the interview process (McCarthy & Goffin, 2004), the influence of social media on the candidate selection process (Jennings, Blount & Weatherly, 2014; Roth, Bobko, Van Iddekinge, & Thatcher, 2016), and candidates' attempts to sway recruiters by implementing impression management tactics and recruiters' interpretation of those efforts (Roulin, Bangerter, & Levashina, 2014). Other studies have examined the questions posed by recruiters, generally categorized as behavioral—actions that candidates have taken in the past—and situational—actions that the candidate would likely take in the future. Job applicants are encouraged to encode their responses in formats that recruiters can easily decode.

Studies that report how candidates respond to behavioral and situational interview questions have been more theoretical than applied. Although such investigations contribute to the body of knowledge, they may be difficult for the layperson to decode. In simple terms, will John Public or Jane Doe have a comprehensive understanding of how their responses are interpreted by recruiters? The purpose of this article is to provide insight into candidate interview responses.

BEHAVIORAL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Traditionally, job applicants interview with recruiters, executives and other company employees before receiving an invitation to join an organization. They answer questions that address the knowledge and skills that influence job performance. Campion, Palmer, & Campion (1997) described four categories of interview questions in structured interviews. Candidates should expect questions about their backgrounds and questions about their ability. Extensive research has focused on the final two categories. Situational questions that address what applicants would do under various work-related conditions and past behavior questions that focus on what the candidate actually did. Behavioral questions allow recruiters to make more accurate predictions about candidates will handle similar problems in the future (Pulakos & Schmitt, 1995).

Behavioral questions are gaining attention in the literature. Walker (2007) advises candidates to prepare for them by drawing upon community activities, neighborhood associations and church functions for examples to share with recruiters. Preparation may prevent candidates from answering too quickly, which may lead to inappropriate responses, or delaying too slowly, which often makes them look inept to recruiters (Brosy, Bangerter & Mayor, 2016). Taylor and Small (2002) found past behavior questions demonstrated superior validity for predicting job performance and a candidate's motivation.

One framework to answer behavioral questions is the S.T.A.R. format. The acronym stands for Situation, Task, Action and Result (Carniol, 2013; Konop, 2014). Research indicates employers implement behavior-based interviews more frequently (Culbertson, Weyhrauch, & Huffcutt, 2017; Huffcutt, Weekley, Wiesner, Degroot, & Jones, 2001; Oliphant, Hansen, & Oliphant, 2008; Young & Kacmar, 1998), but provide little guidance on how candidates have or

should use the S.T.A.R. format (Aronoff, 2005; Browning & Cunningham, 2012). Most of those studies are conducted in academic settings.

Bangerter, Carvalon and Cavin (2014) conducted one of the few studies of how job candidates implement the S.T.A.R. storytelling format when answering behavioral questions. The researchers examined 62 videotapes of applicants for a research assistant position. Respondents discussed situational narrative elements significantly more than tasks/actions or results.

Recognizing that students need assistance with the communication and job skills, several faculty members have included various approaches to teaching general interviewing skills in the curriculum. Academic modules focusing on job descriptions, storytelling, mock job interviews and S.T.A.R. have become key elements of classes (Bloch, 2011; Browning & Cunningham, 2012; Conn, 2009; Crawford, Henry, & Dineen, 2001; Litchfield, 2008). Keltner-Previs, Rudick and Faust (2012) found that students who attended an interview training class and watched a training video that featured the S.T.A.R. format performed better than those who just watched the video or did nothing at all. Mascolini and Supnick (1993) helped students prepare for behavior-based questions and reviewed textbooks to determine if the content helped students excel in job interviews. Browning and Cunningham (2012) paired students to conduct peer interviews using the S.T.A.R. format when responding to behavioral questions. They encouraged communication faculty to incorporate behavior-based interview activities into their teaching plans.

Although behavioral questions are asked in job interviews, these types of questions have generated concerns. Recruiters might fail to follow-up after responses to behavioral questions (Ralston & Kirkwood, 1999). Candidates who are poor storytellers may be unlikely to impress a

recruiter (Bangerter et al., 2014). A third concern is a respondent's examples from previous work settings may not be appropriate for a new employer (Sullivan, 2016).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Previous investigations provided limited insight into the use of the S.T.A.R. format to answer behavior-based questions. Specifically, the current study asks two questions:

RQ1: What S.T.A.R. narrative elements do respondents use when answering behavioral questions?

RQ2: What categories do respondents draw upon for stories to answer behavioral-based questions?

METHOD

This study uses a content analysis procedure to answer the research questions. Content analysis is a systematic, analytical method to examine a phenomenon (Riffe, Lacy, & Fico, 1998). The content analysis is concerned with coding manifest content rather than latent content. The former refers to the material that actually appears, uninterpreted in the message, while the latter is content that becomes apparent after a coder has interested, or "read between the lines" (Sparks, 2015, pp. 20-21).

Students (N=45) enrolled in an undergraduate Business Communication class at a southeastern university completed a semester-long assignment designed to help them excel during selection interviews. Each student was required to find a published job description for an internship, research the company, write a cover letter, update a resume and record a mock interview. From March 19-April 19, 2018, students completed a one-on-one videotaped simulated interview that served as the data for this study. The final interview consisted of 10 questions, including two behavioral questions that should have been answered in the S.T.A.R.

format. The first question asked respondents to tell about a time when they were disappointed in their performance. The second question asked respondents to tell about a time when they lead a team. This study focuses on how respondents implemented the S.T.A.R. format when answering the two behavioral questions.

One research assistant and one of the researchers served as coders for this study. Coders were given coding sheets, which included definitions for most of the variables in this study. After a 90-minute training session, two coders reviewed the videotapes for the presence or absence of information that represented the Situation, Task, Action and Results (See Table 1). When the coding was completed, inter-coder reliabilities were calculated and coders met to discuss any discrepancies. This process was repeated until at least a .70 level of inter-coder reliability was achieved using Krippendorff's Alpha.

RESULTS

The 45 participants in this study were undergraduate students enrolled in a communication class in a School of Business at a southeastern university. Approximately 82% of the respondents were business students, 75% were female and 25% were male. Approximately 44% had completed formal internships or had relevant work experience in their concentrations.

RQ1: What S.T.A.R. narrative elements do respondents use when answering behavioral questions?

To answer the first research question, frequencies were run on each of four components of the S.T.A.R. Researchers were looking for the presence or absence of information that would satisfy each element. Findings suggest respondents were unprepared for the first question. Although 95% provided the Situation or explained the context for the answer, only 33% explained their individual assignment, 27% detailed their actions and 20% provided an outcome.

The second behavioral question generated slightly better results. Again, 95% established context by providing the Situation. For this response, however, the number of respondents who provided details of the Task and Action nearly doubled. In contrast, the number of respondents who provided a Result decreased, though not substantially (See Table 2).

RQ2: What categories do respondents draw upon for stories to answer behavioral-based questions?

The second question asked what storytelling resources respondents consulted for their answers. More than half of the respondents drew upon their Academic experiences. Many of them told stories about preparing for class assignments or leading group projects. The second most popular category was the workplace, with respondents drawing upon their experiences with internships that were related to their fields of study or part-time jobs that were not related to their fields but instead helped finance their educations (See Table 3). With each behavioral question, community service or other volunteer experiences represented less than 7% of the answers.

DISCUSSION

Recruiters attempt to reduce risk by forecasting how prospective employees may affect an organization. It is said that one of the best predictors of future behavior is past behavior. Behavioral questions are designed to moderate uncertainty and thus have become a significant portion of the interview conversation.

This study focused on college students who were engaged in a semester-long Business Communication class that included multiple interview preparation assignments. A great deal of attention was devoted to the S.T.A.R. format, with students completing individual and group projects on this format. Although the students had been instructed how to respond to these questions, many of them failed to incorporate the elements thoroughly and consistently. These

findings are similar to those of Bangerter, Corvalan and Cavin (2014), who found respondents also focused on Situation more than the other narrative elements. The authors surmised applicants focused more on the context of their actions than on the actions themselves.

There are additional items to consider when evaluating these findings. First, the questions must be taken into account. The first question asked students to think about their personal or professional failures. Undertaking this task requires introspection, a skill that develops over time. The question forces students to acknowledge a disappointment and then find one that is appropriate to discuss in an interview setting. In this study, nearly all of the respondents acknowledge the disappointment, but finding the right words to share a negative experience with a prospective employer may have been challenging. It is interesting to note that those who fared well with this question told stories of attempts to reach lofty goals. One respondent tried to earn a 4.0 grade point average in a semester but failed by earning a single B in a course. Another respondent told of her team's attempt to win a national competition but earned fourth place instead.

The second question required respondents to recall positive leadership experiences. Most of the responses on the second attempt. There may be three explanations for this. First, this question was posed near the end of the interview. By that time, respondents may have relaxed and recognized the question required the S.T.A.R. format. The second explanation is respondents may feel more comfortable recalling and telling positive stories. It may be a natural inclination to position oneself as a competitive candidate, and this question allows one to shine. Third, this question was used throughout the semester to practice the S.T.A.R. format. This question may have triggered memories of those exercises and propelled the respondents to excel.

This study highlighted an opportunity for candidates to distinguish themselves from the competition. Less than 10 percent of the respondents mentioned community service or volunteer activities. Recruiters may be impressed that a candidate would give time and energy to an important cause. At the very least, it would be a refreshing change of pace to hear stories that do not focus on university functions or workplace activities.

This study has several limitations. This study focused on college students. Although this group is a convenient sample, the findings may not be generalizable to a larger population. Second, respondents knew prior to the interview that it would be videotaped, but actually seeing the camera made them more nervous than they expected.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The primary finding from this study is respondents—particularly college students—must prepare for job interviews if they want to be perceived as competitive candidates. They should practice different types of interview questions and excelling in different formats. For example, more companies are implementing group interviews that require candidates to be in a room with others who are competing for the same position. In addition, companies also conduct panel interviews where several company representatives may meet simultaneously with a single candidate.

Research suggests faculty members are incorporating job interviewing modules in their courses. These findings suggest repetition and redundancy may be necessary. Instructional time is limited, but perhaps one solution is to use resources provided by the on-campus career planning office. Most career centers offer mock interviews and other interview preparation seminars. Faculty could encourage students to use those resources by making it part of a grade or offering extra credit. A second opportunity may to engage alumni to conduct mock interviews. It

provides an opportunity for students to interview with unfamiliar individuals, thereby simulating an actual interview. The selection interview is still the most common approach to hiring. The goal of faculty, career officers and even recruiters should be to make sure applicants are comfortable and successful in this experience.

Table 1

Components of the S.T.A.R. format

Situation	What was the context of the story?
Task	What was the respondent's particular assignment/task?
Action	What steps did the respondent take to complete the task?
Result	What was the outcome?

Table 2

S.T.A.R. Narrative Elements

Table 1:	STAR 1	STAR 2
Situation	95.6% (n=43)	95.6% (n=43)
Task	33.3% (n=15)	66.7% (n=30)
Action	26.7% (n=12)	51.1% (n=23)
Result	44.4% (n=20)	33.3% (n=15)

Note: The first behavioral question asked respondents to tell about a time when they were disappointed in their performances. The second behavioral question asked respondents to tell about a time when they led a team.

Table 3

S.T.A.R. Response Categories

	STAR 1	STAR 2
Academic	60%	48.9%
Work	35.6%	37.8%
Community Service	2.2%	6.7%
Other	2.2%	6.6%

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