

# **Developments In Business Simulation & Experiential Exercises, Volume 22, 1995**

## **USING CRITICAL INCIDENT SKILLS QUESTIONS TO HELP STUDENTS BECOME MORE SUCCESSFUL AT JOB INTERVIEWING**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Job candidates are invited to a company interview based on paper qualifications, so interviewers evaluate candidates' fit with the company through questions evaluating their knowledge and skills. Currently used Critical Incident Skills questions force candidates to show their knowledge and skills through answers illustrating their experience (Harris (1989), Maurer (1988), Robertson (1990), Solomon (1988), Thibadoux (1991), Wright (1989)). This paper discusses how to teach students to answer currently asked interview questions, using both in-class role-playing and out-of-class exercises for interview preparation.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Questions asked by job interviewers traditionally asked candidates about strengths and weaknesses, education, and job experience. Well-prepared candidates usually were familiar with typical questions and could simply state that they had the skill or experience being asked about ("Yes, I have leadership experience") rather than really show that they had that skill. To more effectively find out how a candidate will fit with a job, interviewers are beginning to ask what are called "critical incident skills" questions. This type of question asks candidates to describe how they would handle a work problem. Instead of asking, "Can you motivate others to do a good job?" the interviewer might say "Give me an example of a situation where you needed to motivate others to finish a project." Students need to think of the skill needed to perform the task and answer accordingly.

Because this type of question is less familiar to students and requires more thought to answer, we need to give students practice in answering critical incident skills questions to help them succeed at their job interviews. The object is to show skills through example rather than just state that they have that skill. Both out-of-class exercises and in-class role-playing can give students this kind of interview practice.

### **What Are Critical Incident Skills?**

People responsible for interviewing job candidates

have analyzed the skills required to perform jobs successfully. For example, an accountant needs solid technical skills, which can be evaluated through traditional questions about education, through contacting academic and job references, and through requiring GPA on the resume. In addition, an accountant for a Big Six firm needs to be able to work in teams, to motivate co-workers, to work under time pressure, and to possess good interpersonal skills to attract and keep clients. These skills can best be evaluated through critical incident skills questions that require candidates to prove that they have these skills through describing successful incidence of them (Thibadoux (1991)).

### **Sample Critical Incident Skills Questions**

Give me an example of a time your work was criticized.

This question is a new version of "what are your weaknesses?" It asks the candidate to discuss a time something went wrong at school or work. A well-prepared job candidate will recognize the negative implications of the question and also recognize that the question is asking for a story illustrating how he or she reacts to criticism and learns from it.

Can you tell me about a project where you had to meet a difficult deadline? How did you finish on time?

Show me how you solve a problem.

Tell me about an obstacle you had to overcome.

What risks did you take in your last few jobs, and what was the result of those risks?

Interviewers usually arrive at these questions by considering the requirements of the job (long hours? lots of conflict? people skills?); candidates can answer these questions well if they've done their job-analysis homework.

### **Giving Students Practice in Interview Skills**

Traditionally, role-playing has been used to give students practice in job interview skills, both in relevant classes and through career planning and placement centers. As classes increase in size, devoting enough class time to give all students role

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playing interview practice becomes more difficult. One way to prepare students for interviews before taking time for role playing in class is to have students develop, outside of class, illustrative stories for several interview questions.

Give students a handout listing a number of critical incident skills questions relevant to their career field. Instruct them to analyze the questions for what skill is being evaluated. (In the earlier example, the actual skill being evaluated was how the candidate reacts to and learns from criticism.) Then have them write out an example as a story that shows what skill they are describing, how they used this skill, and how it will help them be a good employee for the company. A useful reading to assign at this point is John LeFevre's How You Really Get Hired, which explains how candidates must show that they have a skill rather than just say they do. The illustrative stories should be about three paragraphs long and take no more than a minute or so to tell.

In-class role-playing follows this out-of-class preparation, to give students practice in telling their stories fluently. Using the list of questions, assign each "interviewer" a question (groups could be numbered off to randomize the question choice) and have the "candidate" answer the question with his or her story (extemporaneously rather than read, of course). The instructor might choose to have a third person in each group as an observer who writes down comments on how well the story is presented and how well it illustrates the appropriate skills. Videotaping the role-plays is also possible, so that students can later evaluate their own performance.

In addition to giving students interview practice experience, the written stories can be used as parts of job applications asking for most important experiences and personal attributes such as leadership. While job search is just one part of a business student's college training, it is a very important part of the immediate job placement experience that ends most college careers, and preparing students for this part of their college career is important.

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