# National Institutes of Health

# GS-0080 Security Specialist

# Behavioral Interview Guide

## Behavioral-Based Interview Overview

Behavioral-based interviews focus on discovering how a candidate performed in specific work-related situations. This interview technique seeks to uncover how a potential employee actually did behave in a given situation; not on how he or she might behave in the future. The premise behind this technique is that a good predictor of future performance is how someone performed in the past in a similar situation. Behavioral-based interviews are becoming more common throughout industry and government and many candidates are familiar with this technique and are well prepared for these interviews. Candidates can and should draw on previous work-related experiences as well as non-work-related experiences (e.g., school projects, community involvement) that are relevant to the interview questions.

### Behavioral Interviewing Suggested Protocol

1. As much as possible, all questions should relate to experiences that have occurred in the last 2-3 years (best for recollection of behavioral details).
2. All behavioral interview questions should focus on what the interviewee did, said, felt or thought in the past. The interviewer should be looking for phrases such as “I did….”, “I said….” etc.
3. Do not ask questions about what the interviewee would do in a given situation or what they would have done differently. The focus is on what the interviewee actually did/said/thought/felt in the past. If the interviewee uses such phrases as “I would,” the interviewer should probe by saying, “What did you actually do at that time?”
4. The interviewee should focus on what he/she did, rather than what “we” did. While working as part of a team is very common and desirable, it is important to understand what the candidate’s individual role was. The interviewer should probe the interviewee if “We” is used in describing actions. For example, if the interviewee says “We implemented the new payroll system by…..”, it is the interviewer’s job to ask the interviewee what his/her role was and what he actually did (as an individual).
5. Prior to delving into the detail of each question, ask the interviewee to provide a brief (30 second) overview of the situation by highlighting the beginning, middle, and end. This helps the interviewer to keep the interview on track. For example, if you feel lost in the discussion, you can pause the conversation by asking the interviewee where you are in the story (beginning, middle, or end).

### Suggested Introduction to the Interview

This is a behavioral interview, which may be different from interviews you have had in the past. A behavioral interview focuses on what you have done, said, felt and thought in past experiences. Please use the first person as much as possible because I am most interested in what you have done, said, thought and felt in the situations. So, if you use the term “we” rather than “I”, I may interrupt you to clarify what you did in the situation versus what others did.

I am going to ask you specific questions about your experiences and will ask that you try, as best as you can, to only discuss experiences that have occurred within the past 2 or 3 years so that you will be able to recall the details of the situations.

I will ask follow-up questions to get as many of the details around what you were doing in the situation. Imagine that I am making a movie of what you were doing in the given situation. I am interested in everything you did, said, thought and felt.

NOTE: The information provided above offers suggestions for conducting behavioral-based interviews. Interviewers should use this information as a tool and tailor the interview to meet the needs of the individual organization.

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| **Security Specialist** | |
| Competency | Definition |
| **Project/Program Administration** | Completes procedures, documents, forms, reports and/or budgets that are essential to the day-to-day operations of a group, project, or program. |
| **Contract Management** | Understands the process for managing and administering contracts and monitoring contractor performance. |
| **Decision Quality** | Makes sound decisions that take into account objectives, risks, implications, and agency and governmental regulations. |
| **Influence and Negotiation** | Uses persuasion to gain the support and cooperation from stakeholders, superiors, colleagues, subordinates and other parties to achieve a desired course of action consistent with the organization? S strategic goals and objectives. |
| **Federal and Departmental Policies and Procedures Knowledge** | Understand and applies knowledge of Federal and Departmental statutes, regulations, policies, and procedures. |
| **Communications** | Delivers clear, effective communication and takes responsibility for understanding others. |
| **Professional Integrity** | Displays and promotes conduct and behaviors consistent with agency and governmental standards. |

**Project/Program Administration**

Completes procedures, documents, forms, reports and/or budgets that are essential to the day-to-day operations of a group, project, or program.

### Key Behaviors:

* Completes project documents and tasks.
* Adheres to policies and procedures, including timeframes, for all milestones and requirements.
* Keeps managers aware of the status of projects being managed, including timeframes and document requirements, and key operational issues through formal and informal communications (e.g., status reports, e-mails, updates at meetings).
* Recommends changes to forms, documents, procedures, policies, etc., that will increase the effectiveness of the project area.
* Answers and/or researches project-related questions.

### Interview questions:

1. Give me an example of a time when you had to report on the status of a project. What communication methods did you use?
2. Recall a time when you were assigned what you considered to be a complex project or task? What steps did you take to prepare for and finish the project tasks on time? Were you satisfied with the outcome? Why or why not?

### Candidate Response:

### Interview Summary:

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| **Summarize the situation, behaviors demonstrated and outcomes. Then provide an overall proficiency rating for the competency as defined in the Administrative Officer competency model.** |
| Situation: |
| Behaviors: |
| Outcome: |
| Overall Competency Proficiency Rating: 1 2 3 4 5 |

**Contract Management**

Understands the process for managing and administering contracts and monitoring contractor performance.

### Key Behaviors:

* Serves as project officer for personnel security administrative support contracts.
* Develops technical requirements and descriptions of the work to be accomplished in a contract.
* Monitors contracts to ensure proper billing charges.

### Interview questions:

1. Describe how your knowledge of and experience with acquisition regulations, procedures, and methods involved in Federal Government acquisition activities would be helpful in purchasing 500 new PCs for a workforce of scientific and administrative staff supporting a scientific organization.
2. Give an example of a recent assignment you worked on that required a contract modification. What was your role in making this modification? What were the results?
3. Describe a situation in which you conducted negotiations with vendors, developed specifications for use in solicitations, and/or monitored performance of an acquisition. In retrospect, what could you have done differently to possibly have achieved a better outcome?
4. Describe steps you would take to manage the termination of a contract. What are the primary factors you must consider?
5. Describe your experience with monitoring contractor performance. What are the primary factors you consider when doing so?

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**Decision Quality**

Makes sound decisions that take into account objectives, risks, implications, and agency and governmental regulations.

### Key Behaviors:

* Bases decisions on an analysis of short-range consequences or simple options, including people’s reactions and potential problems.
* Gathers sufficient information to identify gaps and variances before making a decision.
* Solicits the input of the appropriate people to improve the quality of a decision.
* Weighs the costs, benefits, risks, and chances for success in a decision.
* Focuses on objectives and results when considering the various alternatives to a decision.
* Foresees the long-range consequences or implications of different options.
* Bases decisions on higher principles and Agency and governmental regulations with the end goal always in mind.

### Interview questions:

1. Describe the project or situation which best demonstrates your analytical abilities. What was your role?
2. Share an example of a challenging research assignment. What made it challenging? How did you work through the difficulties to successfully complete your assignment? What did you learn?
3. Provide an example of a time when you had to gather and interpret data from various sources in order to identify trends. What challenges did you face? How were these challenges overcome?
4. Describe a situation in which you had to collect information by interviewing several people within an organization? What challenges did you face? How were you able to collect all the information you needed?
5. Provide an example of a time when you had to research and provide information on a subject with which you were unfamiliar. How did you go about this task? What sources of information did you use?
6. Tell us about a time when you had to analyze information and make a recommendation. What kind of thought process did you go through? What was your reasoning behind your recommendation?
7. What is the riskiest decision you have made? What was the situation? What happened?
8. Give a specific example of a time when you used good judgment and login in solving a problem.
9. What are some of the major decisions you have made over the past (6, 12, 18) months?
10. Discuss an important decision you have made regarding a task or project at work. What factors influenced your decision?
11. Give an example of a time in which you had to be relatively quick in coming to a decision.
12. Everyone has made some poor decisions or has done something that just did not turn out right. Has this happened to you? What happened?
13. Give an example of a time when there was a decision to be made and procedures were not in place?
14. Give an example of a time when you had to be relatively quick in coming to a decision.
15. How do you go about developing information to make a decision? Give an example
16. How do you involve others when you make a decision?
17. How quickly do you make decisions? Give an example.
18. In a current job task, what steps do you go through to ensure your decisions are correct/effective?
19. Tell us about a time when you had to defend a decision you made even though other important people were opposed to your decision.
20. What was your most difficult decision in the last 6 months? What made it difficult?
21. When you have to make a highly technical decision, how do you go about doing it?
22. What kind of decisions do you make rapidly? What kind takes more time? Give examples.
23. Describe a recent unpopular decision you made and what the result was.

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**Influence and Negotiation**

Uses persuasion to gain the support and cooperation from stakeholders, superiors, colleagues, subordinates and other parties to achieve a desired course of action consistent with the organization’s strategic goals and objectives.

### Key Behaviors:

* Demonstrates ability to influence others when appropriate.
* Maintains an awareness of goals and objectives and navigates solutions towards desired ends, while maintaining relationships and supporting consensus.
* Uses all available information appropriately to guide decisions and negotiations to meet objectives, while acting with integrity.

### Interview questions:

1. Discuss a controversial policy or position statement you developed. How did you develop it? What did you consider when recommending what the organization’s position should be? How was it received?
2. Sometimes the only way to resolve a defense or conflict is through negotiation and compromise. Tell about a time when you were able to resolve a difficult situation by finding some common ground.
3. Describe a situation in which you had to implement new policies, standards or procedures in your organization. What was your approach? What was the outcome? How long did the process take? How did you assure that employees were kept aware of new or changing policies, regulations or processes?
4. Describe the most challenging negotiation in which you were involved. What did you do? What were the results for you? What were the results for the other party?
5. Have you ever been in a situation where you had to bargain with someone? How did you feel about this? How did you prepare for it? How did you present your position? How did you resolve it? Give an example.
6. Describe a situation in which you were able to positively influence the actions of others in a desired direction.
7. Describe a situation where you were able to use persuasion to successfully convince someone to see things your way.
8. Describe a time when you were able to convince a skeptical or resistant customer to purchase a project or utilize your services.
9. Have you ever had to persuade a group to accept a proposal or idea? How did you go about doing it? What was the result?
10. Have you ever had to persuade a peer or manager to accept an idea that you knew they would not like? Describe the resistance you met and how you overcame it.
11. How do you get a peer or colleague to accept one of your ideas?
12. In selling an idea, it is sometimes useful to use metaphors, analogies, or stories to make your point. Give a recent example of when you were able to successfully do that.
13. Tell us about a time when you had to convince someone in authority about your ideas. How did it work out?
14. Tell us about a time when you used facts and reason to persuade someone to accept your recommendation.
15. Tell us about a time when you used your leadership ability to gain support for what initially had strong opposition.
16. Tell us about a time when you were able to successfully influence another person.
17. Tell us about a time when you and your current/previous supervisor disagreed but you still found a way to get your point across.

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**Federal and Departmental Policies and Procedures Knowledge**

Understand and applies knowledge of Federal and Departmental statutes, regulations, policies, and procedures.

### Key Behaviors:

* Maintains comprehensive working knowledge of related statutes, regulations, policies, and procedures affecting assigned areas.
* Ensures work conforms to statutes, regulations, policies, and procedures and is completed within established timeframes.
* Provides advice and guidance concerning statutes, regulations, policies, and procedures.

### Interview questions:

1. Describe a time when you had to inform, advise, and educate others regarding federal government policies and procedures? What was your approach?
2. Provide an example of a time when you had to research information regarding government rules. What sources of information did you use?
3. What steps do you take to research legislation/standards/policies/procedures? Please be specific.
4. Provide an example of a time you were asked to review and analyze a law, regulation or policy, assess the impact on an organization and recommend an action plan. What resources did you use? What was your recommendation?

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**Communications**

Delivers clear, effective communication and takes responsibility for understanding others.

**Key Behaviors:**

* Asks appropriate questions.
* Identifies and uses effective communication channels and methods (e.g., presentations, electronic dissemination, social media).
* Utilizes skill in presenting information, analysis, ideas and positions in a clear, succinct, accurate, convincing manner, as is appropriate with the audience.
* Clearly and effectively conveys information verbally.
* Organizes, expresses, and communicates ideas clearly in writing.
* Listens actively; asks clarifying questions and summarizes or paraphrases what others have said to verify understanding.
* Ensures that regular communication occurs based on the needs of the work, the individual, management or the situation.
* Uses analogies, visuals, and other techniques to tailor communications to specific audiences.

**Interview questions:**

1. Describe a situation in which you were able to effectively “read” another person and guide your actions by your understanding of their individual needs or values.
2. Have you ever dealt with a situation where communications were poor? Where there was a lack of cooperation? Lack of trust? How did you handle these situations?
3. Describe a situation when you were able to strengthen a relationship by communicating effectively. What made your communication effective?
4. Describe a situation where you felt you had not communicated well. How did you correct the situation?
5. Describe the most significant written document, report or presentation which you had to complete.
6. Tell us about a recent successful experience in making a speech or presentation. How did you prepare? What obstacles did you face? How did you handle them?
7. Have you ever had to “sell” an idea to your co-workers or group? How did you do it? Did they “buy” it?
8. What kinds of communication situations cause you difficulty? Give an example.
9. Tell us about a time when you had to use your verbal communication skills in order to get a point across that was important to you.
10. Tell us about a time when your supervisor criticized your work. How did you respond?

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**Professional Integrity**

Displays and promotes conduct and behaviors consistent with agency and governmental standards.

### Key Behaviors:

* Familiarizes oneself with the pertinent rules and regulations that govern their area of responsibility.
* Applies rules and regulations in a consistent, non-biased manner.
* Refrains from behavior that fosters the appearance of conflict of interest.
* Maintains confidentiality of sensitive information.
* Guards the handling of sensitive or high-risk information appropriately.
* Demonstrates sensitivity to surroundings and acts accordingly in conversations.
* Demonstrates behaviors that are consistent with standards for professional and ethical conduct.
* Follows up with a manager after identifying unethical conduct.
* Adheres to the standards of ethical conduct and compliance.
* Maintains composure at all times.

### Interview questions:

1. Give two examples of things you’ve done in previous jobs that demonstrate your willingness to work hard.
2. We work with a great deal of confidential information. Describe how you would have handled sensitive information in a past work experience. What strategies would you utilize to maintain confidentiality when pressured by others?
3. Tell us about a time when you took responsibility for an error and were held personally accountable.
4. Describe a time when you were asked to keep information confidential.
5. Give examples of how you have acted with integrity in your job/work relationship.
6. If you can, tell about a time when your trustworthiness was challenged. How did you react/respond?
7. Tell us about a specific time when you had to handle a tough problem which challenged fairness or ethnical issues.
8. Trust requires personal accountability. Can you tell about a time when you chose to trust someone? What was the outcome?
9. On occasion we are confronted by dishonesty in the workplace. Tell about such an occurrence and how you handled it.

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**NIH Competency Proficiency Scale**

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| --- | --- | --- |
| Score | Proficiency Level | Description |
| **1** | **Fundamental Awareness**  (basic knowledge) | You have a common knowledge or an understanding of basic techniques and concepts.   * Focus on learning. |
| **2** | **Novice**  (limited experience) | You have the level of experience gained in a classroom and/or experimental scenarios or as a trainee on-the-job. You are expected to need help when performing this skill.   * Focus on developing through on-the-job experience; * You understand and can discuss terminology, concepts, principles and issues related to this competency; * You utilize the full range of reference and resource materials in this competency. |
| **3** | **Intermediate**  (practical application) | You are able to successfully complete tasks in this competency as requested. Help from an expert may be required from time to time, but you can usually perform the skill independently.   * Focus is on applying and enhancing knowledge or skill; * You have applied this competency to situations occasionally while needing minimal guidance to perform successfully; * You understand and can discuss the application and implications of changes to processes, policies, and procedures in this area. |
| **4** | **Advanced**  (applied theory) | You can perform the actions associated with this skill without assistance. You are certainly recognized within your immediate organization as "a person to ask" when difficult questions arise regarding this skill.   * Focus is on broad organizational/professional issues; * You have consistently provided practical/relevant ideas and perspectives on process or practice improvements which may easily be implemented; * You are capable of coaching others in the application of this competency by translating complex nuances relating to this competency into easy to understand terms; * You participate in senior level discussions regarding this competency; * You assist in the development of reference and resource materials in this competency. |
| **5** | **Expert**  (recognized authority) | You are known as an expert in this area. You can provide guidance, troubleshoot and answer questions related to this area of expertise and the field where the skill is used.   * Focus is strategic; * You have demonstrated consistent excellence in applying this competency across multiple projects and/or organizations; * You are considered the “go to” person in this area within NIH and/or outside organizations; * You create new applications for and/or lead the development of reference and resource materials for this competency; * You are able to diagram or explain the relevant process elements and issues in relation to organizational issues and trends in sufficient detail during discussions and presentations, to foster a greater understanding among internal and external colleagues and constituents. |