

Acing the Amazon Behavioral Interview



Every Amazon interview, whether an on-site interview or a phone interview is structured to understand your experience and strengths from two perspectives:

1. Behavioral interview - This is a means for your interviewers and hiring team to understand how you have handled various situations in your past work experience, which becomes a key factor in one's ability to be successful at Amazon. With Amazon being a fast-paced, highly innovative environment, we face key challenges on a day to day basis where we need to make quick but critical decisions with limited data. Our ability to take calculated risks and push back against deadlines to ensure delivery of high-quality features play a vital role.
2. Technical interview - This interview is meant to test specific areas of one's technical competencies. This will involve having to write code and draw-up architecture diagrams to design systems for specific scenarios.

Interview Format

Each interviewer can have slightly different styles of interviewing. However, the most common practice is:

1. Introduction from the interviewer and overview of your day [5min]
2. Behavioral interview questions [20min]
3. Coding/System design questions [30min]
4. An opportunity to ask your interviewer questions [5min]

Behavioral Interview Questions

Each interview will typically have two questions which is meant for the interviewer to learn your past experience and background by understanding how you make decisions and how you weigh the pros and cons of different decisions.

It is absolutely essential to read through Amazon's Leadership Principles (LP)

- <https://www.amazon.jobs/en/principles> and really understand them. Many candidates try to memorize them without understanding what each of these LPs mean. Read them multiple times, on different days, each day before your interview. Each time you read them, you'll understand the underlying meaning and the purpose of each of the LPs better.

Now that you understand what each LP means, this step is very important. Preparing for the behavioral interview questions is equally important as preparing for the technical interview. So, definitely spend a lot of time on these steps:

1. **For each of the LPs**, think about how you may have applied these LPs knowingly or unknowingly in the most recent past. Think of scenarios from no more than 3-4 years ago. If you think of multiple scenarios, that is ideal.

2. It is very important to write these scenarios down, either in a notebook or typed in a word document. Note the scenarios in the most verbose format that you can express them in. Furthermore, assume that you are sending it out via email to a friend.
3. If you're still reading this, you're doing great already!
4. Head over to https://www.amazon.jobs/en/landing_pages/in-person-interview and expand the "STAR answer format" section. Take the time to practice answering questions in this format until it becomes second nature. It is okay to say, "The situation was....., the task at hand was.... The action I took was.... The result was....."
5. How consistently you stick to the STAR approach is going to determine how well your interviewer will be able to grasp the important data points in the scenarios you will be describing.
6. Now go back to the emails you've composed (in Step 2) to your friend and re-write that email following the STAR approach. Divide that email into the four sections. Here is an example:
 - a. **Situation** - This is a scenario from 3 years ago when I was working at XYZ Corp., as a Software Engineer. I was just 3 months into this new job and I was part of the team that owned the microservice that interacted with the distributed key-value pair database.
 - b. **Task** - My manager had asked me to scale the microservice to 4x the number of hosts to be able to handle additional traffic which was expected around the winter holiday shopping season. I spoke with two other more tenured engineers to confirm if my understanding of the documentation was correct to make this change and they agreed.
 - c. **Action** - Just before I started following the prescribed process to scale the hosts, I thought I should check on the key-value DB's health and performance. I requested access from the DB team and as I was looking at the metrics graphs, I saw that the machines which hosted the in-memory key-value DB had its average CPU utilization at 85%. It immediately occurred to me that if I scaled the hosts which read/write from the DB, it would severely impact the DB hosts when we have an increase in traffic. So, I decided to not make the change and sat with the DB team to confirm my hypothesis. I worked with them to scale the DB hosts to 2x its current size and then made my changes to scale the service hosts, while monitoring the DB related graphs.
 - d. **Result** - The DB team provided positive feedback, which I heard from my manager. We had a successful and uneventful holiday shopping season and all the systems performed as expected without impacting customers or business.
7. Now make note of a few key things from this example:
 - a. This would have been a really good response to a question - "Tell me about a time you did something outside of your comfort zone. What was the outcome?"
 - b. The use of the "I". I have highlighted *my* contributions to the project/task and called out the ones where it was a team effort explicitly. The interviewer is interested in knowing * your * contribution specifically. So, if you are only using the word "we", it doesn't highlight what *you* have done. It is important to be clear and direct with these scenarios.
 - c. I have used numbers and metrics - 4x, 85%, avg. CPU utilized. Amazon has a strong data-driven decision-making culture. You will see that this is evident in technical contexts and even non-technical scenarios/meetings/discussions. So, if you have any non-employer confidential numbers or metrics, use that to quantify the impact of your contributions. You should not disclose anything that is confidential to your current/previous employers.
 - d. Be concise but provide the right data points. Each section of STAR is very concise and to the point. It is easy to speak about the history of a project or go into extensive details regarding its background. That is not required. Your interviewer will ask you follow-up questions in case that person needs more context.

- e. It can be helpful to take very short pauses in between these STAR sections, to allow your interviewer to ask any questions. You don't have to check with the interviewer explicitly but just give that opportunity.
 - f. Notice how the situation, task and result sections were crisp and concise and how the action was a little more descriptive.
8. It is recommended to think of about 2-3 unique scenarios from the past 3-4 years for each Amazon LP. You want to ensure these are persuasive examples that illuminate your personal and professional alignment with these principles.

Sample Behavioral Interview Questions

Practice using the STAR Method on these common behavioral interviewing questions incorporating examples from the Amazon Leadership Principles:

- Tell me about a time where you sought out perspectives other than your own to make a product/service/project better?
- Tell me about a time when you had to analyze facts quickly, define key issues, and respond immediately to a situation. What was the outcome?
- Give me an example of a time you used customer feedback to drive improvement or innovation. What was the situation and what action did you take?
- Tell me about a goal that you set that took a long time to achieve or that you are still working towards. How do you keep focused on the goal given the other priorities you have?
- Tell me about a time when you linked two or more problems together and identified an underlying issue? Were you able to find a solution?
- What three things you are you working on to improve your overall effectiveness?
- Give me an example of when you took an unpopular stance in a meeting with peers and your leader and you were the outlier. What was it, why did you feel strongly about it, and what did you do?
- Tell me about a time you wouldn't compromise on achieving a great outcome when others felt something was good enough. What was the situation?
- Tell me about a time you made a hard decision to sacrifice short term gain for a longer term goal.
- How do you drive adoption for your vision/ideas? How do you know how well your idea or vision has been adopted by other teams or partners? Give a specific example highlighting one of your ideas.
- Tell me about a time when you realized you needed to have a deeper level of subject matter expertise to do your job well?