

Ace the Behavioral Interview

CHAPTER 4

*Now that you've **finally** built a kick-ass resume, compiled an impressive project portfolio and intrigued the HR department at your dream company enough to call you in for an interview based on your strategically written emails, you're ready to ace the technical data science interview questions and land the job. But there's one more piece to the puzzle whose importance is usually underestimated: the behavioral interview. While it's true that 90% of the reason candidates pass interviews for the most coveted big tech and finance jobs is because of their technical skills — their ability to code on the spot, write SQL queries, and answer conceptual statistics questions — neglecting the other 10%, which stems from the behavioral interview, can be a huge mistake.*

Behavioral Interviews Aren't Fluffy B.S.

You may not agree that the behavioral questions are important. You might think this behavioral interview stuff is fluffy bullshit, and that you can simply wing it. Sure, in some companies, as long as you aren't an asshole in the interview and have the technical skills, you'll be hired. But some companies take this very seriously. Amazon, for example, interviews every single candidate on the company leadership principles like "customer obsession" and "invent and simplify" in their bar raiser interviews. Uber also includes a bar-raiser round which focuses on behavioral questions about culture fit, previous work experience, and past projects. If you want to work there, you've got to take the behavioral interviews seriously.

Even small companies have their unique twist on this. Consider this: my (Nick's) former employer, SafeGraph, displayed the company values on a poster hung in every room in the building. Even the

bathroom. While you're pissing, the company values are in your face. No joke. *It's that paramount. So imagine if you came to an interview with me and didn't share any stories that exhibited SafeGraph's company values. You'd have a pretty piss-poor chance of passing the interview!*

When Do Behavioral Interviews Happen?

You might be wondering, *"I had four interviews for a position, and not one of them was called a behavioral interview."*

The behavioral interview is an integral part of any interview and consists of questions that help the interviewer assess candidates based on actual experiences in prior jobs or situations. Even the "friendly chat" time at the start of the interview can essentially be a behavioral interview.

So while you might not have an explicit calendar invite for "Behavioral Interview," don't be fooled: behavioral interviews occur *all the damn time*. That casual, icebreaker of a question, "So, tell me about yourself..." — that's *an interview question!* For every job, and at practically every round, there will be a behavioral component, whether it's explicit or not. Behavioral interview questions can happen:

- With a recruiter before getting to technical rounds. In which case you might not even get to the technical interview rounds...
- During your technical interviews, where the first 5-10 minutes are usually carved out for a casual chat about your past projects and your interest in the company.
- During lunch, to understand how you behave outside of the interview setting.
- At the end of the on-site interview; they know you can do the work, but are you someone they want to personally work with? You'll meet with your future boss, and maybe even their boss, where they'll both try to sell you on the company, but also see if you'd be a good culture fit.

The reality is, *you are constantly being assessed!* That's why, on the basis of frequency alone, preparing for and practicing answers to these questions is well worth the effort.

Ace the Behavioral Interview to Beat the Odds

Acing the behavioral interview can be the X-factor — the thing that separates you out from the horde of other applicants. You don't want to be lying in bed at night, wide awake, thinking, "Damn it, I forgot to tell them about that time I caught that data analysis mistake and saved the company \$50,000!" A little prep work for your interview can mean the difference between a strikeout and a home run.

Focusing on behavioral interviews is especially important if you're new to the data science game. When a company makes an investment in junior talent, they are looking at 3-6 months of training before that junior data person becomes truly productive. You probably won't give the best answers on technical questions, and there will always be more senior candidates in the pipeline, but the what convinces a company to take a chance and invest in you.

3 Things Behavioral Interviews Test For

You know that behavioral interviews are important, that they happen all the time, and that the stakes are high especially for junior talent. Now you might be wondering, "What are interviewers even

looking for?" Behavioral questions have to do with...well...behavior. There are three basic kinds of things an employer tests for:

- **Soft skills:** How well do you communicate? So much of effective data science is dealing with stakeholders — would you be able to articulate your proposals to them, or sell your ideas convincingly enough to get buy-in from them? How well do you work with others? Data science is a team sport, after all! How do you deal with setbacks and failures? Do you get defensive, or exhibit a growth mindset?
- **Position fit:** How interested are you in the job and team you're gunning for? What motivates you about the position — only the paycheck or passion as well?
- **Culture fit:** How well do you fit the team and company's culture? Can you get behind the company's mission and values? Basically the corporate version of a "vibe check"!

Essentially, while technical interviews are about whether you can do the job, behavioral interviews are about whether you want to do the job, and if you are someone others will want to work with. Fortunately, you can have the charisma of Sheldon Cooper from *Big Bang Theory* and still pass behavioral interviews — if you prepare for the most common behavioral questions asked in data science interviews.

Tell Me About Yourself: The #1 Behavioral Interview Question

"Tell me about yourself" may seem like a simple icebreaker to ease tension and get the interview rolling, but it's actually the #1 most asked behavioral interview question! If you are not properly prepared with your answer, you can stumble through it blithely, telling your life history and all sorts of irrelevant details that are *not* what they want to know about you. First impressions matter, and a well-thought-out answer can impress the hell out of your interviewer and put you in the running from the get-go.

So, how do you prepare an awesome answer to this seemingly innocuous question?

- Limit your answer to a minute or two; don't ramble! As such, start your story at a strategically relevant point (which is often college for most early-career folks).
- Relate your story to the position and company at hand. See if you can weave your pitch with key terms from the job description and company values. Speak their language!
- Mention a big accomplishment or two; even though they've seen your resume, don't let them forget about your biggest selling point!
- Rehearse. You know this question will be asked at the start of every interview.

Your answer should include these three key points:

- 1) Who you are
- 2) How you came to be where you are today (sprinkle in your achievements here)
- 3) What you're into/looking for now (*hint hint: it's basically this role + this company*)

To make this more concrete, here's the "about me" pitch we authors used on the job hunt.

Kevin's Wall Street "About Me" Pitch

Hi, I'm Kevin, currently a data scientist at Facebook. I graduated from Penn in 2017, studying computer science, statistics, and finance. At Facebook I focused on analytics within the groups team, making sure Facebook Groups is free of spam and hate speech. Before Facebook, I briefly interned at a hedge fund, working on looking at alternative data sets, like clickstream data and satellite imagery, to analyze stocks. Having worked in both big tech and Wall Street, I've come to realize I'm more passionate about applying data science in financial markets because of the fast-paced nature and high stakes environment. I was drawn to your fund in particular due to the small team, high autonomy, and chance to be part of a more greenfield data science effort.

Nick's Google Nest Data Infrastructure Internship "About Me" Pitch

Hi! I'm Nick, and I'm currently a 3rd year student at the University of Virginia! I love the intersection between software and data, which is why I'm studying Systems Engineering and Computer Science at UVA. It's also why two summers ago, I interned as a Data Scientist at a defense contractor, and last summer I interned on the Payments team at Microsoft doing back-end work.

I'm super excited to potentially work on the Data Infrastructure team at Nest Labs since it's the perfect blend of my past data and SWE experience. Plus, Nest's intelligent home automation products rely on great data and machine learning, and I want to work at a company where data is at the forefront. Lastly, I love how you all are a smaller, faster-paced division within Google. Having made a startup in the past, which I growth hacked to 2,000 users in just a few months, I love the "move fast" attitude of smaller companies. I think that Nest being an autonomous company within Google strikes the perfect blend between startup and big tech company, and it's why I'm so excited by this team and company.

Why did you choose Data Science?

Here's another question you might be asked, which is closely related to your personal pitch: "Why did you choose Data Science?" Likely your answer to "tell me about yourself" contains some element of how you got into the field, but you may be asked to harp on this point more, especially if you're an industry switcher, or come from an untraditional background.

If your path isn't the most straightforward, don't be nervous — capitalize on this opportunity to show you are a go-getter who decided to make a career change, a fast learner who has accomplished so much in a short time, and how your passion for the field is genuine! This is also a great opportunity to talk about how your skills from prior jobs and industry experience naturally led you into data science. Remember, data science is much more than modeling — even if you weren't throwing XGBoost at random datasets in your last job, there must have been some relevant data science-adjacent skills you acquired. And deep down, internalize that your newness to the field isn't a weakness, but a strength — you've probably got extra subject matter expertise and a fresh perspective!

Tell Me About a Time: The #1 Most Common Pattern for Questions

Once you have your opening pitch prepared, along with the story of how you got into the field, it's time to focus on the other questions most likely to be asked.

The #1 question after "tell me about yourself" is: "Tell me about a situation where" something happened. Note that this question can be phrased in various ways: "Give me an example of when you

X" and "Describe a situation when you Y." This is your time to share war stories from past jobs. If you lack work experience, this is the time for your independent portfolio projects to shine.

Most Common "Tell Me About a Time" Questions

Some of the most commonly asked "tell me about a time" questions are:

Tell me about a time...

- you dealt with a setback — how did you handle it?
- you had to deal with a particularly difficult co-worker — how did you manage it?
- you made a decision that wasn't popular — how did you go about implementing it?
- you accomplished something in your career that made you very proud — why was that moment meaningful to you?
- you missed a big deadline — how did you handle it?

"Tell Me About a Time" for Data Scientists

While the above popular questions are fair game, you might also be asked a twist on these questions so that they're better geared towards data scientists, analysts, and machine learning engineers. Below are some more data-driven behavioral interview questions.

Tell me about a time...

- *when data helped drive a business decision.*
- *where the results of your analysis were much different than what you would have expected. Why was that? What did you do?*
- *when you had to make a decision BUT the data you needed wasn't available.*
- *you had an interesting hypothesis — how did you validate it?*
- *when you disagreed with a PM or engineer.*

Now that we've got the laundry list of situational questions out of the way, how do you answer these questions well, on the spot?

A superSTAR Answer

The trick to answering the behavioral questions we listed earlier on the spot is...well...to NOT answer them on the spot! A lot of preparation needs to go into this so you can give effortless off-the-cuff answers come interview time. Your first step in preparing flawless answers is to prepare stories that address the questions we mentioned earlier. But don't prepare *factual* answers.

Prepare stories.

"But I'm no storyteller, I'm a data scientist! How am I supposed to "weave a fascinating tale" about something as mundane as my work history?"

Luckily, there is a simple formula you can use as a framework to structure your story. It's easy to remember, too. Just remember that a great story will make you a STAR, so you have to use the STAR formula:

- **Situation** — Describe a specific challenge (problem or opportunity) you or your team, your company, or your customers encountered.
- **Task** — Describe the goal you needed to accomplish (the *project* or *task*).

- **Action** — Describe your role in the project or task using first person (not what your *team* did, but what *you* did).
- **Result** — Describe what happened as a result of your actions. What did you learn or accomplish? Keep in mind that not all outcomes need be positive; if things didn't go your way, explain what lesson you learned (for example, "I learned about the importance of transparency and clear communication"). Showing that you can handle failure and learn from it is a great trait!

Write your stories out using the STAR formula. Where possible, weave into your narrative key phrases from the job description and the company culture or values page, so that you hit the position fit and culture fit elements of the interview.

Amazon Data Scientist Interview Example

For a concrete example of STAR, assume I (Nick) am interviewing to be a data scientist on the AWS Product Analytics team. According to the job opening, the role entails influencing the long-term roadmap of the AWS EC2 Product Team. The job description also mentions looking for someone with a startup mentality, since "AWS is a high-growth, fast-moving division." Finally, their preferred qualifications include "demonstrated ability to balance technical and business needs" and "independently drive issues to resolution while communicating insights to nontechnical audiences."

Now that we've set up the role I'm interviewing for, imagine the Amazon bar-raiser hits me with the question: "Tell me about a time you were not satisfied with the status quo."

My answer:

- **Situation:** I challenged the status quo back when I worked on Facebook's Growth Team, specifically on the New User Experience division. Our main goal was to improve new user retention rates. In 2018, there was a company-wide push for Facebook Stories based on the success of Instagram stories and the fear of Snapchat gaining even more market share. The status quo was to prioritize features that would promote the adoption of Facebook Stories, but I had a strong hunch this wasn't good for new users.
- **Task:** My goal was to understand how new users used Facebook Stories, and whether the feature helped or hurt new user retention rates.
- **Action:** For 3 weeks, I sliced and diced data to better understand whether Facebook Stories helped or hurt new users. In the process, I found multiple bugs and user experience gaps related to Stories for new users, which led to decreased retention rates for new users. I fixed the smaller bugs, and presented the bigger data-driven insights into the user experience problems with the wider Facebook Stories team as well as the New Person Experience team.
- **Result:** Fixing the bugs resulted in new user retention rates increasing by X%, and Y% more usage in Facebook Stories. More importantly, by questioning the status quo that Facebook Stories was good for everyone, I made the Facebook Stories team more conscious of gaps in the product as it related to new users. This affected the Facebook Stories product roadmap, and led them to prioritize user onboarding features for their next quarter.

This is an effective answer because it emphasizes how my data-driven work impacted the product roadmap — essentially what this Amazon product analytics job is all about. It also demonstrates my passion for new users, which jives with Amazon's company value of customer obsession.

Remember, though, a winning answer to a behavioral interview question is about more than just words. Project the confidence of a college sophomore who thinks majoring in business means they'll

be a CEO one day. Embody BDE — big data energy. To dial in your delivery, practice telling your stories out loud. Do this in front of a mirror — it'll force you to pay attention to your nonverbal skills, which are also very important in an interview. Use a timer, and without rushing, ensure your answers are under two minutes long.

How to Ace Project Walk-Through Questions

Rather than asking you about a situation, project walk-through questions let you talk about a project in detail. These questions often have follow-ups where they ask for more details — and they may even be a jumping-off point to ask more general technical questions.

In addition to checking your communication skills, like the more traditional behavioral questions, these questions are also testing to see if you've *actually* done what you say you did. The bullet points on your resume don't always tell the whole story — maybe the work is less (or more!) impressive than you made it sound. In fact, with the length limitations on a resume's job description, there's probably a LOT more to the story than the resume reveals.

In project walk-throughs, you might specifically be asked questions such as:

- *How did you collect and clean the data? Did you run into any issues when interpreting the data?*
- *How did you decide what models and techniques to use? What did you eventually try?*
- *How did you evaluate the success of your projects? Was there a baseline to compare against? What metrics did you use to quantify the project's impact?*
- *Did you deploy the final solution? What challenges did you face launching your work?*
- *What tough technical problems did you face — and how did you overcome them?*
- *How did you work with stakeholders and teammates to ensure the project was successful? If there were any conflicts, how did you resolve them?*
- *If you did the project again, what would you do differently?*

If the above questions look familiar, that's because you can consider the project walk-through questions as the inverse of "tell me about a time" questions. Said another way, given a project, the interviewer asks a lot of the same "tell me about a time" questions, except the "time" is all about a certain project. The same concepts for applying STAR still apply!

"Do you have any questions for us?"

Pretty much every interview includes a segment where you get to ask questions. "I don't really have any" is NOT the right answer. So, what *should* you ask when the interviewer says, "Do you have any questions for us?"

There is a right way to answer this! Don't waste this time asking random questions like how much time you get off or how much the job pays! Traditional advice says, "This is the time to interview the company." We disagree! Be strategic about what questions you ask. Have the mindset "until I have the offer in hand, I need to keep showing why I'm a good fit" — you aren't interviewing *them*, you're selling *yourself*! As such, prepare at least three smart, interesting questions per interviewer. *Don't pass on this!* You can ask about salary once you've got the job in the bag. At that point, you are in a far better position to discuss compensation.

As we mention later in Chapter 10: Product Sense, *this* is the time to leverage the company and product research you did. You'll gain much more by asking questions that convey your interest in

the company and what they do. From your readings and product analysis, surely you must be curious about some internal detail, design decision, or what's coming next for some product. This point in the interview is your opportunity not only to have your intellectual curiosity fulfilled, but to impress them with your research and genuine interest in the company and its business.

Another idea is to check out details about your interviewer on LinkedIn. It's not uncommon to know who you'll be interviewing with. Asking a personal question is a sure way to get the interviewer talking about themselves. And people love to do that! If you can tailor questions to their background or projects they've worked on, great! If not, you can ask these sure-fire conversation starters:

- *How did you come into this role or company?*
- *What's the most interesting project you've worked on?*
- *What do you think is the most exciting opportunity for the company or product?*
- *In your opinion, what are the top three challenges facing the business?*
- *What do you think is the hardest part of this role?*
- *How do you see the company values in action during your day-to-day work?*

Going against the grain from traditional career advice, we think asking questions about the role isn't the most beneficial use of this opportunity. Sure, you're not going to get into trouble for asking about the growth trajectory for the role at hand, or what success looks like for the position. It's just that you'll have ample time, and it's a better use of your time to ask these questions *after* you have the job. While you're in the interview mode, again, it's important to either reinforce your interest in the company, their mission and values, or at least have the interviewer talk about themselves. We believe discussing nuances about the role isn't the most productive step to take without an offer at hand.

Post-Interview Etiquette

Whew! Your interview is finally over!

No, it's not!

Send a follow-up thank you note via email a few hours after your interview to keep your name and abilities fresh in their mind. Plus it shows them your interest in the position is deep and sincere. Ideally, you'll mention a few of the specific things you connected with them over during the interview in your email/note. This will help jog their memory as to which interviewee you were and hopefully bring that connection to mind when they see your name again.

The Best Is Yet to Come!

Now that we've walked you through our process for landing more data science interviews and passing the behavioral interview screen, you're *almost* ready for the meat of the book: acing the technical data science interview.

Before we get to the 201 interview problems, we have a quick favor to ask from you. Yes, *you*. If you're enjoying this book, share a photo of your copy of *Ace the Data Science Interview* on LinkedIn and tag us (Nick Singh and Kevin Huo). Feel free to add a quick sentence or two on what's resonated with you so far. We'll both connect with you as well as like and comment on the post. You'll get more LinkedIn profile views, followers, and brownie points from us this way!