

# The Employee Selection Interview: A Fresh Look at an Old Problem

Laura M. Graves and Ronald J. Karren

*This article, takes a fresh look at employee selection interviews as they are practiced in most organizations. Interviewers' selection decisions are demonstrated to be idiosyncratic and it is concluded that variation in interviewers' decision processes jeopardizes organizational effectiveness. Practical recommendations for improving employment interviews are offered. © 1996 by John Wiley & Sons, Inc.*

## INTRODUCTION

Effective staffing procedures are critical if organizations are to hire skilled employees who can meet the demands of today's workplace (Offerman & Gowing, 1993). Selecting individuals with good technical skills is no longer sufficient to ensure effective job performance. Due to increasing reliance on teams as a source of competitive advantage employees must be able to work as team members (Jackson & Alvarez, 1992; Reich, 1987). Further, employees must have knowledge of automated processes and have the ability to use the computer as a tool (U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, 1993). Due to downsizing, employees must also manage heavy workloads and master tasks previously accomplished by other employees (Houston, 1992). Thus, organizations need "super-employees" with multiple skills who can operate in demanding work environments.

Existing selection practices make it difficult for organizations to select these "super-employees." The prevailing selection device continues to be the employment interview (Bureau of National Affairs, 1988; Dipboye, 1992) which, as it is practiced in most organizations, is not likely to yield good selection decisions. For instance, in spite of evidence that structured interviews are more effective (Bureau of National Affairs, 1988; Terpstra & Rozell, 1993; Wiesner & Cronshaw, 1988; McDaniel, Whetzel, Schmidt, & Maurer, 1994), about 70% of organizations use unstructured interviews in which the interviewer is totally responsible for the nature of the interview. In many cases, the interview consists of su-

perfidial, shoot-from-the-hip questions (Rynes, 1993). Further, there is evidence that many interviewers do not receive adequate training. For example, only 48% of large corporations require interviewers to receive training before conducting campus interviews (Rynes & Boudreau, 1986).

Undesirable interview practices continue despite the fact that personnel psychologists have consistently stressed the need to improve these practices (Schmidt, 1993). The purpose of this article is to convince organizations of the need to improve employment interviews. To accomplish this objective, the article takes a fresh look at the problem of poor interviews. Instead of presenting data on the modest validity and reliability of the interview, this article demonstrates that interviewers' judgments are unique or idiosyncratic. It argues that variation in interviewers' decision processes undermines organizational effectiveness. Organizations are urged to take steps to remedy deficient interview practices.

The first section of the article documents the unique nature of interviewers' decisions. The next section describes the causes of idiosyncracies in the employment interview. The final sections of the article outline the organizational implications of idiosyncratic interview decisions and provide practical steps that organizations may use to improve interviews.

## A FRESH LOOK AT INTERVIEWERS' DECISIONS

To better understand the unique nature of interviewers' decision processes, we took an in-depth look at the decision processes of 29 recruiters at a large service company (Graves & Karren, 1992). We analyzed how recruiters evaluated applicants for customer service positions. Customer service representatives are the primary link between the customer and the company, and their performance is crucial in maintaining the company's reputation among clients. We also evaluated each recruiter's effectiveness or ability to select applicants who will perform successfully on the job. The results of our study are described below and summarized in Table I.

*First*, we found that recruiters did not base their decisions on the same factors. When, in fact, they *did* rely on the same factors, the importance they attached to the factors varied greatly. The 29 recruiters had 13 different ways of using five criteria (i.e., interpersonal skills, communication skills, education, work experience, motivation) to judge applicants. For instance, some recruiters relied heavily on two factors (e.g., interpersonal skills, communication skills) to make their evaluations. Other recruiters used a single factor such as work experience. The differences in interviewers' approaches to evaluating applicants were striking given that they were from a single organization and evaluated applicants for one position. Studies conducted in other organizations, however, produced similar results (Kinicki, et al., 1990; Zedeck, Tziner, & Middlestadt, 1983).

**Table I.** Summary of Research Findings on Interviewers' Decisions.

Finding	Implications for Interviewer Effectiveness
1. Interviewers base their decisions on different factors.	1. Interviewers who use factors that are not related to job performance are ineffective.
2. Interviewers have different hiring standards. Some interviewers hire many applicants while others hire few applicants.	2. Interviewers who hire few applicants reject qualified applicants, while interviewers who hire many applicants select unqualified applicants.
3. Interviewers differ in the extent to which their actual selection criteria match their intended criteria.	3. Interviewers whose actual selection criteria match their intended criteria are likely to be most effective.

Differences in interviewers' decision criteria also had implications for their effectiveness. Recruiters who relied primarily on interpersonal skills and oral communications skills to make their judgments were rated as more effective by hiring supervisors than were interviewers who used other criteria. Zedeck et al. (1983) found that the interviewers who were best at predicting employee performance in a training program used different factors than did less effective interviewers. It does appear that effective interviewers use different criteria than do ineffective interviewers. A conclusion that seems logical is that effective interviewers focus on the factors that are most relevant for predicting employees' job attitudes and behavior while ineffective interviewers focus on less relevant factors.

*Second*, we found that interviewers' hiring standards varied a great deal. The percentage of applicants receiving positive hiring recommendations ranged from 6% to 56% across recruiters. Large differences in hiring standards also have been found in studies by Rowe (1963, 1970) and Zedeck et al. (1983). One might expect that hiring standards influence interviewer effectiveness; interviewers who accept very few or very many candidates are more likely to make erroneous decisions than are interviewers who are neither harsh nor lenient in their hiring standards.

*Third*, interviewers' actual decision processes did not always match their preferred decision processes. We asked participants to rank order the importance of five factors for success in a customer service position. We then examined whether each interviewer's ranking of the factors matched the extent to which he/she actually used the factors in evaluating applicants. Some interviewers used the factors in a manner that matched their rankings. Other interviewers, however, used the factors in a manner that contradicted their own rankings; these recruiters were the least effective recruiters. Although further research is needed to

confirm our findings, ineffective recruiters do not seem to use selection criteria in a manner consistent with their beliefs about the importance of the criteria.

Our findings, together with previous evidence, suggest that interviewers' decision processes are idiosyncratic. Interviewers' decision criteria and hiring standards differ dramatically. Interviewers also differ in the extent to which their actual decision processes match their preferred decision processes. These differences occur even when interviewers in a single organization are filling identical positions. Most importantly, differences among interviewers' decision processes are related to their effectiveness.

### Why Are Interview Decisions Idiosyncratic?

To better understand differences in interviewers' judgments and to determine how they might be addressed, it is useful to explore why these differences occur. This section of the article reviews some of the factors that create idiosyncratic interview decisions. These factors are also summarized in Table II.

#### *Views of the Ideal Applicant*

One important source of idiosyncracies in interviewers' decisions is their views of the ideal applicant (Graves, 1993). Interviewers' beliefs about the characteristics of an ideal applicant for a position differ greatly (Rowe, 1984). Even when interviewers do agree on the ideal applicant's characteristics, their beliefs about the importance of a particular characteristic may vary. Of course, differences in interviewers' views of the ideal applicant sometimes result from real differences in jobs that share a common title. More often, however, they simply reflect interviewers' personal preferences.

**Table II.** Causes of Idiosyncratic Interview Decisions.

---

---

1. Interviewers' views of the ideal applicant	differences in beliefs about the characteristics of the ideal applicant
2. Interviewers' information processing skills	differences in the ability to recall information about applicants and to utilize and combine information about multiple criteria in the decision process
3. Similarity bias	preferences for applicants who share interviewers' characteristics
4. Interviewers' behaviors	differences in social competence and general approach to interview

---

---

An incident that occurred in the interview process for a nursing position at Hospital A (a Catholic teaching hospital with approximately 500 licensed beds) shows how interviewers' views of the ideal applicant affect selection decisions. A panel of three nurses was selecting a nurse to provide training for the nursing staff of the hospital's cardiac care unit. After interviewing the first applicant, panel members disagreed about the applicant's suitability. The applicant had delivered training programs to medical/surgical nurses but had not actually worked in a cardiac care unit. The manager of the cardiac care unit was not impressed with the applicant, citing her lack of experience in cardiac care. Other members of the panel were quite positive about the applicant, due to her extensive training experience. Obviously, the panelists had different views of the ideal applicant. The manager believed that cardiac care experience was paramount, while the others believed that training experience was most important. They did not discover the differences in their beliefs until after they had interviewed the first applicant. Through discussion, they agreed that experience in training and cardiac care nursing were equally critical to the position and stressed both factors in conducting subsequent interviews and in making their final selection decision.

### *Information Processing*

Differences in information processing skills are another source of idiosyncratic interview judgments. For instance, interviewers differ in their ability to remember information obtained in interviews (Carlson et al., 1971; Schuh, 1980). Obviously, poor recall will have a negative effect on the quality of decisions.

In addition, interviewers differ in their ability to use multiple criteria to evaluate applicants. Some interviewers are analytical, viewing people as multidimensional (Cardy & Kehoe, 1984; Hunt et al., 1989). These interviewers evaluate candidates on multiple criteria. In contrast, other interviewers are intuitive, viewing people in their entirety; they may find it difficult to judge applicants on multiple dimensions and are likely to make global gut-level judgments. These interviewers typically cannot articulate how they make their decisions and pride themselves on their "intuition" about job applicants. Their judgments may be less accurate than the judgments of analytical interviewers.

Finally, interviewers differ in their ability to combine information to make decisions about applicants. As noted earlier, some interviewers are unable to combine information about selection criteria in a way that reflects the true importance of the criteria. For instance, a college recruiter may attach great importance to criteria that are highly conspicuous in campus interviews (e.g., communication skills), while ignoring criteria that are less conspicuous, but equally important for job performance

(e.g., job-related knowledge). When interviewers have difficulty combining information about multiple criteria, using a mathematical equation to combine interviewers' ratings of applicants on selection criteria may actually yield better decisions than relying on interviewers to combine the ratings (Dougherty, Ebert, & Callender, 1986). In these cases, computers can do a better job of making selection decisions than interviewers can!

### *Similarity*

Another possible cause of idiosyncratic interview judgments is the fact that interviewers' judgments are influenced by the extent to which they see applicants as similar to themselves (Anderson & Shackleton, 1990; Graves & Powell, 1988). The match between the demographic characteristics of the interviewer and the applicant may be especially important (Graves, 1993; Tsui & O'Reilly, 1989). Interviewers may view applicants who share their characteristics as more qualified than applicants who do not. As a result, applicants who are demographically similar to interviewers may be likely to be hired. For example, in exploratory interviews with recruiters at a large service firm, we found that a recruiter who had worked her own way through college favored applicants who also had supported themselves during college.

The selection process in the nursing department at Hospital B (a community teaching hospital with approximately 400 licensed beds) provides a more extensive example of the effect of similarity on interviewers' decisions. Although Hospital B is fairly large, its nursing department does not use a standard set of selection criteria for selecting staff nurses. Managers develop their own selection criteria for filling vacancies. One unusual aspect of the nursing profession is that registered nurses vary considerably in educational background. Managers and staff nurses in this particular hospital hold associate's, bachelor's, or master's degrees. Managers, however, prefer to hire nurses who have educational backgrounds similar to their own. For instance, a nurse manager with a bachelor's degree prefers to hire registered nurses who have at least a bachelor's degree, while another nurse manager who possesses only an associate's degree believes that nurses with bachelor's degrees "have book knowledge, but poor clinical skills." Thus, managers' decisions seem to reflect the similarity between their own and applicants' demographic characteristics.

### *Interview Behavior*

Finally, variation in behavior across interviewers is another potential cause of idiosyncratic interview decisions. For instance, interviewers

differ in their ability to interact with applicants (Graves, 1993; Dipboye & Macan, 1988). Differences in social competence, or the ability to deal with a variety of social situations, are particularly important (Dipboye, 1992). Interviewers who lack social competence typically fail to display the positive nonverbal behaviors (e.g., smiling, nodding, eye contact) and empathy needed to establish rapport with applicants. As a result, applicants are likely to limit the quality and quantity of information they share with these interviewers (Graves, 1993). In contrast, interviewers who are skilled at putting applicants at ease will obtain more and better information from applicants.

The interviewer's general approach to the interview will also affect his/her behaviors. Whereas most interviewers engage in supportive behaviors that facilitate their rapport with applicants, some interviewers deliberately adopt confrontational interview behaviors designed to rattle and intimidate applicants (Herman, 1994). For example, a female participant in a study of recruitment practices reported that "The guy at the interview made a joke about how nice my nails were and how they were going to ruin them there due to all the tough work." (Rynes, Bretz, & Gerhart, 1991, p. 500). Obviously, such a comment would put the applicant on the defensive and would not enhance the applicant's willingness to share information with the interviewer. Of course, this particular comment might also provide the applicant with evidence for a sex discrimination claim against the organization.

This section described a few of the factors that lead to idiosyncratic interview decisions. As a result of these factors, even well-intentioned managers may make poor judgments. The next section of the article describes the implications of idiosyncratic judgments for organizational effectiveness.

### **Organizational Implications**

The idiosyncratic nature of interviewers' judgments has serious implications for organizational effectiveness. Haphazard judgments may lower employee performance, increase the likelihood of expensive legal judgments, decrease applicant attraction, and, ultimately, reduce organizational performance.

#### *Employee Performance*

As a result of differences in employment interviewers' decision processes, there will be differences in the accuracy with which interviewers can predict employee performance (Dougherty et al., 1986; Zedeck et al., 1983). For instance, in one recent study (Dougherty et al., 1986), the validity of corporate recruiters' evaluations for predicting applicants' sub-

sequent performance ratings ranged from .02 to .26 across interviewers. When interviewers cannot accurately predict who will perform well, some of the employees who are selected will not be good performers.

### *Litigation*

Interview processes are likely to be viewed as discriminatory by the court when they (1) result in differential treatment of different applicants, (2) include questions that convey discriminatory intent, or (3) have adverse impact against women or minorities (Arvey & Faley, 1988). Idiosyncracies in the interview processes increase the likelihood that one or more of these conditions will occur. For instance, since interviewers will use different criteria to evaluate applicants, they are likely to ask different questions of applicants resulting in differential treatment. In addition, if interviewers favor applicants who are like themselves, they may respond negatively to those who differ from themselves with respect to gender, race, or ethnicity. In some cases, women and minorities may be subjected to differential treatment, asked questions that convey discriminatory intent, or selected at low rates.

In fact, idiosyncratic interviewer behavior led to negative court decisions against organizations in a number of cases (see Arvey & Faley, 1988; Gatewood & Feild, 1994 for a review). In the case of the *United States v. Hazelwood School District* (1976), the court, in ruling against the school district, pointed to the fact that no two principals in the school district used the same selection criteria. In addition, in several cases, male interviewers treated male and female applicants differently or displayed discriminatory intent toward female applicants because of their personal preferences for male applicants (e.g., *King v. TWA*, 1984; *Weiner v. County of Oakland*, 1976).

### *Applicant Attraction*

Even if idiosyncracies in interviewers' decision processes do not lead to costly court judgments they may decrease applicants' interest in working for the firm. Applicants may become annoyed if they find out that others were not asked similar personal or "difficult" questions (Arvey & Sackett, 1993). Applicants may also interpret arbitrary interview procedures as a sign of poor preparation and low professionalism on the part of the corporation, or they may believe that the company simply is not interested in them (Rynes, 1993).

A recent study (Rynes et al., 1991) of job applicants' views of corporate recruitment practices supports the notion that interviewers' idiosyncratic behaviors influence applicant attraction. Generally, the study documented the existence of poor recruitment practices. For instance, applicants described corporate interviewers in negative terms such as



"rude, boring, obnoxious, barely literate, full of themselves, incompetent, and jerks." In addition, 50% of female applicants experienced some negative gender-related experience during the job search process (e.g., inappropriate comments about their personal appearance, being asked to interview in a man's hotel room). This study also found that recruiters' behaviors had implications for applicants' search behaviors. When the recruiter's behavior was unacceptable, the applicant either eliminated the organization from consideration or scrutinized the organization very carefully.

### *Organizational Performance*

In the end, the idiosyncratic nature of interviewers' judgments will be detrimental to organizational performance. In many organizations, a particular culture is important to success. Staffing is a way to maintain this culture and to make sure that new hires have core values that are consistent with the organization's strategy. Staffing is a way of attaining competitive advantage (Schneider & Bowen, 1993; Schuler & MacMillan, 1984).

For instance, organizations that seek to obtain competitive advantage through the delivery of high quality customer service must have selection systems that choose individuals whose values are consistent with a quality-oriented culture (Bowen & Lawler, 1992). Who gets hired and how the hiring is done are critical in creating a "passion for service." Idiosyncratic hiring decisions may lead to the selection of applicants whose values are inconsistent with a quality orientation.

To date, there is little hard evidence about the relationship between interview practices and organizational performance. One study (Terpstra & Rozell, 1993) indicated that firms using effective staffing practices (e.g., structured interviews, validation studies, etc.) had higher annual profits and profit growth than firms which did not. Consistent with the above discussion, the link between staffing practices and organizational performance was extremely strong in service firms where success was dependent on the nature and quality of human resources. The use of structured interviews was also highly related to organizational performance. Since the standardization provided by structured interviews reduces the likelihood of individual differences in interviewers' decision processes, this finding supports the notion that idiosyncratic interview processes may lead to poor organizational performance. Further research is needed to establish the link between interview practices and organizational performance.

### **What Should Organizations Do?**

The preceding discussion has emphasized the unique nature of interviewers' decisions and the negative implications of idiosyncratic deci-

**Table III.** Action Steps for Improving Interview Decisions.

---

---

Step 1—Develop selection criteria

Determine the knowledge, skills, and abilities required to perform the job, as well as any characteristics needed to function in the broader organizational environment. Determine which of these criteria are most important.

Step 2—Determine how criteria will be assessed

Determine which of the criteria can be assessed in the interview and which should be measured using other techniques.

Step 3—Develop interview guide

Develop semistructured interview guide to assess any criteria identified in Step 1 and determined to be suitable for assessment in the interview in Step 2.

Step 4—Train interviewers

Train interviewers to use the interview guide and teach them how to have positive interactions with applicants.

Step 5—Monitor the effectiveness of interviews

Collect data on the job performance, job satisfaction, and retention of new employees. Evaluate and reward managers based on their selection decisions.

---

---

sion processes for organizations. In this section, we offer a number of steps that organizations can easily implement to reduce individual differences in interviewers' decisions. These steps are described below and summarized in Table III.

Generally, these five steps improve interview decisions by increasing the structure of the interview process. The idea of standardizing the interview process is certainly not new. In developing our recommendations we drew on several authors' (e.g., Dipboye, 1992; Gatewood & Feild, 1994) ideas for improving the interview. There are, however, two unique aspects of the steps described below. One, the structured interview described below is relatively simple for organizations to implement. Existing approaches such as the patterned behavior description interview (Janz, 1989) and situational interview (Latham et al., 1980) require the generation and analysis of numerous critical incidents of job performance. Interview questions and scoring keys are then based on these critical incidents. In contrast, the approach offered here is not based on critical incidents nor does it require the development of a scoring key. Two, the steps may be used to improve hiring decisions for either a single job or for a group of similar jobs (e.g., managerial positions). In some cases, it is most appropriate to focus on a group of jobs. There may be an insufficient number of individuals in a single job to justify the cost of developing a structured interview for that position. Further, the underlying dimensions of effective performance may be similar across positions (Offerman & Gowing, 1993). This is especially true when a particular organizational culture (e.g., a quality orientation) is the key component of the organization's competitive strategy.

### *Step 1: Develop Explicit Consensus about Selection Criteria*

Companies cannot assume that interviewers possess a shared view of the selection criteria that should be used in filling a position. Explicit agreement concerning the knowledge, skills, and abilities required for a position is needed to ensure consistent selection decisions across interviewers. To attain agreement, the organization should convene a group of managers and interviewers who are involved in interviewing applicants for the target position or positions. During a series of group meetings, participants analyze the job by identifying the key tasks or activities required to perform the job, as well as the knowledge, skills, and abilities required to perform these tasks. It also may be appropriate for participants to identify the characteristics that are needed to function effectively in the broader organizational environment (Bowen, Ledford, & Nathan, 1991). This analysis will help the organization select individuals who are compatible with the organization's culture and strategy. For example, team-based organizations are likely to identify interpersonal skills such as supporting the work of others, getting along with others, and managing conflict as important characteristics (Offerman & Gowing, 1993). Finally, participants should determine which factors (knowledge, skills, abilities, characteristics) are most important to performance in the position and the organization. These factors will serve as the selection criteria.

### *Step 2: Determine How Selection Criteria Will Be Assessed*

The next step is to determine whether the criteria identified in Step 1 can be adequately assessed in an interview (see Gatewood & Feild, 1994). The interview is best at measuring a narrow set of applicant characteristics including job knowledge, sociability and verbal fluency, and organizational citizenship behaviors. Other selection techniques may be better for measuring other criteria. Alternative selection methods are discussed below.

### *Step 3: Develop Interview Guide*

A semi-structured interview guide is then constructed to measure the criteria that can be assessed in the interview. The group that participated in Step 1 may also assist in the development of the interview guide. For each criterion, the guide should include a definition and sample questions for use in interviews. When conducting interviews, managers choose from the sample questions for each factor and then ask appropriate follow-up questions. The use of sample questions improves standardization in the content of the interview across interviewers.

The interview guide should also require interviewers to record notes during each interview. Notetaking will reduce idiosyncracies in interviewers' judgments that are due to differences in recall. The guide should also require interviewers to evaluate and compare each applicant on each factor (Dipboye, 1992). This will force interviewers to focus on all relevant factors rather than allowing them to make global judgments. In addition, it will increase the likelihood of a match between the intended and actual decision criteria.

In addition, the interview guide should encourage the use of multiple interviewers (Dipboye, 1992). Panel interviews in which multiple interviewers simultaneously interview the applicant are possible, as are serial interviews in which multiple interviewers meet sequentially with the applicant. Generally, the use of multiple interviewers improves interview judgments by improving recall of interview information, by reducing error, and by utilizing the diverse perspectives of several individuals. The use of multiple interviewers also may be a learning tool. As interviewers share their reactions to the same applicant, they may become aware of their own unique perspectives on the selection process and learn from others. Interviewers then bring this new knowledge to future interviews.

#### *Step 4: Training*

To improve interviewer effectiveness, organizations must remedy the lack of training. All interviewers who fill the target position(s) should be trained in the use of the interview guide and should receive training on how to conduct interviews. Role playing is an especially valuable component of such training (Dipboye, 1992). Playing the role of interviewer helps interviewers feel comfortable with the interpersonal aspects of the interview process and reduces the effects of interviewers' differing levels of social competence on the conduct of the interview. As a result of increased comfort with the face-to-face interview, interviewers can focus on assessing the applicant rather than on worrying about what they should say or do next.

#### *Step 5: Monitor Effectiveness of Interviews*

Organizations should monitor the effectiveness of their selection interviews by collecting data on the performance, job satisfaction, and retention of individuals who are hired. In some cases (e.g., college recruiting), managers have little idea as to how the individuals they select actually perform in the organization. Finally, managers should be evaluated and rewarded on their ability to select employees who succeed in the organization.

### *Other Options*

As noted in Step 2, the interview may not be the best method for assessing some selection criteria (Gatewood & Feild, 1994). If an organization has sufficient resources, it may want to use other selection methods to assess criteria that are not readily assessed in the interview. Alternative techniques may be especially useful for assessing the applicant's ability to perform in the broader organizational environment. Techniques such as team interviews and assessment center exercises are appropriate for determining whether individuals have the ability to work well as members of ongoing teams or task forces (Bowen & Lawler, 1992). For instance, when Toyota hired a work force to build cars in Kentucky, a multi-phase selection system was instituted that included a teamwork simulation and a group discussion exercise to assess the interpersonal and teamwork skills of the applicants (Cosentino, Allen, & Wellins, 1990). Similarly, the assessment center has become an important part of the selection process at a plant operated by the Hamilton Standard division of United Technologies. A team-based simulation is used to evaluate candidates on dimensions of team performance such as participation, flexibility, and interpersonal skills (Kirksey & Zawacki, 1994). Although both Toyota and Hamilton Standard still use the interview, they believe that assessment center exercises and simulations offer more effective evaluations of specific interpersonal skills and team behaviors than does the interview.

### *Example*

Aetna Life and Casualty successfully used the steps outlined above to enhance selection practices for managerial and executive positions (our description of Aetna's practices is based on discussions with several of Aetna's human resources professionals). Prior to the implementation of the steps, there was no consistent set of criteria for filling managerial positions across the various divisions of the organization. Individual managers developed selection criteria for openings with assistance from their divisional human resources professionals. Since most managers made selection decisions infrequently, they had limited opportunity to develop systematic interviewing techniques. Aetna's human resources executives felt that this unstructured approach would not ensure that the organization had the managerial talent it needed to meet the present and future strategic challenges facing the organization. Thus, the organization developed and implemented a coherent set of selection practices for filling managerial positions.

As suggested in Step 1, a task force of line managers and human resources professionals identified the knowledge, skills, and abilities

managers must possess to enhance present and future corporate performance. During a series of meetings, this group analyzed the internal and external challenges facing the organization and identified ten competencies (e.g., selecting people, developing people, building teamwork, computer savvy, leadership, etc.) that they believed were critical to success in managerial roles at Aetna.

Next, Aetna's staffing professionals used the competencies as the basis for a new managerial selection system. The interview is the key component of that system. Corporate executives are satisfied with the interview as a tool for assessing the management competencies.

As suggested in Step 3, the staffing department developed an "Interview and Selection Guide" to assist managers in filling management positions. The guide describes the ten management competencies developed by the task force. The first portion of the guide helps the hiring manager determine which of the ten competencies are most critical to achieving the mission of the open position. The manager focuses on these competencies in the interview process but also considers the remaining competencies. The next portion of the guide assists the manager in conducting structured interviews. Numerous sample questions for each competency are included in the guide. The manager uses the same sequence of questions for each applicant and takes notes during all interviews to insure that no information is forgotten. After each interview, the manager completes a form that documents the applicant's qualifications with respect to the competencies. Further, the manager has other employees participate in the interview process, especially when these employees will interact closely with the new hire or are likely to offer a valuable perspective. The final portion of the guide helps the manager to structure the final decision and to avoid global judgments. The manager completes a worksheet that requires him/her to compare the candidates to each other and to the position requirements. S/he then makes the final selection decision and records the reasoning behind the decision.

As suggested in Step 4, all managers are trained in interviewing through a course at the Aetna Institute for Corporate Education. One goal of the course is to help managers learn to use the processes outlined in the interview guide. A second goal is to help managers enhance their interview behaviors. Managers conduct mock interviews with "applicants" who are not employed by the company. These applicants are actually professionals who give the managers feedback on their interview behavior. This feedback helps managers sharpen their skills at guiding interview discussions and eliminates behaviors that applicants might find offensive.

Aetna monitors the effectiveness of the new managerial selection process in several ways. One, turnover data are used to identify areas where selection decisions may need to be examined. Since selection decisions and performance appraisal ratings typically are made by the

same individuals, the company has not examined the validity of the new system for predicting performance. Two, as part of the performance appraisal system, managers are evaluated on the "selection of people." This includes the extent to which they use the structured interview process. Three, the corporation occasionally revisits the managerial selection system to ensure that it continues to meet the company's needs for managerial talent. For instance, another competency, customer focus, was recently added to reflect the importance of customer satisfaction to the company's success.

Although empirical evidence of the effectiveness of the new interview guide is lacking, staffing professionals at Aetna believe that the changes outlined above have improved hiring for managerial positions. The competency-based selection process helps take the guesswork out of selection decisions. Managers have a concrete tool that assists them in focusing on the critical aspects of the job and in selecting the appropriate candidate.

### **Implications for HR Executives**

As the prevailing selection device, the employment interview will play an important role as organizations seek to hire employees who can operate in today's increasingly demanding workplace. In this article, we have demonstrated that many of the existing employment interview practices are inadequate and are likely to interfere with the ability of organizations to obtain high-caliber employees. HR executives should take a leadership role in improving these practices. More specifically, HR executives must:

- Audit the effectiveness of existing interview practices. The audit should include examination of the validity of interview decisions for predicting outcomes such as employee performance, satisfaction, and turnover. In many organizations, there is sufficient information to determine the validity of interview decisions, but this information is not utilized. The audit should also examine the interview processes that serve as the basis for selection decisions, since these processes affect the validity of interviewers' decisions and influence the organization's ability to attract applicants and avoid litigation.
- Educate managers and human resources professionals about the idiosyncratic nature of interviewers' decisions and the consequences of haphazard decisions for organizational effectiveness.
- Initiate improvements in interview practices similar to those suggested in this article. The HR function might be the first area of the organization to assess its interview practices and implement improved practices.
- Institute systems that provide ongoing data about the effectiveness

of the organization's interview practices. Without such data, it will be difficult to monitor the effectiveness of these practices.

- Assign responsibility for insuring the quality of the organization's interview practices to a highly placed HR manager.

In conclusion, the success of today's organizations is increasingly dependent on the quality of their human capital (Reich, 1987; Snow & Snell, 1993). Organizations that fail to take steps to remedy poor interview practices may well endanger their ability to compete in today's economy. HR executives must insure that their organizations heed the call for better interview practices.

*Laura M. Graves, Ph.D. is Assistant Professor of Management at the Graduate School of Management at Clark University. She holds a doctorate in Social Psychology from the University of Connecticut. She has conducted research and published articles on issues related to employee recruitment and selection, including individual differences in interviewers' decision processes, gender effects in the interview, and affirmative action practices. Before joining the faculty at Clark, she was employed in Corporate Human Resources at Aetna Life and Casualty.*

*Ronald J. Karren, Ph.D. is Associate Professor of Management and Director of the Ph.D. Program at the School of Management at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst. He holds a doctorate in Psychology from the University of Maryland. He has conducted research and published articles on employee selection, utility analysis, drug testing, and interviewers' decision processes.*

## REFERENCES

- Anderson, N., & Shackleton, V. (1990). Decision making in the graduate selection interview: A field study. *Journal of Occupational Psychology, 63*, 63-76.
- Arvey, R. D., & Faley, R. H. (1988). *Fairness in selecting employees* (2nd ed.). Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.
- Arvey, R. D., & Sackett, P. R. (1993). Fairness in selection: Current developments and perspectives. In N. Schmitt & W. C. Borman (Eds.), *Personnel selection in organizations* (pp. 171-203). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Bowen, D. E., & Lawler III, E. E. (1992). Total quality-oriented human resources management. *Organizational dynamics, 20*, 29-41.
- Bowen, D., Ledford Jr., G., & Nathan, B. (1991). Hiring for the organization, not the job. *Academy of Management Executive, 5*(4), 35-51.
- Bureau of National Affairs, Inc. (1988). *Recruiting and selection procedures. Personnel policies forum survey no. 146*. Washington, D. C.: Bureau of National Affairs, Inc.
- Cardy, R. L., & Kehoe, J. F. (1984). Rater selective attention ability and appraisal effectiveness: The effect of cognitive style on the accuracy of differentiation among ratees. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 69*, 589-594.
- Carlson, R. E., Thayer, P. W., Mayfield, E. C., & Peterson, D. (1971). Improvements in the selection interview. *Personnel Journal, 50*, 268-275.
- Cosentino, C., Allen, J., & Wellins, R. (1990). Choosing the right people. *HR Magazine, 35*(3), 66-70.



- Dipboye, R. L. (1992). *Selection interviews: Process perspectives*. Cincinnati, OH: Southwestern.
- Dipboye, R. L., & Macan, T. M. (1988). A process view of the selection/recruitment interview. In R. S. Schuler, S. A. Youngblood, & V. L. Huber (Eds.), *Readings in personnel and human resource management* (pp. 217-232). St. Paul, MN: West.
- Dougherty, T. W., Ebert, R. J., & Callender, J. C. (1986). Policy capturing in the employment interview. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 71*, 9-15.
- Gatewood, R. D., & Feild, H. S. (1994). *Human resource selection* (3rd ed.). Fort Worth, TX: Dryden.
- Graves, L. M. (1993). Sources of individual differences in interviewer effectiveness: A model and implications for future research. *Journal of Organizational Behavior, 14*, 349-370.
- Graves, L. M., & Karren, R. J. (1992). Interviewer decision processes and effectiveness: An experimental policy-capturing investigation. *Personnel Psychology, 45*, 313-340.
- Graves, L. M., & Powell, G. N. (1988). An investigation of sex discrimination in recruiters' evaluations of actual applicants. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 73*, 20-29.
- Herman, S. J. (1994). *Hiring right*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Houston, P. (1992). Surviving the survivor syndrome. *Working Woman, 17*(8), 56-60.
- Hunt, R. G., Krzystofiak, F. J., Meindl, J. R., & Yousry, A. M. (1989). Cognitive style and decision making. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes, 44*, 436-453.
- Jackson, S. E., & Alvarez, E. B. (1992). Working through diversity as a strategic imperative. In S. E. Jackson (Ed.), *Diversity in the workplace: Human resource initiatives* (pp. 13-25). New York: Guilford.
- Janz, T. (1989). The patterned behavior description interview: The best profit of the future is the past. In R. W. Eder & G. R. Ferris (Eds.), *The employment interview: theory, research, and practice* (pp. 158-168). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- King v. TWA, 35 EPD 34, 588 (1984).
- Kinicki, A. J., Lockwood, C. A., Hom, P. W., & Griffeth, R. W. (1990). Interviewer predictions of applicant qualifications and interviewer validity: Aggregate and individual analyses. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 75*, 477-486.
- Kirksey, J., & Zawacki, R. A. (1994). Assessment center helps find team-oriented candidates. *Personnel Journal, 73*(5), 92.
- Latham, G. P., Saari, L. M., Pursell, E. D., & Campion, M. A. (1980). The situational interview. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 65*, 422-427.
- McDaniel, M. A., Whetzel, D. L., Schmidt, F. L., & Maurer, S. D. (1994). The validity of employment interviews: A comprehensive review and meta-analysis. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 79*, 599-616.
- Offerman, L. R., & Gowing, M. K. (1993). Personnel selection in the future: The impact of changing demographics and the nature of work. In N. Schmitt & W. C. Borman (Eds.), *Personnel selection in organizations* (pp. 385-417). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Reich, R. B. (1987). Entrepreneurship reconsidered: The team as hero. *Harvard Business Review, 65*(3), 77-83.
- Rowe, P. M. (1963). Individual differences in selection decisions. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 47*, 304-307.
- Rowe, P. M. (1970). Differences in selection decisions among personnel interviewers. *Canadian Personnel and Industrial Relations Journal, 17*, 19-23.
- Rowe, P. M. (1984). Decision processes in personnel selection. *Canadian Journal of Behavioral Sciences, 16*, 326-337.
- Rynes, S. L. (1993). Who's selecting whom? Effects of selection practices on

- applicants' attitudes and behavior. In N. Schmitt & W. C. Borman (Eds.), *Personnel selection in organizations* (pp. 240-274). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Rynes, S. L., & Boudreau, J. W. (1986). College recruiting in large organizations: Practice, evaluation, and research implications. *Personnel Psychology, 39*, 729-757.
- Rynes, S. L., Bretz, R. D., & Gerhart, B. (1991). The importance of recruitment in job choice: A different way of looking. *Personnel Psychology, 44*, 487-521.
- Schmidt, F. L. (1993). Personnel psychology at the cutting edge. In N. Schmitt & W. C. Borman (Eds.), *Personnel selection in organizations* (pp. 597-515). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Schuh, A. J. (1980). Verbal listening skill in the interview and personal characteristics of listeners. *Bulletin of the Psychonomic Society, 15*(2), 125-127.
- Schneider, B., & Bowen, D. E. (1993). The service organization: Human resource management is crucial. *Organizational Dynamics, 20*, 39-52.
- Schuler, R. D. & MacMillan, I. C. (1984). Gaining competitive advantage through human resource management practices. *Human Resource Management, 23*, 241-255.
- Snow, C. C., & Snell, S. A. (1993). Staffing as strategy. In N. Schmitt & W. C. Borman (Eds.), *Personnel selection in organizations* (pp. 448-478). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Terpstra, D. E., & Rozell, E. J. (1993). The relationship of staffing practices to organizational level measures of performance. *Personnel Psychology, 46*, 27-48.
- Tsui, A. S., & O'Reilly III, C. A. (1989). Beyond simple demographic effects: The importance of relational demography in superior-subordinate dyads. *Academy of Management Journal, 32*, 402-423.
- U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board (1993). *Evolving workforce demographics: Federal agency action and reaction*. Washington, D. C.: U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board.
- United States v. Hazelwood School District, 11 EPD 10854 (1976).
- Weiner v. County of Oakland, 14 FEP 380 (1976).
- Wiesner, W. H., & Cronshaw, S. F. (1988). A meta-analytic investigation of interview format and degree of structure on the validity of the employment interview. *Journal of Occupational Psychology, 61*, 275-290.
- Zedeck, S., Tziner, A., & Middlestadt, S. E. (1983). Interviewer validity and reliability: An individual analysis approach. *Personnel Psychology, 36*, 355-370.

Copyright of *Human Resource Management* is the property of John Wiley & Sons, Inc. / Business and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.