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Interviewing Job Applicants: How to Get beyond First Impressions

Abstract

The traditional approach to interviewing job candidates is hardly more effective than drawing a candidate's name from a hat. But structuring an interview can maximize its predictive power.

Keywords

hiring, interview bias, behavioral interviews, application process

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Comments

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Interviewing Job Applicants—

How to Get beyond First Impressions

The traditional approach to interviewing job candidates is hardly more effective than drawing a candidate's name from a hat. But structuring an interview can maximize its predictive power.

by Tony Simons

According to one source, the chances of employers' finding reliable employees through a typical interview process is only 3-percent better than if they picked names out of a hat.[1] While that figure may be accurate for the casual interview, recent studies show that managers *who know what questions to ask* can predict candidates' future job performance almost ten times more accurately than those who don't.

[1] From the *Financial Times Career Guide,* cf. Richard N. Bolles, *What Color Is Your Parachute?* (Berkeley, CA: Ten Speed Press, 1993).

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Up through the late 1980s studies of how well job interviews predict employees' future performance showed that employment interviews have little validity for that purpose. Evidence from the employment records of thousands of management and line employees suggests that a candidate with a positive interview report is just about as likely to do a good job as a candidate with a marginal interview report or one with no interview report at all.[2] (Obviously, there are few records available of an employee's future performance after receiving a *negative* interview report, as those candidates rarely received an offer of employment.) In the late 1980s, as research methods and interview techniques improved, study results changed somewhat. Analyses of thousands of cases determined that standard, free-form interviews do have a little bit of predictive power, even though they are vulnerable to biases, individual differences between interviewers, and other shortcomings.

Employers, however, can predict the future performance of job candidates around ten times more accurately if they use well-structured and deliberately targeted interviews.[3] Carefully planned and focused interviews reduce the chances that hiring decisions will be influenced by subtle and not-so-subtle biases and errors. The ability to predict employees' performance before they are hired translates into improved service and savings of real dollars.

This article first identifies the potential biases and pitfalls of traditional interviewing. Then it offers recommendations from recent research for improving interview techniques. Finally, it discusses controversial practices involved in interviewing processes.

Interview Bias

Imagine yourself about to interview a candidate. You have already decided that filling this particular position warrants your personal attention to make sure that a bright, skilled, and motivated candidate is chosen. You've scanned a few dozen résumés, selected those candidates who seem most promising, and made arrangements for interviews. You now review the résumé of the candidate who is sitting in the hotel lobby. How will you make your assessment of the candidate's desirability? You are going to talk to her and, afterward, you'll just have a feeling about the candidate, right?

Unfortunately, there are many factors that can misguide a manager's "gut feel." First, your personal assessment of the applicant's intelligence, reliability, and interpersonal skills is apt to be influenced by whether you *like* the applicant. "Liking" can be influenced by such factors as the physical attractiveness of candidates, by their age or race, and by their apparent similarity to yourself (e.g., cultural and family background, disposition, and values).[4] Moreover, if the interviewer is female, there is evidence that her ratings of all candidates may be higher than the ratings of the same candidates interviewed by a male. That is not to say that female or male interviewers are more accurate than their counterparts—only that female interviewers tend to rate candidates more favorably than do males.[5]

No mo' halo. When an interviewer likes a candidate, that feeling most often leads to an impression of competence and intelligence, known as the halo effect. This effect occurs when an interviewer unwittingly assumes that a candidate's positive impression or presentation in one area indicates abilities in other areas. For example, a management candidate's winning smile or demonstrated sales ability can lead an unwary interviewer to assume the candidate has many other positive traits—and to interpret his statements in such a way as to confirm that impression. Similarly, regarding employees already onboard, the assumption that your top sales representative has the skills needed to be a sales manager is also an example of the halo effect.

Interviewers tend to confirm their first impressions of candidates by directing the interviews in certain ways. That is, first impressions influence interviewers' memories and affect how interviewers behave during an interview. For example, when an interviewer starts off with a positive impression of a candidate—either through a review of the résumé or because of the first few seconds of the meeting—the interviewer acts differently than if the first impression was negative or neutral. She may ask questions aimed at supporting her positive views, interpret answers in a positive light, encourage the candidate, and sell the company's virtues, all the while gathering little overall information from the applicant.[6] Impres-

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[2] Allen Huffcutt and Winfred Arthur, Jr., "Hunter and Hunter Revisited: Interview Validity for Entry-level Jobs," *Journal of Applied Psychology*, Vol. 79, No. 2 (April 1994), pp. 184–190.

[3] Michael Campion, Elliott Pursell, and Barbara Brown, "Structured Interviewing: Raising the Psychometric Properties of the Employment Interview," *Personnel Psychology*, Vol. 41, No. 1 (Spring 1988), pp. 25–42.

[4] Susan M. Raza and Bruce N. Carpenter, "A Model of Hiring Decisions in Real Employment Interviews," *Journal of Applied Psychology*, Vol. 72, No. 4 (November 1987), pp. 596–603; and Thung-Run Lin, Gregory Dobbins, and Jiing-Lih Farh, "A Field Study of Race and Age Similarity Effects on Interview Ratings in Conventional and Situational Interviews," *Journal of Applied Psychology*, Vol. 77, No. 3 (June 1992), pp. 363–371.

[5] See, for example, Raza and Carpenter.

[6] Thomas Dougherty, Daniel Turban, and John Callender, "Confirming First Impressions in the Employment Interview," *Journal of Applied Psychology*, Vol. 79, No. 5 (October 1994), pp. 659–665.

sions, both good and bad, also determine which parts of the interview people perceive and remember: people tend to notice and remember those parts that support the conclusions they have already drawn.

Stereotyping. The impact of stereotypes on perception is well documented. Even the most well-meaning interviewer can begin an interview with impressions of a candidate's attitude or intelligence based on virtually any known or visible characteristic of the interviewee. While most interviewers try to be fair by acknowledging and suppressing their personal stereotype-based assumptions about people, the fact remains that it is virtually impossible to do so completely. Therefore, quite unintentionally, interviewers are likely to confirm those impressions that result from their personal bias through the mechanisms laid out in the previous paragraph. For example, a manager who considers a particular job to be a male or female role will not have a good first impression of applicants who do not fit that expectation. The manager might not "feel right" about a man's interviewing for what the manager believes to be a "woman's job," and he might, without thinking about it, start to build a case to support his impression that the male applicant is not the right candidate for the job.

Finally, impressions of candidates are influenced by nonverbal cues and by how the individuals approach the interview process itself. For example, does the candidate look you in the eye and shake your hand firmly? Is the interviewee willing to disagree with you thoughtfully, or to argue a point? Did the applicant come prepared for the interview and to ask questions? Most people think of these actions as markers of personality, and most interviewers' assessments are strongly influenced by such so-called markers. In this case, however, most interviewers are wrong. These actions, which researchers term "self-presentation strategies," are essentially unrelated to candidates' true personalities.[7] Candidates' self-presentation strategies tell you primarily how experienced they are at being interviewed and whether they have sought coaching or read books on the subject. Moreover, because job-search advice is so readily available in today's market, a wise interviewer will not assume resourcefulness or initiative on the part of candidates who have learned to be sophisticated interviewees.

When an interviewer's approach to conducting an interview is to "play it by ear" or to "form an impression," then that person's perception can be swayed by the halo effect, stereotype influences, situational cues, and first impressions. As a result of those biases, the interviewer is unlikely to hire the best candidate.

The point is, interviewers who do have good information about how well the candidate is likely to perform can do nothing better than to make their assessment based on the information they have, even when much of that information is tainted. Here, then, are some suggestions for getting reliable information about how well candidates are likely to perform on the job.[8]

Experts' Recommendations

A fair amount of time and money has gone into studying how well different interviewing approaches help an employer hire the most qualified candidate. While some techniques remain controversial, there are a few guidelines about which all the experts agree. When interviewers follow those guidelines, they are typically able to predict candidates' future job performance with eight to ten times the accuracy of simple, seat-of-the-pants interviews.[9] Not surprisingly, the improvement in making hiring decisions has resulted in reduced turnover and increased customer satisfaction for several hospitality companies.

First, gather as much information as you can about the job for which you are hiring. Learn all about the knowledge, skills, abilities, attitudes, and anything else that is required for excellent performance of the job. Use that information to craft a detailed set of questions that you ask of *all* applicants for the position. Finding out what you need and asking questions aimed at determining whether an applicant matches your needs sounds like a simple formula, but it's not always as easy as it seems. Here, then, are a few guidelines to help you interview efficiently and effectively.

To collect the necessary information, talk with job incumbents and supervisors to collect stories about people who have performed the job especially well, and about those who failed to perform. The purpose of these examples is to refine your picture of what goes into excellent performance. Collect as many stories as possible through conversations and group meetings, and by asking people to write them down. Sort those stories into common themes of particular skills, knowledge, abilities, attitudes, or

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[7] Clive Fletcher, "The Relationship between Candidate Personality, Self-Presentation Strategies, and Interviewer Assessments in Selection Interviews: An Empirical Study," *Human Relations*, Vol. 43, No. 8 (August 1990), pp. 739–749.

[8] Another structured approach to predicting success on the job is to use an assessment center. See: Florence Berger, "Assessing Assessment Centers for Hospitality Organizations," *Cornell Hotel and Restaurant Administration Quarterly*, Vol. 26, No. 2 (August 1985), pp. 56–61.

[9] Huffcutt and Arthur, pp. 184–190.

whatever else the employee displayed to perform well. This approach is called a "critical-incident job analysis" and can help you design effective interview questions.

Examples of themes or skills for a customer-service job might include the following dimensions:[10]

- Tact (interacting with disappointed customers without offending them, calming angry customers, and winning customer trust and friendship),
- Service orientation (learning about customer problems and needs and helping them to satisfy their needs), and
- Organization (keeping equipment or paperwork organized and readily accessible).

Find ten or so qualities that you would like to measure for any particular job. If one dimension seems to be critical to job performance, consider splitting it into two more-specific dimensions, so that you can measure it more carefully.

Once you have determined the dimensions to measure, formulate a series of questions that you will ask of all applicants for the position. Be sure to conduct the interview in the same way for all applicants.

Also prepare guidelines and examples (called anchors) that allow interviewers to assess excellent, mediocre, and poor answers to each question, as explained below. This method is called structured interviewing.[11]

There are several variations to structured interviewing, all of which share a reliance on job analysis, consistent questioning, and anchored, numeric scoring. The approaches differ slightly in the kinds of questions asked and in the scoring process. The two primary forms of structured interviewing are behavioral interviews and situational interviews.[12]

There is value to be gained from asking the same questions of all applicants, but there is a point at which excessive structure no longer adds value to the process.

Behavioral interviews. Behavioral interviews "...consist of a set of standard questions about how interviewees handled past situations that are like situations that might happen on the job and that might elicit behavior representing one or more of the interview dimensions."[13] Behavioral interviews are based on the premise that past behavior is an excellent predictor of future behavior. Thus, typical question formats are "What did you do when...?" and "Tell me about a time when...." For example, "Tell me about a time when you had to talk with someone who had a difficult time understanding you. What did you do to convey your message?" Another example is: "When have you had to help a difficult or upset guest? What did you do? What was the outcome?"

The questions you write should vary in their pattern of wording—that is, they should not always start with the same phrase. Variety is important because interviewers should use the questions exactly as written (for consistency) and you do not want the questions to sound mechanical. Also, the questions should be easy to understand the first time, so that additional explanations aren't necessary. It's a good idea to test the questions with employees or colleagues before use.

Discuss each question with job incumbents, managers, and training professionals to determine the best illustrations (anchors) that represent

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[10] Adapted from Stephen Motowidlo *et al.*, "Studies of the Structured Behavioral Interview," *Journal of Applied Psychology*, Vol. 77, No. 5 (October 1992), pp. 571–587.

[11] Campion, Pursell, and Brown, pp. 25–42.

[12] See: Motowidlo *et al.*, pp. 571–587, about behavioral interviews; and, about situational interviews, Jeff Weekley and Joseph Gier, "Reliability and Validity of the Situational Interview for a Sales Position," *Journal of Applied Psychology*, Vol. 72, No. 3 (August 1987), pp. 484–487.

[13] Motowidlo *et al.*, p. 572.

excellent, mediocre, and poor answers, as shown below. Be sure to discuss the questions long enough to arrive at anchors about which all of your experts agree. The anchors are used to score candidates' responses and as such are not revealed to the candidates.

An example of the question and related anchors used to assess conflict-resolution skills is as follows.[14]

- What is the biggest difference of opinion you ever had with a coworker? How did it get resolved?

Excellent answers: "We looked into the situation, found the problem, and resolved the difference"; and "Had an honest conversation with the person." *Score = 5*

Good answers: "Compromised"; "Resolved the problem by taking turns"; and "I explained the problem (my side) carefully." *Score = 3*

Marginal answers: "I got mad and told the coworker off"; "We got the supervisor to resolve the problem"; and "I never have differences with anyone." *Score = 1*

Note that the lowest anchors are not set so low as to be ridiculous. There is no need to write an anchor to describe any behavior that would automatically disqualify a candidate, such as violent or illegal acts.

You may find yourself disagreeing with the anchors as written here. Ideally, the anchors as well as the questions should be developed in-house and based on your own company's standards and ways of getting things done. When developing anchors, consider as possible resources your company-policy manual and performance-appraisal instruments.

Upon the completion of a behavioral interview the interviewer examines each of the candidate's answers. By assessing the answers according to the dimensions that were developed in the interview-planning process, scores can be assigned for the different dimensions or characteristics specified as desirable candidate attributes. Each dimension's score may be based on the responses to one or more questions, and any given question might provide information about several dimensions. The end result is a "profile" of each applicant in terms of attribute scores, for example, conflict-management skills: 8; subordinate coaching skills: 10; knowledge of front-desk operations: 5; and so forth.

Situational interviews. Situational interviews take an approach similar to that of behavioral interviews, but the questions asked are hypothetical, future-oriented questions. The interviewer suggests scenarios and asks the candidate how they might respond in such a situation. While the behavioral interview uses past behavior to predict future behavior, the situational interview bases its outcomes on the candidate's stated intentions.

The typical format is a description of a make-believe scenario followed by the question, "How would you handle that situation?" or "What would you do in that situation?"[15]

As with behavioral interviews, the questions are developed to assess the knowledge, skills, abilities, attitudes, and other attributes that you have determined as critical for excellent job performance. Questions may be developed directly from the critical incidents collected as part of your job analysis.

For example, to assess service orientation, you might offer the following scenario to an applicant for a desk-clerk position.

- It is 11:00 PM on a fairly busy Tuesday night. A woman in a rumpled business suit, carrying a garment bag and a laptop computer, comes to the front desk and asks for her room. She says she has a reservation—but the computer shows no record of it. The hotel is sold out. What do you do? (You can make the question more difficult by adding that the business traveler appears intoxicated or behaves rudely when told that there is no room available.)

Excellent answers: "Briefly check for typographical or other errors that could result in a misplaced reservation, for example, ask if the reservation could have been made under another name"; "Check to see if the reservation was made with a nearby, affiliated hotel"; and "Make a reservation for her elsewhere and transport her there in the hotel van." *Score = 5*

Good answer: "Call nearby hotels and find a room for her." *Score = 3*

Marginal answer: "Apologize and suggest that she start calling nearby hotels." *Score = 1*

As with behavioral interviews, responses should be scored based on the anchors you have developed from conversations with your experts. Each question in a situational interview is targeted at a specific job requirement. Therefore, if a requirement is especially important, be sure to ask several questions about it.

Here is another example of a complete situational interview question, with a key for interviewers to score responses based on conflict-management skills.[16]

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[14] Adapted from Michael Campion, James Campion, and Peter Hudson, Jr., "Structured Interviewing: A Note on Incremental Validity and Alternative Question Types," *Journal of Applied Psychology*, Vol. 79, No. 6 (December 1994), pp. 998–1002.

[15] Weekley and Gier, p. 485.

[16] Adapted from Campion, Campion, and Hudson, pp. 998–1002.

- Suppose you are a front-desk manager and you have an idea for a change in reservations procedures to reduce errors, but there is a problem in that some members of your staff are against any type of change. What do you do in this situation?

Excellent answers: "Explain the change and try to show the benefits"; and "Discuss it openly in a meeting." *Score = 5*

Good answers: "Ask them why they are against change"; and "Try to convince them." *Score = 3*

Marginal answer: "Fire them." *Score = 1*

Advocates of this approach suggest that candidates get scores based on a simple numeric sum of all their interview question responses, unlike the method used for scoring behavioral interviews. This difference in scoring emerges from the fact that each situational interview question focuses on a single job dimension (e.g., skill, attitude) while behavioral interviews can elicit stories that illustrate several different qualities. Since there is no weighting of different attributes, an effective situational interview uses several questions to assess the qualities of greatest interest.

Proven success. Both forms of structured interviewing are in wide use in today's top hospitality companies. For example, Hyatt and Marriott both use behavioral-interview questions. Disney, Resorts International, and Mirage use situational-interview questions. The debate about which form of interview is better is ongoing.

A study that asked both types of questions found weak evidence that past-oriented questions were a superior predictor of future employee performance compared to future-oriented questions and the results "...may mean that past behavior is a slightly better predictor of future behavior than are future intentions."[17] This difference might reflect the fact that it is easier to guess at the optimum answers for a hypothetical question whereas a past-oriented question calls for a specific, presumably accurate—and verifiable—report.

Behavioral questions, however, are of limited usefulness when candidates are not experienced at the type of job for which they are applying. This limitation in some cases might unfairly influence the interview performance of youthful or nontraditional candidates. Similarly, if the bulk of the applicant pool is inexperienced, past-oriented questions might fail to differentiate candidates. Hybrid interviews have not been widely studied, but it is possible that a well-crafted combination of the two types of question could capture the advantages of each.

Controversial Issues in Interview Practice

The issue of whether it is wiser to frame questions in the past or the future is not the only controversial issue in interviewing practice. Additional issues that I discuss in detail below include: different methods of scoring interviews, the use of panels or teams to conduct interviews, whether to ask follow-up questions or to use improvised probes, and whether interviewers should preview applicant qualifications before the interview.

Scoring. As noted in the discussion of situational versus behavioral interviewing, the two approaches advocate different types of scoring: situational interviews are scored strictly as an average or a sum of the individual question scores while behavioral interviews are scored on several predetermined dimensions, based on interviewer judgments of the information gathered. This difference in scoring—whereby situational interviews offer the benefit of consistency while behavioral interviews offer the benefit of flexibility—is strongly linked to the use of future- versus past-oriented questions. Responses to past-oriented questions are more likely to yield unexpected but relevant information, and this difference calls for a more flexible scoring approach.

Two on one. A second controversy involves the use of two or more interviewers in the room with the candidate.[18] Harvey Hotels uses this approach when interviewing for executive positions. Harvey's management feels that it adds more-diverse perspectives on the candidate and allows for more interaction between the candidate and the company's senior officers—which makes for greater information flow all around.

Studies report mixed results on whether groups (called panels) make more accurate interview assessments. One study found that panels were more accurate in their interview assessments when the interview format was flexible or unstructured, but that the difference was negligible when the interview format was behavioral or situational.[19] Another found that panels of an ethnic origin similar to the candidates' were likely to give more-positive assessments than were individuals.[20]

A recent review of several studies found that panel interviews were *less* accurate than individual interviews, whether the interview was

[17] Campion, Campion, and Hudson, p. 1001.

[18] Not considered in this article is the approach of interviewing more than one candidate at a time. See: Louis A. Birenbaum, "Hiring for a Spa: Building a Team with Group Interviews," *Cornell Hotel and Restaurant Administration Quarterly*, Vol. 30, No. 4 (February 1990), pp. 53–56.

[19] Weisner and Cranshaw.

[20] Lin, Dobbins, and Farh.

structured or not.[21] Despite the prevalent impression that a panel or committee lends credibility to decisions, the improvement in accuracy of panel interviews over individual interviews is suspect. Furthermore, panel interviews cost more in terms of person-hours than do individual interviews. Thus, panel interviews might be recommended where group consensus about a particular job's successful candidate is critical, or where participation in that group is a qualification for the job. Otherwise, there is little evidence to support the added expense of multiple interviewers.

Winging it. Follow-up questions and improvised probes are eschewed by people who seek to maximize the consistency of interview practice among different interviewers. After all, some interviewers might ask better probing questions than others. Moreover, probes can easily allow an interviewer to guide a candidate toward the desired response—and thereby introduce the sorts of biases described earlier.

Reviews of existing practice and studies say that there is great value to be gained from asking the same questions of all applicants, but that there is a point of diminishing returns whereby excessive structure no longer adds value (or predictive accuracy) to the interview process.[22] That is to say, consistency is good, but absolute lockstep does not add anything, and may detract.

Moreover, it's clear that decisions based on more relevant information are superior to those based on less information. The solution, then, is not to limit interviewers' discretion to probe, but rather to train them extensively in how and when to probe for explanation and further information from a candidate.[23]

Another controversial question is whether interviewers should preview applicant résumés, applications, and test scores prior to the interview. There is ample evidence that such previews are likely to influence the interviewer's questioning behavior, nonverbal reactions, and selective recall. While the pre-interview information may have excessive influence on the interviewer and thereby undercut the effectiveness of the interview, there is evidence that such preview information, if its negative effects can be attenuated, can improve an interview's predictive accuracy.[24] In other words, previews may bias some interviews, but a little of that bias can be useful. In sum, the jury is still out on this issue, but the wisest course seems to be to allow previews, but to recognize the potential for bias and to temper its influence on the interview process and outcome.

Concerns about Implementation

There are legitimate concerns about implementing advanced interviewing techniques such as those described above.

Cost. While it takes a substantial investment of person-hours to develop and test a good behavioral interview, this cost should properly be weighed against the cost of a bad hiring decision—a cost that has been estimated at one to two times the employee's annual salary.[25] This figure includes the poor productivity of the bad hire, business lost through dissatisfied customers, managers' time spent assessing replacement candidates, the training of a replacement, and the time it takes for the replacement to get up to speed at the job.

If you hire frequently for a particular position, careful design work and question-testing for that position is probably worth the effort. You may consider hiring a consultant for the question-development task. If hiring is far more occasional, a few hours would be well-spent talking with job incumbents and others about how the job works, and afterward designing good questions. Attention to the principles if not the details laid out in this article won't hurt, even if the final product is not an orthodox implementation. Note also that well-developed questions often apply to multiple job categories and so can be used in different hiring situations. Thus, the process of developing structured-interview protocols becomes easier and less expensive as your question file grows.

Management reaction. People who consider implementing a program like this may worry, "Will managers take the system seriously? Will they resent it?" Typically, managers appreciate the obvious job relevance and fairness of structured interviews. Many managers hate to interview just because the process seems so ambiguous. With this type of process, managers typically find that they are more comfortable making hiring decisions, because there is more good information available. Also, managers who have participated in the development of the interview questions, including generating examples or assessing preliminary drafts, will have a personal investment in switching to structured interviews and in making the change successful. If the questions are good, and if managers are taught how to use them, then the managers will probably be appreciative of the additional support. **CQ**

[21] Michael McDaniel, Deborah Whetzel, Frank Schmidt, and Steven Maurer, "The Validity of Employment Interviews: A Comprehensive Review and Meta-Analysis," *Journal of Applied Psychology,* Vol. 79, No. 4 (August 1994), pp. 599–616.

[22] Huffcutt and Arthur.

[23] Motowidlo *et al.*

[24] Dougherty, Turban, and Callender.

[25] Pamela A. Kaul, "Interviewing Is Your Business," *Association Management,* Vol. 44 ; No. 11 (November 1992), p. 26.