



The Employment Interview - Best Practices

In our article, "The Employment Interview - Overview", we discussed interview formats and how they can vary in terms of structure and content. We covered how structure and content variations impact the effectiveness of the interview as a selection tool. This time, we will talk about issues related to implementing a structured interviewing program. Specifically, we will discuss:

- interviewer judgment errors,
- integrating interview information with other assessment tools,
- maintaining documentation, and
- quality control (or avoiding the return of bad habits).

Interviewer Judgment Errors

First, we will talk about common decision making errors people make when interviewing applicants. Rigorous training programs, along with added structure, are important ways of minimizing decision making errors, but understanding the different types of error and recognizing when they occur is important.

- *Stereotyping* – This error involves making judgments about a candidate based on broad generalizations, rather than information specific to the candidate. These generalizations typically refer (accurately or inaccurately) to attributes of a larger group to which the candidate belongs, such as gender, age, or racial/ethnic status.
- *Similar to Me* – In some cases, interviewers will display a tendency to attribute some of their own characteristics to candidates. There may be something about a candidate that reminds the interviewer of himself or herself, and this superficial similarity can lead the interviewer to overlook or discount distinguishing details specific to a candidate.
- *First Impression* – This one is pretty self-explanatory. It is very unfortunate, but many poorly or inadequately trained interviewers tend to judge a candidate within minutes of beginning the interview. It can be difficult to design an interviewing process with validity matching that of other selection tools. Drawing conclusions based on first impressions makes this task nearly impossible.

- *Halo* – When interviewers commit halo error, they are allowing their evaluation of one characteristic to influence their overall evaluation of the candidate. For example, an interviewer who is very impressed with a candidate's decision-making skills may perceive other skills, such as communication or persuasiveness, to be at a similar level of proficiency. This can work in the negative direction too.
- *Leniency/Severity* – Some interviewers tend to be excessively lenient across the board when evaluating candidates, while others may be unfairly critical. These are similar kinds of error, and can be detected readily.
- *Restriction of Range* – Lastly, interviewers may hesitate to use the extreme ends of a rating scale when evaluating candidates. Instead, all evaluations tend to be “middle of the road.” This can occur even if you are not using numerical ratings.

Working with Multiple Assessment Tools

Next, we will offer some tips on integrating interview results with information gathered using other assessment tools in the selection process. It is easy to forget that the interview is just another assessment tool, just like reference checks, pre-employment tests and in-box simulations. The role and contribution of the pre-employment interview can be very different when other tools are used along with it. Before talking about integrating results, consider the types of individual differences you might be measuring in a pre-employment selection process.

- *Traits and abilities* – these include innate tendencies and talents candidates bring to the table. The primary method of assessing these characteristics is through the use of tests, such as personality inventories (like the PPI), or cognitive ability tests.
- *Knowledge and skills (competencies)* – these include behaviors, procedures, and bodies of information candidates acquire through development. While sometimes assessed through tests, these characteristics are also often measured with simulations (for example, role playing to assess interpersonal skills) and work samples.

The role of the interview changes considerably when measuring each of these types of individual differences. Although this breakdown is somewhat simplified, interviews are best used as a means of confirmation or clarification when assessing traits or abilities, and as a means of covering additional competencies when assessing knowledge or skills.

- For example, suppose a candidate has taken the PPI and scored low on Likes Attention, and she is being considered for a high profile job requiring her to deliver presentations to large audiences. We recommend using interview questions to determine whether the candidate has developed skills to compensate for her discomfort with attention. This may involve asking behavioral questions focusing on examples of how the candidate has dealt with public speaking engagements in the past. Such information will enable the interviewer to determine whether the candidate is truly a poor fit because of this issue, capable of overcoming the limitation through development, or actually in the process of overcoming it through development. To help insure consistency in the interviewing process, it is usually best to pre-determine the traits or abilities to be covered in the interview for confirmation/clarification purposes, and ask these questions of all candidates for a particular position.
- In a contrasting example, let's say a candidate is pursuing a software development job, and has completed a test to assess knowledge of the programming language favored by the employer. Scores on a good quality knowledge test will reveal where the candidate stands in terms of development in this area, and no follow-up is really warranted. So, in this case, interview questions might be better used focusing on unrelated skill sets that are not covered by other skill assessment tools. These may include collaboration or organization skills.

A&M Psychometrics believes the best approach to selection is to use multiple methods to cover the maximum range of job-relevant knowledge, skills, abilities and other characteristics. The interview's rightful place in this arsenal is to add flexibility as confirmation/clarification tool when it comes to traits/abilities, and to add comprehensiveness by filling in the gaps in skills assessment.

Documentation

The proper maintenance of notes and other documentation from the pre-employment interview is another area that is critical to understand before implementation. Remember, the interview is subject to the same regulations and guidelines as any other selection tool. In an increasingly litigious world, straightforward, thorough, and accurate record keeping are vital. Because topics like this evolve with each new court ruling, ***we strongly urge you to consult your legal advisor on matters concerning documentation.*** However, we can offer some general tips that you can apply in many cases.

- *Record only job relevant information* – Your evaluations should focus only on what is relevant to the candidate’s likely performance on the job. Because that is the focus, there is no reason to record and retain notes on irrelevant details about the candidate. If scrutinized by others later, it may be difficult to determine what information was used and what was not used in making the hiring decision.
- *Retain information used to make the employment decision* – This is self-explanatory. Your records should clearly indicate how the final decision was made using the information recorded. This is true for hires and rejections.
- *Be consistent* – Organizations vary in terms of the amount and level of detail in the interview information that is retained. Regardless, these aspects should be applied similarly across candidates. Lack of consistency in this area will draw attention, and may raise questions about the consistency of the process in general.
- *Collect demographics* – Because interviews are selection tools falling under the same rules and regulations as tests, interview performance must be similarly monitored. It may be necessary to collect demographic variables for interviewed candidates in order to insure fairness and check for adverse impact against protected groups. This information can be kept separately from interview results specific to each candidate.
- *Maintain confidentiality* – This is another self-explanatory one. In general, the hiring manager, HR, and the candidate himself or herself should be the only members of the organization with access to interview results.

Avoiding the Return of Bad Habits

Finally, the biggest threat to the success of a well-designed pre employment interviewing program is lack of staying power. In other words, over time, there is a tendency for the interviewers on the front lines to revert to techniques with which they are more comfortable. Your ongoing attention is necessary in order to maintain the quality and rigor of the process. Below are some tips for monitoring and maintaining quality in your interviewing process.

- *Shadowing* – Make it a routine event, rather than a probation-like experience. Sit in with the interviewer as he or she screens 3-4 candidates. Offer tips for improvement on the spot, if necessary. If remedial tips are necessary for an interviewer on more than one occasion, refresher training may be necessary.
- *Auditing files* – This goes along with shadowing. The “paperwork” is the only record you will likely have after the interview occurs, so quality here is just as important as what you can observe in shadowing. Develop a checklist of what you are looking for when you audit files, and share it with all of your interviewers.

- *New hire surveys* – This information will be limited by lack of access to rejected candidates, but it can still be helpful. You can learn what the experience is like from candidates' perspectives. Research shows that the perceived quality and fairness of the selection process has an impact on the candidates' likelihood of accepting offers, and initial impressions of the organization as a whole.
- *Refresher training* – Refresher training should be mandatory for everyone every couple of years or so. However, it may be necessary to retrain some interviewers sooner, if they appear to be struggling with consistency.

- Joseph Abraham & John Morrison