

## **A Guide to Staffing Assessment Interviews**

Excerpt from the book

“Hiring Success: the art and science of staffing assessment and employee selection”

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Interviews are probably the most common assessment method used to make selection decisions. The idea of interviewing is pretty simple: have people who are familiar with the job ask candidates questions and then evaluate the candidate’s suitability for the job based on the interviewer’s opinion of the candidate’s answers. Typical interviewers include hiring managers, recruiters, co-workers who will work with the candidate if he/she is hired, and more senior leaders who may oversee the manager who is doing the hiring. These people are usually presumed to have a fairly good understanding of what the job requires.

I have yet to find a company that does not include some sort of interview in their staffing processes. Most managers will not hire candidates without first interviewing them in person. Candidates also expect to be interviewed during the staffing process. Many candidates react negatively if they are not at least given the opportunity to interview for a job. This is because interviews are often perceived as the most “fair” way to evaluate a person.<sup>i</sup> But despite their popularity and widespread acceptance, many interviews provide little in the way of useful information for evaluating candidates. This is because the techniques used by many interviewers to assess candidates are highly misleading and inaccurate.

Interviews can be placed into two basic categories: structured and unstructured. Unstructured interviews are the most common. Unstructured interviews do not follow a clearly defined process for asking candidates questions and evaluating their responses. Although the interviewer may have a few “favorite interview questions” he/she tends to use, for the most part an unstructured interview consists of a loosely structured conversation with the candidate about different topics that may or may not relate directly to the job. Different candidates may be asked to talk about significantly different things depending on how the conversation during the interview unfolds. At the end of an unstructured interview, the interviewer evaluates the quality of the candidate based on their general feelings and attitudes. No clearly defined criteria or guidelines are used to interpret whether candidate answers to questions should be considered to be good or bad.

Unstructured interviews have been shown to have very little validity for predicting job performance<sup>ii</sup>. The poor validity of unstructured interviews is due to a variety of factors. Different candidates are often asked completely different questions during the interview, so there is no way to make a direct comparison between candidate responses. Because interviewers do not follow a clear agenda, they may fail to address important topics relevant to determining if the candidate is suitable for the job. Because the interviewer is not evaluating the candidates against clear criteria, evaluations of candidates are often based on more superficial characteristics such as their physical appearance. In many unstructured interviews the interviewer actually does most of the talking, leaving the candidate to simply sit and listen. When interviewers do ask questions, the questions are often highly leading with the correct answer implied in the question itself. For example, “do you agree with me that it is better to ask others for input before making decisions?”. Often the best way to do well in an unstructured interview is to refrain from interrupting the interviewer when he/she is talking and simply agree with whatever the interviewer may happen to say.

As implied by their name, structured interviews follow a very clearly defined process. In a structured interview, the interviewer is provided with a clear agenda and list of questions to cover during the interview. The interviews are designed so all applicants for a certain job or class of jobs are asked the same questions during the interview process. Most structured interviews also provide interviewers with well-defined rating scales for evaluating candidate responses to each question. Unlike unstructured interviews, structured interviews often show fairly high levels of validity for predicting job performance.<sup>iii</sup>

Conceivably, any type of question could be included in a structured interview. However, most structured interviews use one or more of the following types of questions to evaluate candidates.

**Motivational Questions.** These ask candidates about goals and motives related to their careers and the job they are applying for. The following are examples of motivational interview questions:

“How would you describe your ideal job?”

“Where do you want to be in 3 years?”

The main limitation of motivational questions is that what people want to do and what they are good at doing are often not the same thing. In addition, many people have difficulty articulating their long-term career goals and may not actually know what truly motivates them<sup>iv</sup>.

**Situational Questions.** These ask candidates how they would react to different hypothetical job relevant situations. The following are examples of situational interview questions

“Describe how you would calm down an irate customer.”

“Imagine a co-worker told your supervisor that he/she thought you were not working hard enough. How would you respond?”

Situational interview questions tend to be more predictive than motivational questions. However these questions suffer from the problem that what people say they would do in a situation is often different from what they actually will do. For example, it is one thing to respond to an interview question by saying that you would remain calm and collected if asked to deal with an angry, abusive customer, but it is quite another thing to actually remain calm when a customer is screaming in your face.

**Behavioral-Based Questions.** These ask candidates about their past experiences performing tasks or dealing with situations that are similar to those they will encounter in the job. The following are examples of behavioral-based interview questions.

“Tell me about a time you had to manage a large project that required coordinating the work of several different groups.”

“Tell me about a time you had to calm down a customer or other person who was upset and emotional”.

An advantage of behavioral interview questions is they ask candidates to provide examples of things they have actually done in the past, as opposed to having them talk about hypothetical actions they might take in the future. There is evidence that behavioral-based interviews can be the most effective type of structured interview<sup>v</sup>. But because behavioral-based questions focus on past experiences they may be less effective for determining people’s ability to do things they have never had an opportunity to do before.

Structured interviews are usually conducted in-person or over the phone. They can also be automated by having candidates read interview questions on a computer and then type in their answers

electronically. While it is possible to design computer programs to automatically interpret and score candidates' written responses to interview questions, this type of scoring is complex and has questionable accuracy. Consequently, automated interviews usually still require having someone manually read and evaluate candidate answers to different questions. Because structured interviews are typically conducted and scored by people, their effectiveness depends heavily on providing appropriate training to ensure the interviewers ask the questions in the right way and accurately interpret the candidates' responses<sup>vi</sup>.

Interviews play multiple roles in the staffing process that go beyond merely assessing candidates. One should not evaluate the worth of interviews solely on their utility for predicting job performance. They are also used to help recruit candidates, provide hiring managers and other employees with a sense of involvement and ownership around staffing decisions, and give candidates a sense of being fairly evaluated. Even though unstructured interviews have questionable value for making selection decisions, they can still play a useful role in terms of building candidate relationships or giving hiring managers a greater sense of comfort toward the staffing process. Nevertheless, it is almost always better to use structured interviews rather than unstructured interviews. When structured interviews are designed to include some time for more informal discussions with candidates, they provide accurate information for making hiring decisions and fulfill all the functions served by unstructured interviews.

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<sup>i</sup> Hausknecht, J.P., Day, D., & Thomas, S.C. (2004). Applicant reactions to selection procedures: an updated model and meta-analysis. **Personnel Psychology**, *57*, 639-683.

<sup>ii</sup> Campion, M.A., Pursell, E.D., & Brown, B.K. (1988). Structured interviewing: raising the psychometric properties of the employment interview. **Personnel Psychology**, *41*, 25-41.

<sup>iii</sup> Huffcut, A.I., & Woehr, D.J. (1999). Further analysis of employment interview validity: a quantitative evaluation of interviewer-related structuring methods. **Journal of Organizational Behavior**, *20*, 549-560.

<sup>iv</sup> Beach, L.R. (1996). Decision making in the workplace: a unified perspective. Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum.

<sup>v</sup> Janz, T., Hellervik, L., & Gilmore, D.C. (1986). Behavioral Description Interviewing. Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

<sup>vi</sup> Huffcut, A.I., & Woehr, D.J. (1999). Further analysis of employment interview validity: a quantitative evaluation of interviewer-related structuring methods. **Journal of Organizational Behavior**, *20*, 549-560.