



PERSONNEL PSYCHOLOGY NZ LTD

**ADVANCED INTERVIEWING SKILLS
FOR
PERSONNEL SELECTION**

An Overview

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SELECTION INTERVIEWING: INTRODUCTION

Interviewing as a means of assessment has a chequered reputation. Many academic studies suggest that interviewing is invalid and unreliable; others indicate that it may have some validity. The fact remains, however, that it is the single main selection tool used by employers and is likely to always remain so.

Properly conducted, interviewing can be an extremely accurate means of assessing the potential of an individual to do a job. The catch, however, is that the apparently logical approach to interviewing is not necessarily the most effective.

The structured interview is the flagship of all the methods based on logical analysis. Intuitively, structured interviewing makes a great deal of sense. It is linked directly to the competencies that analysis has revealed to be important for success in the job, it takes the guesswork out of the interview, and generates a quantitative result which can be used to rank candidates and assist with subsequent validation.

Typically, structured interviewing focuses on past behaviour by presenting situations appropriate to the applicant's level of experience and then scoring their answers on a set of pre-determined criteria. An example could be: *"Balancing the cash bag is always the bottom line for a cashier position, but bags don't always balance. Tell us about a time your experience helped you discover why your bag didn't balance."*

Alternatively, hypothetical scenarios are presented and the candidate is asked what they would do. An example could be: *"You observe a colleague in a restaurant surreptitiously passing a printout of sales figures to a member of a competing company. What would you do?"* Again, the answer is scored according to a pre-determined schedule of anchor points.

There are, however, six main issues with these types of questions. The first is that in developing the rating scales assumptions have to be made about what constitutes a 'right' or 'wrong' answer. The second is that there is often no relationship between what people say they would do and what they in fact typically do. The third is that the actual behaviour being measured is the ability of the individual to 'think on their feet' and it is frequently those who are best able to sell themselves who rate well. The fourth is that the process is biased significantly in favour of the candidate and gives the interviewer very little useful information about the values, attitudes, likes and dislikes of the candidate. The fifth is that candidates find this style of questioning artificial and frustrating because they are unable to talk about their experiences or ability to contribute, and the sixth is that interviewers often feel they are getting a prepared answer and are at a loss to find out what the candidate is 'really' like.

To overcome these problems we have developed an interview process which recognises the following issues:

- **Jobs as standalone entities do not exist.**

Organisations are dynamic systems which do not conform to formulae. For example, jobs are a complex interaction of:

The required outcomes
The preferences of the job holder
The organisational and group culture
The behaviour of the manager or supervisor.

The selection process must recognise this and have the capacity to adapt easily in order to keep in tune with the changing environment.

- **The distinction between ability and motivation.**

The structured format assesses how well the candidate can respond to hypothetical scenarios or how well they can best-guess what the interviewer is looking for, but provides no information about the motivational components of the candidate's personality. It reveals what the candidate *can* do as opposed to what they *will* do. It is a process which favours the articulate and those adept at presenting themselves well in socially evaluative situations.

- **The difference between intentions and actual behaviour.**

The relationship between intentions and actual behaviour is tenuous at best. It has been our experience that while some managerial candidates know how they should manage staff and can give textbook descriptions, they also know full well that their actual behaviour is quite different. This is further compounded by candidates who genuinely believe that they are, for example, good 'people' managers when the reality is quite different.

- **Questions provide information which the candidate will either intentionally or unintentionally use to guide their responses.**

To be effective, the interviewer must give no indication as to what they are looking for. Regardless of how a question is phrased, inclusion of the word 'manager', for example, will automatically prompt a comment about managers - it has become an issue for discussion at the initiative of the interviewer, not the candidate. An astute candidate will mentally note this as important and focus more attention on this area of the interview.

- **To be effective the process must allow evidence to be weighed without constraint.**

Structured interviews with predetermined weighting scales generate a very narrow focus and can allow information to slip past unnoticed. In a sense it could be thought of in terms of a court of law and the development of a series of standardised questions to determine the guilt or innocence of the accused; if they score above 100 they are guilty, if below 100 they walk free. Such an approach would never be permitted because it would remove the element of weighing evidence without constraint and not allow for the one vital piece of evidence which had not been included in the formula.

- **As jobs become more complex, the selection interview must become more open and flexible.**

The structured approach becomes progressively more difficult to apply as the tasks become more complex. For a pulp mill labourer there are a number of relatively discrete tasks, but for an investment analyst there is an increasing level of complexity.

To define a rating scale of potential responses to questions relating to more complex tasks assumes there is a 'right' and a 'wrong' way of doing a job. The reality is that two individuals can do the same job in two totally different ways and yet both may be seen as correct in the eyes of their respective organisations.

- **Selection should be based primarily on those dimensions that are not easily trained.**

Structured interviews tend to assess behaviours that are in practice quite easily trained. In management candidates, for example, skills such as establishing clear objectives, appraising staff performance, tackling non-performance and coaching staff can be developed and enhanced by training and feedback and should not be the main subject of a selection assessment. Selection should be based primarily on those dimensions that are not easily trained, such as an intrinsic respect for the worth of other people.

- **Where competencies are important they must be probed in depth.**

We have noted a frequent tendency for subject matter experts on an interview panel to be reluctant to probe in depth or ask 'dumb' questions. Often an interviewer will hear a familiar term, such as "I prepared the chart of accounts", and then assume a level of skill which may not be present. Where a competency is required the interviewer must explore that competency in depth to ensure that the candidate's skill level is satisfactory.

- **The selection interview should meet legal, moral and ethical criteria.**

Selection decisions must be based on hard evidence and not supposition or assumption. All decisions are open to review and for this reason alone it is essential to bear in mind that the interviewer could one day find him or herself on the witness stand. Any selection method, therefore, must be fair and legally defensible.

In the event that a candidate is not selected, the interviewer must be able to confidently give them clear feedback on the decision complete with supporting evidence and an explanation as to how the assessment was reached.

We acknowledge openly that in expressing our concerns about the wisdom of structured interviewing we are going against the tide of current human resource thinking. We have adopted this position, however, as a direct result of constantly reviewing our assessment decisions in the light of subsequent on-the-job performance.

What we suggest as a strategy is the **Indirect Behavioural Interview**, which is somewhat radical in that it is 'unstructured' and does not require the preparation of questions. The key points are:

- Most people are natural interviewers. Ask any person how their partner or a close relative would perform as a hotel receptionist and they can generally give a reasonably astute assessment, despite never having interviewed that person for the job. They are able to make such an assessment because they are aware of the predominant behaviour patterns shown by their partner and will have a fairly accurate perception of what is required of a receptionist. From this we can draw the conclusion that in order to carry out the *interview itself* it is not necessary to know what the job is. The interview is basically the process whereby a

representative sample of the candidate's predominant behaviours are elicited and recorded. Once these behaviours have been analysed sufficiently to identify the stable patterns then these can be matched to the various job requirements. It should be possible for an interviewer to conduct an interview and then, when presented with a range of job descriptions or competency profiles, to be able to comment accurately on the extent to which the candidate would be compatible and competent. It should not be necessary to re-interview each time.

- The most important aspect of an interview is to avoid cueing the candidate on how to respond or providing any information about the priorities of the interviewer. The candidate is invariably searching for any piece of information to guide their answers in the 'correct' direction. The more an interviewer says, the greater the likelihood that they will reveal their own likes and dislikes. For this reason it is critical to ascertain a candidate's attitudes and values before any attempt is made to identify their competencies.
- The best assessments will be those based on the structure and timing of the candidate's answers rather than the content. A candidate, for example, who responds to the question: "How do you organise your work flow?" with "Well, you first identify the most important tasks and get these out of the way before you move on to the less important ones", has just failed to answer the question and in all probability admitted to not being an effective time manager. Similarly, a candidate who comments, "I went through a period of tension with Bill and the Boss" and "I did things differently to the way Dale and the Boss wanted them done" is almost certainly revealing a fundamental problem between himself and his immediate manager.

This approach is not based on any underlying psychological assumptions but rather on the fact that every word used by an individual has significance in the context within which it occurs. Nothing occurs by accident when people speak. In the first example above there is a lack of alignment between the question and the answer. The interviewer asked "How do you organise your work flow?", but the candidate responded in the second person by using "you" rather than "I". The only conclusion that can be drawn is that the interviewer still does not know how the candidate organises his or her workflow.

In the second example the individual used first names for everyone he referred to in the interview except 'the Boss'. Subsequent checking revealed a deep resentment towards this manager, who had been appointed from outside the organisation and taken a position that the candidate had seen as rightfully his.

- Indirect Behavioural Interviewing is a generic skill which can be used at home, at work on a daily basis, in interviews, and in selling. It is designed to allow the interviewer to form an accurate perception of the personality of the other person without that person feeling that they are being interviewed. It is very easy to carry out in practice and completely non-threatening for the person being interviewed.

It is not intended to replace existing interview techniques but rather to add an overlay to extract the value and attitude data not normally available using a more structured approach. Despite being less structured, however, the technique leaves a clear audit trail which can withstand legal scrutiny.

.. Programme

PROGRAMME

Objectives

At the completion of the programme participants will be able to:

- *re-define ordinary job descriptions in terms of the key behaviours and competencies necessary for success in a job*
- *quickly gather accurate information about a candidate's knowledge, experience, attitudes, values and motivation without shaping their responses or signalling the 'correct' answers to questions*
- *form an accurate and reliable assessment of a candidate based on the behaviour they exhibited in the interview rather than the content of their answers*
- *prepare a written report together with a recommendation based on hard behavioural evidence.*

Topics

• Fundamental Issues in Selection

- Keeping in touch with reality in an artificial setting
- The Two-Stage Interviewing Model
- Defining key behaviours and competencies
- Performance versus behaviour in internal selection
- Negative versus positive selection
- Key issues in managerial and supervisory selection
- Implications of legislation:
 - The Official Information Act 1982*
 - The Human Rights Act 1993*
 - The Privacy Act 1993*

• Indirect Behavioural Interviewing System

- Building the interview platform
- How to question without signalling the 'correct' answer
- Obtaining a detailed personal history
- Questions to uncover attitudes and values
- Questions to determine knowledge and skills
- Identifying 'hidden' attitudes and values by analysing the structure of the candidate's comments
- Lowering the candidate's 'psychological guard'
- How to avoid influencing a candidate's responses
- Conducting effective referee checks

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- **Practical Considerations**
 - Briefing the candidate
 - Preparing the setting
 - Key points to note-taking
 - Legal and ethical issues

- **Principles of Interpreting Behaviour**
 - Observing behaviour patterns during the interview
 - Determining the significance of behaviour patterns
 - Steps to interpreting interview notes
 - Identifying sources of personal motivation
 - Objectively matching the candidate to the selection criteria

- **Preparing a Written Report**
 - Completing a key competency assessment
 - Bringing it all together - a summary and recommendation
 - Ensuring legal defensibility
 - Procedures for validating the assessment

Presentation Skills practice is a large component of the training and involves conducting an interview and completing a comprehensive assessment.

Follow-up Exercises Periodic follow-up exercises, designed to keep the training alive, are available. These take the form of case studies. Participants are given an interview transcript from which they are asked to provide a written assessment of the interviewee's attitudes, sources of motivation and work behaviours.