

# Technical Affairs

By Mike Aamodt, Associate Editor

## The Case Against Unstructured Employment Interviews

**A**lthough structured interviews were covered in a previous *Technical Affairs* Column (February 2001), it seems like a good idea to review the differences between structured and unstructured interviews. As most readers will agree, interviews are the most commonly used method to select employees. What readers may not agree on is the best way in which interviews should be conducted and the relative merits of different interview formats.

Interviews are based on the assumption that a manager or human resource professional can ask an applicant questions, listen to the answers and the paralanguage associated with the answers (e.g., tone, speed, volume), observe the applicant's nonverbal cues and appearance, make judgments about the applicant's knowledge, skills, abilities, personality, interests, and values, and then logically combine this information to predict the applicant's future performance, tenure, and person-organization fit. Though this practice sounds good in theory, in reality, traditional interviews do not do a good job of predicting anything.

### Types of Interviews

Perhaps a good place to start a discussion on interviews is to define the various types of interviews. Interviews vary on three main factors: structure, style, and medium.

#### Structure

The structure of an interview is determined by the source of the questions, extent to which all applicants are asked the same questions, and the structure of the system used to score answers. A *structured interview* is one in which (1) the source of the questions is a job analysis (job-related questions), (2) all applicants are asked the same questions, and (3) there is a standardized scoring key to evaluate each answer. An *unstructured (or traditional) interview* is one in which interviewers are free to ask anything they want (e.g., Where do you want to be in five years? What was the last book you read?), are not required to have consistency in what they ask of each applicant, and points assigned to an answer are at the discretion of the interviewer. Because interviews vary in their structure, rather than calling interviews structured or unstructured, it might make more sense to use terms such as highly structured (all 3 criteria are met), moderately structured (2 criteria are met), slightly structured (1 criterion met), and unstructured (none of the

3 criteria are met). The research is clear that highly structured interviews are more reliable and valid than interviews with less structure (Huffcutt & Arthur, 1994).

A source of confusion regarding interview structure is the tendency to call structured interviews, behavioral interviews. The behavioral term actually relates to the type of question rather than the interview itself. Regardless of the structure of the interview, interviews contain six types of questions: clarifiers, disqualifiers, skill-level determiners, past-focused (behavioral), future-focused (situational), and organizational fit.

*Clarifiers* allow the interviewer to clarify résumé, cover letter, and application information, fill in gaps, and obtain necessary information. Because each applicant's résumé and cover letter are unique, specific clarifiers are not standard across applicants. For example, an interviewer may need to ask one applicant to explain what she won the McArthur Award for and another applicant what she was doing during a two-year gap between jobs.

*Disqualifiers* are questions that must be answered a particular way or the applicant is disqualified. For example, if a job requires that employees work on weekends, a disqualifier might be "Are you available to work on weekends?" If the answer is "no," the applicant will not get the job.

*Skill level determiners* tap an interviewee's level of expertise. For example, if an applicant says she is proficient in Microsoft Word, an interviewer might ask some questions about the word processing program. If an applicant claims to be fluent in Spanish, the interviewer might want to ask her a few questions in Spanish.

*Future-focused questions*, also called *situational questions*, ask an applicant what she would do in a particular situation.

*Past-focused questions*, commonly referred to as *behavioral questions* or *patterned behavior description interviews*, differ from situational interview questions by focusing on previous behavior rather than future intended behavior. That is, applicants are asked to provide specific examples of how they demonstrated job-related skills in previous jobs.

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Rather than trying to predict future performance, *organizational-fit questions* tap the extent to which an applicant will fit into the culture of an organization or with the leadership style of a particular supervisor. For example, some organizations are very policy-oriented whereas others encourage employees to use their initiative. Some supervisors are very task-oriented whereas others are more person-oriented. The idea behind organizational-fit questions is to make sure that the applicant's personality and goals are consistent with those of the organization.

### **Style**

The style of an interview is determined by the number of interviewees and number of interviewers. *One-on-one interviews* involve one interviewer interviewing one applicant. *Serial interviews* involve a series of single interviews. For example, the HR manager might interview an applicant at 9:00 a.m., the department supervisor interviews the applicant at 10:00 a.m., and the vice-president interviews the applicant at 11:00 a.m. *Return interviews* are similar to serial interviews with the difference being a passing of time between the first and subsequent interview. For example, an applicant might be interviewed by the HR manager and then brought back a week later to interview with the vice-president. *Panel interviews* have multiple interviewers

asking questions and evaluating answers of the same applicant at the same time, and *group interviews* have multiple applicants answering questions during the same interview. Of course, one could put together several combinations such as a *serial-panel-group interview*, but life is too short for such nonsense.

### **Medium**

Interviews also differ on the extent to which they are done in person. In *face-to-face interviews*, both the interviewer and the applicant are in the same room. Face-to-face interviews provide a personal setting and allow the participants to use both visual and vocal cues to evaluate information. *Telephone interviews* are often used to screen applicants but do not allow the use of visual cues (not always a bad thing).

*Videoconference interviews* are conducted at remote sites. The applicant and the interviewer can hear and see each other but the setting is not as personal nor is the image and vocal quality of the interview as sharp as in face-to-face interviews. *Written interviews* involve the applicant answering a series of written questions and then sending the answers back through regular mail or through email.

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## Problems with Unstructured Interviews

As mentioned previously, research is clear that highly structured interviews demonstrate higher levels of criterion validity than unstructured interviews (Huffcutt & Arthur, 1994; McDaniel, Whetzel, Schmidt, & Maurer, 1994). There are many reasons why unstructured interviews do not do a good job of predicting future performance.

### Unstructured Interviews Lack Content Validity

By definition, unstructured interviews are not based on a job analysis, and thus many of the questions asked are not job-related. Perhaps the best evidence of this is to look at any of the popular books that give advice on how to answer common interview questions. When interviewers ask such questions as, *Where do you want to be in five years?*, *What was your favorite subject in school?*, and *What did you like least about your previous supervisor?*, it is not surprising that unstructured interviews do not predict performance.

### Humans Have Poor Intuitive Ability

Interviewers often base their hiring decisions on “gut reactions,” or intuition. However, people are not good at using intuition to predict behavior. And contrary to what many HR professionals think, there are no individual differences in interviewers’ ability to predict future performance (Pulakos, Schmitt, Whitney, & Smith, 1996). That is, research does not support the idea that some interviewers are able to predict behavior whereas others are not.

Divorce rates provide an excellent example of this poor predictive ability. Couples involved in romantic relationships spend, on average, two years together before getting married. In spite of this time together, 50% of all marriages fail—an important reason for which is lack of compatibility. So, if after two years of “interviewing” a prospective spouse, we make the wrong choice 50% of the time, is it logical to assume that after spending only 15 minutes interviewing an applicant we can predict how well she will get along with the varied members of an organization?

Research also indicates that people are not very good about reading nonverbal cues and making judgments. For example, Heather Mitchell and I conducted a meta-analysis of individual differences in the ability to detect deception and concluded that people are barely above chance at detecting when people are lying, that trained professionals such as police detectives are no more accurate in their judgments than the average person, and that individual difference variables such as sex, personality (e.g., extroversion, self-monitoring), intelligence, and experience are not related to our ability to detect deception (Aamodt, 2005; Aamodt & Mitchell, in press).

Perhaps even more troubling are the meta-analysis results indicating that our confidence in making judgments is not related to our actual levels of accuracy. That is, we think we are accurate but, in fact, are not. Meta-analyses have shown low correlations between confidence and accuracy in detecting deception (Aamodt & Mitchell, in press), eyewitness testimony (Sporer, Penrod, Read, & Cutler, 1995), and test performance (Kennedy, Lawton, & Plumlee, 2002). This blissful ignorance allows us to believe that our judgments are accurate, even when the research shows that “other people” are not very intuitive.

Even if we were good at using interview answers, non-verbal cues, and vocal cues to accurately determine an applicant’s personality, mood, interests, and values, what would that do for us? If we look at meta-analyses of the validity of various selection methods, we find that personality inventories and interest inventories are two of the lowest predictors of performance! So, if using reliable measures of personality (i.e., personality inventories) result in low levels of prediction, what would we get if we used unreliable human judgment?

### Interviewers are Subject to Common Rating Errors

In unstructured interviews, interviewers are subject to several types of common ratings errors that are unrelated to actual interviewee performance. For example, interviewers are subject to *primacy effects* in which we make quick judgments, *contrast effects* where our rating of an applicant is based on our evaluation of the previous applicant, and *negative information bias* in which we apply too much weight to negative information.

### Humans are Biased

In highly structured interviews, interviewers are forced to use a scoring key that limits their individual judgments of interviewee answers and limits judgments based on extraneous variables such as sex, race, and appearance. Again, research dealing with unstructured interviews clearly shows that individuals are affected by such things as the applicant’s physical attractiveness, weight, type of perfume or cologne, disability, and similarity to the interviewee (e.g., sex, race, & personality). Not surprisingly, research indicates that structured interviews result in less adverse impact than do unstructured interviews (Huffcutt & Roth, 1998).

### Final Thoughts

As mentioned previously, the use of highly structured interviews in which the questions are based on a job analysis, all applicants are asked the same questions, and there

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is a standard scoring key for each question, will result in more reliable ratings, higher validity coefficients, lower levels of adverse impact, and better legal defensibility (Williamson et al., 1997) than unstructured interviews. Why the superiority? Structured interviews reliably tap job-related information while at the same time reducing the chance for bias and the influence of extraneous variables. Unstructured interviews, however, encourage interviewers to use intuition and are a breeding ground for bias and rating errors.

Research has shown that, whereas structured interviews can add incremental validity to cognitive ability tests (Cortina, Goldstein, Payne, Davison, & Gilliland, 2000), unstructured clinical interviews actually reduce the validity of personality inventories (Aamodt, 2004). Though it is tempting to think humans are good at reading people, using intuition, and making judgments, there is no body of evidence to support such thinking.

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## HR Humor

Because the topic of the technical affairs column was structured interviews, I am going to reuse a piece of *HR Humor* from the October, 1996 *Technical Affairs* Column. These are actual interviewing methods I have read about or have been told by people that they use (they usually preface the statement with, "I have this perfect method for screening applicants").

### Mike's Top Ten Stupid Interviewer Tricks

- A manager at Wells Fargo won't hire MBA's who take more than 60 seconds to scan the menu at lunch
- A CEO wouldn't hire applicants who salted their food before testing it
- Holiday Inn doesn't hire applicants who smile less than four times during the interview
- An HR professional wouldn't hire applicants who didn't have the backs of their shoes properly shined
- An auto insurance executive takes off points for education, stating, "I don't want the valedictorian. I want the kid who sold cigarettes in the bathroom."
- An HR manager asks applicants about their favorite book
- A town manager likes to leave the room, not come back, and then wait to see how long an applicant will wait
- An HR recruiter asks applicants, "If you could be an animal, what would you be?"
- A local school superintendent won't hire men with hair in their ears

### # 1 Stupid Interviewer Trick

- Any interviewer who does not use structured interviews!—ACN