

Technical Affairs

By Mike Aamodt, Associate Editor

The Structured Interview Begins

I couldn't decide if I should call this column *Structured Interviews II*, *The Return of the Structured Interview*, or *Structured Interviews: The Sequel*. But then I realized that the content of the column helps readers understand the previous column, and it actually serves as a prequel to last month's column rather than a sequel, so I went the route of the latest Batman movie (Batman Begins).

I received several emails from ACN readers regarding the August Technical Affairs Column on structured interviews. To stick with our movie theme, some were good, some were bad, but none were ugly. Several of the emails asked about some information that I didn't include in the column and others expressed the view that they preferred "moderately structured" interviews over the *rigidly* structured interview. So, let me use this month's column to add some information, clarify a few points, and discuss those "moderately structured" interviews.

Structure

In the August column, I indicated that a structured interview is one in which all questions are based on a job analysis, every applicant is asked the same questions, and a standardized scoring key is used to assign ratings to each question. I think this definition caused some confusion. Asking every applicant the same question does not imply that an interviewer can't follow up or use probes (ideally, an interview guide would contain a non-exhaustive list of potential follow-up questions or probes). For example, suppose an applicant was asked how he would handle a situation with a problem employee and the applicant responded, "I would discuss the matter with her." It certainly makes sense for an interviewer to follow up with statements such as, "Could you tell me more about that?" or "How would you start the discussion?"

The key to follow-up questions is to ensure that you are asking for information that will allow you to assign the most accurate rating to the construct being measured by the question. Take for example, the following situational question for a network analyst:

It is 10:00 a.m. and you realize it will take another three hours to finish repairing the computer system for Smith Groceries. You are scheduled to work on a system at Blues Brothers at 11:30, meet a potential client for lunch at 12:30, and work on a system problem for another client at 2:00. How would you handle this situation?

The KSAO tapped by this question involves priority setting. If the applicant replied, "I would reschedule my appointment with Blues Brothers," or replied, "I would leave Smith Groceries at 11:15 and tell them I will be back later," it would be essential to follow up and ask the applicant to explain his choice. In a question like this, it is not necessarily the choice that is important, but rather, the reason for the choice (e.g., size of client, criticality of a particular system being fixed quickly). If an applicant responded, "I would give priority to the client that would most be hurt by having their system down," some interviewers would probably not need a follow-up question because they understood the applicant's reasoning. Another interviewer, however, might believe that she should follow up and ask how the applicant would determine which client would be hurt the most. With this answer, asking a follow-up question or not asking a follow-up question is an equally valid approach. The important point is to ensure that the interviewers understand the applicant's answer well enough to use the scoring key to assign a score to the answer.

I hope from the above discussion, you can see that a highly structured interview is not a "rigidly" structured interview. As mentioned in the August column, every interview will also contain clarifying questions in which applicants will be asked to clarify or expand on information in their resumes or applications. Clarifiers, of course, will vary across applicants.

In highly structured interviews, it is essential to finish the interview with a question such as the following, "We have asked you many questions. Is there anything we didn't ask you about your qualifications that you would like us to know about?" This final question gives applicants a chance to sell themselves and feel that you have all the necessary information. This question is not scored unless it directly provides information related to a previous question that somehow was missed.

Scoring

The typical way to score a structured interview is for each interviewer (rater) to score each answer immediately after it is given. What happens after that is a matter for debate. The easiest way to score the interview after its conclusion is to add the scores for each question (questions can be

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weighted, if desired) and then select the applicant with the highest score across the interviewers. Whether you want to simply add scores across interviewers or discuss the scoring and reach consensus on each question is probably a matter of personal preference. I haven't seen any research that indicates one method is better than the other.

As mentioned in the August column, some questions serve as disqualifiers in that a "wrong" answer disqualifies the applicant regardless of how well they do on the other questions. When I create structured interviews, the scoring key for most questions includes disqualifying answers. For example, if a question about how to handle a shoplifting suspect who was fleeing the scene was answered by a police applicant with, "I'd cap the SOB," it is safe to say that the applicant's answers to other questions would probably not save him.

One *ACN* reader commented that she likes to wait until the end of the interview and make an overall rating based on the answers to all the questions as well as the applicant's interviewing skills. This is probably not a good idea. Immediately scoring the answers to each question, especially if the questions have different weights, helps reduce the bias that comes from overall impressions. That bias could be sex- or race-related, halo error, or an uneasy feeling that came from one relatively minor question.

Interpersonal Skills

An applicant's behavior in an interview can certainly be rated in a structured interview. However, the behaviors to be rated must be job-related. For example, if you are interviewing an applicant for a position on an assembly line, the fact that he mumbled and didn't make eye contact during the interview is probably not relevant. However, if he sits down, props his feet on your desk, and lights up a cigar, those behaviors might have some predictive value about his future work behavior.

If interpersonal skills are to be considered, a structured scoring system should be used. Not only will this keep the focus on relevant behaviors, but it will make it easier to defend hiring decisions during a legal challenge.

Interviewer Autonomy

Another *ACN* reader commented that he objected to a highly structured interview because it is hard to get people to agree to serve as interviewers if they know that they must stick to asking certain questions and are told how to score the answers. I would be curious to hear the thoughts of other *ACN* readers about this. My experience has been that as long as the internal or external client played a major role in developing the questions and the scoring key, it was not

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difficult to recruit interviewers or get them to accept the structure of the interview. During the training session with potential interviews, we always discussed the importance of the structure, when it was appropriate to ask follow-up questions, and the importance of continually revising the interview and scoring key when problems were encountered.

Though I would agree that interviewers *prefer* to have less structure, a lack of structure results in potentially irrelevant or illegal questions, the opportunity for bias to subconsciously affect ratings, and a reduction in reliability and validity.

Final Thoughts for Review

- Highly structured interviews are the most reliable and valid type of interview.
- Highly structured interviews reduce, but do not eliminate, potential sources of interview bias.
- Highly structured does not mean “rigidly structured.”
- Interviewers want to use their own judgment, they believe they are effective processors of information and excellent readers of people, but the research across many fields of psychology consistently demonstrates that when left to their own intuition, people are not particularly accurate judges or predictors of others’ behavior.—AGN

Terry McKinney is Retiring!

Please join IPMAAC in wishing Terry the best in his retirement from the City of Phoenix Personnel Department! Terry has stated that he is retiring from the City, but not from the assessment community, so look for Terry to continue his active role in IPMAAC.

Following are some words of wisdom concerning retirement:

Retirement — A time of life to happily recall the things you’ve done — the friends you’ve made — the meaning of them all. You have the right to feel a special sense of pride — and know the time has come for you to set your work (at the City of Phoenix) aside. You’ve earned some well-deserved respect and warmest wishes, too, that your retirement days will be enjoyable for you.

“Retire, now it is your time to:
Experience all that life has to offer,
Take time to smell the roses,
Investigate your hobbies,
Revitalize your dreams, and,
Embark on a new way of life!”

— Catherine Pulsifer

HR Humor

The Importance of a Written Job Description

A woman looking desperately for work goes to the toy plant where they make Elmo dolls. The HR Manager goes over her resume and tells her that none of his job openings match her skills and experience.

The woman replies that she really needs work and will take almost anything. The HR Manager thinks about it and then says that he does have one job on the Tickle Me Elmo production line that requires very low skills. The woman is thrilled at the opportunity and happily accepts the job. Then the manager takes her down to the assembly line and explains her duties to her. She replies that she thinks she can handle the job and agrees to report for work at 8:00 a.m. the next morning.

The next morning at 8:45, there’s a knock on the HR Manager’s door. The Tickle Me Elmo line manager comes in and starts ranting about the woman just hired. After listening to the manager

scream for 15 minutes about the badly backed-up assembly line, the HR Manager suggests that the line manager show him the problem.

Together they head down to the line and, sure enough, Elmos are backed up from here to kingdom come, as far as the eye can see. Right at the end of the line is the woman just hired. She has pulled over a roll of material used for Elmo’s furry exterior and she has a big bag of marbles at her side. Both managers watch as she cuts out a small swatch of the material, takes two marbles, and begins sewing them between Elmo’s legs.

The Personnel Manager starts to laugh uncontrollably, and finally, after about 20 minutes of rolling around in hysterics, he pulls himself together and walks over to his newest employee. “I’m sorry,” he says to her. “I guess you misunderstood me yesterday. What I wanted you to do, was give each Elmo two test tickles.”