

Validity of Expert Opinion Regarding the Employment Interview

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Although much research regarding the employment interview has been published in professional journals, there are relatively few people in the general population who read this type of literature. Instead, the general public obtains information about the interview from popular literary sources. It was the purpose of this study to investigate the validity of the advice concerning the employment interview that is published in popular magazines and books. After a review of the popular literature, 13 hypotheses were formulated that were the result of advice offered by "experts." To test this advice, 19 professional employment interviewers were asked to provide data on their interviews with 96 actual job applicants. These data were compared with the score that an applicant received on his/her interview performance. The results indicated that the advice offered in popular sources was accurate more times (8) than it was inaccurate (5).

Although much research regarding the employment interview has been published in professional journals (see Arvey & Campion, 1982 for a review), there are relatively few people in the general population who read this type of literature. Instead, the general public obtains information about the interview from such magazine sources as *Glamour* and *Mademoiselle*. Thus rather than reading empirically based articles on such concepts as contrast effects, negative information bias, or discrimination, the average person reads "expert opinion" articles on such topics as firm handshakes, making eye contact, and dressing for success.

Because more people are exposed to popular magazine and books rather than professional journals, it is important to determine the validity of the advice received through these popular sources. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to first gather the types of advice that have been published in popular sources and to then test the validity of this advice.

To obtain the types of advice that are most commonly given to job applicants, all articles concerning the employment interview that were listed between 1980 and 1983 in the *Reader's Guide to Periodic Literature* were reviewed. In addition, advice provided in self-help interview books such as Bolles (1983) and Krannich (1982) was also examined.

This review of the popular literature yielded the following pieces of advice which also served as the hypotheses being tested in this study:

Interviewer Preparation

1a: A job applicant should learn about the company prior to the interview (Fader, 1981; *Glamour*, 1963; Krannich, 1982; Laughridge, 1983; Lee, 1983; *McCall's*, 1980, Medley, 1978; *Seventeen*, 1980).

1b: A job applicant does not need to learn about the company prior to the interview (Challenger, 1984).

Interview Behavior

- 2: A job applicant should not hesitate before answering interview questions (*Glamour*, 1983).
- 3a: A job applicant should ask many questions during the interview (*Glamour*, 1984; Krannich, 1982; Laughridge, 1983; Lewis & Lewis, 1982)
- 3b: A job applicant should not ask many questions during the interview (Challenger, 1984).
- 4: A job applicant should not ask about the salary early in the interview (Berman, 1981; Challenger, 1984; Chastain, 1981; Krannich, 1982; Lee, 1983; Medley, 1978; *Seventeen*, 1980).
- 5: An applicant should speak at a moderate rate of speech (Krannich, 1982)
- 6: An applicant should wait for the interviewer to break periods of silence (Medley, 1978).

Dress Style of the Interviewee

- 7: An interviewee should dress well and conservatively (Allen, 1983; *Essence*, 1980; Kennedy, 1982; Krannich, 1982; Lee, 1983; Lewis & Lewis, 1982; *Mademoiselle*, 1981; Medley, 1978; Molloy, 1975; *Seventeen*, 1980).

Time of Arrival for the Interview

- 8: An applicant should not be more than five minutes early for the interview (Allen, 1983; Lee, 1983)
- 9: An applicant should be early for the interview (Hallowell, 1983; Krannich, 1982; Lewis & Lewis, 1982).
- 10: An applicant should not interview on a Monday or a Friday (Allen, 1983; *Glamour*, 1983).
- 11: An applicant should not interview early in the morning or late in the day (*Glamour*, 1983).

Nonverbal Cues

- 12. An applicant should use a firm handshake (Allen, 1983; Krannich, 1982; Medley, 1978; *Seventeen*, 1980).
- 13. An applicant should make eye contact with the interviewer (Allen, 1983; *Glamour*, 1983; Krannich, 1982; Lee, 1983).

In addition to the testing of “popular hypotheses,” the design of the study allowed for a test of the generalizability of the following research findings:

Contrast Effects

14. There will be a negative correlation between the interview scores of applicants and the interview scores of the applicants interviewed directly prior to the applicant (Wexley, Yukl, Kovacs, & Sanders, 1972).

Sex Bias

15. Female applicants will receive lower interviewer ratings from male interviewers than from female interviewers and male applicants will receive lower interview ratings from female interviewers than from male interviewers (Cohen & Bunker, 1975).
16. Female interviewers will give higher overall ratings than will male interviewers (London & Poplowski, 1976).

Physical Attractiveness

17. There will be a significant correlation between ratings of physical attractiveness and interview scores (Arvey, 1979).

Once all hypotheses were formulated, 19 professional interviewers who were interviewing 96 applicants for actual job openings were asked to provide information on the variables contained in the hypotheses, information on the interview performance of the applicants, and information as to whether the applicant would be hired.

Method

Participants

The participants in the study were 19 interviewers (11 men, 8 women) and 96 interviewees (46 men, 50 women). The interviewers were employers who had run help-wanted advertisements in a local newspaper, and represented a wide variety of organizations. The interviewees were job applicants who had answered the help-wanted ads and were applying for positions ranging from a printing press operator to a management trainee.

Procedure

Interviewers who agreed to participate in the study were sent forms on which to record impressions of their interviews with each applicant. The rating forms requested the following information: Day of the interview, time of the interview, sex of the applicant, sex of the interviewer, type of dress worn by the interviewee, when and by whom the salary was mentioned, what the applicant did during periods of silence, when the applicant arrived for the interview, and the final hiring decision based on the interview.

In addition, each interviewer was asked to provide ratings on the following variables: handshake firmness, amount of eye contact, physical attractiveness of the applicant, applicant's speech rate, applicant's knowledge of the company, number of questions asked by the applicant, hesitation between interviewer question and applicant

answer, and an overall interview rating. The results of the ratings and questions were then compared with the hiring decision and the overall interview rating.

It is necessary to note that no reliability or validity data exist for the ratings used in the study. That is, it is not known whether two interviewers would give the same ratings on such characteristics of applicant attractiveness and knowledge. Likewise, it is not known if these rating would correlate with any objective criteria. However, it must be kept in mind that the actual attractiveness of knowledge of the applicant is not important. Instead, it is the *perception* of the interviewer that is important.

Results

As shown in Table 1, correlations between interview variables and both the interview score and the hiring decision support hypotheses 1a, 2, 3, 12, 13, and 17. Hypothesis 14 was not supported. Thus, high interview scores were related to high levels of eye contact, knowledge of the company, and the number of questions asked by the applicant as well as a firm handshake and being physically attractive. Contrast effects did not occur.

Analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to test hypotheses 4 through 11 and hypotheses 15 and 16. As shown in Table 2, hypothesis 4 was supported. That is, applicants who asked about the salary early in the interview received lower scores than did applicants who waited later in the interview or never asked, $F(3, 90) = 7.84, p < .0001$.

Hypothesis 5 was only marginally supported, $F(2, 90) = 2.47, p < .09$. Least significant difference (LSD) tests revealed that applicants who spoke at a moderate rate during the interview received higher ratings than did applicants who spoke at a slow rate. The difference between fast and medium rates of speech was not statistically significant.

Hypothesis 6 was not supported as applicants who broke any period of silence by speaking ($M = 4.88$) did not receive significantly higher interview ratings than did applicants who did not speak during periods of silence ($M = 5.34$).

Hypothesis 7 was supported. Applicants who dressed well (3-piece suit, suit or coat and tie for men; skirt, dress, or suit for women) received higher interview scores than did applicants who dressed casually (pants and shirt or blouse), $F(3, 89) = 2.95, p < .04$.

Table 1
Correlations between interview variables and interview scores and hiring decisions

Interview variable	Interview Score	Hiring Decision
Knowledge of company	.32**	.31**
Hesitation in answering	.48**	.24*
Number of questions asked by applicant	.46**	.47**
Firmness of handshake	.40**	.15
Amount of eye contact by applicant	.61**	.33*
Contrast effect (score of previous applicant)	.06	-.06
Physical attractiveness	.47**	.24*

* $p < .01$ ** $p < .001$

Neither hypothesis 8 nor 9 were completely supported as applicants arriving 10 minutes early did not receive lower ratings than applicants arriving only 5 minutes early. Furthermore, applicants arriving early did not receive higher interview scores than applicants arriving on-time. However, LSD tests indicated that applicants arriving either early or on-time received higher interview ratings than did applicants arriving late.

Hypotheses 10 and 11 were not supported, as neither the day nor the time of day had any effect on interview scores. The finding concerning time of day is consistent with the results found by Huegli and Tschirgi (1975).

Table 2
Mean interview scores by interview behavior

Interview variable	Mean	Standard Deviation
Information about salary		
Interviewer mentioned salary	6.55 ^a	1.71
Applicant asked early	2.89 ^b	2.71
Applicant asked late	5.95 ^a	1.88
Salary not discussed	6.00 ^a	2.40
Applicant's rate of speech		
Slow	4.88 ^a	2.66
Moderate	6.22 ^b	2.11
Fast	5.64 ^b	2.29
Applicant's style of dress		
3-piece suit/suit	6.83 ^a	1.34
Suit/dress	6.09 ^a	2.14
Coat & tie/Skirt & blouse	6.30 ^a	2.03
Slacks and a shirt/blouse	5.06 ^b	2.67
Applicant time of arrival		
10 minutes early	6.57 ^a	1.28
5 minutes early	5.70 ^a	1.81
On-time	6.45 ^a	2.26
Late	4.27 ^b	2.69
Day of the Week		
Monday	5.72 ^a	2.56
Tuesday	5.62 ^a	2.31
Wednesday	6.54 ^a	1.60
Thursday	5.64 ^a	2.82
Friday	6.18 ^a	2.14
Time of Day		
8:00 a.m. – 8:59 a.m.	5.20 ^a	2.95
9:00 a.m. – 9:59 a.m.	6.00 ^a	1.90
10:00 a.m. – 10:59 a.m.	6.00 ^a	1.32
11:00 a.m. – 11:59 a.m.	5.56 ^a	2.30
12:00 p.m. – 12:59 p.m.	6.50 ^a	2.51
1:00 p.m. – 1:59 p.m.	6.44 ^a	2.16
2:00 p.m. – 2:59 p.m.	5.24 ^a	2.56
3:00 p.m. – 3:59 p.m.	6.17 ^a	2.17
4:00 p.m. – 7:00 p.m.	6.70 ^a	2.26

Note: Means sharing the same superscript are not statistically different

As shown in Table 3, neither hypothesis 15 nor 16 was supported. That is, female interviewers did not assign higher interview scores than male interviewers. Furthermore, male interviewers did not rate male interviewees higher than female interviewees nor did female interviewers rate female interviewees higher than male interviewees.

Multivariate analysis revealed that a regression model consisting of eye contact accounts for 36 percent of the variance in overall interview ratings. No other variables explained a significant amount of unique variance in interview scores.

Discussion

The results of this study provide insight into two main areas: the validity of expert opinion regarding the interview and the interview itself. In regard to expert opinion, this study tested 13 hypotheses that are based on the advice of “expert opinion” that was published in popular magazines and books. Of these 13 hypotheses, eight were supported by the results of this study.

This level of accuracy would seem to have two implications. The first is for human resource professionals who might have a tendency to look down upon popular literary sources. The results of this study seem to indicate that the majority of the advice offered in these books and magazines is at least marginally valuable. Thus, job applicants might be encouraged rather than discouraged from consulting such sources.

The second implication is that readers of popular sources should accept the advice with at least some caution. Although the majority of the advice was supported, it must be remembered that five of the 13 hypotheses were not supported. Thus, following the bad advice might, for example, encourage a job applicant to refuse an interview that was scheduled on a Monday or during the early morning.

The second area of insight provided by this study involves the interview itself. The results indicate that a job applicant should make more eye contact, offer a firm handshake, learn about the company prior to the interview, ask questions during the interview, not hesitate before answering questions, wait until late in the interview to ask about salary issues, speak at a moderate or fast pace, and dress well.

The single variable with the greatest relationship to interview scores was eye contact. This finding is consistent with previous research (Tessler & Sushelsky, 1978; Young & Beier, 1977). However, because this study did not use an experimental design, it cannot be determined whether making eye contact itself led to higher interview scores or whether another variable related to making eye contact explains the relationship.

Table 3
Mean interview scores by sex of applicant and sex of interviewer

Applicant Sex	Interviewer Sex		Combined
	Male	Female	
Male	6.12 (2.30)	4.40 (3.29)	5.89 (2.47)
Female	6.15 (1.51)	5.76 (2.60)	5.95 (2.14)
Combined	6.13 (1.97)	5.56 (2.70)	5.93 (2.26)

Note: Standard deviations are in parentheses

A close examination of the significant findings seems to indicate that applicants who display signs of self-confidence or social skills (e.g., eye contact, firm handshake, no hesitation in speech) received the highest interview scores. Thus it may not be the separate parts of an individual's behavior which result in high interview scores, but rather, an overall impression related to an applicant's personality or behavioral style. Such a conclusion is consistent with the findings of Kimbrough and Aamodt (1983) who found personality to be related to interview scores for police and fire applicants.

If this conclusion is true, a lack of content validity is indicated for the interview which might help explain its traditionally low criterion validity (Hunter & Hunter, 1984). Many interviewers seem to be looking for particular personality characteristics (e.g., social skills or self-confidence) which may or may not be job related. Structured interviews may alleviate such a search for these non-job related characteristics.

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