The Interview as a Selection Device: Problems and Possibilities

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ABSTRACT

The interview continues to be the most common selection device used by all organizations worldwide. Furthermore, the interview tends to have a disproportionate amount of influence on the hiring decision. The applicant who performs poorly in the job interview is likely to be eliminated from the applicant pool regardless of experience, test scores, or letters of recommendation. In addition, despite its widespread use, the interview is a poor predictor of job performance. In this article, I discuss the problems encountered with interviews as a selection device and ways to improve the interview process.

The interview continues to be the most common selection device used by all organizations worldwide (Yeung, 2011). Furthermore, the interview tends to have a disproportionate amount of influence on the hiring decision. The applicant who performs poorly in the job interview is likely to be eliminated from the applicant pool regardless of experience, test scores, or letters of recommendation (Robbins & Judge, 2011). Very often the individual who is most skilled in interview techniques is the person hired, even though he or she may not be the best candidate for the position. For this reason, numerous books have been written about improving a job candidate's interviewing skills (Corfield, 2011; Davis, 2011; DeLuca, 2011; Taylor, 2011). In addition, despite its widespread use, the interview is a poor predictor of job performance (Conway, Jako, & Goodman, 1995; McDaniel, Whetzel, Schmidt, & Maurer, 1994; Posthuma, Moregeson & Campion, 2002; Schmidt & Hunter, 1998; Wilk & Cappelli, 2003).

Interviewing Problems

Interviewing problems include the following and should be avoided: unfamiliarity with the job, premature decisions, emphasis on negative information, personal biases, applicant order, and hiring quotas (Fry, 2011; Yeung, 2011). Each one will be discussed in turn.

Unfamiliarity with the Job

Interviewers frequently are unfamiliar with the job. When interviewers do not know what the job entails, they do not ask the right questions, interpret the obtained information differently, have faulty impressions of the information supplied, and spend time discussing matters irrelevant to the job (Fry, 2011).

Premature Decisions

Interviewers tend to make a decision about an applicant in the first few minutes of the interview before all relevant information has been gathered (Dougherty, Turban, & Callender, 1994). Then they spend the rest of the interview seeking information that confirms their initial impression.

Emphasis on Negative Information

Interviewers tend to weight negative information supplied by the applicant more heavily than positive information. On occasion, the interviewer may change his or her mind, but the change tends to be from positive to negative rather than vice versa. In fact, in most cases, interviews tend to be a search for negative information (Dougherty, Turban, & Callender, 1994).

Personal Biases

Some interviewers tend to have preconceptions and prejudices about people. Some examples follow: "fat people are lazy"; "people from the East are unfriendly and arrogant"; "people from the South are slow"; "people with low foreheads are stupid." Other biases may reflect negatively against some minority groups or in favor of those candidates who have backgrounds similar to the interviewer(s). As ridiculous as these prejudices may seem, many of these personal biases still exist (Schmidt & Hunter, 1998). Furthermore, some interviewers are overly impressed with surface signs of composure, manner of speech, and physical appearance (Hosoda, Stone-Romero, & Coats, 2003; Luxen & van de Vijver, 2006).

Applicant Order

Interviewers' ratings of an applicant are influenced by the order in which candidates are interviewed. For example, when an average applicant is interviewed immediately following one or more below-average applicants, the average applicant

usually tends to be evaluated well above average. A similar process works in reverse. If an average applicant follows an outstanding applicant, the former is rated below average.

Hiring Quotas

Interviewers who have been given hiring quotas tend to rate applicants higher than interviewers who have not been given quotas. Thus, pressure to hire influences the interviewer's judgment of the applicant and thereby diminishes the usefulness of the interview as a selection technique.

Improving the Interview Process

Organizations will continue to use interviews regardless of the problems. Thus, researchers have identified several techniques for improving the interview process (Cohen, 2011; Yeung, 2011).

Use a Structured Interview Format

Interviews should be more structured. In a structured interview, questions are written in advance, scaled on a standardized rating scale, and asked of all job applicants. The structured interview has three major advantages (Moscoso & Salgado, 2002; Campion, Palmer & Campion, 1997). It brings consistency to the interview process; it provides an opportunity to develop questions that are relevant to the job; and it allows screening and refinement of questions that may be discriminatory. In addition, the structured interview is more defensible in court (Huffcutt & Woehr, 1999). A less-structured method can be used when interviewing administrative personnel (Cohen, 2011). That is, the interview is still carefully planned in terms of content areas covered, but it allows more flexibility by the interviewer.

Train Interviewers

One way to improve the validity and reliability of the interview is to train interviewers. Effective interviewing requires specific skills including asking questions, probing, listening, observing, recording unbiased information, rating, and the like (Caruth, 2009). Specifically designed workshops can teach these skills. A cadre of trained interviewers can then interview job applicants.

Keep a Written Record of Each Interview

Keeping a written record of each interview facilitates a comparison of the applicants interviewed. To make accurate comparisons among the candidates, maintain and preserve the details of their responses and impressions. Without such information, later deliberations and decision making will be less accurate and valid.

Use Multiple Interviewers

Using multiple interviewers facilitates a comparison of evaluations and perceptions. Specifically, it allows the organization to place greater confidence in areas where consensus of opinion exists. And it opens up discussion on specific areas where disagreement occurs, with the purpose of arriving at an equitable hiring decision. Personnel who have specific knowledge of the job and the candidate's immediate supervisor-to-be would provide a well-balanced interview team. Or the organization may wish to use a cadre of trained interviewers in every interview situation.

Get the Applicant to Talk

The main purpose of an interview is to learn as much as possible about a job applicant. This can be accomplished by getting the applicant to talk. Establish a friendly, open rapport with the applicant early in the interview, with some brief comments about the organization and the job. Then shift to a preplanned question format. Listen carefully to content. Probe for answers to all questions and check for inconsistencies. Relate responses given to questions during the interview to written biographical information supplied earlier. Pay attention to nonverbal cues such as tone of voice, general personality, and emotional characteristics of the applicant. For example, failure of a candidate to maintain eye contact may be a danger sign. Thus, observation during an interview is as important as listening.

Use the Interview as One Aspect of the Selection Process

Avoid using the interview as the sole criterion for selecting applicants. By the same token, the interviewer(s) should not be the sole decision maker for who is or is not hired. Supplement the interview with data from other sources, including biographical information, results of tests, written references, and telephone inquiries. Interviewers may not be privy to the telephone reference checks, which may rest exclusively in the hands of the top-executive officer. When the aforementioned suggestions are implemented, the interview can be a useful source of information in the selection process.

An effective interview requires adequate preparation, a comfortable setting, and clear communication between interviewer and interviewee. Here are some tips for conducting a successful interview. They include interviewing steps, the role of the interviewer, interviewing techniques, and questioning (Caruth, 2009). (See Table 1.)

Table 1

Tips for Interviewing

Components
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Interviewing Steps

- *Step 1: Establish an atmosphere of interest in the interviewee.* Establishing an atmosphere of interest can be accomplished in three ways: by showing friendliness, by maintaining eye contact, and by using a firm handshake.
- *Step 2: Become an active listener.* It is the interviewer's responsibility to listen carefully to the spoken words of the interviewee, to direct the communication toward the final goal, and to remember key words that may add discussion or clarification.
- *Step 3: Make the purpose known.* Typically, the manager's purpose is to approve or recommend an interviewee for a position in the organization. Once the purpose of the interview is known, the interviewer directs the questions and focuses the interview toward that purpose.

Role of the Interviewer

- *Maximize the forces that lead to communication.* These include a relaxed atmosphere, focus on the interview purpose, and indication of listening by both parties.
- *Measure the data collected.* To measure the adequateness of a response, the interviewer must decide if the question was truly answered. If not, ask additional questions. If yes, reward the interviewee with a nod or murmur of understanding.

How to Interview

- *The interviewer should have a strong background in all aspects of the job.*
- *The interview begins with observation.* The interviewer must note what the interviewee says and what the interviewee does not say.
- *Question with a purpose.* The purpose of every interview is to determine if the interviewee has the qualifications to do the job and fit in with existing personnel.
- *Pace your questions to the answers of the interviewee.* Proceeding too rapidly can cause confusion or a missed response and may give the interviewee the appearance of being understood.

Questions

- *What if?* Hypothetical situation questions allow the interviewer to determine values, and to determine if the interviewee has orderly thought processes.
- *Describe your philosophy of management* (for a management position). *Describe your philosophy of teamwork* (for non-management position). This helps the interviewer hear what the interviewee hopes his or her followers or coworkers, respectively will gain from the association with the candidate.
- *How would you evaluate a program (such as new technology system)?* Look for conceptual thinking, a set of checks and balances for assessing mastery, a plan to monitor the new program, where to seek resources, how to accommodate individual needs of workers.
- *What are your weaknesses?* Look for an admission that anyone can learn and an indication that the interviewee does not think he or she knows everything.
- *Define the manager's role.* Look for those applicants who perceive the manager's role as complex and multi-faceted.
- *Describe yourself.* Look for enthusiasm, warmth, caring, emotional stability, leadership or teaming skills, and a willingness to learn.

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Conclusion

The interview continues to be the most common selection device used by all organizations. Furthermore, the interview tends to have a disproportionate amount of influence on the hiring decision. The applicant who performs poorly in the job interview is likely to be eliminated from the applicant pool regardless of experience, test scores, or letters of recommendation. In addition, despite its widespread use, the interview is a poor predictor of job performance. Problems with interviews include the following: unfamiliarity with the job, premature decisions, emphasis on negative information, personal biases, applicant order, and hiring quotas. Organizations will continue to use interviews despite the problems. The following techniques can be used to improve the interview process: Use a structured interview format, train interviewers, keep a written record of each interview as it happens, use multiple interviewers, get the applicant to talk, and use the interview as one aspect of the selection process.

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