Selection Practices: The Interview as an Integral Determinant in the Hiring Decision

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Abstract

The most important decision employers make is deciding who to hire. When properly designed, an organization's hiring practices will identify competent personnel and match them to the job and the organization. Some organizations fail to design a hiring process that achieves the right person-job fit. When hiring errors occur, the performance of the employee and the organization both suffer. The interview is a critical determinant in achieving the right person-job fit. The typical unstructured interview—brief, casual, consisting of random questions—is not a very effective selection device. Tips for conducting a successful hiring interview are provided.

The most important human resource decision you can make is deciding who to hire (Dessler, 2013). The objective of effective selection is to determine who the right person is by matching individual characteristics (education, ability, experience) with the requirements of the job (DeRue & Morgeson, 2007; Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, & Johnson, 2005). When management fails to get the proper match, both the individual and the organization suffer (Robbins & Judge, 2013).

The Selection Process

In most organizations, the selection process involves acquiring information concerning each job applicant from application forms, background checks, paper-and-pencil tests, performance simulations, and interviews (Noe, 2012). The interview is a critical determinant in the selection process. After initial screening and preliminary "rough cuts" of all job applicants, the selection process begins and ends with the interview.

Having decided to apply for a job, applicants typically go through three stages (initial screening, substantive selection, and contingent selection), during which they can be rejected at any time (Robbins & Judge, 2013). The *initial screening stage* is used for

preliminary "rough cuts" to decide if an applicant meets the basic qualifications of the job. Information used to screen applicants, include application forms and background checks. Applicants who do not meet basic qualifications are rejected. The *substantive selection stage* is used to determine the most qualified applicants from among those who meet basic qualifications. Information used at the substantive selection stage, include preliminary telephone interviews, written tests, and performance simulations. Applicants who meet basic qualifications, but are less qualified than others, are rejected. The *contingent selection stage* is used to make a final check before making an offer to the applicant. Information used at the contingent selection stage, include physical examination and drug tests (not always required), in-depth background checks, and interviews (usually face-to-face). Applicants who are among the best qualified, but who fail contingent selection, (physical examination, drug test, unfavorable background check, poor interview), are rejected.

Interviews

Of all the devices organizations use to select job applicants, the interview is the most common (Cohen, 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. Very often, the individual who is most skilled in interviewing techniques is the person hired, even though he or she may not be the best candidate for the position. Numerous books devoted to applicant interviewing techniques have appeared on the best-seller list recently (Corfield, 2011; Davis, 2011; DeLuca, 2011; Taylor, 2011).

Despite its widespread use, the interview is a poor predictor of job performance (Yeung, 2011). These findings are relevant because of the nature of interviews. The typical unstructured interview—brief, casual, consisting of random questions—is not a very effective selection device (Fry, 2011). The data gathered from such an approach are biased; tend to favor applicants who share the interviewers' beliefs; give undue weight to negative information; and allow first impressions, applicant appearance, and applicant order to influence interviewers' evaluations (Caruth, 2009).

To reduce such bias and improve the interview process, managers should adopt a standardized set of questions, a uniform method of recording responses, and a standardized rating scale; train interviewers; use multiple interviewers or interview panels; get the applicant to talk; and use the interview as one aspect of the selection process. Another way to improve interview effectiveness is when employers use *structured behavioral interviews* (Motawidlo, Carter, Dunnette, Tippins, Werner, Burnett, & Vaughan, 1992; Moscoso & Salgado, 2001). Such interviews require applicants to describe how they handled specific problems in previous job situations. This approach is based on the assumption that past behavior provides the best predictor of future performance. Using multiple interviewers and interview panels also minimizes the influence of individual biases and tend to have higher validity (Schmidt & Zimmerman, 2004).

Components of a Good Interview Process

An effective interview requires adequate preparation, a comfortable setting, and clear communication between interviewer and interviewee. Following are some tips for conducting a successful hiring interview (Caruth, 2009; Stewart, 2011; Thompson, 2002; Yeung, 2011).

Candidates should be given interviews only after references have been checked. This information gives the interviewer(s) some insight into prior experiences that shape the candidate's attitudes and work ethic.

Candidates' files should be screened to ensure completeness, neatness, and the lack of gaps in their employment history. Experience has shown that an application that is incomplete, sloppy, or missing pieces of past employment is indicative of a candidate's work quality.

Time should be an important consideration during the interview. Candidates should not be bunched together as this will cause both the interviewers and the candidates to become anxious, as the line grows longer in the waiting room.

Two or three questions may be mailed to the candidates prior to the interview. This serves to make the beginning of the interview more productive.

Name cards can be placed in front of each interviewer for easy identification. A host should greet each candidate prior to the interview.

Introductions should be made at the outset. Each member of the interview committee should be introduced, the position fully explained, and the process and timeline for the selection process outlined.

Each candidate should be presented, at the conclusion of the interview, with an evaluation form regarding the interview experience. This evaluation, which covers interview team preparation, attention to the process, and listening skills, should be accompanied with a stamped, self-addressed envelope. The evaluation should have room for the candidate to share any ideas to improve the interview process.

Legal Constraints

Every employer is affected to some extent by federal laws governing the selection of employees. The laws governing *equal employment opportunity* (EEO) have had an especially long history in the United States; the laws prohibit employment decisions based on race, color, religion, sex, national origin, age, or disability (Moran, 2011). This legal environment has increased the need for high-caliber managers who can deal with the complex legal requirements in human resource management (Cushway, 2011).

The specific requirements of the most important EEO laws are shown in Table 1. The laws apply to recruitment and selection; wages, hours, and working conditions; classification, assignment, transfer, and promotion of employees; training and development; and performance appraisal.

Table 1
Major Laws Affecting Hiring Practices

Law	Basic Requirements
Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (as amended)	Prohibits discrimination in employment on the basis of race, color, religion, gender, or national origin.
Age Discrimination in Employment Act of 1968 (as amended)	Prohibits discrimination in employment against any person 40 years of age or over.
Equal Pay Act of 1963	Prohibits wage discrimination on the basis of gender; requires equal pay for equal work regardless of gender.
Rehabilitation Act of 1973	Requires employers to take affirmative action to employ and promote qualified handicapped persons.
Pregnancy Discrimination Act of 1978	Requires employers to treat pregnant women and new mothers the same as other employees for all employment-related purposes.
Vietnam Era Veterans' Readjustment Act of 1974	Requires employers to take affirmative action to employ disabled Vietnam War veterans.
Occupational Safety and Health Act (OSHA) of 1970	Establishes mandatory safety and health standards in organizations.

These basic laws have been supplemented by numerous guidelines and regulations issued by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), the Office of Federal Contract Compliance, and the Department of Labor. They are too numerous and complex to mention here; however, the impact on employment decisions in organizations has been significant. For example, job descriptions and job specifications must be written so as not to exclude any race, sex, age, or other factor prohibited by law. Applicant interviewing and testing also must be conducted carefully in order to meet legal requirements. And *affirmative action programs*, designed to increase employment opportunities for women and minority groups, put pressure on employers to ensure that females and other minorities (including veterans, the aged, and the handicapped) are

employed in proportion to their actual availability in the area labor market.

Interview Questions: Potential Problem Areas

What questions are permissible and impermissible during interviews? The basic principle in determining the acceptability of any applicant questions is whether the employer can demonstrate a job-related reason for asking the question. In asking the applicant questions, the interviewer should decide whether or not the information is truly necessary in order to evaluate the applicant's qualifications, level of skills, and overall competence for the job in question. Problem areas arise with respect to questions to inquire, whether directly or indirectly, about the applicant's gender, race, age, national origin, marital or parental status, handicap, or disability.

The following provides broad generalizations concerning permissible and impermissible inquiries with respect to a variety of employment questions. As the State and Federal laws prohibiting discrimination in the employment arena can be vast and complex, it is imperative for the manager to consult with his or her legal counsel to either review the organization's current employment application or, when making changes to the application or lists of questions asked by an interviewer.

In order to ensure a nonsexist and nonracist interview, interviewers should remember to: (a) ask the same general questions and require the same standards of all applicants, (b) treat all applicants with fairness, equality, and consistency, and (c) follow a structured interview plan that will help achieve fairness in interviewing (Merton, 2008; Smart, 2010).

Questions That May Be Asked

Some of the questions that may be asked at an interview include:
- Why do you want to work here?
- What can you bring to the organization or department that is uniquely yours?
- What type of employee assessment do you use (management position)?
- How do you keep current in your field?
- In the last year, what have you done to develop professionally?
- What is your view of the relationship between employee and management?

Questions That May Not Be Asked

A selection committee cannot inquire about:
- an applicant's age unless it is relevant to the job
- financial condition
- prior wage garnishments
- credit rating and bank accounts
- home ownership
- disabilities
- marital status
- where his/her spouse works or resides

- pregnancy or medical history concerning pregnancy
- ages of children
- military experience or discharge
- religious observance
- lineage, ancestry, national origin, descent, place of birth, original language, or the national origin of an applicant's parents or spouse
- how the applicant learned to read, write, or speak a foreign language
- membership in clubs such as country clubs, social clubs, religious clubs, or fraternal orders that would indicate an applicant's race, color, sex, religion, etc.
- names and addresses of relatives other than those working for the organization
- how long the applicant intends to work

Conclusion

The most important decision employers make is deciding who to hire. When properly designed, an organization's hiring practices will identify competent personnel and match them to the job and the organization. Some organizations fail to design a hiring process that achieves the right person-job fit. When hiring errors occur, the performance of the employee and the organization both suffer. The interview is a critical determinant in achieving the right person-job fit. The typical unstructured interview—brief, casual, consisting of random questions—is not a very effective selection device. Tips for conducting a successful hiring interview are provided.

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