

Guidelines for Best Practice in Selection Interviewing



SFTL

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Introduction

The interview has always played a significant part in employee selection. It is used by both human resources specialists and line managers, either as the sole method of selection or in conjunction with other types of assessment.

Despite its universality, some practitioners have concerns or questions about selection interviews. These relate to several aspects of the selection interview. For example, consistency of approach across different interviewers is an issue for some organisations. Others will be interested in the practical processes; how long should we spend on the interview; who should be involved? Yet other considerations are to do with interviewing skills; what sort of questions to ask, and how to develop rapport with the candidate?

This guide addresses some of the issues to be considered when attempting to maximise the effectiveness of interviews in selecting the best candidate. It cannot, of course, replace adequate training for interviewers.

1. The Use Of The Interview In Selection

Surveys of selection practices in the UK confirm that interviews are very widely used.

The British Market Research Board conducted a survey (on behalf of SHL) in November 1993 which questioned 450 companies employing 1000 or more employees on their selection practices. Table 1 below indicates the use of the interview compared with other selection techniques.

**Table 1 Assessment Methods Used in the Last 12 Months
(Based on 450 companies)**

Assessment Method	Private Sector n=350	Public Sector n=100	All Sectors
Interview	98%	100%	98%
Tests	65%	71%	66%
Questionnaires	55%	42%	52%
In-Tray	21%	39%	25%
Group Exercise	34%	39%	35%
Any Behavioural Simulation	46%	60%	49%
Handwriting Analysis	2%	0%	1%

What is a Selection Interview?

The selection interview takes many forms; it can be one to one or one to several interviewers - the panel interview. Organisations quite commonly hold more than one interview, and interviews at different stages of the selection process, or with different interviewers, may well have varying objectives. This diversity in format and objectives no doubt contributes to some of the reported inconsistencies across interviews. This also has an impact on the interview's value in predicting future job performance.

The Objectives of the Selection Interview

Much research has focused on the interview as a selection instrument, with the emphasis on the interviewer obtaining information from candidates in order to assess their ability to do the job. However, in practice, interviewers and candidates place considerable importance on the interview as an exchange of information and less tangible (and more subjective) issues such as:- the fit of the candidate with the organisation and its culture, or the candidate's personal fit within the team. These variations in the objectives will influence the type of interview carried out and the selection procedure may include several interviews with different objectives, format and content. The most common types of interview used in selection are described in the next section.

2. Different Approaches To Selection Interviews

2.1. Introduction

Selection interviews can be conducted in many different ways, but perhaps the three models most widely used by personnel professionals are:

- The Biographical Interview
- The Competency Based Interview or The Behaviourally Based Criterion Interview
- The Situational Interview

Depending upon the situation, and the information that the interviewer hopes to obtain, a combination of two or even all three may be useful. Increasingly, the telephone is being used as a medium through which to conduct an initial screening interview.

2.2. Biographical Interview

2.2.1 Definition

The biographical interview can be defined as a semi-structured chronological exploration of the candidate's past experiences.

It is based on the premise that past behaviour will predict future behaviour. Its aim is to cover, in a comprehensive and probing manner, previous experience both within and outside formal work situations.

2.2.2 Areas of Use

The biographical interview is very widely used at all levels and stages of selection interviewing.

It is probably most appropriate for external candidates, either as the only or the first interview, where technical interviews with line managers are also included.

2.2.3 Strengths and Limitations

Potential Strengths

- It is the most common format of interview, seen from the perspective of the candidate, so may be what the candidate “expects”.
- It provides a comprehensive picture of an individual, in terms of both their work and personal life.

Potential Limitations

- Candidates who are more articulate or have good social skills may do better.
- Used without regard to the job criteria, it can lead to questions which are irrelevant to the job.
- Its use can be seen as less appropriate for internal interviews where career history is, or should be, known.
- It is likely to take both training and time to extract the relevant evidence for specific criteria eg. planning and organising skills.
- The difficulty of relating the interview information to job relevant criteria means that interviewers’ personal biases and stereotypes are more likely to affect decisions. This increases the danger of poor decisions and illegal direct and/or indirect discrimination under equal opportunities legislation.

2.3 Competency Based Interview or Behaviourally Based Criterion Interview

2.3.1 Definition

Competency based interviewing or criterion interviewing is a structured series of questions aimed at eliciting behavioural information against specific job-related competencies, or criteria.

A competency or criterion in this context is a type of behaviour found to be relevant to the job.

Job analysis is usually used to identify relevant behaviour of good job performers.

An example of a competency or criterion is:

Detail Conscious:

Able to cope with detailed work, conscious of the need to be accurate with detail, even if the detailed work is to be delegated.

Questions usually focus on eliciting specific examples from the candidate, describing situations where they have demonstrated the required behaviours. These are probed in a systematic way by the interviewer to build up a picture of relative strengths and weaknesses of the candidate against the criteria. Competency definitions can describe both acceptable/successful and unacceptable/unsuccessful behaviour.

2.3.2 Areas of Use

Competency based or criterion interviewing can be used for external selection and internal promotion/selection interviewing. It is particularly useful in assessment centres where the interview is usually employed to provide evidence against specific criteria. It is also a useful technique at second interviews, and where selection is shared between different interviewers, individually or in panels, because it allows for a structured and systematic approach with minimal overlap or repetition.

2.3.3 Strengths and Limitations

Potential Strengths

- Questions are based on an objective analysis of the job and can be seen to be directly relevant to the skills required in the job.
- It is easier for information gathered in the interview to be evaluated on a rating scale against that competency or criterion.
- By using the same competencies or criteria, evaluation of the assessment from the interview can be readily integrated with information from other sources such as tests, exercises and questionnaires.

Potential Limitations

- To cover a large number of competencies fully, the interview could be extremely long.
- Highly articulate candidates may be able to make a credible case at interview and be over-rated.
- The method assumes that a thorough job analysis has been undertaken. Its effectiveness is markedly reduced if the selection of competencies has not been systematic.
- If a chronological/biographical interview has not been carried out there could be significant aspects of a candidate's work history which have not been explored.

2.4 Situational Interview

2.4.1 Definition

The situational interview is a series of predetermined, hypothetical, job-related questions, the responses to which are evaluated against a set of example answers.

The interview is therefore highly structured in terms of both the questions and the evaluation of the answers. The situational interview attempts to reduce the potential bias and subjectivity of the interview. It produces an interview which has some of the characteristics of a psychometric test.

Typical job situations need to be fairly straightforward, where job behaviour is restricted to one or two dimensions. Where a number of equally viable or acceptable responses could be given, it becomes difficult to rate them objectively in terms of their effectiveness.

2.4.2 Areas of Use

The situational interview was initially developed for use with straightforward manual positions and exclusively in selection. It has been used as a telephone pre-screening interview where there are large numbers of applicants. More recent applications have involved use in selection for clerical and administrative jobs.

2.4.3 Strengths and Limitations

Potential Strengths

- All candidates receive standard identical questions and the information gathered is evaluated objectively.
- The questions are based exclusively on job situations. Therefore, the content is viewed as being highly relevant to the job.
- A good level of predictive validity* has been found for situational interviews.

Potential Limitations

- The underlying assumption of the situational interview is that people's intentions (as expressed in response to hypothetical questions) are related to actual behaviour. However, some researchers suggest that it may measure cognitive problem solving skills rather than typical patterns of behaviour.
- The interview is open to social desirability responding. In some cases, the interviewee may discern from the wording of the question the answer the interviewer will rate favourably.
- The time and expense of devising, running and scoring the interviews can be very resource intensive.
- Articulate candidates may do better.
- Candidates may find the formality and structure of the interview unfriendly and intimidating.
- Gaps in work history are not fully explored.

*Predictive validity - The ability of a measure to predict future performance levels.

2.5 The Telephone Interview

2.5.1 Definition

The telephone interview refers to the medium in which the interview is conducted, rather than any particular style of interviewing.

The telephone interview may be biographical or competency based or indeed a combination of interview models.

2.5.2 Areas of Use

Whatever the type, the telephone interview is most frequently used as an initial screening interview, either following short listing from CV's/application forms, or subsequent to initial web based screening through bio data, tests and questionnaires.

The telephone interview is particularly valuable when it precedes a more sophisticated selection process, perhaps involving significant time and money in travel. It is also beneficial when the telephone is a medium used a great deal in the job itself i.e. it can act as a simulation in order to evaluate telephone communication skills. Initial interviews for call centre staff can be conducted by phone.

The telephone interview can also be of particular benefit in terms of convenience for potential employees who are going to be home based, and may find travel to an initial interview inconvenient, preferring an exploratory discussion on the phone.

2.5.3 Guidelines, Strengths and Limitations.

The strengths of the telephone interview are dependent on it being conducted well. In addition to the considerations outlined for other types of interview e.g. competency, the following guidelines should be borne in mind:

Guidelines

- ✓ Help the candidate prepare for the interview and acknowledge this format may be new to them. In particular you may wish to:
 - Make it clear in the advertisement or agency brief that you will be conducting initial telephone interviews.
 - Arrange a convenient day and time with each candidate just as you would when preparing a face-to-face interview schedule.
 - When you make arrangements, indicate how long you expect the interview to last and ask the candidate to try and be alone with no distractions or interruptions.
- ✓ You will not have the normal visual clues, so expect to feel different from face to face interviews. Early rapport building will be needed to enable the candidates to present themselves well. Do set out the parameters of the interview in the normal way. Silence and hesitance may feel more uncomfortable in the absence of eye contact, so do tell the candidate that it is quite alright for them to pause while they think or to go back to add pertinent information.

- ✓ Most interviewers will need to consciously slow down. It is harder for candidates to absorb questions if they cannot see you. There may be a more frequent need to reframe questions if the candidate is hesitant. On the telephone, it is more difficult to discern whether hesitancy is giving you valuable data on the candidate's knowledge and experience, their communication style or simply lack of understanding of the question.

Potential Strengths

The strengths of the telephone interview are mostly connected with efficiency and practicality.

- Candidates are more likely to be available early by telephone than for a visit.
- Actual time spent setting up interviews is minimised. The overall time frame may be reduced.
- A telephone interview can often be accommodated into both parties' working days (or evenings) without disrupting other commitments.
- Meeting rooms will not necessarily be required.
- Potentially more candidates can be screened – a bonus when the response has been high and it is only convenient to interview a short list, or indeed when the market is not on your side and it is tempting to interview marginal candidates. It can save time and money to conduct initial structured telephone interviews.
- Where good telephone skills are essential for the job e.g. customer support staff, sales, helpline operators, telesales people, reception staff, research assistants – the telephone is a perfect simulation medium to assess relevant skills.

Potential Limitations

Most of the potential limitations have to do with the lack of visual clues in communication.

- The interviewer needs enhanced skills of clarity and empathy, and a willingness to use increased verbal affirmations to encourage communication.
- Candidates will not always have positioned themselves to participate in the interview without distraction.
- If the job does not require telephone communication, individuals who are not comfortable with this medium of communication will be disadvantaged.

3.Does The Interview Work?

There has been a considerable amount of research undertaken into the selection interview. Much of the early research was concerned with the overall outcome of the interview in terms of its reliability and validity. More recent research has focused on specific aspects of selection interviews such as non-verbal behaviour of the interviewer and interviewee, and the influence of personal perception on decision making in the interview. The following sections explore the reliability and validity of selection interviews and outline factors which influence decision-making before, during and after the interview.

Reliability

Reliability refers to the consistency of judgements made by an interviewer if she/he were to interview the candidate afresh on a second occasion or if someone else were to interview the same candidate. In practice, greater emphasis is placed on inter-rater reliability; that is, the extent to which different interviewers make the same assessment of the candidate they have seen, either separately or together at a panel interview. Studies usually show quite low levels of consistency between raters. Reasons for low inter-interviewer reliability could be that interviewers are not in fact basing their judgements on the same information, or that they hold different perceptions of the candidate requirements. Good job analysis, providing selection criteria and interviewer training tend to increase reliability.

Validity

Although it is essential to achieve a reasonable level of reliability for the interview before it can be used as an assessment technique with any confidence, it is also necessary to show that it is valid, i.e. that it can predict training and/or job success. Over the years, many studies have attempted to assess the ability of the interview to predict job success. Statistical techniques (meta-analysis) have allowed the summarisation of many different studies to produce general conclusions about the validity of interviews. Interviews appear to offer low but positive validity in relation to work success. More recent studies suggest that different types of interview may have different validities. Structured interviews, with job relevant criteria derived from detailed job analysis, are better at predicting future job performance.

4. What Are The Problems?

Many factors have been found to influence the decisions made by interviewers. The basis for many decisions, however, stems from factors outside the interview as well as those during it. The following sections examine factors before, during and after the interview which influence the resulting decision.

4.1 Before the Interview

Before the interview takes place, there are several factors which will affect the way it will proceed.

- **Lack of Clear Job Information** - Research suggests that the more information interviewers have about the job, the more consistency there is between interviewers.
- **Inappropriate Person Specification Stereotypes** - Interviewers selecting for the same post tend to share part of their stereotype of a “good candidate” with their colleagues, but also tend to hold additional personal views.
- **Insufficient Preparation** - Interviews which are not well planned and structured tend to have poorer results.
- **Limited Interview Skills Training** - The absence of some form of interviewer training, before the interview takes place, is likely to increase any effect the above factors may have.
- **Ignorance of the Law** - Equal Opportunities Legislation (Sex Discrimination Act, Race Relations Act, Fair Employment Act [Northern Ireland]) covers all selection procedures. Interviewers should be aware of the implications of these Acts for their behaviour at an interview.
- **Lack of Diversity Awareness** - Training in diversity awareness will help interviewers avoid being biased by stereotypical views of members of different groups and to interpret interview information in the relevant context.

4.2 During the Interview

The factors highlighted as potential problems before the interview serve also as problems during the interview itself. For example:

- **First Impressions** - These are usually lasting impressions. Decisions tend to be made early on in the interview. Webster (1964) demonstrated that in a series of 15 minute interviews the average 'decision time' was just under four minutes. After that, the decision predisposed the interviewer to perceive and accept information that supported their "decision".
- **Visual Cues** - Several researchers suggest that non-verbal sources of information are more important than verbal ones. For example, it has been shown that successful candidates look the interviewer in the eye more, smile more, gesture more, and generally appear more enthusiastic. With reference to candidates, it was also found that interviewees who 'liked' their interviewer, were more likely to accept offers. Visual cues are therefore important to both parties.
- **Hearing What They Want to Hear** - Seeking information which supports initial impressions suggests that interviewers are selectively listening. The outcome could lead to information being weighted differently by different interviewers.
- **Overweighting Negative Information** - A number of studies suggest that interviewers give more weight to unfavourable information than to positive. This suggests that negative information presented early in the interview will be of considerable importance to the final decision.
- **Overweighting Academic Qualifications** - Interviewers generally seem to give most weight to academic achievement, even in jobs where it is not as relevant as other factors (such as, for example manual skill, flexibility, motivation etc).
- **Attitudinal, Gender and Racial Similarity** - A number of studies suggest interviewers give higher ratings on some traits to candidates who are like themselves. For example, a study demonstrated that females were given lower evaluations than males by male interviewers. Also, both male and female candidates were more likely to be recommended for traditional role stereotyped jobs.
- **Cross Cultural Issues** - Where interviewer and interviewee approach the interview with different cultural assumptions, there is a risk of poor assessment of skills, unless the interviewer is aware of the potential dangers and how to deal with them.
- **Questioning Style** - Asking open questions and sensitively probing responses will enhance the amount and quality of information obtained from the interviewee.

4.3 After the Interview

Following the interview, additional factors can affect how the information gathered is evaluated and selection decisions made.

- **Contrast Effects** - Studies suggest that assessment of a candidate partially depends upon the other individuals being rated at the same time, i.e. assessments seem to come from person-to-person comparisons, rather than from comparing each applicant thoroughly with the person specification for the job. Although this may mean that the “best” candidate is selected, in essence the decision has been made between the available candidates. The “best” candidate from a poor bunch may not be good enough!
- **Pressure to Select** - In studies where interviewers are required to rate candidates on a range of different criteria, it has been found that the average level of ratings increases, when there is a strong pressure to fill a post urgently (regardless of the quality of the candidates).
- **Intuitive Decision Making** - Interviewers are human. Despite repeated calls for interviewers to base their decisions on the objective evidence they have collected, there remains a constant temptation to make overall judgements based on intuition. The “gut-feel” school of interviewing still has a few ardent supporters, as does the “I-can-spot-’em-when-they-walk-through-the-door” school!
- **Structured Interview Guides and Note Taking** - There is some evidence to suggest that interviewers who work to a structure and who takes notes during the interview have more accurate recall of applicants after the interview.

5. Overcoming The Problems

Considering all the potential problems associated with selection interviews, it seems rather surprising that the procedure remains the most popular method for assessing candidates for jobs. If it was abolished there would be an uproar: employers want the opportunity to meet potential recruits prior to making selection decisions and candidates expect to be interviewed, feeling cheated if they are not.

Hence it looks like the interview is here to stay, so how can it be improved?

5.1 Before the Interview

- **Analysing the Job** - In order to conduct an interview effectively it is imperative to establish what the job involves and the specific skills and attributes needed to perform successfully in the role. (Interviewers working from a good job description are more likely to focus on key areas and pay less attention to irrelevant information).
- **Structuring the Interview** - The more structured the interview the better. Following a structure is probably the single technique which is most likely to help in improving the reliability of a selection exercise. Adherence to a structure helps to ensure that for each candidate broadly the same areas are covered. With a structure, the interviewer can more easily monitor the progress of the interview, ensuring that the discussion remains job-related. Moreover, adherence to a structure exposes gaps in the evidence collected, which might otherwise be overlooked.
- **Planning the Interview** - Careful consideration of pre-interview information, application forms or CV's is critical in identifying relevant areas to explore further. Some standard questions for all candidates can be prepared in advance where this is appropriate.
- **Training the Interviewer** - Trained interviewers will not only be more likely to demonstrate the appropriate skills of effective interviewing, but they will also be more aware of the potential pitfalls of interviewing as a selection technique. Maintaining a healthy scepticism and an alertness to the possibility of bias and stereotyping serves as an excellent defence against the subjectivity and personal preferences, which can so easily undermine the quality of evidence collected.

5.2 During the Interview

- **Obtaining Evidence** - The interview should be planned and conducted to collect relevant information about the candidates, in order to make an assessment against the selection criteria. Effective interviewing skills such as questioning techniques, developing rapport, controlling and summarising also contribute to ensuring that sufficient and appropriate information is collected.
- **Taking Notes** - It is difficult for an interviewer to remember accurately everything that an interviewee has said during the course of an interview. If the interviewer relies solely on his or her memory, points will almost certainly be forgotten or distorted. In order to limit this risk, note-taking during the interview is strongly recommended. This will enable interviewers to check that they have elicited all the information they require against their predetermined interview plan, and to check their understanding with the interviewee. In addition, gaps in written information are much more visible (and therefore difficult to ignore), than gaps in information which is stored solely in the memory of the interviewer. An accurate record of the interview is useful evidence (of the objectiveness of decisions) should a candidate challenge the selection process under Equal Opportunities Legislation at an industrial tribunal.
- **More than One Interviewer?** - In terms of perceived fairness, involving more than one interviewer, such as in a panel interview may, particularly in the eyes of the candidates, increase their confidence that the selection decision is not based on one face to face encounter, which may be subject to interview bias. Where no other selection techniques are involved this may be particularly important. However, facing more than one interviewer can be a rather intimidating experience for some candidates.
- **More than One Interview?** - An alternative to panel interviews is to conduct further interviews with different interviewers, who may see the candidates in a different light. In discussion after the interview, the interviewers should be able to compare evaluations and challenge each other's biases.

5.3 After the Interview

- **Recording the Evidence** - Note-taking during the interview should be supplemented by note-taking after the interview. During the interview, it is of course not possible to fully cover all that is discussed, and therefore interviewers should add to their notes immediately after the interview has finished. Once this process has been completed, the interviewer is then in a position to undertake their final write-up of the interview. This should be structured against the pre-determined selection criteria.
- **Evaluating the Findings Effectively** - Clear descriptions of the selection criteria, with bench-marks of either detailed behavioural description and/or numerical ratings, encourage interviewers to evaluate specific aspects of required performance, rather than make a generalised judgement of "I liked that person". Ratings should be completed after the interview on each candidate, together with written evidence to support the rating.
- **Using Other Assessment Techniques** - Interviews can be an efficient and cost-effective means of collecting certain types of information (for example, about past work experience or personal presentation). However, they are a less reliable technique for gathering information about other potentially important characteristics, such as aptitude. For this reason, it is recommended that information collected from interviews should be supplemented by the use of other assessment techniques such as ability tests or personality questionnaires, which can provide objective and reliable evidence about the suitability of the candidate. The use of multiple assessment techniques in assessment centres has been repeatedly demonstrated to improve the validity of a selection procedure.

6. Making The Best Use Of Your Interviews

There is no evidence to suggest that organisations will reduce their use of the interview, although there are indications that additional selection techniques are being used alongside interviews. Therefore, organisations need to direct their attention more closely to what they expect the interview to achieve for them in the selection process. Other selection techniques may focus on assessing the candidate's match with the skills and abilities required to do the job, but the interview can explore wider issues such as why the candidate wants this job in your organisation. It also provides an opportunity for the candidate to meet people in the organisation and seek information from them to help in his/her decision making. A professional, well conducted selection interview can have a significant impact on the candidates' perception of your organisation and whether they wish to work for you or even, in some circumstances, do business with you in the future.

Reviewing Selection Interviewing

Consideration of the following will help to ensure that your interviews are conducted effectively and that interviewers and candidates have confidence in them.

Do interviewers have:

- up to date job descriptions, selection criteria or competency frameworks available?
- a clear objective for their interview?
- training in interviewing skills?
- awareness of equal opportunities legislation?
- adequate time to prepare: alone or with others?
- an interview schedule which allows time to explore information thoroughly?
- knowledge of other selection methods being used?
- interview record forms for interview notes and final decisions?
- feedback on the outcome of their decisions?

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