

Conducting a Robust Interview: The Behaviorally and Competency-Based Structured Interview

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Published in the December 2008 *HR News* magazine, by the [International Public Management Association for Human Resources](#)

In today's business climate organizations are being required to do more with less due to staff and budget reductions, increased competition and the decrease of available talent. For these reasons it is critical that organizations know how to hire well.

A review of 85 years' worth of research on selection methods led Schmidt and Hunter to conclude in a 1998 *Psychological Bulletin* article that interviews are valid predictors of job performance. It is not surprising that researchers and HR practitioners have tried to identify ways to develop especially useful and job-specific interview formats. Recently, a federal agency, with the assistance of a our organization, CPS Human Resource Services, analyzed various elements of effective interviews and determined that the most vigorous interview process would be one that incorporated a structured interview format, behaviorally based questions, and competency-based questions.

This article addresses each of these critical elements and emphasizes the importance of educating interviewers on the correct use of the format and the tailored questions.

Element #1: Structured Interviews

Structured interviewing has been extensively researched and found to be effective in the hiring process. What gives the structured interview its power is its consistency, adherence to structure and standardized rating process and scale.

Using this process, all qualified applicants selected to be interviewed for a position are asked the same questions and evaluated using the same criteria. Although structured interviews lack the free flow of the friendly conversation that characterizes unstructured interviews, structured interviews provide increased levels of validity and reliability, as Campion, Palmer, and Campion wrote in *Personnel Psychology* in 1997.

The characteristics of structured interviews include

- Questions based on a job analysis that determines the job requirements
- Asking the same questions of all candidates
- Limiting follow-up (probing) questions to those that relate to behaviors on the job
- Using rating scales to score responses to the interview questions
- Consistently administering the interview to all candidates.

In addition to the structured interview showing evidence of greater validity than the unstructured interview format, Williamson, Gollub, Campion, Malos, Stanley, Roehling and Campion, in their 1997 *Journal of Applied Psychology* review of court decisions about interviews, wrote that

structured interviews are more likely to result in decisions in favor of the employer than unstructured interviews. This proved true in court cases concerning both disparate treatment and disparate impact claims.

Element #2: Behaviorally Based Questions

Behaviorally based questions, which are also referred to as experienced-based questions, have also received research interest. These types of questions ask respondents what they did in previous jobs or other situations that are relevant to the requirements of the job for which they are being interviewed. Pulakos and Schmitt provided the following rationale for asking behaviorally based questions in a 1995 *Personnel Psychology* article: “The underlying notion is that the best predictor of future performance is past performance in similar situations. Thus, by asking questions about how candidates have handled situations in the past similar to those they will face on the job, a prediction can be made about how effectively they will perform in these types of situations in the future.” Pulakos and Schmitt also undertook a study in which they found that the experienced-based interview was a valid predictor of job performance.

Element #3: Competency-Based Interviews

The third element included in the interviewing process developed by the federal agency and CPS is the competency-based question. Caldwell and O’Reilly wrote in the *Journal of Applied Psychology* in 1990 that competency-based selection methods are based on the hypothesis that the better the fit between the requirements of a job and the competencies of the jobholder, the higher the job performance and satisfaction will be.

The federal agency used three sources when drafting its competency-based questions:

- Agency-specific technical and core competencies
- The job analysis, which was based on extensive interviews with the hiring manager
- The position description.

The draft questions were then reviewed by the hiring manager to ensure that they assessed the behaviors determined to be critical and essential to performance of the job.

Example of Behaviorally and Competency-Based Structured Interview Questions

Below is an example that illustrates the resulting combination of the three interview elements ultimately used by the federal agency. Notice how the questions in the example are competency-based, as they reflect the requirements of the job; are behaviorally based, in that applicants were asked to describe their prior experiences that were relevant to the competency being measured; and the format of the interview is structured, in that the same questions were used for each candidate.

Competency Being Assessed

The ability to conduct research, analyze data and provide recommendations

- Knowledge of assessment, analysis and evaluation methods
- Expertise on a range of qualitative and quantitative approaches for the assessment and improvement of program effectiveness and management processes and systems
- Skill in developing recommendations based on the assessment
- Knowledge of methods to plan, organize and conduct studies on a variety of issues and situations.



Sample Behaviorally and Competency-Based Question

One of the responsibilities of the job is analyzing and evaluating the effectiveness of a program, policy or procedure and developing recommendations based on the evaluation. Describe a situation in which you undertook an assessment and made recommendations based on that assessment.

Optional follow-up questions could include the following:

- What were you evaluating? Why did you undertake the evaluation?
- What methods did you use? How did you choose them?
- What were the findings?
- What were your recommendations?
- Were the recommendations accepted? Why, or why not?

Orientation to the Hiring Process

A critical aspect of successful interviewing is ensuring that interviewers learn and practice the interviewing process. Individuals in the federal agency who were part of the hiring team attended an orientation session during which they

- Learned the steps of the behaviorally and competency-based structured interview process
- Reviewed legal considerations (e.g., what can and cannot be said during an interview)
- Had an opportunity to role play the interview process, including how to objectively take notes, and received feedback and coaching from an experienced interviewer
- Learned and practiced using the candidate rating scale.

Outline of the Structured Interview Process

As part of the orientation, interviewers were provided with an outline and time estimates for the structured interview process.

Panelists' Reaction to the Behaviorally and Competency-Based Interviewing Process

During the orientation some of the interviewers voiced concerns that the behaviorally and competency-based structured interview would be difficult to manage and too rigid in practice. However, once they went through the process they found that

- Although the same initial questions would be asked of each candidate, there was flexibility in the follow-up questions that could be used to obtain further information, which would help maintain a more natural flow of conversation
- If the candidate has no direct job experience that was relevant to the question, the candidate could be asked to describe a related experience
- If the candidate has similar relevant experience, the candidate can be asked how he or she would behave in similar situations
- Although the interviewers only saw questions for a job at one grade level, they were assured that questions could be tailored to the grade level of the job and to the specific needs of the organization.

After conducting several hiring panels using the behaviorally and competency-based structured interview process, the interviewers agreed that this process met their organization's needs and had



the flexibility to be used with a variety of job candidates. Future steps in the evaluation of this process are to evaluate candidates selected by the federal agency over time, to link competency data on the structured interview to competency-based performance appraisal data, and to track turnover data while considering other organizational factors in order to further ensure that the process truly leads to the selection of high-performing employees.

Summary

In summary, a behaviorally and competency-based structured interview process is likely to (1) increase the likelihood of hiring the right person for the position, and (2) ensure that the hiring process is consistent and fair. If interview questions are based on validated position and organization-specific competencies, the questions are asked in a structured way to determine how the candidate responded to similar situations in the past, and the interviewers have the opportunity to practice the process prior to conducting the interview; then the probability that right person is hired for the position is greatly enhanced.

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All of the authors contributed to the design and implementation of the structured interview process and orientation, as well as to this article.



Figure 1
Structured Interview Process Outline

STEP	Approximate Time Required
PREPARING FOR THE INTERVIEW	
Total preparation time: Approx. 1-2 ½ hours	
1. Preparation	
a) Select panel (and lead panelist)	1-2 hrs
b) Review applicant information (per applicant)	20 min
c) Review questions, who will ask which ones, how much time to spend on each	15 min

CONDUCTING THE INTERVIEW	
Total conduct time: Approx. 30 minutes-1 hour	
2. Opening	5-10 minutes
a) Welcome the applicant	
b) Introduce panelists, give the panelists' job title(s) and the title of the job opening	
c) Briefly describe the job and organization	
3. Outlining the Process (for the Applicant)	3-5 minutes
a) The interview is only part of the selection process	
b) Interviewers will ask questions to obtain information about the applicant's previous jobs and work experience relating to the position	
c) Interviewers will ask questions in a rotating manner	
d) Interviewers will be taking notes to ensure that responses are recorded accurately; the applicant may take notes if desired	
4. Asking Structured Questions/Taking Objective Notes	25-40 minutes
a) Ask all questions exactly as worded, in agreed upon order	
5. Answering Questions	0-10 minutes
a) Invite the applicant to ask questions about anything discussed	
b) Keep answers brief; if an answer is not known, offer to follow up	
6. Closing the Interview	1-2 minutes
a) Tell applicant when and how he or she will be notified	
b) Thank applicant for his or her time and interest	

AFTER THE INTERVIEW	
Total after interview time: Approx. 1 hour	
7. Rating the Individual Candidate	5 minutes
8. Conducting the Candidate Rating and Review Process (depends on the number of candidates)	30-60 minutes