THEORY AND TECHNIQUES OF THE INTERVIEW

9. TYPES OF INTERVIEWS & QUESTIONS

9.1. Research: Validity and Predictive Power

There is extensive data which puts into question the value of job interviews as a tool for selecting employees. Where the aim of a job interview is ostensibly to choose a candidate who will perform well in the job role, other methods of selection provide greater predictive power and often lower costs. Furthermore, given the unstructured approach of most interviews they often have almost no useful predictive power of employee success. While unstructured interviews are commonly used, structured interviews have yielded much better results and are considered a best practice. Interview structure is defined as the reduction in procedural variance across applicants, which can translate into the degree of discretion that an interviewer is allowed in conducting the interview. Structure in an interview can be compared to a typical paper and pencil test: we would not think it was fair if every test taker was given different questions and a different number of questions on an exam, or if their answers were each graded differently. Yet this is exactly what occurs in an unstructured interview. Thus, a structured interview attempts to standardize this popular selection tool. While there is debate surrounding what is meant specifically by a structured interview, there are typically two broad categories of standardization: 1) content structure and 2) evaluation structure. Content structure includes elements that refer to the actual content of the interview:

- Base questions on attributes that are representative of the job, as indicated by a job analysis
- Ask the same questions of all interviewees
- Limit prompting, or follow up questions, that interviewers may ask
- Ask better questions, such as behavioral description questions
- Have a longer interview
- Control ancillary information available to the interviewees, such as resume's
- Don't allow questions from applicants during interview

Evaluation structure includes aspects that refer to the actual rating of the interviewee:

- Rate each answer rather than making an overall evaluation at the end of the interview
- Use anchored rating scales
- Have the interviewer take detailed notes
- Have more than one interviewer view each applicant (i.e. have panel interviews)
- Have the same interviewers rate each applicant
- Don't allow any discussion about the applicants between interviewers
- Train the interviewers
- Use statistical procedures to create an overall interview score

It is important to note that structure should be thought of as a continuum. That is, the degree of structure present in an interview can vary along these various elements listed above.

In terms of reliability, meta-analytic results provided evidence that interviews can have acceptable levels of interrater reliability, or consistent ratings across interviewers interrater reliability (i.e. .75 or above), when a structured panel interview is used. In terms of criterion-related validity, or how well the interview predicts later job performance criterion validity, meta-analytic results have shown that when compared to unstructured interviews, structured interviews have higher validities, with values ranging from .20 -.57 (on a scale from 0 to 1). That is, as the degree of structure in an interview increases, the more likely interviewers can successfully predict how well the person will do on the job, especially when compared to unstructured interviews. In fact, one structured interview that included a) a predetermined set of questions that interviewers were able to choose from, and b) interviewer scoring of applicant answers after each individual question using previously created benchmark answers, showed validity levels comparable to cognitive ability tests (traditionally one of the best predictors of job performance) for entry level jobs. Honesty and integrity are attributes that can be very hard to determine using a formal job interview process. The competitive environment of the job interview may in fact promote dishonesty. Some experts on job interviews express a degree of cynicism towards the process.

9.2. History of Interview Questions

In interviews that are considered structured interviews, there are typically two types of questions interviewers ask applicants: situational questions and behavioral questions (also known as patterned behavioral description interviews). Both types of questions are based on critical incidents that are required to perform the job, but they differ in their focus. Critical incidents are relevant tasks that are required for the job and can be collected through interviews or surveys with current employees, managers, or subject matter experts. One of the first critical incidents techniques ever used in the United States Army asked combat veterans to report specific incidents of effective or ineffective behavior of a leader. The question posed to veterans was "Describe the officer's actions. What did he do?" Their responses were compiled to create a factual definition or critical requirements of what an effective combat leader is.

Previous meta-analyses have found mixed results for which type of question will best predict future job performance of an applicant. For example, some studies have shown that situational type questions have better predictability for job performance in interviews, while, other researchers have found that behavioral type questions are better at predicting future job performance of applicants. In actual interview settings it is not likely that the sole use of just one type of interview question (situational or behavioral) is asked. A range of questions can add variety for both the interviewer and applicant. In addition, the use of high-quality questions, whether behavioral or situational based, is essential to make sure that candidates provide meaningful responses that lead to insight into their capability to perform on the job.

9.3. Behavioral Questions

Behavioral (experience-based or patterned behavioral) interviews are past-oriented in that they ask respondents to relate what they did in past jobs or life situations that are relevant to the particular job relevant knowledge, skills, and abilities required for success. The idea is that past behavior is the best predictor of future performance in similar situations. By asking questions about how job applicants have handled situations in the past that are similar to those they will face on the job, employers can gauge how they might perform in future situations. Behavioral interview question examples:

- Describe a situation in which you were able to use persuasion to successfully convince someone to see things your way.
- Give me an example of a time when you set a goal and were able to meet or achieve it.
- Tell me about a time when you had to use your presentation skills to influence someone's opinion.
- Give me an example of a time when you had to conform to a policy with which you did not agree.

One way individuals can prepare for behavioral type questions is to practice the STAR method. The STAR method is a structured manner of responding to a behavioral based interview question by discussing the specific situation, task, action, and result of the situation you are describing.

Situation: Describe the situation that you were in or the task that you needed to accomplish. This should describe specifics rather than general descriptions of past behavior.

Task: What goal were you working toward?

Action: Describe the actions you took to address the situation with detail and focus on yourself. What specific steps did you take and what was your contribution?

Result: Describe the outcome of your actions. What happened? How did the event end? What did you accomplish? What did you learn? Make sure your answer contains multiple positive results.

9.4. Situational Interview Questions

Situational Interview (SI) questions ask job applicants to imagine a set of circumstances and then indicate how they would respond in that situation; hence, the questions are future oriented. One advantage of situational questions is that all interviewees respond to the same hypothetical situation rather than describe experiences unique to them from their past. Another advantage is that situational questions allow respondents who have had no direct job experience relevant to a particular question to provide a hypothetical response. Two core aspects of the SI are the development of situational dilemmas that employees encounter on the job, and a scoring guide to evaluate responses to each dilemma. Situational examples include:

- You are managing a work group and notice that one of your employees has become angry and hostile in recent weeks, to the point of disrupting the entire group. What would you do?
- You are in a meeting. Your manager blames you for not doing well on a task, in front of all your peers and managers from other divisions. You believe that your manager is wrong in his critique, and that he might have come to this conclusion hastily without knowing all the information. You feel you are being treated unfairly in front of your peers. You feel that your reputation may be affected by this critique. What would you do in this situation?

9.5. Other Types of Questions

Other possible types of questions that may be asked in an interview include: background questions, job experience questions, and puzzle type questions. A brief explanation of each follows:

- Background questions include a focus on work experience, education, and other qualifications. For instance, an interviewer may ask "What experience have you had with direct sales phone calls?"
- Job experience questions may ask candidates to describe or demonstrate job knowledge. These are typically highly specific questions. For example, one question may be "What steps would you take to conduct a manager training session on safety?"
- The puzzle interview was popularized by Microsoft in the 1990s, and is now used in other organizations. The most common types of questions either ask the applicant to solve puzzles or brain teasers (e.g., "Why are manhole covers round?") or to solve unusual problems (e.g., "How would you weigh an airplane without a scale?").

A case interview is an interview form used mostly by management consulting firms and investment banks in which the job applicant is given a question, situation, problem or challenge and asked to resolve the situation. The case problem is often a business situation or a business case that the interviewer has worked on in real life. In recent years, companies in other sectors like Design, Architecture, Marketing, Advertising, Finance and Strategy have adopted a similar approach to interviewing candidates. Technology has transformed the Case based

and Technical interview process from a purely private in-person experience to an online exchange of job skills and endorsements.

Another type of job interview found throughout the professional and academic ranks is the panel interview. In this type of interview the candidate is interviewed by a group of panelists representing the various stakeholders in the hiring process. Within this format there are several approaches to conducting the interview. Example formats include;

- Presentation format – The candidate is given a generic topic and asked to make a presentation to the panel. Often used in academic or sales-related interviews.
- Role format – Each panelist is tasked with asking questions related to a specific role of the position. For example one panelist may ask technical questions, another may ask management questions, another may ask customer service related questions etc.
- Skeet shoot format – The candidate is given questions from a series of panelists in rapid succession to test his or her ability to handle stress filled situations.

The benefits of the panel approach to interviewing include: time savings over serial interviewing, more focused interviews as there is often less time spend building rapport with small talk, and "apples to apples" comparison because each stake holder/interviewer/panelist gets to hear the answers to the same questions.

Stress interviews are still in common use. One type of stress interview is where the employer uses a succession of interviewers (one at a time or *en masse*) whose mission is to intimidate the candidate and keep him/her off-balance. The ostensible purpose of this interview: to find out how the candidate handles stress. Stress interviews might involve testing an applicant's behavior in a busy environment. Questions about handling work overload, dealing with multiple projects, and handling conflict are typical. Another type of stress interview may involve only a single interviewer who behaves in an uninterested or hostile manner. For example, the interviewer may not make eye contact, may roll his eyes or sigh at the candidate's answers, interrupt, turn his back, take phone calls during the interview, or ask questions in a demeaning or challenging style. The goal is to assess how the interviewee handles pressure or to purposely evoke emotional responses. This technique was also used in research protocols studying stress and type-A (coronary prone) behavior because it would evoke hostility and even changes in blood pressure and heart rate in study subjects. The key to success for the candidate is to

de-personalize the process. The interviewer is acting a role, deliberately and calculatedly trying to rattle the cage. Once the candidate realizes that there is nothing personal behind the interviewer's approach, it is easier to handle the questions with aplomb. Example of stress interview questions include:

- Sticky situation: "If you caught a colleague cheating on his expenses, what would you do?"
- Putting you on the spot: "How do you feel this interview is going?"
- Popping the balloon: (deep sigh) "Well, if that's the best answer you can give ... " (shakes head) "Okay, what about this one ...?"
- Oddball question: "What would you change about the design of the hockey stick?"
- Doubting your veracity: "I don't feel like we're getting to the heart of the matter here. Start again – tell me what *really* makes you tick."

Candidates may also be asked to deliver a presentation as part of the selection process. The Platform Test method involves having the candidate make a presentation to both the selection panel and other candidates for the same job. This is obviously highly stressful and is therefore useful as a predictor of how the candidate will perform under similar circumstances on the job. Selection processes in academic, training, airline, legal and teaching circles frequently involve presentations of this sort. A technical interview focuses on problem solving and creativity. The questions aim at the interviewee's problem solving skills and likely show their ability in solving the challenges faced in the job through creativity. Technical interviews are being conducted online at progressive companies before in person talks as a way to screen job applicants. Telephone interviews take place if a recruiter wishes to reduce the number of prospective candidates before deciding on a shortlist for face-to-face interviews. They also take place if a job applicant is a significant distance away from the premises of the hiring company, such as abroad or in another state or province. Video interviews are a modern variation of telephone interviews. Prospective candidates are asked preset questions using computer software then their immediate responses are recorded. These responses are then viewed and evaluated by recruiters to form a shortlist of suitable candidates for face-to-face interviews.