

THEORY AND TECHNIQUES OF THE INTERVIEW

8. INTERVIEW BEHAVIORS & BIAS

8.1. Background Research

The research and professional world relies on interviews as a common method for candidate selection for various positions. The most common form of interviews used is the face-to-face interview. Both one on one and group interviews are widely used. The major drawback with the face-to-face interview is the presence of interviewer bias. In the context of research, characteristics of the interviewee may prompt the interviewer to exhibit various cues to the interviewee, resulting in skewed or biased responses. Interviewer effects could also include social desirability on the part of the subject, as they would tailor their responses to be seen in a favorable light if the interviewer expresses a negative reaction. In the case of job interviews, simple acts such as validation of the interviewer or matching a predetermined stereotype of a job position may result in interviewer bias. Because face-to-face interviews are used in college applications, internships, and job applications, the possibility for interviewer bias runs high in many high stake settings.

A common manifestation of interviewer bias is the similar to me effect. This term describes the phenomenon when higher interview ratings are given towards interviewees who possess similar attitudes and demographics as the interviewer. One explanation for this effect is through sheer similarity. If both the interviewer and interviewee are similar, whether in demographics or even education level, they will develop more accurate perceptions of the other's self-concepts, as the two self-concepts will be similar. A more accurate perception and validation to the interviewer's self-concept by the interviewee would lead to higher interview ratings and scores.

Interviewer bias also seems to occur at higher rates in less structured interviews, most likely due to more disclosure of personal information. More information means more opportunity to either rate the interviewee as more or less favorable than they would have in a strictly structured interview.

Interviewer evaluations of applicant responses also tend to be colored by how an applicant behaves in the interview. These behaviors may not be directly related to the constructs the interview questions were designed to assess, but can be related to aspects of the job for which they are applying. Applicants without realizing it may engage in a number of behaviors that influence ratings of their performance. The applicant may have acquired these behaviors during training or from previous interview experience. These interviewee performance constructs can also be classified into three categories: social effectiveness skills, interpersonal presentation, and personal/contextual factors.

Social effectiveness skills:

- Impression management: Applicants' attempt to make sure the interviewer forms a positive impression of them
- Social skills: Applicants' ability to adapt his/her behavior according to the demands of the situation to positively influence the interviewer
- Self-monitoring: Applicants' regulation of behaviors to control the image presented to the interviewer
- Relational control: Applicants' attempt to control the flow of the conversation

Interpersonal Presentation:

- Verbal expression: Pitch, rate, pauses
- Nonverbal behavior: Gaze, smile, hand movement, body orientation

Personal/contextual factors:

- Interview training: Coaching, mock interviews with feedback
- Interview experience: Number of prior interviews
- Interview self-efficacy: Applicants' perceived ability to do well in the interview
- Interview motivation: Applicants' motivation to succeed in an interview

8.2. Behavioral Interviews

What is a behavioral interview? Behavioral interview questions often start with: “Tell me about a time,” “Describe a time” or “Provide me with an example.” The idea behind behavioral interviews is well founded research that past behavior is a

reliable predictor of future behavior, that is what you've done in the past, will predict what you do in the future. If the behavioral interview is well constructed, the questions you are asked will come from some solid on the job research. A recruiter benchmarks top performers in a role, isolates in detail the competencies required to perform that role, then writes questions to allow the interviewee to demonstrate those competencies.

How are you assessed in a behavioral interview? You are judged on the quality of the examples you provide. In general, under each competency is a set of behaviors that the recruiter will physically or mentally tick off as you answer each question. You may be asked the same question in different ways to check that your skills are well developed and that you've used them consistently. You'll be assessed highly if you demonstrate all the behaviors required in each competency. Recruiters like this method of assessing people because it's structured and clear and a good answer is obvious to all. The challenge for interviewers in this scenario is for them to elicit the best answer out of you to enable you to demonstrate your skills. Your challenge is to understand and clarify the intent of the question properly.

How much detail should you give? As you tell the story you need to provide detail about how you achieved something, but don't provide so much detail that you lose track of what you are talking about. Give enough to be credible which will reassure the interviewer you have the skills they are looking for. If you are confused, remember interviewing does not need to be a one way interaction. You can always ask the interviewer if they need more detail or how much detail they need. If you think you are providing too much detail, check with the interviewer. Or use your cue from the body language of the interviewer. If they stop writing, then it's a good idea for you to stop talking, and check back in.

It's not a great idea to pass on too many questions. However it is easy to freeze up under the stare of an interviewer. Don't put pressure on yourself by trying to think of your best scenario. If you can't think of your best example, then think of your most recent. Many people take for granted the skills they use every day, yet if you are doing these things every day, you may under rate your competency. Can you use a general example instead? For a behavioral interview the short answer is no. It's too text book, and just not convincing. You could have made it all up and you will sound just like the next person in line. What if you can't provide relevant examples at all? One of the beautiful things about behavioral interviews is that they allow you to showcase competencies. You may have developed these skills in a role unrelated to the position for which you are

applying. So listen carefully to the question and provide an example that answers that question, regardless of where you have gained that experience. Again if you are not sure whether you can present an answer from another context, ask the interviewer.

8.3. Job Interviewer Biases

Interviewing is the gateway to an organization. It is the singularly most relied on form of candidate assessment. Yet, ironically, there is quite a lot of academic and professional debate as to how effective interviews are at predicting the subsequent performance of candidates who are awarded the job. Yes, in fact some studies found that job interviews can only predict about 14 percent of the variability in employee performance. This is a worrying statistic, given how much we all rely on job interviews to help us choose top talent. So, why are interviewees such a poor predictor of performance? Researchers have suggested that as a result of interviews being a personal exchange between people, there is huge room for social factors, that are not related to the candidate's ability to do the job, to unintentionally influence the evaluation of that candidate and subsequent hiring decision. Being humans, our recruitment decisions are vulnerable to subjectivity, biases and other influences, which we should be both aware of and take steps to counteract in order to introduce more objectivity. This will help us to make better and more predictive hiring assessments and decisions for our employers and clients. So, what are these interviewer biases that recruiters should be aware of? There are many types of interviewer bias with an outline of four of the more prominent ones.

1. Confirmation Bias: This is a tendency for humans to seek out information that supports a preconceived belief about the applicant that has been formed prior to the interview. This means interviewers look to confirm a possibly shallow impression they may have formed of the candidate pre-interview, as opposed to having a more open outlook on the candidate's abilities in this area.

2. Affective Heuristic: This is where interviewer's decisions are influenced by quick and superficial evaluations, such as: the level of attractiveness of a candidate, race, gender, background, etc., none of which are relevant to the candidate's suitability for the role. One study found that applicant obesity actually accounted for 35% of the variance in hiring decisions.

3. Anchoring: This is a tendency for interviewers to place an arbitrary anchor of expectation of an candidate, which then influences their evaluation of the candidate. For example, candidates who had a high anchor of expectation were evaluated more favorably than those with a low anchor scale.

4. Intuition: A huge part of the candidate evaluation process is based on intuition as there is not enough data to objectively test every area of the candidate's fit to the culture and demands of the job. The problem is that intuition is not reliable, as it is thought to be susceptible to factors not related to the hiring decision such as emotion, memory, etc.

So, having understood that we as humans are subject to interviewer bias, what steps can we take to eliminate or at least minimize it to allow us to make more predictive hiring decisions? There seem to be several actions we can take and these are shown below:

1. Studies have shown that allowing enough time to do evaluations increases accuracy and reduces gender bias. So, allow plenty of time to read interview materials and take notes.

2. A structured criteria for decision making leads to more accurate evaluations. So, make sure to conduct structured interviews based on job-related hiring criteria.

3. Structured processes for recording observations increase accuracy and reduce bias. So, try and use structured evaluations during interviews and selection discussions.

4. Increased accountability reduces the effect of gender bias and increases the accuracy of evaluations. So make sure there is a culture/requirement for interview note taking, and evaluators should use named forms, and each interviewer selection decision should be justified, documented and filed.

Of course, most experienced professionals are aware of the limited predictive value of job interviews and even while using these interventions we can only hope to reduce and not eliminate interview bias. This is why it is important that interviews are combined with other forms of assessment method, such as aptitude and

attainment tests and assessment centers, in order to increase the predictive accuracy of the hiring process.

The following are personal and demographic characteristics that can potentially influence interviewer evaluations of interviewee responses. These factors are typically not relevant to whether the individual can do the job (that is, not related to job performance), thus, their influence on interview ratings should be minimized or excluded. In fact, there are laws in many countries that prohibit consideration of many of these protected classes of people when making selection decisions. Using structured interviews with multiple interviewers coupled with training may help reduce the effect of the following characteristics on interview ratings. The list of job irrelevant interviewer biases is presented below.

- **Attractiveness:** Applicant physical attractiveness can influence interviewer's evaluation of one's interview performance
- **Race:** Whites tend to score higher than Blacks and Hispanics; racial similarity between interviewer and applicant, on the other hand, has not been found to influence interview ratings
- **Gender:** Females tend to receive slightly higher interview scores than their male counterparts; gender similarity does not seem to influence interview ratings
- **Similarities in background and attitudes:** Interviewer perceived interpersonal attraction was found to influence interview ratings
- **Culture:** Applicants with an ethnic name and a foreign accent were viewed less favorably than applicants with just an ethnic name and no accent or an applicant with a traditional name with or without an accent

The extent to which ratings of interviewee performance reflect certain constructs varies widely depending on the level of structure of the interview, the kind of questions asked, interviewer or applicant biases, applicant professional dress or nonverbal behavior, and a host of other factors. For example, some research suggests that applicant's cognitive ability, education, training, and work experiences may be better captured in unstructured interviews, whereas applicant's job knowledge, organizational fit, interpersonal skills, and applied knowledge may be better captured in a structured interview. Further, interviews are typically designed to assess a number of constructs. Given the social nature of the interview, applicant responses to interview questions and interviewer evaluations of those responses are sometimes influenced by constructs beyond those the questions were intended to assess, making it extremely difficult to tease out the specific constructs measured during the interview. Reducing the number of constructs the interview is

intended to assess may help mitigate this issue. Moreover, of practical importance is whether the interview is a better measure of some constructs in comparison to paper and pencil tests of the same constructs. Indeed, certain constructs (mental ability and skills, experience) may be better measured with paper and pencil tests than during the interview, whereas personality related constructs seem to be better measured during the interview in comparison to paper and pencil tests of the same personality constructs. Summarily, the following is recommended: Interviews should be developed to assess the job relevant constructs identified in the job analysis.