

Structured versus Unstructured Interviews

Facts and Research

Background

To identify the best-in-class evidence and metrics-based talent management practices for the legal industry, Lawyer Metrics reviewed the vast research available from other industries. We also studied and conversed with human capital specialists working in consulting and accounting-related professional service firms.

This document reports our findings on structured versus unstructured job interviews. The evidence strongly suggests that, when making a hiring decision, the structured interview, particularly one that is behaviorally based, is a significantly better tool than the traditional unstructured, one-on-one approach.

What is a Structured Interview?

Interviews typically range from unstructured to structured. At one end of the continuum, an unstructured interview is completely unplanned. The questions are asked spontaneously, vary across candidates, and the responses are not evaluated in any consistent manner.

At the other end, a highly structured interview includes behavioral questions that are based on a thorough analysis of the job requirements and success traits. All candidates are asked the same questions and their responses are assessed in a standardized manner against job-specific criteria using a predetermined scorecard. These features help to establish a clear link between performance at the interview and performance on the job. They also minimize bias during the assessment process.

The following table¹ outlines the characteristics of unstructured versus structured interviews.

¹ Adapted from Structured Interviewing: How to Design and Conduct Structured Interviews for an Appointment Process; Assessment Oversight and the Personnel Psychology Centre, Public Service Commission of Canada 2009.

Unstructured Interviews	Structured Interviews
Interview Development	
Very little, if any, planning is conducted	Careful planning of interview objectives and the role takes place prior to the interview process
The factors evaluated by the interviewers are implicit and vary across applicants	The factors evaluated by the interviewers are based on a thorough job analysis and are consistent across candidates
Questioning is spontaneous and not necessarily job-related	Interview questions are predetermined and linked to job relevant criteria (e.g., knowledge, skills, and abilities)
Interview Administration	
Questions vary from one interview to the next for the same job	Each applicant is asked the same questions
Little, if any, control over type or amount of information collected across applicants	Questions and follow-up questions are controlled
Extraneous information can influence the direction of the interview	Irrelevant information is disregarded
Note-taking can be sketchy, disorganized, or nonexistent	Detailed notes are taken
Interview Evaluation	
No system, guide, or basis for evaluating interview responses	Pre-developed, behavioral basis for evaluating interview responses
Interviewer Training	
No formal training or instruction; preparation varies by interviewer	Extensive, experiential learning-based training and preparation provided

What are the Benefits of Structured Interviews?

Structured Behavioral interviews provide a number of advantages over unstructured interviews, including:

Increased accuracy and prediction. Since structured questions are behavioral and historical – about what the candidate did in the past, not what they would do in the future – and linked to job-related competencies, a candidate's responses are more likely to predict their on-the-job performance (Taylor & Small, 2002). Research also shows that panel interviews with the use of standardized questions and multiple ratings increase the validity of structured interviews (Conway & Jako, 1995). Additionally, well-trained interviewers make more accurate, consistent predictions about a candidate's performance than do untrained interviewers. (Huffcutt & Woehr, 1999).

Overall, research has shown that structured interviews are twice as effective at predicting job performance as unstructured interviews (Hunter & Schmidt, 1982; Weisner & Crowshaw, 1988; McDanile & Schmidt, 1994).

Enhanced objectivity and reduced bias. By asking the same questions and assessing responses according to the same job-relevant criteria, candidates have an equal opportunity to demonstrate their qualifications and to be assessed fairly (Huffcutt & Roth, 1999). In addition, the use of an interview board or panel rather than one individual assessor increases objectivity since consensus on a final evaluation must be reached (Campion, Pursell & Brown, 1991).

People are often unaware of their own biases and how these biases unconsciously influence their decisions. Research has shown that particular attributes can inappropriately influence an interview panel's assessment, including:

1. Physical attractiveness (Morrow, 1990);
2. Similarity of the applicant to the interviewer (Dipboye, 1992);
3. Gender (Graves & Powell, 1996); and
4. Race (Prewett-Livingston, Feild, Veres & Lewis, 1984)

Personal beliefs and values also may influence the unstructured interview process so that different questions may be asked of different people, or the same answer provided by different applicants may be interpreted differently.

Greater legal defensibility. When structured interviews are developed and administered according to professional guidelines, they are more likely to be legally defensible. Unstructured interviews are more likely than structured ones to be challenged in court, based on grounds of illegal discrimination (Williamson, Campion, Malos, Roehling & Campion, 1997). A study of 158 cases in U.S. Federal Court involving hiring discrimination from 1978 to 1997 showed that unstructured interview processes were challenged in court more than any other selection tool. Notably, the structured interview survived 100% of the legal challenges mounted against it, while the unstructured interview survived only 59% of challenges (Terpstra & Mohamed, 1999).

The courts tend to closely scrutinize the following three components of an interview when challenged legally:

1. The consistency of the interview across applicants;
2. The job-relatedness of the interview questions; and
3. The extent to which the interview process was designed to be objective.

Given the enhanced accuracy, consistency, and procedural rigor of a structured interview, the process is more likely to comply with the relevant legal requirements.

What Types of Organizations Utilize Structured Interviews?

Lawyer Metrics' research of other industries shows that many Fortune 500 companies and professional service firms use structured interviews to hire their high-level directors and partners. Select examples follow.

P&G – In addition to structured interviews, P&G also uses online success-driver assessments and reasoning assessments. (For more details on P&G's interview process, please visit: http://www.pg.com/en_US/downloads/careers/PGHiringProcess.pdf)

Altria – As part of its structured interview process, Altria uses behavioral interviewing in a panel setting to identify and select the highest performers. (For more details, please visit: http://www.cantbeattheexperience.com/en/cms/Getting_the_Job/Interview_Preparation/default.aspx)

PwC – In PwC's assurance group, structured interviews are used to hire managing directors and partners. After a comprehensive competency study of the critical skills necessary for success, PwC implemented behavioral questions and a balanced scorecard based on those success traits. These scorecards are used for both candidate interviews and performance evaluations of their existing directors and partners. According to the assurance's group lead recruiter, they have used this approach to hire over 200 high-level directors over the past year who have contributed 30% of the group's revenue growth, which equates to more than \$70 million dollars. They have had a 90% acceptance rate and less than 1% attrition over the past two and one-half years.

References

"Structured Interviewing: How to Design and Conduct Structured Interviews for an Appointment Process," Assessment Oversight and the Personnel Psychology Centre, Public Service Commission of Canada, 2, 3, 4. (2009)

Hunter and Schmidt (1982), *"Quantifying the Effects of Psychological Interventions on Employee Job Performance and Work-Force Productivity,"* Vol. 38, *American Psychologist*, 473, 474.

Wiesner and Crowshaw (1988), *"A Meta-Analytic Investigation of the Impact of Interview Format and Degree of Structure on the Validity of the Employment Interview,"* *Journal of Occupational Psychology*, Vol. 61, 275, 282 table 1.

Terpstra, D. A., Mohamed, A. A., Kethley R. B. (1999), *"An analysis of federal court cases involving nine selection devices,"* *International Journal of Selection and Assessment*, 7(1), 26-34.

Huffcutt, A.I. & Woehr, D.J. (1999), *"Further analysis of employment interview validity: a quantitative evaluation of interviewer-related structuring methods,"* *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 20, 549-560.

Huffcutt, A. I., & Roth, P. L. (1998), *"Racial group differences in employment interview evaluations,"* *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 83(2), 179-189.

Taylor, P., & Small, B. (2002), *"Asking applicants what they would do versus what they did do: A meta-analytic comparison of situational and past behavior employment interview questions,"* *Journal of Occupational & Organizational Psychology*, 75(3), 277-294.

Conway, J.M., Jako, R.A. & Goodman, D. F. (1995), *"A meta-analysis of interrater and internal consistency reliability of selection interviews,"* *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 80, 565-579.

McDaniel, M.A., Whetzel, D.L., Schmidt, F.L., & Maurer, S.D. (1994), *"The validity of employment interviews: A comprehensive review and meta-analysis,"* *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 79, 599-616.

Morrow, P. C. (1990), *"Physical attractiveness and selection decision*

making," *Journal of Management*, 16, 45-60.

Dipboye, R. L. (1992), *"Selection Interviews: Process Perspectives,"* South-Western Educational Publishing, Cincinnati, Ohio.

Graves, L. & Powell, G. (1996), *"Sex similarity, quality of the employment interview and recruiters' evaluation of actual applicants,"* *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology*, 69, 243-261.

Prewett-Livingston, A., Feild, H. S., Veres, J. G., & Lewis, P. M. (1984). *"Effects of race on interview ratings in a situational panel interview,"* *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 81, 178-186.

Williamson, L. G., Campion, J. E., Malos, S. B., Roehling, M. V., & Campion, M. A. (1997), *"Employment interview on trial: Linking interview structure with litigation outcomes,"* *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 82(6), 900-912.

Campion, M.A., Palmer, D. & Campion, J.E. (1997), *"A review of structure in the selection interviews,"* *Personnel Psychology*, 50, 655-702.

Campion, M.A., Pursell, E.D., & Brown, B.K. (1991), *"Structured interviewing techniques for personnel selection."* In Jones, J.W., Steffy, B.D., & Bray, D.W. (Eds.), *"Applying Psychology in Business: The Handbook for Managers and Human Resource Professionals,"* (pp. 251-259). Lexington Books.