

The four stages of the employment interview

Helping interviewers put two and two together

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to provide a conceptual model of the standard employment interview that practitioners may use to improve their interview skills and the accuracy of their selection decisions.

Design/methodology/approach – The dynamics of each discrete stage of the interview model are supported by empirical findings from the research literature on employment interviewing.

Findings – An interview transitions through four naturally occurring stages: the initial impression formed in the first few seconds when the candidate and interviewer first lay eyes on one another; a rapport building stage of several minutes to help each party settle in; the body of the interview in which job skills and culture-fit are assessed; and the close, when the interviewer asks if the candidate has any questions about the job or company.

Research limitations/implications – Implications for research include providing solutions to the problem of difficult-to-control personal biases (especially during Stages 1 and 2), as well as conducting holistic studies that include the factors that influence decision making across all four stages to determine their relative weights.

Practical implications – The four stage model can be used to design interview training programs. By dividing the interview into discrete stages, practitioners can become aware of the pitfalls within each stage and use evidence-based findings to correct mistakes.

Social implications – Companies and job candidates benefit alike when selection is based on job skills and person-organization fit rather than on how well job candidates can interview.

Originality/value – This is the first paper to propose that employment interviews move through four discrete stages and to support the assertion with findings from secondary empirical research.

Keywords Selection, Cognitive model, Job interview

Paper type Viewpoint

1. Introduction

Companies manage well when they hire well. Yet there is a mismatch between what is known and practiced.

Researchers knew a century ago that standard selection interviews have both, low inter-rater reliability (Scott, 1915) and poor predictive validity (Scott, 1916), and that interviewers are influenced disproportionately by candidate mannerisms, facial expressions, and personal appearance (Magson, 1926). Eldon Wonderlic (1937), of the Wonderlic intelligence test, summed up the frustration of his time when he wrote: “Most interviews today are conducted in exactly the same way as they were 50 years ago [...] Few [interviewers] follow a well-defined pattern and the interview generally amounts to a disorganized conversation resulting in a series of impressions based upon impulsive reactions” (p. 35). Practitioners today continue to use the same basic unstructured, conversational interview (Buckley *et al.*, 2000; Lievens and de Paepe, 2004),



although researchers advise against it (Latham and Sue-Chan, 1999; Wiesner and Cronshaw, 1988).

Cascio (2007) noted that academics focus on technical innovation whereas practitioners focus on administrative style. Academics can sell their ideas to practitioners, who are also lobbied by consultants and journalists, more easily by ensuring that they make intuitive sense. For example, using a social representations approach, Roulin and Bangarter (2012) argue that behavioural interviews are diffused through the practitioner-oriented literature much better than are structured interviews, and conclude that academics should “rethink their ways of communicating with practitioners through media” (p. 149).

This viewpoint outlines the key elements of a four stage interview model that is easily understood by practitioners. People create internal cognitive models of behaviour they intend to perform, compare their performance with the internal model and adjust subsequent actions accordingly (Bandura, 1986). A clear internal concept leads to good task performance. Moreover, complex tasks are best understood and mastered when divided into smaller components and when novel response patterns are related to familiar concepts. Hence, the four interview stages described below offer practitioners a cognitive map and highlight common pitfalls.

2. The four interview stages

Stage 1

Stage 1 begins when interviewers and candidates meet eye-to-eye and ends with a handshake. Strangers assess one another on the two universal dimensions of warmth and competence when they first meet (Fiske *et al.*, 2006), and people judge how trustworthy a stranger’s face looks within one-tenth of a second (Willis and Todorov, 2006). This stage lasts only a few seconds, however premature biases about job candidates, which are unrelated to potential job performance, cause interviewers to hire candidates who perform poorly on the job or to dismiss candidates who could have done the job quite well.

Appearance and the handshake are two sources of bias during Stage 1. Interview decisions are heavily affected by candidate appearance during unstructured, informal interviews but interviewers barely consider appearance when the interview is structured. Moreover, appearance does not correlate with subsequent job performance (Barrick *et al.*, 2009). Handshake quality affects hiring decisions because a firm handshake with a good pump and solid eye contact communicates extroversion (Stewart *et al.*, 2008). Extroverts present well during interviews (Caldwell and Burger, 1998; Huffcutt *et al.*, 2001) because they are emotionally expressive (Riggio and Riggio, 2002), which is generally considered a desirable trait (Friedman *et al.*, 1988). However, with the notable exceptions of managerial (Barrick *et al.*, 2001) and telemarketer jobs (Barrick *et al.*, 2002), extroversion, has not been a good predictor of job performance (Barrick *et al.*, 2001; Berry *et al.*, 2007; Chiaburu *et al.*, 2011).

This suggests that interviewers should withhold judgements during Stage 1.

Stage 2

Stage 2 begins when the interviewer offers coffee or exchanges pleasantries such as “So, did you have any trouble finding the place?” It gives both parties time to settle in. Practitioners can use the time to change gears from their busy schedules.

While engaging in small talk, a mismatch in non-relevant values can bias interviewers. Inadvertent comments by candidates can provoke interviewers’ deeply

held values (e.g. religious, political persuasion) and act as knock-out factors before candidates can prove themselves in Stages 3 and 4. Even when interviewers agree that such negative evaluations are unfair, counteracting the effect is challenging. Wilson and Brekke (1994) have coined the term mental contamination to emphasize that the effects are difficult to control. Research findings on the halo effect, first impression effects, cognitive dissonance, frame of reference, metacognition, heuristics, cognitive schemas and priming show the extent of mental bias.

However, interviewers should do their best to defer any evaluation during Stage 2 until the end. During mock interviews with student job candidates, evaluations after three minutes correlated with end-of-interview ratings (Barrick *et al.*, 2010). However, when the students interviewed with the Big Four accounting firms for summer internships two weeks later, the end-of-interview evaluations in the practice interviews predicted internship offers four times better than did the initial evaluations. Subsequently, Barrick *et al.* (2011) showed that interviewers were most influenced by candidates' verbal fluency and extrovert personalities during Stage 2.

Although applicant non-verbal behaviours influence interviewers throughout the interview, they first manifest during Stage 2. It is well known that interview judgements are swayed by candidates' body language such as eye contact, smiling, hand movements and posture (Burnett and Motowidlo, 1998; Liden *et al.*, 1993) as well as by the quality of their voices (DeGroot, and Gooty, 2009).

Thus, interviewers should build rapport to put candidates at ease, resist the effects of mental contamination, and then collect good-quality, job-related data during Stages 3 and 4.

Stage 3

Stage 3 is what most people think of as the interview. The academic-practitioner gap is most pronounced during this stage. Although Stage 3 is highly important, but it is one of four, and selection decisions are being shaped throughout the interview.

Stage 3 may proceed in either a structured or unstructured fashion (Dipboye, 1994). O'Rourke (1929), a Psychologist who worked for the US Civil Service during the time of Prohibition, developed the first known structured interview. Subsequently, Latham *et al.* (1980) developed the situational interview and Janz (1982) developed the patterned behaviour description interview. During a situational interview, the interviewer describes a dilemma embedded in a realistic job scenario. This is analogous to a work sample such as a typing test, except that words are used to convey the setting, and applicants' responses of how they would act substitute for actual performance. The mean corrected criterion-related validity of the situational interview is $r = 0.47$ (Latham and Sue-Chan, 1999).

Structured interviews ensure that candidates are judged against the requirements of the job instead of in the abstract (Campion *et al.*, 1997; Levashina *et al.*, 2014). Findings show that behavioural and situational questions help interviewers detect honest and deceptive impression management better than does mere interview experience alone (Roulin *et al.*, 2015); reduce employment selection biases against pregnant women (Bragger *et al.*, 2002) and overweight job candidates (Kutcher and Bragge, 2006); and reduce both gender and race similarity effects between interviewers and interviewees (McCarthy *et al.*, 2010). Moreover, structured interviews permit the most qualified job candidates to more accurately identify the target job dimensions (Ingold *et al.*, 2015).

Notwithstanding the superior effects of structured interviews, in practice, interviewers have historically used the unstructured approach (Wagner, 1949) and

continue to do so today (Dipboye, 1994; Stevens, 2009; Van der Zee *et al.*, 2002). Typical questions are, “So, tell me about yourself. Why do you think you’d be good for this position?” “Why should I hire you?” and “How would you describe yourself?”

Unstructured interviews create several problems. Interviewers who use applicants’ resumes to drive interviews are unable to compare multiple candidates against a common yardstick afterwards. This is analogous to giving different final exams to different students and then arguing that the grading is fair. Second, some interviewers are affected by stereotypes, such as bookworms cannot take action, women with families are more interested in benefits than careers, people with weight problems are lazy, ex-military personnel have a command-and-control attitude, and athletes in competitive sports make good leaders. Finally, interviewers use puzzle-tests that do not measure key job requirements. For example, a computer programmer might be asked: “You’re shrunk to a height of a nickel and thrown into a blender. Your mass is reduced so that your density is the same as usual. The blades start moving in 60 seconds. What do you do?”

In addition to measuring job skills during Stage 3, interviewers should explore how well candidates’ values match their corporate cultures. There is a sizable literature on person-organization fit and findings show that fitness matters (Cable and Judge, 1997; Edwards and Cable, 2009; Kristof-Brown *et al.*, 2005). Interviewers should ask “Why do you want to work for *our* company?” As one executive recruiter said, “You and I may have the same exact résumé but it doesn’t mean we’ll be equally happy in that company’s environment [...]. It’s not a bad thing, it’s who you are as a person. [...] there are some cultures that fit different personalities” (Wiersma, 2016, p. 81). Candidates who fit the company culture are happier and stay longer but are not necessarily more productive (Arthur *et al.*, 2006).

In summary, interviewers should structure the interview by basing their questions on a job analysis and then being consistent across job candidates, and assess person-organization fit.

Stage 4

Finally, Stage 4 begins when interviewers ask job candidates at the close of the interview whether they have any questions about the company or position.

The popular literature (e.g. Bolles, 2009) advises applicants to ask questions, and empirical findings, although scarce, confirm the advice. A review of the empirical findings shows that interviewers evaluate candidates more highly when they ask questions (Tullar, 1989); most candidates ask questions about the job (performance standards, schedule, in which department), the organization (culture, career opportunities), and the hiring process (selection criteria, why job is available) (Taylor *et al.*, 2010); interviewee questions average nine words (Babbitt and Jablin, 1985); and that the more successful candidates project themselves into the job by using the first person tense: “What would be *my* responsibilities?” instead of “What are *the* job responsibilities?” (Einhorn, 1981).

It is more difficult to pose a good question than to answer one, therefore candidates reveal useful information about themselves. Better candidates will custom-tailor their questions and link their personal backgrounds to the job responsibilities and needs of the organization. Instead of “How does this division plan to grow?” a thoughtful candidate would ask, “I understand from reading the annual report that this division plans to grow through its new health care acquisitions. How might my past

experience at Total Health Hospital help me in this job and division?" Specific questions may broadcast unique personal qualities that can be a competitive advantage for a company.

For these reasons, interviewers should set a tone at the close that encourages questions from job candidates.

3. Concluding remarks and research implications

The four stage model has research implications. Withholding judgements during the early interview stages is easier said than done because forewarned is not always forearmed (Wilson and Brekke, 1994). We need research that helps practitioners avoid unwanted factors that intrude upon selection decisions, for example, a limp handshake during Stage 1, or an inadvertent comment during Stage 2. One strategy to help interviewers avoid errors is to have them focus more on information that has predictive value. For example, when interviewing recent college graduates, a promising but rarely used approach that could potentially minimize mental contamination is simply to ask for the 'candidate's grade point average (GPA). GPA is an excellent proxy measure for conscientiousness in labour market entrants (Wiersma and Kappe, 2016). Conscientiousness predicts job performance across a wide spectrum of jobs, but is the most difficult of the Big Five personality dimensions to observe in an interview (Barrick *et al.*, 2000).

Second, analysis is part of science, but reductionism has its limits; synthesis is also important. We might conduct studies that measure simultaneously all of the important variables that influence hiring decisions to determine their relative weights, and assess how candidate characteristics interact with one another across the four stages, in both structured and unstructured interview contexts.

In summary, some degree of gut feel will be present during any interview but such feelings should not dictate hiring decisions. It is important to create meritocracies in which job candidates with requisite skills and values are selected, rather than those who just happen to interview well.

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