

THE EMPLOYMENT INTERVIEW: AN OVERVIEW WITH SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

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The paper presents a brief discussion of the employment interview, particularly as regards its purpose, continued use, structuring, and the low use of the data by professionals. It then offers some areas and questions for further research.

While today the selection of the right people is a key factor in any organization's success, this has not always been the case. Traditionally, selection decisions were not necessarily strategic or even key ones. In the industrial revolution "smokestack" world, both salary and wage workers lived in a world where hiring costs were low, workers quickly replaceable, and where required skills were generally simple and unspecialized, easily trainable or transferable, and relatively less portable (workers had to go where the plant was located; any threat to leave meant that they had to tear up roots and physically move). The major investment in the industrial world was in financial capital, not human capital. Indeed, the horror stories of life within "England's dark, satanic mills" graphically indicate just how little workers and their skills—and even their lives—were valued. It is said that in the coal mines of Cape Breton, the first "summer vacation" closures were to give the pit ponies a break; the men were simply fired and re-hired two weeks later. For a plethora of reasons this has, of course, changed over time.

Much current writing on organizational issues suggests that people are increasingly becoming the key factor in an organization's competitive advantage in its marketplace. In particular, the rapid expansion in the service and knowledge industries, where the skills are specialized and inseparable from the employee and where the product being sold is (or can be) intangible and customized by each employee directly for the customer on request has made employees the pivotal factor between success and failure. Increasingly, specific employee knowledge and competencies (often referred to in the literature as KSAOs¹) are part of an organization's success, and these specific skills are the proprietary property of the individual and are entirely portable. Thus hiring procedures must be able to determine accurately which prospective employees represent the best likelihood of effective person-job and person-organization fit. The costs of poor hiring are large and continue to increase.

The cost of turnover is high, both in direct and indirect costs. Various studies suggest that all related costs involved with the recruiting, selection, orientation and training processes can be between 50 and 150 per cent of the annual salary for any position (Lermusiaux. n.d.; Bliss, n.d.). Employee turnover is highest in the first three months after hiring, and a badly designed selection function simply increases the likelihood of new employee turnover.

¹ Knowledge, skills, abilities, and other

Improper or invalid selection techniques can entail legal difficulties and challenges, and can in our present regulated (and litigious) environment quickly bring down charges of both intentional and systemic discrimination on organizations whose selection procedures are badly structured (Roehling, Campion & Arvey, 1999; Kutcher & Bragger, 2004). In a global business world and within increasingly multicultural societies such as Canada, selection procedures must be, and appear to be, valid, unbiased and defensible.

To apply Lord Hewart's famous maxim about justice in a different context, proper hiring procedures, like justice, should not only be done, but should be clearly seen to be done.

The Employment Interview's Staying Power

The employment selection interview² has been examined and researched for many number of decades, with the literature going back as early as W. D. Scott in 1915 (Eder & Harris, 1999). For much of that time most of the literature concluded that the employment interview had limited predictive power, with its usefulness as a selection tool even sometimes seen as not much superior to indulging in simple random selection, no more effective than pulling candidates' names from a hat. Some more recent studies have challenged that view and have suggested that properly structured and applied selection interviews can have a reasonable predictive power in determining future performance.

The employment interview remains a key part of the selection process. Regardless of seemingly endless criticism of the effectiveness, validity, and reliability of the interview (particularly when unstructured) in much of the research, the interview appears to be here to stay (Oliver, 1998). Wiesner and Cronshaw (1988) refer to the employment interview as "a tenaciously popular but controversial selection method" and say that, "the employment interview continues to enjoy ubiquitous (but apparently inexplicable) popularity among practitioners" (p275). Indeed, Judge, Higgins & Cable (2000) suggest that there "is perhaps no more widely used selection procedure than the employment interview. Despite decades of research questioning the validity of the interview and the reliability of interviewers, most organizations still include some type of interview in their selection process" (p383). Wright, Lichtenfels, & Pursell (1989, p191) have said of the employment interview that despite its arguable effectiveness it has become "the most widely used employment technique in America." Barclay (2001) admits that the literature indicates that the employment interview is likely here to stay regardless of the evidence against its overall applied effectiveness.

Consequently, the selection interview has been fairly well, if inconclusively, studied for decades. During the last two decades much of this research has been reviewed, compiled, and re-examined in a number of meta-analyses. Among these are Arvey & Campion (1982), Conway, Jako, &

² The terms employment interview and selection interview will be used interchangeably in this paper.

Goodman (1995), McDaniel, Whetzel, Schmidt, & Maurer (1994), Posthuma, Morgenson, & Campion (2002), Wiesner & Cronshaw (1988), and Wright, Lichtenfels, & Pursell (1989) as well as general investigations into employment interview methods (Buckley & Weitzel, 1989). Though the study results vary as to the overall effectiveness (validity) of the interview, generally they do indicate that validity increases with structure.

Yet despite all the research, there still remains a noticeable gap between what the research indicates, and actual interviewing as performed by field practitioners (Arvey & Campion, 1982; Eder, Kacmar & Ferris, 1989; Harris & Eder, 1999). The more traditional, standard, or what is now more commonly called unstructured interview is still not only used a good portion of the time but also may even still represent the format of a majority of all selection interviews held today. More to the point, why are the decades of literature and research, and verifiable resultant data apparently ignored by many HR practitioners and hiring managers?

What is the Purpose of the Employment Interview?

While this is not the place to go into a detailed discussion of the definition of the employment interview, it is worth noting that although there is some general agreement as to a definition of what is meant or what constitutes an employment interview, there are also sufficient degrees of differences in definitions to complicate study. The selection interview has been defined as “a face-to-face exchange of job relevant information...with the overall goal of attracting, selecting, and retaining a highly competent workforce” (Eder, Kacmar & Ferris, 1989, p 3), as the point where all previous information about a candidate is integrated with the information the candidate provides about past behaviours and future intentions (Fear, 1984), as “an interpersonal interaction of limited duration between one or more interviewers and a job-seeker for the purpose of identifying interviewee knowledge, skills, abilities and behaviours that may be predictive of success in subsequent employment” (Weisner and Cronshaw, 1988, p276). As Eder & Harris (1999) say in quoting Guion (1997), “There are many different interviewers, looking for many different things, and using many different methods” (p2).

The employment interview has also been defined as a test of an applicant’s interpersonal and communication skills and where the interaction of the participants in the interview process itself is a key variable in assessment, or oppositely as an additional or even substitute assessment device where the structure and substantive content of the questions is key while process is relegated at much less importance, or as a verbal cognitive ability test (this is particularly true with more highly structured interviews), or as a measure of long-term motivation that may try to determine person-organization fit or the candidate’s organizational citizenship tendencies (Buckley and Weitzel, 1989). As well, the interview is seen by some practitioners—at least in some circumstances—as a means to sell candidates (and applicants) on the organization, to present them with realistic job-related information (Arvey and Campion, 1982) or to encourage applicants to accept an offered position (Rynes, Colbert & Brown, 2002).

Each one of these different purposes necessitates different strategies, methodologies, and likely quite different processes, and will entail different dynamics and favour the impact of certain variables over others. These various perspectives across studies concerning settings, processes,

and questions are still a problem with the employment interview research, and a confounding factor when comparing articles and studies.

Webster (1982, p7), repeating the opinion of Carlson, Thayer, Mayfield and Peterson (1971), says that the true purpose of a selection interview is to gather data, both concrete facts and information about the candidate's attitudes and values, in order to permit the organization to make as accurate as possible predictions concerning future job performance. While one might suppose that this would be a basic and all-encompassing definition, even this definition has been challenged. Indeed, some researchers maintain that due to the nature of the dynamics that encompass the employment interview that there are "as many different interviews as there are numbers of interviewers and interviewees" (Wiesner & Cronshaw, 1988; p276). But as Buckley & Weitzel (1989) say, despite the variety of perspectives held by researchers, there does appear to be "general agreement that the interview is an interaction between two or more individuals where an individual evaluative decision is occurring" (p296). In the specific employment-oriented interview (versus an interview for any other purpose) Buckley and Weitzel suggest the main outcome of such an interaction is a decision on one side to make an offer or not and on the other to accept or not.

Webster agreed with the collection of information as being very important, but decided that the key characteristic of the employment interview is interviewer cognitive processes (decision-making), the judgement that produces the actual decision; "everything else is preparatory" (1982; p7). Thus the selection interview is not just about asking questions; it is equally if not more so about how to use the answers (Breakwell, 1990). That is, it is about making, or at least attempting to make, effective hiring decisions.

All this implies an exchange of information between interviewer and applicant. As Eder and Harris (1999) put it, regardless of any and all other purposes served by an interview, "[T]he key word here is *exchange*—an *expectation* of give-and-take between the interviewer and the applicant. Perhaps it is the interviewer-applicant exchange that makes the interview more than just a method of obtaining information; it is the exchange itself that provides potentially unique information beyond what is ordinarily obtained from other methods" (p2). (authors' italics)

The Question of Structure

The literature generally discusses two "types" or formats of employment interview: structured and unstructured. The truth is in fact that interviews can fall anywhere along a spectrum from a totally unstructured (and even disorganized) style to a highly structured interview situation, a thoroughly preplanned, practised, and rigidly managed format that would be standardized (i.e. identical for all candidates), consciously unbiased, and directly job-related. While a preponderance of the research has indicated that despite the fact that both reliability and validity increase with high structure interviews (Wright, Lichtenfels, & Pursell, 1989; Foster & Godkin, 1998; Barclay, 2001; Campion, Palmer & Campion, 1997; Judge, Higgins, & Cable, 2000), the structured interview appears to be used less often than might be expected given these results (Lievens & De Paepe, 2004). Thus the truth is that the bulk of selection interviews are in a range

that goes from a totally unstructured, off the cuff format to what could be loosely called a semi-structured style, though the term semi-structured is vague as it defines a rather large set of possibilities as to levels of structure.

In fact, even when discussing the “structured” interview there is no firm agreement among researchers or within the literature as to what is exactly meant by this term (Eder & Harris, 1999). For example, Campion et al. (1997) identify a number of different levels or degrees of structure, from those that influence content to those that can influence the cognitive evaluation / judgement processes. Generally, the structured interview can take two general approaches: the previous-job-related (experience-based) interview (Janz, 1989), which attempts to ascertain and assess relevant past behaviours (“what actions did you take...?”), and the future-oriented, situational interview (Latham, 1989) that works to assess candidates’ ability to give an indication of their actions in potential future situations (“What would you do if...?”)

Proper structured interviews are based upon previously determined required KSAOs (which themselves are prioritized) and around which assessment questions are designed. (Hakel, 1989). Further, in the current legal environment of specific anti-discriminatory rules and regulations, job analysis is a requirement for compliance (Feild & Gatewood, 1989). As well, the question format must be based around a detailed and effective job analysis system that develops a real understanding of the needs of the job being filled. Though job analysis may not necessarily increase reliability, it is considered “a basic requirement for developing valid selection procedures” (Campion, Palmer & Campion, 1997, p660; Barclay, 2001).

Unstructured interviews tend to be less (or much less) planned procedures that are often made up as the interviewer goes along, and that often entail questions based on the interviewer’s personal diagnosis of the situation. Questions can be casual, subjective, unrelated to any job-pertinent criteria, and/or uninformed as to job requirements (see Catano et al., 2001; p404-5 for samples), and consequently validity can be quite low - if not very low (Cronshaw & Weisner, 1989). Reliability of unstructured interviews is poor as well, mainly due to interviewer subjectivity and cognitive biases. While extraneous factors can influence any interview (DeGroot & Motowidlo, 1999), they can become seriously pronounced in less structured situations, where matters concerning the applicant’s appearance or the applicant’s human and cultural characteristics can come into play. Attractiveness (however defined) has been shown to have an impact, (Dipboy, Arvey & Terpstra, 1977; Elliot, 1981; Forsythe, Drake & Cox, 1985; Gilmore, Beehr & Love, 1986; Graves & Powell, 1996; Kutcher & Bragger, 2004), as has those characteristics of race, sex, educational level (and institution), age and other such personal attributes (Prewett-Livingston, Feild, Veres, & Lewis, 1996; Weiss & Maurer, 2004). Gender can have an impact regardless of whether interviewers and or applicants are male or female, and regardless whether both are same sex or different sex (Parsons & Liden, 1984). As Dipboye (1994) states even the same interviewer (let alone different interviewers) will make different evaluative decisions from applicant to applicant.

Despite their high potential for flaws and subsequent evaluation errors, unstructured interviews can allow spontaneous information to be sought or provided, to follow up on an unexpected piece of information, to make room for probing and elaboration, and to give both parties a

chance to feel out and make some subjective decisions about the other. As well, unstructured interviews are generally less costly, and involve less preparation and interviewing skills, and often don't require such preliminary activities as job analysis. And they still comprise by far the large majority of employment interviews (Dipboye, 1994; Dreher & Maurer, 1989). Though some researchers, for various reasons, have started to question whether the unstructured interview should even continue to be studied, Eder and Harris (1999) argue that, "most organizations continue to use the unstructured interview to a large extent, and hence there is value...in scholarly studies of how these interviews affect important outcomes" (p17).

Why is the Unstructured Interview Still Used Despite the Literature?

Why is there such a gap between interview research and actual interview practice? Regardless of the amount of research data, including a couple of validity meta-analyses, that indicates that structured interviews, if properly done, increase interview validity (Huffcutt & Arthur, 1994; Huffcutt & Woehr, 1999; McDaniel, Whetzel, Schmidt, & Maurer, 1994; Weisner & Cronshaw, 1988), most practitioners still appear to favour an unstructured or at best a semi-structured interview format. Smart (1983) says that surveys of some thousands of middle and upper managers indicates that a large majority do not use a structured format. One suggestion as to why the people who actually do interviews display a disinterest in utilizing employment interview research is a feeling on behalf of these real practitioners that all this research is at times less than understandable, and often more academic than applicable to the day-to-day world of organizational reality (Rynes, Colbert, & Brown, 2002). That is, there is sense in the minds of practitioners of two different worlds in this matter: the real world of theirs and the "other-worldly" one of the academics.

Webster (1982) wondered why, if the purpose of the employment interview was simply to collect data that would lead to an effective hiring decision, were there then such problems with the selection interview? Why did the different research studies give different results as regards reliability, validity, and even basic effectiveness? He came to the conclusion that the problem was in the design methodology of the research and that much of the research was practically irrelevant to the outside world. He maintained that since the interview is an event that occurs in the far less controllable environment of the real world, where organizational needs and constraints, social requirements, time pressures, interviewer incompetence and bias, and legal demands all have an impact, the results obtained in much selection interview research done in more laboratory or artificial (that is, not actual) settings was of minimal use to those who actually did the job.

In his research, Smart (1983) found his own surveys to indicate that many interviewers "have a vague feeling in their gut that there would be advantages" to a structured process, but they just never do it (p 60). Practitioners offered a variety of reasons: the feeling of being constrained by a structured format, the lack of any spontaneity and a sense of doing things by rote, the appearance of a lack of competence and knowledge by not knowing what questions to ask without having to read them off, sounding mechanical and impersonal, and so on. Rynes et al. (2002) found from almost one thousand HR professionals that there was a large gap between

research findings and the practitioners awareness of, interest in, acceptance of, or use of the results.

Though not a lot of study has been done on this subject, some possible further reasons for this that have been offered include time constraints that left professionals with little time to keep up with the literature, the difficulty in even accessing such journals, the fact that the average research paper or journal has become increasingly technical and scientific, rendering them difficult for non-academics to comprehend or apply, and the problem that those issues that academics think important are not those that the practitioners think should rate much attention (Rynes, Colbert, & Brown, 2002). This may be unfortunate since Rynes et al. found that in staffing matters, less than 50% of respondents from a survey among HR practitioners agreed with current research findings when asked a series of selection-based questions. For example, for over 50% of professionals, their opinion of the predictive impact on future job performance of applicant intelligence (low) and applicant conscientiousness and values (high) was wrong on both counts given recent research results,

Arvey and Campion (1982) in their review of the research into the employment interview suggested that use of the (generally unstructured) interview persists for four possible categories of reasons. The first reason is that the interview is valid, at least insofar as it offers valid observations on certain behaviours such as speech or social attitudes. The remaining categories accept the fact that the employment may not be measurably valid, but regardless that it offers other advantages. These include the fact that practical considerations (number of candidates, size of organization, or other constraints) make the unstructured interview functional; that despite the lack of validity, many interviewers retain a great belief in their ability to make effective judgements by over-valuing their experience and successes; and finally, that the interview may not offer much validity per se, but fills other non-selection needs, such as selling candidates on the job or answering candidates' questions.

Terpstra and Rozell (1997) add to these reasons some other possibilities: organizational philosophy or objectives, including social objectives that may outweigh performance objectives, a fear that rigid hiring practices could harm the organization's image, no support from top management, internal politics, or a culture that is change resistant.

Some Suggestions for Future Research

While the employment interview has been studied for decades, much of the research has been into the areas as validity, reliability, structure, cognition, and various potential biases. What has been investigated less are such issues as the impact of the regulatory and legal environment on the interview process, structure, design, and even continued use, the purpose - or purposes - of the interview as perceived by the organization and the interviewer (i.e. why is the interview held?), perceived value and validity of the interview on the part of both the interviewer and the interviewee, actual and perceived constraints on both the interview process and the interviewer, and awareness and use of the research literature on the selection interview by actual practitioners. As was discussed previously, some researchers have noted that there seems to still

be great disinterest in utilizing employment interview research on the part of hiring managers and even HR professionals, although there is an abundance of research into the subject (Barclay, 2001; Rynes, Colbert, Brown, 2002). Obviously this is not just a recent occurrence; twenty years earlier Lewis (1980) had also commented that interview research, for a variety of reasons, had been, and continued to be, generally ignored by actual practitioners in the field.

At the moment there appear to be three possible categories of forces that combine to determine the form and function of the employment interview. The first can be called the environmental arena, where major influences on the use and structure of the employment interview derive from the firm's human environment, legal concerns, and issues of diversity. Factors here could include the legal and regulatory environment that concerns valid and proper hiring procedures, employment equity demands or concerns, social and stakeholder concerns within the organization that will impact selection objectives, the demands of the organization's customer base on the cultural / racial / ethnic / linguistic makeup of (at least some) segments of the internal workforce, and the changing demographics of the external workforce applicant pool.

The second area could deal with the belief in the selection interview as being generally effective (this might also be referred to as the any interview is better than no interview construct). Pertinent issues here could include the fact that while interviewers may agree that the interview is open to problems of validity and biases, they (may) feel that these problems do not particularly apply to themselves (often by overrating their own judgement and their successes, and underestimating their failures). As well, is it felt that candidates respond accurately and honestly, and if not can be found out by a skilled interviewer (that skilled interviewers are capable of seeing through applicant impression management techniques), and even the fact that the interview, often in conjunction with other testing and selection devices does offer reasonable predictive power. Indeed, in many cases it appears that the unstructured interview is acceptable, or even preferable, to a structured format.

The last area is the concept that the interview serves purposes other than just determining applicant KSAOs. This construct covers the apparent need within organizations for the employment interview within the hiring process, even if its low validity (or relative ineffectiveness) is admitted by practitioners. Factors here could include the need to actually physically see the person; it may be argued that regardless of how inaccurate our judgements about another person may turn out, it is necessary for us to want to experience the other person's physical presence, in order to make a decision with any level of confidence. Also, there can/may be other purposes that can be served by an interview: a chance to view dress, behaviours, speaking ability, and less proper details such as sex, race and colour, or ethnic background. Finally, is the interview seen as a chance to sell the company or the job, and/or to impart some realistic job information, or to serve some other organizational purpose not previously discussed?

Thus potential research questions could look at the following variables and relationships:

Is there a direct relationship between employment interview structure and its requirement for social and legal conformance?

Is there a relationship between the use of the employment interview and the increasing legal and social concerns as regards demographic diversity in the workplace?

Is there a relationship between a variety of internal organizational factors, interviewer attitudes, and the level of structure of the employment interview?

Is there a relationship between the published research into the use of, effectiveness of, impact of structure on, and problems with, the employment interview and the actual practices as employed by managers and/or human resource practitioners? And if not (as appears may be the case) why not?

Is there a relationship between the influence of a possible number of extraneous less-than-relevant factors and the outcome of the employment interview; that is, what is the impact of non-job-related factors on selection judgements?

And finally, is an interview necessary at all? That is, would a hiring decision be made without a (face-to-face) interview, and if not, why not?

Summary

It seems a shame that the literature on the employment interview receives so little attention from so many practitioners. In other fields of research, the literature is read and ingested, critically examined, re-interpreted, and used as the base for further study and knowledge. In other fields, from history to physics, research (or most of it at least) serves to further extend the working knowledge of the respective discipline, and the effectiveness of its practitioners. In the case of the employment interview—and perhaps much business research altogether—it is ignored by many of its practitioners. Much of the research on the employment interview done over decades often seems to have not served much more purpose than producing studies and developing the careers of researchers. Both are honourable activities, and researchers can not be held entirely culpable for the lack of interest from outside professionals, but if the research is not going to have much practical impact or application in the world beyond the university, it seems to serve little purpose and scarcely fulfills its intended mission of providing a better set of working tools. A first step might be to find out why the literature is regarded as impractical or simply ignored.

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