

Why Interviews Are Insufficient on Their Own

Separating Fact from Fiction

The concept of the interview is prevalent in society. For example, the biggest commercial television network in the United Kingdom, ITV, features the hit talk-show, Parkinson. Every Saturday night, one in three ITV viewers tune in to watch Michael Parkinson take on famous guests. Parkinson uses a certain style of questioning to draw information from his guests. For example, see this excerpt from his interview with Simon Cowell:

Michael: "What is it Simon? You bring the worst out in people, what is it?"

Simon: Misunderstood probably.

Michael: You're not really that rude, arrogant person on television?

Simon: Well sometimes, but you've got to remember that when we do the audition shows, for example, they cut out 99 percent of the times when I'm really nice (laughter), so you only see the one percent where occasionally I'm in a bad mood.

Michael: Oh, occasionally.

Simon: So I blame the producers."

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Typically, this style of interviewing is quite assertive and provides great entertainment, but do you ever wish that interviewers would ask something they haven't, or question guests more directly? Have you ever been frustrated when a talk-show host has upset one of his or her guests? The conversation with Simon Cowell demonstrates that interviews are a regular, normalized part of modern society.

Interviews are even more prevalent in organizational life. But is the interview's position as the most frequently used recruitment method justified?

Fact
98 percent of public and private sector organisations use the interview to select people to fill job vacancies.
Fiction
In most cases, using the interview method enables the right person to be chosen for a particular job.

We know that most organizations use interviews and that the majority of us will experience the interviewing process at one time or another. However, many organizations place a firm and often inappropriate emphasis on the evidence they gain from these interviews when selecting candidates.

Although questions repeatedly continue to be raised about the worth of interview data and the quality of decisions that arise from them, nothing has appeared to change.

So Why Do We Persevere?

Kenexa® recognizes that there are three key factors that must be understood and adhered to in order for an interview to be truly effective:

- The interview must be based on a sound, up-to-date competency framework that is validated against job performance.
- Questions should be written to gain sound evidence of past behavior against this competency framework.
- A structured format should be used to guide interviewers to collect the appropriate information during the interview.

The majority of organizations do not follow this approach and continue to use their interviewing methodology that has consistently failed in the past. What are the reasons for this?

Fact
Candidates and line managers have firmly held expectations that the interview will be part of every recruitment process.
Fiction
The interview is the most appropriate recruitment method in all situations.

In essence, one of the main reasons interviews remain prevalent, even with their bad image, is because they have become such an established part of the recruitment process. Candidates and line managers would be in an uproar if interviews were eliminated.

- Line managers want the opportunity to meet their potential team members and 'size' them up prior to any job offers, and feel cheated if they are not allowed to do this.
- Candidates want the opportunity to sell themselves, which many feel is easier to do in an interview than in other assessment methods, and to find out more about the organization so that they can make a realistic and informed decision about their desire for the job.

If these reasons are accepted and the interview is in fact here to stay, organizations, HR practitioners and psychologists must take responsibility for increasing the value of this method.

Optimizing the Interview
Step One: Apply Structure

Fact
Structuring the interview has been proven to increase the effectiveness of recruitment decisions.
Fiction
Applying structure to the interview is sufficient to make it a robust, worthwhile process.

Research suggests that structuring the interview is the best way of ensuring a suitable candidate is chosen. Certainly, over the last few years, the structured interview has become more prevalent than its unstructured predecessor. In essence, this means that each candidate is asked exactly the same question in exactly the same order. Adopting this approach seeks to minimize the amount of variability between interviewers and ensure that all candidates experience a fair, consistent process.

It is necessary, however, to go much deeper to ensure that decision-making from the interview process improves.

Step Two: Interview against the Right Criteria

Fact
Interviewing against well-chosen competencies has been shown to facilitate the selection of an optimal performer.
Fiction
Once a competency interview has been designed, it can be used for years across a variety of different job positions.

Structured interviewing against competencies can work well, but it is essential to spend time making an informed decision about the core competencies required for a specific job. It is also crucial to decide the competencies that are best assessed by the interview.

There is no point in conducting a fully structured competency-based interview that covers three competencies not key to the position. There is equally little value in spending time interviewing on a competency that is better assessed elsewhere. For example, analytical thinking is much better assessed through a psychometric test or simulation exercise than through an interview. Therefore, it is important to remember:

- It is vital to conduct job analyses across the organization in order to ensure that a detailed understanding of the behavioral competencies required for optimal performance in all job positions is gained. These analyses must be repeated at regular intervals to take into account the rate of change that organizations are experiencing.
- Interview questions and schedules must be designed to effectively assess relevant competencies. These schedules should be specific to each position and not generically applied across an entire department.
- Questions should be refreshed regularly to ensure that they stay up-to-date and relevant to the job requirements. Keeping the same bank of questions for many years may allow candidates to become too familiar with the questions and provide rehearsed answers.
- Realistic timing should be applied. Two questions should be asked per competency, with a minimum of 10 minutes allowed to cover these. This means that it provides two sets of evidence for a candidate's competence; it also minimizes the ability of candidates to reproduce or fabricate an answer that matches the competency.

Step Three: The Interviewers

Fact
Many interviewers make a decision about a candidate in the first two minutes of the interview.
Fiction
Training interviewers ensures that they do a good job.

Many organizations use a combination of HR and line managers to conduct recruitment interviews, which may be one-to-one or panel based. Regardless of the approach that is used, the interviewers must be provided with rigorous training.

But many ask ‘Why?’ The answer is complex, but individuals should be trained to ensure that:

- Interviewers learn objective, practical techniques to ensure they question and probe a candidate in an effective way.
- Interviewers gain understanding of the need to control those natural human tendencies to make judgements about others that are not evidence-based.
- Interviewers have the opportunity to practice and re-practice interviewing in a ‘safe’ environment and receive constructive feedback on their technique.

Those trained effectively in competency-based interviewing techniques are more likely to reach a sound decision at the end of the process. Although this is true, the answer is more complicated than that.

A study of individuals who had been trained in interviewing techniques found that only 17 percent felt they had been trained effectively. Many indicated a lack of experience as an issue when they were conducting interviews. It is essential to choose the right training that allows plenty of opportunity to gain confidence and experience. In addition, organizations should try to remember that continual review of the interview training program, retraining where necessary, and constant practice of the skills acquired is essential in order to minimize issues with individuals conducting the interview process.

Step Four: Effective Evaluation

Fact
Many organizations put time into creating competency-based structured interviews and training their interviewers to be thorough and rigorous, only to disregard the evidence and make an intuitive decision anyway.
Fiction
The interview is complete when the candidate walks out of the door.

The process that happens once an interview is complete is both vital, but frequently rushed.

- As part of the interview design, a rating scale should be assigned that fits to the competency model.
- Detailed notes should be taken during the interview (an additional scribe often facilitates this process).
- An assessment of a candidate’s performance should happen immediately after the interview against the defined criteria.

- Notes should be reviewed against these criteria and rating judgements should be supported by evidence. Each interviewer must take responsibility for this and for ensuring that the temptation to make an intuitive decision of, “I can see that person fitting in” is avoided.

What Next?

People and organizations frequently use the interview method ineffectively. It’s important to ask whether you or your organization fit into this category. Take responsibility now for doing something to improve the recruitment situation within your organization. If used effectively, the interview can play a prominent role in ensuring that organizational performance is optimized by selecting the right people.

Kenexa has many years of practical experience applying the interview method to a variety of situations within organizations. Remember this method can also add value to performance appraisals and disciplinary action. Kenexa follows a practical, robust model, which is easy to use and provides focused information that is needed to facilitate decision making. This structure also enables interviewers to collect relevant evidence from a candidate’s experience that focuses on what they have done and the business outcomes that materialized. Our interviewing workshops focus on providing practical use of this model so that attendees leave feeling fully prepared for what is to follow. ■

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