

# Using Structured Interviews for Selecting and Developing Employees

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**T**he purpose of structured, competency-based interviewing is to help organizations hire and promote people who will succeed in their jobs. Different jobs require different competencies. Competencies are important because they can be used to improve performance (both individual and organizational) in at least three ways: selection, feedback and development.

1. Selection: Competencies can be used to guide recruitment (the company seeks to identify recruiting sources rich in critical competencies) and selection (the company builds structured interviews around the critical competencies). If new employees can be hired into the job already possessing most, if not all, of the critical competencies, they will be more successful more quickly.

2. Feedback: Research has shown that employees receiving feedback about their strengths and weaknesses improve their performance more than those who do not (Smither, London, Vasilopoulous, Reilly, Milsap & Salvemini, 1995). Furthermore, it appears that those who need it most are those who benefit the most from feedback. Competencies provide a useful framework for organizing job-relevant feedback.

3. Development: Finally, competencies can be strengthened through a variety of developmental activities. Although enhancing one's knowledge or changing one's skills is not easy, those who make development a priority can improve competencies and their resulting performance.

The objective of interviewing is to help managers and human resource professionals hire and promote employees who possess the knowledge and skills necessary to succeed in the target job and the broader organization.

A structured interview has scripted questions and guidelines for consistently evaluating responses. Therefore, all candidates are

asked the same questions, in the same order and in exactly the same way (without differing explanations or interpretations by the interviewer). Structured also means that every candidate's responses are evaluated and scored, typically using behaviorally anchored rating scales developed for each question. After all, structured questions have been asked and evaluated, any follow-up questions can be asked based on answers given by candidates.

Some elements of structure in employment interviewing as defined by Huffcutt and Arthur (1994) include:

1. Basing questions on an analysis of the target job (i.e., tying questions to competencies required by the job)
2. Asking the same questions of each candidate
3. Asking specific types of questions (i.e., asking about specific past job behaviors or what one would do in hypothetical job-related situations)
4. Using detailed, behaviorally anchored rating scales (i.e., rating scales with behavioral examples to illustrate points along the scale)
5. Limiting the use of follow-up questions by the interviewer
6. Systematically combining ratings of questions to derive an overall score
7. Providing comprehensive training for interviewers

A recent analysis of 120 interview studies, with 18,158 interviews, showed that interviewer training improves the validity of the interview (Huffcutt & Woehr, 1999). That is, well-trained interviewers make more accurate, consistent predictions about a candidate's likely performance than do untrained interviewers.

## Why Use a Structured Interview?

The employment interview is undoubtedly the most widely used of all candidate assessment techniques. In the typical unstructured interview, the interviewer asks questions based on the applicant's resume or from a limited set of "pet" interview

questions. Research on unstructured interviews is extensive and not particularly encouraging.

Most unstructured interviews are nearly random events. As an illustration, consider that if selection decisions were purely random and that half of all applicants were hired, the odds of hiring an above-average performer would be 50/50 (half or 50 percent of those hired would perform above average and half would be below average). Based on past research, the odds of hiring an above-average performer using an unstructured interview (versus relying totally on chance) would improve to only 56 percent (Huffcutt & Arthur, 1994). In other words, the typical unstructured interview barely improves upon a roll of the dice. At the risk of discouraging the reader, interviewer accuracy does not appear to improve with experience (most interviewers continue to make the same mistakes).

This same research, however, has shown that structuring the interview can pay handsome dividends. The average structured interview will increase the odds of hiring an above-average performer to 70 percent. While recognizing that no selection method is perfect, this still represents a dramatic improvement. The use of structured interviews increases the chances of hiring an above-average performer from about 56 to 70 percent.

While unstructured interviews are among the least reliable and least valid methods of assessing job candidates, properly structured interviews are among the most reliable (Conway, Jako & Goodman, 1995) and valid methods (Campion, Palmer & Campion, 1997).

In measurement terms, reliability refers to the degree of consistency and may take several forms. The consistency with which different interviewers arrive at similar conclusions (inter-rater reliability), the consistency with which the same interviewer reaches the same conclusions after interviewing a candidate on two different occasions (test-retest reliability) and the consistency with which different but related questions yield similar conclusions (internal consistency reliability) are all forms of reliability. Reliability is a necessary condition for validity.

Validity refers to the accuracy of the inferences drawn from the interview about future job performance. It is not the interview form itself that is valid, but the inferences drawn from it (which is why the same interview can be valid or invalid if, for example, it is used with two totally different jobs). As noted previously, structuring an interview for a job is an effective way of increasing the accuracy of inferences (i.e., prediction of job performance) drawn about job candidates (McDaniel, Whetzel, Schmidt and Maurer, 1994).

In addition to the increased reliability and validity of structured interviews, there is also research documenting a relationship

between litigation outcomes and the level of structure of the employment interview (Gollub Williamson, Campion, Malos, Roehling, & Campion, 1997). The more structured the interview process, the more likely it is that the employer will receive a favorable verdict when challenged legally.

Finally, a properly constructed and administered structured interview can produce a "competency profile" of key competencies related to the job for each candidate. This profile gives hiring managers insight into candidates' strengths and weaknesses. This information can help managers focus subsequent steps in the selection process and provide a foundation for developing newly hired or promoted employees. Below is an illustration of a Competency Profile. On this form, ratings of interview performance in given competency areas can be recorded and combined to give an overall look at a candidate's strengths and weaknesses and, therefore, his/her suitability for the target job.

Despite many documented advantages of using structured interviews, many organizations find them to be difficult and time consuming to develop. One study showed that more than two out of three employers rely on unstructured interviews (Bureau of National Affairs). ■

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Ame Creglow, M.S., is the global assessment director of operations and principal at Kenexa. Between 1999 and 2005, Ms. Creglow served as a Project Manager and Senior Consultant for the Global Survey and Assessment practices. With more than 18 years of experience in Human Resources, Ms. Creglow has been responsible for the development of more than 75 custom assessments and has designed, validated and implemented large-scale employee selection systems for retail managers, hourly associates, sales professionals, customer service representatives, health care providers, guest-contact employees, technical professionals and engineers. Before joining Kenexa, Ms. Creglow served as a Senior Research Analyst with The Gallup Organization.

Ms. Creglow has also completed a Meta-analytic study that relates employees' perceptions of management to business outcomes. This study, which included over 2,500 business units and more than 105,000 employees, has been featured in *First Break All the Rules*. Creglow holds a Master of Science from The Gallup University in Organizational Research and a Bachelor of Arts from Loras College in Marketing and German.

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