High impact interviewing:
Finding the right person for the job

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In the workplace, interviews are used for many purposes including determining whom to hire for a job, whom to promote, and whom to let go. They are used to decide which employee shows potential and should be trained, and which ones should be put on the fast track. Ultimately, interviews are used to identify the right person for the right job, regardless of level of position, nature of the organization, or type of industry. Interviews are typically categorized in one of two ways, namely, as traditional or structured. Traditional interviews consist of a set of questions that are developed by the manager who is searching for a new employee as well as doing the interviewing.

A number of problems exist with traditional interviews. The first problem is that the questions tend to be developed by the manager, hence they reflect knowledge, skills, and information that the manager perceives to be important. How the manager determines that they are important is based on that individual's experience, education, and knowledge of the job. As such, two managers conducting interviews for the same job may perceive a mix of similar and much different information to be important. They may ask different questions and as a result, gather different information about the candidates. The candidates are then evaluated based on the information collected. As the information gathered varies, the candidates are evaluated differently, without knowing which evaluation is accurate for the actual job.

A second problem is that the traditional interview may not focus on the truly critical or necessary job requirements. The manager may not have accurate and complete information as to the knowledge, skills and abilities that are needed to do the job well, and as a result, the manager may gather unnecessary information that does not shed light on the candidate's suitability for the job. However, a decision will still be made regarding whom to hire.

A third problem concerns the answers to the interview questions. Managers often develop questions without identifying criteria for assessing a candidate's answers. This presents a dilemma. A good answer would be one that shows that the candidate meets the criteria for effective job performance. A poor answer would show the opposite, that the candidate does not meet the criteria. However, without specifying the criteria for good performance on the job, how is the manager to determine objectively whether the candidate's answer is good or bad? The manager must rate applicants' answers based on his or her own limited view of the job. A second manager is likely to rate the answers differently. Which manager is right?

Finally, because there are no clear criteria to distinguish a good answer from a poor one, managers often compare one candidate to another instead of comparing each one to the job requirements. This means that the candidate who handles the interview most effectively through impression management is the one who appears to be the best candidate. This interview reveals little, and often nothing, about who is the best candidate to effectively perform the job tasks.

Structured interviews form the second category of interviews. Unlike the traditional interview, each candidate is asked the same questions in the same order. As a result, the interviewer gathers the same information from each candidate and can therefore evaluate all the candidates based on the same information.

One specific type of structured interview is the situational interview. Consistent with the structured interview, all candidates in the situational interview are asked the same questions in the same order. Unlike the traditional interview, the situational interview is based on an analysis of job criteria. In addition, it includes a behavioral scoring guide. This means that interview questions focus on the knowledge, skills and abilities that have been identified by subject matter experts as critical for effective job performance. A scoring guide tells interviewers what constitutes a good answer, thereby informing interviewers how to evaluate

the candidates' answers. Moreover, the questions present candidates with a dilemma about how they would handle the situation. Candidates' responses are compared to the same scoring guide, not to one another. Thus, interviewers discover who can do the job best, not which candidate is best at impression management. The interviewer can consistently determine whether an answer indicates effective or ineffective performance. In addition, because effective handling of the dilemma is partly determined by the specific needs of the organization, good answers are those that align with the organization's strategy, values and culture. As a result, using situational interviews, instead of traditional interviews, helps managers identify the candidate who best fits both the job and the organization. Consequently, the best performance can be attained.

An example of a situational interview and a scoring guide is shown in Table A1.

THEORIES OF INTERVIEWING

Four theories explain the effectiveness of the situational interview in identifying the best candidate for a job. Goal setting theory states that setting specific goals leads to more effective performance than setting vague or no goals does. This is because intentions or goals guide a person's behavior. In the situational interview, candidates are presented with a specific future situation and asked to describe how they would handle it. To answer the question well, a clear, specific description, much like a goal, is required. When individuals describe how they intend to handle a situation, they are setting a goal. This provides them with direction and clarity. Goal setting theory tells us that people are more likely to realize their behavior once it has been articulated into a specific goal. Thus, the response to the situation presented in the interview represents the person's intention or goal, and the performance that is likely to follow.

Social cognitive theory also explains why the situational interview is an effective technique for identifying those individuals who will perform the job effectively. This theory states that people think about outcomes they desire and what needs to be done to achieve those outcomes, and then they behave in a way that will lead to attaining those results. Their motivation to achieve the desired outcomes guides their behavior. Thus, asking individuals how they would handle a situation requires them to think about desired results and their actions that they believe will help them realize those results. Answering a situational interview question requires individuals to first think about actions that will lead to future results, and then to share them with the interviewer. Their desired outcomes and described actions are then compared to actions considered to be ideal for the job. Those whose actions most closely match the job requirements as defined in the scoring guide have been shown to be the best candidates.

A third theory that explains the effectiveness of the situational interview is attribution theory. Attribution theory describes how people explain behaviors that they observe, often incorrectly. When we succeed at a task, we tend to explain our success in terms of an internal factor, such as our ability. When we fail, we tend to explain our lack of success in terms of poor luck or external factors over which we have no control. By comparison, when others succeed, we tend to explain their successes in terms of external factors that they do not control. We say they were lucky or just happened to be at the right place at the right time. When they fail, we often explain it in terms of factors that they control, concluding that they did not work hard enough or that they lacked the requisite ability. Attribution theory tells us that one reason we make attribution errors when we assess others' behavior is because we have incomplete information with which to understand what we see and hear. In order to make sense of this information and understand what happened, we fill in the gaps. We often do this by explaining others' failures in terms of internal factors, and their successes in terms of external factors.

In an interview, managers rate interviewees based on successes and failures that are identified in the interview process. When the traditional interview method is used, the interviewer often asks different questions of each interviewee. When the responses are evaluated, the interviewer, who does not have all the necessary information, is likely to fill in the gaps incorrectly. By comparison, the situational interview minimizes the likelihood of attribution errors. Training interviewers how to use the situational interview leads them to ask job-related questions, and to evaluate the answers consistently in terms of a predetermined scoring guide. By training managers to use the situational interview, they learn to Furthermore, they are trained to evaluate the information gathered. This results in fewer gaps in the necessary information, less need to fill in the gaps, and more accurate information and decisions.

A fourth theory that sheds light on the interview process focuses on the way in which people make decisions. The theory of bounded rationality states that we are unable to process large quantities of information. Thus, we tend to use shortcuts or biases to assist us in the decision-making process. In the traditional interview, an interviewer may gather a large quantity of information without clear direction as to how to use the information. When it is time to evaluate the information, the interviewer often finds it difficult to make sense of all the information, and consequently, invokes decision biases when evaluating a candidate. For example, the interviewer may have gone to the same school as the candidate, and taken courses with the same professors. The candidate appears to be similar to the interviewer, and is therefore considered to be an excellent candidate and consequently, a good match for the job in question. In comparison, the situational interview includes only questions that are relevant to the job, as well as a behavioral scoring guide that differentiates good from poor answers. In so doing, it minimizes the chances of gathering information that will inappropriately bias the interviewer. Similarly, by specifying those behaviors that constitute poor, moderately acceptable and excellent behavior, the scoring guide minimizes the likelihood that the interviewer will evaluate a candidate based on data that are irrelevant. In short, training in how to use the situational interview enables the interviewer to make better decisions regarding job candidates.

Finally, the theory of judgment under uncertainty explains the effectiveness of training in the situational interview to hire people. People use heuristics or rules of thumb to help simplify the decision making process. Anchoring is one of these shortcuts. It refers to a comparison process whereby

Jane is compared to the candidate interviewed before her. If the candidate has two years of experience and Jane has 3 years, Jane's experience will be compared favorably to the candidate with two years of experience. That may not be a relevant factor for the job, but in the absence of better information, the interviewer will err, deciding that Jane's experience is better. The interviewer who is trained in the situational interview will not use the anchoring shortcut. Rather, she will use the scoring guideline, which requires the interviewer to compare the candidates to the job criteria, and not to other candidates until all the candidates have been interviewed. As a result, the best person for the job is hired.

Training in the situational interview teaches individuals to ask all interviewees the same job related questions. It trains individuals to rate responses according to a predetermined scoring guide. The questions are relevant, focus on the job's requirements, and evaluate interviewee responses based on organizationally valid, job relevant criteria. This ensures that the same information will be solicited from each candidate. Responses will be evaluated in terms of the same behaviors and those individuals who have the best knowledge, skills and abilities for the job, thus enhancing organizational performance, will get the job.

EVIDENCE BASED PRINCIPLES OF THE SITUATIONAL INTERVIEW

The situational interview has attracted much interest in organizational settings, specifically as a means of hiring the right candidates for the job, and coaching them to achieve excellent performance. Many studies have been done showing its effectiveness. The studies suggest six evidence based practices.

First, the situational interview is job specific. As such, the first step is identifying the job for which the individual will be interviewed. This takes into account that each job is different, and hence has unique requirements. Different questions are needed for each job to address those unique requirements.

Second, once the job has been identified, the knowledge, skills and abilities needed for the competencies required to perform the job, have to be identified. This is done through a job analysis, a process that identifies the knowledge, skills and abilities (KSAs) truly required to perform the job effectively. The job analysis provides an opportunity to distinguish those KSAs without which the job cannot be done effectively, from those that are sometimes part of the job, but are not critical for effective performance. One way of conducting a job analysis is to ask those familiar with the job to think of a time in the past six months when the job was done effectively. The subject matter experts are then asked to describe what was done, and what made the performance effective. As an example, in the past, a minimum height was perceived to be a job requirement for firefighters. A job analysis made it clear that this was not a critical job requirement, and that the job can be done effectively by people of various heights. Thus, the job analysis ensures that the knowledge, skills and abilities necessary for a job are valid, or in other words, truly required to perform the job in question. This process results in the development of questions that are job relevant.

Third, using information derived from the job analysis, situations that are encountered in the specific job are identified. They are then described in the form of a dilemma. The interviewees are asked how they would handle the situation. The dilemma forces each interviewee to make a choice between options that may be equally good, but not equally well suited to the hiring organization and its culture. By revealing the interviewee's perceptions and values, in addition to the intended behavior, the situational interview helps determine who has the KSAs that match the job and the values of the hiring organization.

Fourth, desirable-undesirable responses to the questions are prepared by subject matter experts in the organization (e.g., managers, peers, subordinates, customers). The responses are valid, reflecting the true requirements of the job and the culture of the organization. The desirable-undesirable responses are described in terms of observable behaviors. This is done to increase reliability, the likelihood that multiple interviewers will rate a candidate's responses similarly. For each question, three possible responses are described. One response illustrates an ideal behavior, indicating that the interviewee has the knowledge, skills and abilities to perform the job, and that the interviewee shares the values of the organization. A second response illustrates an acceptable behavior, and a third response illustrates poor behavior. In each case, the responses are valid, as they are based on the knowledge, skills and abilities identified in the job analysis, and are thus relevant to the specific job.

Fifth, a numerical value is assigned to each response. For example, the ideal behavior would be assigned a "5", the moderate behavior would receive a "3" and the poor behavior would get a "1". This allows raters to determine an overall score for each interviewee.

Sixth, the interviewer asks the interviewee questions. Responses are evaluated using the behavioral scoring guide. At the end of the interview, the score for each candidate is tallied. The candidate with the highest score is the one whose responses are best suited to the knowledge, skills and abilities of the job and the values of the organization as identified by the job analysis.

To summarize, the situational interview is an effective technique for hiring the "right candidate" for the job because it:

1 identifies the knowledge, skills, and abilities that the candidate requires in order to perform the job effectively
2 asks the same job-related questions of each candidate
3 compares responses to a scoring guide that is based on the job and organization criteria, and indicates the ideal response as well as an acceptable and a poor response
4 uses situations that are based on behaviors that are observable so that multiple interviewers can "see" the same thing
5 shows interviewers how to focus on the relevant questions to minimize biases and decision errors.

In conclusion, research has provided support for the situational interview as a means of enhancing individual, team, and organizational performance. Organizations should start by developing situational interviews and then training the interviewers to properly use this technique. Once the technique has been learned, managers can use it to enhance their

team's performance by hiring and promoting the right people for the job.

Want to Increase Sales? Use the Situational Interview!

Hiring and promoting staff is a critical element in the workplace. Hire the right person and productivity increases. Hire the wrong person and everyone in the department and organization will feel the results. In department store sales, hiring the wrong sales staff means that sales will be poor and the store will not generate the revenue and profit needed to survive and thrive. In one organization, two managers, namely the human resource manager and the operations manager were trained to use the situational interview. From a pool of 54 applicants, 24 sales people were hired, using this interview technique. Nine months after they were hired, their sales performance was compared to a productivity measure designed by the organization. The results showed that the situational interview had effectively identified those individuals with sales performance that met the organization's productivity goals. The managers who conducted the interviews described the situational interview as being easy to use; the results were also easily understood, suggesting that the situational interview had indeed helped them select the right employees.

Deciding on Which Manager to Promote? Use the Situational Interview

Effective performance evaluations are an important part of the process when deciding whom to promote. The situational interview, with its focus on job behavior, can identify those employees who are ready to assume additional responsibility. In a financial services organization, the situational interview was used to indicate whom to promote. To develop the questions, employees currently in the financial services job were asked to identify and describe in detail, challenging situations they faced. Five job dimensions were identified, namely, adaptability, positive demeanor, career commitment, organization commitment, and social and teamwork skills. A total of 75 situations were generated. Two subject matter experts reviewed the situations and developed interview questions that addressed each of the five dimensions.

Interviewers were trained in the use of the situational interview. Based on the candidates' responses to the situational questions, 63 of the 106 candidates were promoted. One year after the situational interviews were conducted, managers were asked to rate the selected candidates. The performance measures of the new hires correlated with their scores on the situational interviews, indicating that the situational interview was effective in predicting work performance.

Go Global with the Situational Interview!

Most of the research that informs effective management practices has been done in North America, Australia, the U.K. and Israel. The situational interview, however, has been shown to be effective in other countries with different cultures. One country that provides an example of the situational interview's effectiveness is Iran, where it is common for employers to use subjective non-job related criteria (e.g., family membership) when hiring employees. Members of an automobile company agreed to use the situational interview to determine whether it would be an effective means of predicting performance in an Islamic culture. The employees participated in developing situational questions based on events that candidates would encounter if they were hired. Performance was measured by evaluating their ability to make decisions, work in teams and be precise in their tasks. The situational interview proved to be effective in predicting job performance.

Need to Predict Team Performance? Use the Situational Interview

Teams have become an important part of the way in which work is done in organizations around the world. As such, the ability to work effectively in teams is viewed as a highly valued competency for managers.

Organizations must be able to recruit and select individuals who will perform effectively as part of a team. The situational interview has been shown to be an effective predictor of team behavior and performance. Adult students in an executive MBA course participated in situational interviews that were designed to measure team playing performance. At the end of the course, the students completed peer reviews regarding each individual's performance on the work done. The situational interview effectively predicted team playing behavior. Individuals who received a high score on the situational interview also received a strong grade on their peer reviews, as well as in the course overall. Thus, situational interviews can be used in organizations to identify those individuals who will likely demonstrate strong team performance.

Want to Minimize Racial Bias? Use the Situational Interview

Despite societal and judicial advances that have been made, racial bias in hiring decisions continues to exist. A study reported in the New York Times found that applicants with stereotypically white names were more likely to be called for an interview than were those with stereotypically black names, despite having identical resumes. One way in which this bias can be minimized is by using the situational interview. Individuals applying for a school custodian job were divided into two groups. One group of individuals was interviewed with a conventional structured interview. The second group was interviewed with the situational interview. In both instances, questions were based on a job analysis, and interviewees were asked the same questions. In the situational interview format, interviewers rated interviewee responses based on how closely they matched clearly defined behavioral benchmarks, that is, the scoring guide. An excellent answer received 5 points, a mediocre answer received 3 points and a poor answer received 1 point. By comparison, interviewers who used the conventional structured interview evaluated interviewee responses based on how they compared to the dimensions of job relevant behavior. The results revealed that adding structure in the form of defined benchmark behaviors provided by the situational interview,

both in the questions and in the scoring of responses, minimized racial bias. By giving interviewers clearly defined benchmarks for scoring a candidate's answers, racial bias was reduced.

KEY LESSONS

When asked to identify key business goals, most executives include recruiting and hiring the right people as a critical, ongoing challenge for their organization. Learning how to increase the likelihood that the right person will be selected, and that person will remain in the organization as an effective performer, is critical to ensuring an organization's success. Traditional interviews have been found to be less than effective in identifying who is the right individual for the position, or who to train for more responsibility. Several important questions need to be asked. One such question is, how do we identify who will be an effective performer for a specific role? Another question concerns how to identify whose performance will align not only with the required knowledge, skills and abilities but also with the organization's values, goals and culture. The situational interview provides a clear and straightforward way to identify the candidates who have the knowledge, skills and abilities required by the role, as well as the values and culture that guide the organization.

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APPENDIX A

Table A1   Example of a critical incident, situational interview with scoring guide.

Critical Incident describing ineffective performance of a management level employee:
The employee was Director of Leadership Development at a large organization. She was responsible for identifying high potential employees and facilitating a confidential leadership forum in which the high potentials cultivate trust, share problems, and help each other identify solutions. She has had problems responding to her boss's requests for information regarding what the high potentials are discussing.

Situational interview question:
You are the Director of Leadership Development. One program you oversee is the High Potential Leadership Development Forum. Managers who have been identified as high potential have been invited to attend the forum, discuss problems, and help each other find solutions. You are the facilitator for this forum. To ensure an environment of trust that will enable managers to share honestly, all forum meetings are confidential, and all information shared in the meetings must not leave the room.
Your boss is looking for a new senior manager and has asked you to share information that has been discussed in the leadership forum. If you share information, you will go against the rules of the leadership development forum, likely destroy the trust that has been cultivated, and be unsuccessful in your efforts to develop the high potential managers. If you do not share the information, your boss will believe that you are being insubordinate, and may threaten to demote you. What do you do?

Situational interview question scoring guide
1 — You tell your boss what has been discussed in the forum.
Unacceptable = 1 point
2 — You tell your boss that you cannot share information that has been discussed because there is a condition of confidentiality, and sharing the information would go against that, destroy trust that is essential to the group, and render it unsuccessful in developing the high potential managers.

Table A1 (*Continued*)

Acceptable = 3 points

You tell your boss that a condition of the group is confidentiality. The confidentiality is essential to development of trust so that the participants share problems, and help each other develop solutions that will ultimately benefit the organization. You ask him if there is some other information that could be provided that might help him make his decision and not harm the trust in the group.

Highly acceptable = 5 points

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