



“Psychology Works” Fact Sheet: Hire Better Job Applicants Using a Structured Job Interview

When it is time to hire a new employee, almost all organizations use some form of job interview as part of the personnel selection process. How well the interview predicts job performance depends on how well it is designed and conducted.

The typical unstructured job interview

The job interview is the most commonly used selection method available so conducting them properly is critical for successful hiring. The job interview can be thought of as an assessment, or test, like any other test used in personnel selection. The main difference is that the interview involves asking a job applicant a series of oral questions rather than completing a test online or on paper. The applicant’s responses to the interview questions are used to determine the applicant’s suitability for the job and the work environment. Interviews may serve additional purposes as well, including active recruitment of an applicant.

However, job interviews are vulnerable to a number of problems that interviewers need to be aware of if they want to conduct effective interviews, and avoid unnecessary legal risks.

Research highlights some difficulties of using the typical job interview, including:

- Potential for biased, lower ratings of applicants based on factors that are not relevant to job performance—such as appearance, gender, weight, age, or race
- Difficulty knowing which pieces of information are relevant, and why
- Judgmental biases and heuristics (ways of simplifying a complex task) often rule the day. These biases begin before the interview even starts - for example, interviewers often form initial impressions about applicants based on the resume or when meeting the applicant, and then tend to confirm these initial impressions during the interview.

Many poorly constructed job interviews suffer from questions that may vary from one interviewer to another, and that may be interpreted differently from one interviewer to another. Poorly constructed interviews may also use questions that are not actually related to the job being filled. These interviews are referred to as *unstructured interviews*, because the interview questions are not based on any explicit or systematic analysis of the work, questions vary haphazardly for different interviewers and interviewees, and the scoring of the interviewees’ responses is arbitrary and subjective. In essence, unstructured interviews involve the use of “gut” feelings regarding the job applicant, and the interview proceeds in a conversational format – the proverbial ‘coffee chat’. These interviews are susceptible to bias, contamination by error, inaccuracy, and weak relationships with later performance on the job. Research has shown that these kinds of interviews provide very limited information for selecting the applicant who is truly best for the job. They also offer limited legal protection for the hiring organization.





A better option: The structured job interview

Structured interviews have consistently been shown to be significantly more predictive than unstructured ones, and in fact are one of the most predictive personnel selection tools available. Structured interviews have been found to reduce or eliminate the biases discussed earlier.

Structured interviews have the following four defining characteristics.

- **Question Sophistication:** The development of the interview questions is guided by a “job analysis”, based on the activities performed on the job, and unique context of the work place.
- **Question Consistency:** All interviewers administer the same set of questions in a standardized order to each interviewee, without probing or by using a standardized probing process.
- **Evaluation Standardization:** A standardized scoring key is used to quantify the performance of an interviewee’s for each individual interview question.
- **Limited Rapport Building:** Rapport building questions and informal conversation are either prohibited or, if included at all, performed in a structured manner that is common to every job applicant and avoids asking about things prohibited by human rights legislation.

How can I build a structured job interview?

- 1) **Start with questions based on critical job requirements.** Conducting a job analysis or deriving a competency model allows you to identify what knowledge, skills, and abilities are required for the job. If possible, identify critical incidents and examples of effective and less-effective behaviours of employees when facing them. Once you know what is required, then develop questions, such as those noted below, which are known to assess the job requirements in ways that are well-suited to your target applicants.
 - For *experienced* applicants, use questions focusing on their past behaviour in related situations (i.e. behavioural questions), which are usually strong predictors of future behaviour. For example, “Tell me about a time when you disagreed with a team member. How did you react? What was the outcome?”
 - For *inexperienced* applicants, use situational questions to determine how the interviewee would respond if presented with a particular situation, which includes some form of dilemma. For example, “You are supervising a team of ten employees on a time-sensitive project. Two team members start arguing with one another over some budgeting error, each blaming the other for the problem. One employee storms off the room yelling profanities, while the second one comes to you claiming they cannot work in this team anymore. How would you approach this situation?”
- 2) An interview can include both types of questions listed above. Regardless of the type of question used, **the same set of interview questions must be administered to all job applicants.** An *interview guide* should seek to ensure that the interviewers understand the order in which questions should be given, the scoring key for each question, which should include definitions and/or examples of constitutes a response that merits a certain score (e.g., what is worth 4 points on a 1-5 scoring





system), and so forth. Detailed instructions should be included in the interview guide and interviewer training (including training about error and biases) should be administered. Frame-of-reference training, detailed extensively elsewhere, is likely one of the best methods. Ideally, interviews should be conducted by a panel of interviews (with diverse backgrounds).

- 3) Information obtained from the **job analysis, competency model, or critical incidents should form the basis of the scoring key**. For example, in order to score an interview question inquiring about levels of a given capability, such as mechanical knowledge, job experts can be asked the extent to which that capability is needed in order to effectively perform the job. (Further details on job analysis can be found in the book references.)

Where can I get more information?

CPA Industrial and Organizational Psychology Section (CSIOP)

Within the larger field of psychology, Industrial-Organizational (or I-O) Psychology is a specialty area based on the scientific study of behaviour in organizations. I-O psychologists work to improve organizational functioning and employee well-being through management and communication systems, hiring practices, performance appraisal, leadership development, and training programs.

I-O psychologists also provide professional consultation to organizations in order to help enhance work productivity and employee satisfaction. More information can be found on the section website at:

<https://cpa.ca/sections/industrialorganizationalpsychology/>

Bridge Magazine Articles

- Society for Human Resources Management (2021). *Guidelines on Interview and Employment Application Questions*. Society for Human Resources Management, Inc.

Technical Guides

- Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology (2018). *Principles for the validation and use of personnel selection procedures* (5th ed.). SIOP Inc.

Books

- Catano, V. M., Wiesner, W. H., Hackett, R. D., & Roulin, N. (2021). *Recruitment and selection in Canada* (8th ed.). TopHat/Nelson.
- Kelloway, K. E., Catano, V. M., & Day, A. L. (2011). *People and work in Canada*. Toronto, ON: Nelson.
- Roulin (2017). *The psychology of job interviews*. Routledge





Research Articles

- Chapman, D. & Zweig, D. I. (2005) Developing a nomological network for interview structure: Antecedents and consequences of the structured selection interview. *Personnel Psychology, 58*, 673-702.
- Latham, G.P., & Sue-Chan, C. (1999). A meta-analysis of the situational interview: An enumerative review of reasons for its validity. *Canadian Psychology, 40*, 56-67.
- Levashina, J., Hartwell, C. J., Morgeson, F. P., & Campion, M. A. (2014). The structured employment interview: Narrative and quantitative review of the research literature. *Personnel Psychology, 67*(1), 241-293.

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Your opinion matters! Please contact us with any questions or comments about any of the *Psychology Works* Fact Sheets: factsheets@cpa.ca

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