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# Selection Interviewing Skills

One of the most important people management tasks carried out by managers is to interview candidates for a position on their team. Even when an HR (human resources) department or a recruitment agency is involved, managers usually make the final decision. The problem is that many managers think that they are good at selecting people but actually they are not. This is often revealed by an analysis of leavers, which shows that a large proportion leave in the first six months – about one in five according to a recent national survey.

Interviewing is a skilled process, and the aim of this chapter is to help you develop the skills required, by first defining the nature of a selection interview and its content, then providing guidance on preparing for and planning the interview, interviewing techniques and assessing the data.

## The nature of a selection interview

A selection interview should provide you with the answers to three fundamental questions:

- Can the individual do the job? Is the person capable of doing the work to the standard required?
- Will the individual do the job? Is the person well motivated?
- How is the individual likely to fit into the team? Will I and other team members be able to work well with this person?

It should take the form of a conversation with a purpose. It is a conversation because candidates should be given the opportunity to talk freely about themselves and their careers. But the conversation has to be planned, directed and controlled to achieve your aims in the time available.

Your task as an interviewer is to draw candidates out to ensure that you get the information you want. Candidates should be encouraged to do most of the talking – one of the besetting sins of poor interviewers is that they talk too much. But you have to plan the structure of the interview to achieve its purpose, and decide in advance the questions you need to ask – questions which will give you what you need to make an accurate assessment.

Overall, an effective approach to interviewing can be summed up as the three Cs:

- **Content:** the information you want and the questions you ask to get it.
- **Contact:** your ability to make and maintain good contact with candidates; to establish the sort of rapport that will encourage them to talk freely, thus revealing their strengths and their weaknesses.
- **Control:** your ability to control the interview so that you get the information you want.

All this requires you to plan the interview thoroughly in terms of content, timing, structure and use of questions.

## The content of an interview

The content of an interview can be analysed into three sections; its beginning, middle and end.

### Beginning

At the start of the interview you should put candidates at their ease. You want them to talk freely in response to your questions. They will not do this if you plunge in too abruptly. Welcome them and thank them for coming to the interview, expressing genuine pleasure about the meeting. But do not waste too much time talking about their journey or the weather.

Some interviewers start by describing the company and the job. Wherever possible it is best to eliminate this part of the interview by sending candidates a brief job description and something about the organization.

If you are not careful you will spend far too much time at this stage, especially if the candidate later turns out to be clearly unsuitable. A brief reference to the job should suffice, and this can be extended at the end of the interview.

### Middle

The middle part of the interview is where you find out what you need to know about candidates. It should take at least 80 per cent of the time, leaving, say, 5 per cent at the beginning and 15 per cent at the end.

This is when you ask questions designed to provide information on:

- the extent to which the knowledge, skills, capabilities and personal qualities of candidates meet the person specification;
- the career history and ambitions of candidates;
- sometimes, certain aspects of the individual's behaviour at work such as sickness and absenteeism.

## End

At the end of the interview you should give candidates the opportunity to ask about the job and the company. How they do this can often give you clues about the degree to which applicants are interested and their ability to ask pertinent questions.

You may want to expand a little on the job. If candidates are promising, some interviewers at this stage extol the attractive features of the job. This is fine as long as these are not exaggerated. To give a realistic preview, the possible downsides should be mentioned: for example the need to travel or unsocial working hours. If candidates are clearly unsuitable you can tactfully help them to deselect themselves by referring to aspects of the work that might not appeal to them, or for which they are not really qualified. It is best not to spell out these points too strongly. It is often sufficient simply to put the question 'This is a key requirement of the job. How do you feel about it?' You can follow up this general question by more specific questions: 'Do you feel you have the right sort of experience?' 'Are you happy about (this aspect of the job)?'

At this stage you should ask a question about the availability of the candidate, if they are promising. You can ask when they would be able to start and about any holiday arrangements to which they are committed.

You should also ask their permission to obtain references from their present and previous employers. They might not want you to approach their present employer, but you should tell them that if they are made an offer of employment it would be conditional on a satisfactory reference from that employer. It is useful to ensure that you have the names of people you can approach.

Finally, you should inform candidates of what will happen next. If some time could elapse before they hear from you, they should be told that you will be writing as soon as possible, but that there will be some delay. (Do not make a promise you will be unable to keep.)

It is not normally good practice to inform candidates of your decision at the end of the interview. You should take time to reflect on their suitability, and you do not want to give them the impression that you are making a snap judgement.

## Preparing for the interview

### Initial preparations

Your first step in preparing for an interview is to familiarize or refamiliarize yourself with the person specification, which defines the sort of individual you want in terms of qualifications, competencies required, experience and person qualities. It is also advisable at this stage to prepare questions that you can put to all candidates to obtain the information you require. If you ask everyone some identical questions you will be able to compare the answers.

You should then read the candidates' CVs and application forms or letters. This will identify any special questions you should ask about their career, or to fill in the gaps. For example you might want to know 'What does this gap between jobs C and D signify?', although you would not put the question as baldly as that. It is better to say something like 'I see there was a gap of six months between when you left your job in C and started in D. Would you tell me what you were doing during this time?'

## Timing

You should decide at this stage how long you want to spend on each interview. As a rule of thumb, 45 to 60 minutes are usually required for senior professional or technical appointments. Middle-ranking jobs need about 30 to 45 minutes. The more routine jobs can be covered in 20 to 30 minutes. But the time allowed depends on the job, and you do not want to insult a candidate by conducting a superficial interview.

## Planning the interview

When planning interviews you should give some thought to how you are going to sequence your questions, especially in the middle part. There are two basic approaches, as described below.

### Biographical approach

The biographical approach is probably the most popular because it is simple to use and appears to be logical. The interview can be sequenced chronologically, starting with the first job or even before that with school, and if relevant college or university. The person's succeeding jobs, if any, are then dealt with in turn, ending with the present job, on which most time is spent if the candidate has been in it for a reasonable time. If you are not careful, however, using the chronological method for someone who has had a number of jobs can mean spending too much time on their earlier jobs, leaving insufficient time for the most important recent experiences.

To overcome this problem, an alternative biographical approach is to start with the present job, which is discussed in some depth. The interviewer then works backwards, job by job, but only concentrating on particularly interesting or relevant experience in earlier jobs.

The problem with the biographical approach is that it is predictable. Experienced candidates are familiar with it and have their story ready, glossing over any weak points. It can also be unreliable. You can easily miss an important piece of information by concentrating on a succession of jobs rather than focusing on key aspects of the candidates' experience which illustrate their capabilities.

## Criteria-based or targeted approach (competency-based interviews)

This approach is based on an analysis of the person specification with particular reference to the competencies required (this is sometimes referred to as a competency-based interview). You can then select the criteria for judging the suitability of the candidate, and this will put you in a position to target these key criteria during the interview. You can decide on the questions you need to ask to draw out from candidates information about their knowledge, skills, competencies, capabilities and personal qualities, which can be compared with the criteria to assess the extent to which candidates meet the specification. This is probably the best way of focusing your interview to ensure that you get all the information you require about candidates for comparison with the person specification.

## Interviewing techniques – asking questions

As mentioned earlier, an interview is a conversation with a purpose. The interviewer's job is to draw the candidate out, at the same time ensuring that the information required is obtained. To this end it is desirable to ask a number of open-ended questions – questions which cannot be answered by a yes or no, and which promote a full response. A good interviewer will have an armoury of other types of questions to be asked when appropriate, as described below.

### Open questions

Open questions are phrased generally, give no indication of the expected reply, and cannot be answered by a yes or no. They encourage candidates to talk, drawing them out and obtaining a full response. Single-word answers are seldom illuminating. It is a good idea to begin the interview with some open questions to obtain a general picture of candidates, helping them to settle in. Open questions or phrases inviting a response can be phrased like this:

*I'd like you to tell me about the sort of work you are doing in your present job.*

*What do you know about...?*

*Could you give me some examples of...?*

*In what ways do you think your experience fits you to do the job for which you have applied?*

*How have you tackled...?*

*What have been the most challenging aspects of your job?*

*Please tell me about some of the interesting things you have been doing at work recently.*

Open questions can give you a lot of useful information, but you may not get exactly what you want, and answers can go into too much detail. For example, the question 'What has been the main feature of your work in recent months?' might result in a one-word reply – 'Marketing.' Or it might produce a lengthy explanation which takes up too much time. Replies to open

questions can get bogged down in too much detail, or miss out some key points. They can come to a sudden halt or lose their way. You need to ensure that you get all the facts, keep the flow going and maintain control. Remember that you are in charge. Hence the value of probing, closed and the other types of questions, which are discussed below.

## Probing questions

Probing questions ask for further details and explanations to ensure that you are getting all the facts. You ask them when answers have been too generalized or when you suspect that there may be some more relevant information which candidates have not disclosed. If a candidate claims to have done something which clearly involved teamwork, for instance, it might be useful to find out more about the nature of their own contribution. Poor interviewers tend to let general and uninformative answers pass by without probing for further details, simply because they are sticking rigidly to a predetermined list of open questions. Skilled interviewers are able to flex their approach to ensure they get the facts, while still keeping control to ensure that the interview is completed on time.

A candidate could say to you something like ‘I was involved in a major exercise that produced significant improvements in the flow of work through the factory.’ This statement conveys nothing about what the candidate actually did. You have to ask probing questions such as:

*You've informed me that you have had experience in... Could you tell me more about what you did?*

*What sort of targets or standards have you been expected to achieve?*

*How successful have you been in achieving those targets or standards? Please give examples.*

*Could you give an example of any project you have undertaken?*

*What was your precise role in this project?*

*What exactly was the contribution you made to its success?*

*What knowledge and skills were you able to apply to the project?*

*Were you responsible for monitoring progress?*

*Did you prepare the final recommendations in full or in part? If in part, which part?*

*Could you describe in more detail the equipment you used?*

## Closed questions

Closed questions aim to clarify a point of fact. The expected reply will be an explicit single word or brief sentence. In a sense, a closed question acts as a probe but produces a succinct factual statement without going into detail. When you ask a closed question you intend to find out:

- what the candidate has or has not done – ‘What did you do then?’
- why something took place – ‘Why did that happen?’
- when something took place – ‘When did that happen?’
- how something happened – ‘How did that situation arise?’
- where something happened – ‘Where were you at the time?’
- who took part – ‘Who else was involved?’

## Hypothetical questions

Hypothetical questions are used in structured situational-based interviews when a situation is described to candidates and they are asked how they would respond. Hypothetical questions can be prepared in advance to test how candidates would approach a typical problem. Such questions may be phrased: ‘What do you think you would do if...?’ When such questions lie well within the candidate’s expertise and experience the answers can be illuminating. But it could be unfair to ask candidates to say how they would deal with a problem without their knowing more about the context in which the problem arose. It can also be argued that what candidates say they would do and what they actually would do could be quite different. Hypothetical questions can produce hypothetical answers. The best information on which judgements about candidates can be made involves what they have actually done or achieved. You need to find out whether they have successfully dealt with the sort of issues and problems they may be faced with if they join your organization.

## Behavioural event questions

Behavioural event questions as used in behavioural-based structured interviews aim to get candidates to tell you how they would behave in situations that have been identified as critical to successful job performance. The assumption upon which such questions are based is that past behaviour in dealing with or reacting to events is the best predictor of future behaviour.

These are some typical behavioural event questions:

*Could you give an instance when you persuaded others to take an unusual course of action?*

*Could you describe an occasion when you completed a project or task in the face of great difficulties?*

*Could you describe any contribution you have made as a member of a team in achieving an unusually successful result?*

*Could you give an instance when you took the lead in a difficult situation in getting something worthwhile done?*

## Capability questions

Capability questions aim to establish what candidates know, the skills they possess and use, and their competencies – what they are capable of doing. They can be open, probing or closed, but they will always be focused as precisely as possible on the contents of the person specification referring to knowledge, skills and competences. Capability questions are used in behavioural-based structured interviews.

Capability questions should therefore be explicit – focused on what candidates must know and be able to do. Their purpose is to obtain evidence from candidates which shows the extent to which they meet the specification in each of its key areas. Because time is always limited it is best to concentrate on the most important aspects of the work, and it is always best to prepare the questions in advance. The types of capability questions you can ask are:

*What do you know about...?*

*How did you gain this knowledge?*

*What are the key skills you are expected to use in your work?*

*How would your present employer rate the level of skill you have reached in...?*

*Could you please tell me exactly what sort and how much experience you have had in...?*

*Could you tell me more about what you have actually been doing in this aspect of your work?*

*Can you give me any examples of the sort of work you have done which would qualify you to do this job?*

*What are the most typical problems you have to deal with?*

*Please tell me about any instances when you have had to deal with an unexpected problem or a crisis.*

## Questions about motivation

The degree to which candidates are motivated is a personal quality to which it is necessary to give special attention if it is to be properly assessed. This is usually achieved by inference rather than direct questions. ‘How well are you motivated?’ is a leading question that will usually produce the response ‘Highly’. You can make inferences about the level of motivation of candidates by asking questions on the following subjects.

- Their career – replies to such questions as ‘Why did you decide to move on from there?’ can give an indication of the extent to which they have been well motivated in progressing their career.
- Achievements – not just ‘What did you achieve?’ but ‘How did you achieve it?’ and ‘What difficulties did you overcome?’

- Triumphant over disadvantages – candidates who have done well in spite of an unpromising upbringing and relatively poor education may be more highly motivated than those with all the advantages that upbringing and education can bestow, but who have not made good use of these advantages.
- Spare-time interests – don't accept at its face value a reply to a question about spare-time interests which, for example, reveals that a candidate collects stamps. Find out whether the candidate is well-motivated enough to have pursued the interest with determination and achieved something in the process.

## Continuity questions

Continuity questions aim to keep the flow going in an interview, and encourage candidates to enlarge on what they have told you, within limits. Here are some examples of continuity questions.

*What happened next?*

*What did you do then?*

*Can we talk about your next job?*

*Can we move on now to...?*

*Could you tell me more about...?*

It has been said that to keep the conversation going during an interview, the best thing an interviewer can do is to make encouraging grunts at appropriate moments. There is more to interviewing than that, but single words or phrases like 'Good', 'Fine', 'That's interesting' and 'Carry on' can help things along.

## Play-back questions

Play-back questions test your understanding of what candidates have said, and give an opportunity to check on misunderstandings or hidden meanings. You repeat in your own words what you think they have told you, and ask them if they agree or disagree with your version. For example, you could say 'As I understand it, you resigned from your last position because you disagreed with your boss on a number of fundamental issues. Have I got that right?' The answer might simply be yes to this closed question, in which case you might probe to find out more about what happened. Or the candidate may reply 'Not exactly', in which case you ask for the full story.

## Career questions

As mentioned earlier, questions about the career history of candidates can provide some insight into motivation as well as establishing how they have progressed in acquiring useful and relevant knowledge, skills and experience. You can ask questions such as:

- What did you learn from that new job?*
- What different skills had you to use when you were promoted?*
- Why did you leave that job?*
- What happened after you left that job?*
- In what ways do you think this job will advance your career?*

## Focused work questions

These are questions designed to tell you more about particular aspects of the candidate's work history, such as:

- How many days absence from work did you have last year?*
- How many times were you late last year?*
- Have you been absent from work for any medical reason not shown on your application form?*
- Have you a clean driving licence? (for those whose work will involve driving)*

## Unhelpful questions

Multiple questions such as 'What skills do you use most frequently in your job? Are they technical skills, leadership skills, teamworking skills or communicating skills?' will only confuse candidates. You will probably get a partial or misleading reply. Ask only one question at a time.

Leading questions which indicate the reply you expect are also unhelpful. If you ask a question such as 'That's what you think, isn't it?', you will get the reply 'Yes, I do.' If you ask a question such as 'I take it that you don't really believe that...?', you will get the reply 'No, I don't.' Neither of these replies will get you anywhere.

## Questions to be avoided

Avoid any questions that could be construed as being biased on the grounds of sex, race, disability or age.

*Some examples of questions you must not ask*

Who is going to look after the children?

Are you planning to have any more children?

Are you concerned at all about racial prejudice?

Would it worry you being the only immigrant around here?

With your disability, do you think you can cope with the job?

Do you think that at your time of life you will be able to learn the new skills associated with this job?

*Ten useful questions*

What are the most important aspects of your present job?

What do you think have been your most notable achievements in your career to date?

What sort of problems have you successfully solved recently in your job?

What have you learned from your present job?

What has been your experience in...?

What do you know about...?

What particularly interests you in this job and why?

Now you have heard more about the job, would you please tell me which aspects of your experience are most relevant.

What do you think you can bring to this job?

Is there anything else about your career which hasn't come out yet in this interview but you think I ought to hear?

**Key interviewing skills**

The key interviewing skills are establishing rapport, listening, maintaining continuity, keeping control and note taking.

## Establishing rapport

Establishing rapport means establishing a good relationship with candidates – getting on their wavelength, putting them at ease, encouraging them to respond and generally being friendly. This is not just a question of being ‘nice’ to candidates. If you achieve rapport you are more likely to get them to talk freely about both their strengths and weaknesses.

Good rapport is created by the way in which you greet candidates, how you start the interview and how you put your questions and respond to replies. Questions should not be posed aggressively or imply that you are criticizing some aspect of the candidate’s career. Some people like the idea of ‘stress’ interviews but they are counterproductive. Candidates clam up and gain a negative impression of you and the organization.

When responding to answers you should be appreciative, not critical. Say ‘Thank you, that was very helpful. Now can we go on to...?’ Do not say anything like ‘Well, it seems to me that things did not go according to plan there.’

Body language can also be important. If you maintain natural eye contact, avoid slumping in your seat, nod and make encouraging comments when appropriate, you will establish better rapport and get more out of the interview.

## Listening

If an interview is a conversation with a purpose, listening skills are important. You need not only to hear but also to understand what candidates are saying. When interviewing you must concentrate on what candidates are telling you. Summarizing at regular intervals forces you to listen. If you play back to candidates your understanding of what they have told you for them to confirm or amend, it will ensure that you have fully comprehended the messages they are delivering.

## Maintaining continuity

As far as possible, link your questions to a candidate’s last reply so that the interview progresses logically and a cumulative set of data is built up. You can put bridging questions to candidates such as ‘Thank you, that was an interesting summary of what you have been doing in this aspect of your work. Now could you tell me something about your other key responsibilities?’

## Keeping control

You want candidates to talk, but not too much. When preparing for the interview you should have drawn up an agenda, and you must try to stick to it. Do not cut candidates short too

brutally, but you should interrupt when you feel it is necessary. Say something like ‘Thank you, I’ve got a good picture of that. Now what about...?’

Focus on specifics as much as you can. If candidates ramble on, ask a pointed question (a ‘probe’ question) which asks for an example of what they are describing.

## Note taking

You will not remember everything that candidates tell you. It is useful to take notes of the key points they make, discreetly but not surreptitiously. However, do not put candidates off by frowning or tut-tutting when you are making a negative note. It may be helpful to ask candidates whether they mind if you take notes. They cannot really object but will appreciate the fact that they have been asked.

## Coming to a conclusion

It is essential not to be beguiled by a pleasant, articulate and confident interviewee who is all surface without substance. Beware of the ‘halo’ effect which occurs when people seize onto one or two early good points, and neglect later negative indicators. The opposite ‘horns’ effect of focusing on the negatives should also be avoided.

Individual candidates should be assessed against the criteria. These could be set under the headings of knowledge and skills, competencies, education, qualifications, training, experience and overall suitability. Ratings can be given against each heading, for example very acceptable, acceptable, marginally acceptable, unacceptable. If you have used situational or behaviourally based questions you can indicate against each question whether the reply was good, acceptable or poor. These assessments can inform your overall assessment of the candidate’s knowledge, skills and competencies.

Next, compare your own assessments of each of the candidates with those of the other interviewers. You can do this heading by heading to try to come to a composite judgement.

In the end, your decision between qualified candidates may well be a matter of fine judgement. There could be one outstanding candidate, but quite often there are two or three who seem equally suitable. In these circumstances you have to come to a balanced view on which one is more likely to fit the job and the organization, and have the potential for a long-term career, if this is possible. Do not, however, settle for second best in desperation. It is better to try again.

Remember to make and keep notes of the reasons for your choice, and why candidates have been rejected. These, together with the applications, should be kept for at least six months just in case your decision is challenged as being discriminatory. An example of an interview rating form is given in Table 20.1.

**Table 20.1** Example of an interview rating form

	very acceptable	acceptable	marginally acceptable	unacceptable	comments
knowledge and skills					
competencies					
education and qualifications					
training					
experience					
overall suitability					

### *Dos and don'ts of selection interviewing*

Do:

- Plan the interview.
- Give yourself sufficient time.
- Use a structured interview approach wherever possible.
- Create the right atmosphere.
- Establish an easy and informal relationship – start with open questions.
- Encourage the candidate to talk.
- Cover the ground as planned, ensuring that you complete a prepared agenda and maintain continuity.
- Analyse the candidate's career to reveal strengths, weaknesses and patterns of interest.
- Ask clear, unambiguous questions.
- Get examples and instances of the successful application of knowledge, skills and the effective use of capabilities.
- Make judgements on the basis of the factual information you have obtained about candidates' experience and attributes in relation to the person specification.
- Keep control over the content and timing of the interview.

**Don't:**

- Start the interview unprepared.
- Plunge too quickly into demanding (probe) questions.
- Ask multiple or leading questions.
- Pay too much attention to isolated strengths or weaknesses.
- Allow candidates to gloss over important facts.
- Talk too much or allow candidates to ramble on.
- Allow your prejudices to get the better of your capacity to make objective judgements.
- Fall into the halo or horns effect trap.
- Ask questions or make remarks that could be construed as in any way discriminatory.
- Attempt too many interviews in a row.