The Evolution of the Employment Interview - The Arrival of the Blended Interview

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Early History of the Employment Interview

Selection decisions no doubt have been made since the beginning of time. Making such decisions using selection techniques has a shorter history but still dates back to ancient times. The earliest record likely is in the Indian political treatise called Arthasatra. This treatise, written in 4th century BC, describes a rigorous process for the selection of ministers, priests and government employees. Chinese civil service exams, established in AD 605, are also an early record and may be the first documented use of actual selection tests (Schneider and Schmidt). Aristotle and Plato suggested the use of measures of physical prowess for the selection of soldiers. While there are some early references of the use of selection techniques, most psychological methods for measuring individual differences did not appear until the 1800's.

It is not certain when the employment interview was developed. Many scholars link the origin of the employment interview to Thomas Edison. Edison was faced with the dilemma of having hundreds of applicants who wished to work with him. He needed some way to identify the best of the many so he devised a series of 150 questions to evaluate their knowledge (Dennis, 1984). Some of the questions were relevant to the job being sought but many were more esoteric and related to areas of general knowledge. Few applicants could answer all the questions and Edison had developed a way of differentiating and selecting candidates from a large pool.

Newspapers of the day wrote about Edison's approach to selecting candidates (e.g., New York Times, 1921) and other industry leaders began developing their own employment questions which eventually evolved into the employment interview process in use today.

Types of Interviews in Use Today

There are many different types of employment interviews being used today. However, all interviews can be categorized as either following a structured approach or an unstructured approach.

Structured interviews:

- Tie interview questions to specific constructs important to performance in the job. Typically competencies are used as the framework for structuring the interview. Competencies are based on a job analysis which is a systematic review of what it takes to be successful in a particular job.
- Use pre-planned interview questions that are linked to job requirements. This ensures that the interview questions are job related. Pre-planned questions also ensure that the same questions are asked of each candidate to ensure consistency and "apple to apple" comparisons. Every candidate has the same opportunity to demonstrate they have the knowledge, skills, and background to perform the job.

- Use trained interviewers. Interviewers are trained in how to evaluate responses to prepared questions. Training helps take the bias and subjectivity out of the evaluation process and gives interviewers a common frame of reference for evaluating candidates.
- Ratings are integrated in a common way to arrive at an overall score as well as a profile of strengths and weaknesses.

Unstructured Interviews - Unstructured interviews are typically characterized by:

- Each interviewer deciding where they would like to focus their information gathering.
- Each interviewer coming up with their own questions
- Each interviewer using their own evaluation framework for evaluating responses
- Each interviewer integrating the interview responses in their own way to reach conclusions

We will come back to this distinction of structured versus unstructured when we discuss research findings regarding the employment interview.

Interviews may be conducted using different formats. Some common interview formats in use today include:

Panel Interviews – In a panel interview, multiple interviewers conduct the interview instead of just one interviewer. Each interviewer has their own set of questions and take turns interviewing the candidate.

Case Interviews – Case interviews are focused on understanding how a candidate would solve specific business issues. The candidate is presented with a business case that provides detailed background information on a business problem. After reviewing the case, the interviewer asks a series of questions to understand how the candidate would approach and solve the problem.

Situational Interviews – Situational interviews are similar to case interviews in that candidates are asked to describe their approach to business problems. However, rather than presenting a detailed case study, the interviewer presents a variety of hypothetical situations that contain more limited information. The candidate is asked how they would respond or handle each hypothetical situation.

Behavioral Interviews – The key assumption of behavioral interviews is that past behavior predicts future behavior. In a behavioral interview, the interviewer attempts to elicit descriptions of specific behaviors that were taken in past situations that closely parallel the challenges that will be faced in the job. The interviewer is not interested in how a candidate generally behaves or would behave in a hypothetical situation but wants specific examples of actions taken in specific circumstances that the candidate has faced in the past.

In addition to different interview formats, interviews may also be conducted in a variety of different modalities including telephone interviews, video interviews, and face to face interviews.

Findings from Decades of Research

The employment interview has been researched scientifically for at least a century. Many reviewers have reviled the interview as subjective, biased, and little better than flipping a coin to make selection decisions. Other reviewers have found the employment interview to be a powerful selection tool. What is the truth about the employment interview?

It turns out that structure matters! Research has shown unstructured interviews are little better than flipping a coin while structured behavioral interviews are one of the most powerful selection tools in use today.

There are three key dimensions to interview structure that contribute to the predictive power of the behavioral interview.

Content - Structured interviews are organized around competencies. Competencies are simply a language for describing the kinds of behaviors that are associated with successful performance in a job. Then the interview questions are constructed to obtain examples of an individual's past behaviors that illustrate their proficiency in each competency area. Let's say that an important competency for job success is understanding and solving complex business problems. A structured pre-planned question might be, "Describe the most difficult or complex work-related problem that you have ever solved. What was your approach for analyzing and solving the problem?"

Responses - In a behavioral interview, the interviewer attempts to elicit responses that have a particular structure. The structure of a behavioral response can be represented by the acronym CAR,

> **C** - Circumstances or situation. A clear description of the situation, task, or circumstances faced.
>
> **A** - Actions or behaviors. A clear description of the specific behaviors or actions taken in the circumstances.
>
> **R** - Results of actions or behaviors. A clear description of the impact or results of those actions and behaviors.

Evaluation Process - There are four key dimensions considered in evaluating a response in a structured behavioral interview:

- Recency – The interviewer is more interested in behaviors that have been exhibited in recent job situations than in behaviors exhibited in the distant past.

- Situation Similarity – The interviewer is interested in behaviors that have been exhibited in situations or circumstances that are most similar to the challenges that will be faced in the job under consideration.

- Approach Effectiveness – The interviewer is interested in how effective the candidate was in handling the situation described.

- Significance – The interviewer is interested in the impact of the behavior taken in the situation described.

Interviewer training is a key component for structuring the evaluation process and ensuring accurate evaluations. Data integration is also a key component of structuring the evaluation process. After interviews are completed, the interview team comes together as a group to integrate their findings and discuss the interview responses in a systematic manner. After all the behavioral information for a competency has been shared and discussed, the interview team comes to a consensus rating for the competency.

Problems with Behavioral Interviews

Extensive research has shown behavioral interviewing to be the most predictive interviewing approach in use today and represents the current evolution of best interviewing practices. However, there are still some significant drawbacks and problems with the behavioral interview. These problems can be categorized as follows:

Negative Interviewer Reactions – Many interviewer resist behavioral interviews because they find them overly structured and formal. They do not want to be so constrained in how they conduct the interview. They prefer a more informal approach and want to inject more of their own personal style and approach in evaluating a candidate.

Negative Candidate Reactions – Candidates can also find behavioral interviews to be taxing. The questions are difficult to answer and call for an immediate response. The candidate has to quickly recall specific situations in the past and provide detailed descriptions of approach and results. The candidate is being put on the spot repeatedly. The interview may feel like an interrogation which can impede the exchange of information and make it difficult for the candidate to recall needed information.

Awkward Process Flow – Behavioral interviews do not flow naturally as part of a normal conversation about the person and the job. The interview follows an overly formal process that is very different than how people would normally communicate. A strict adherence to the pre-planned questions can make it difficult to establish and maintain rapport with the candidate.

Breadth of Information – Behavioral interviews are highly effective in gathering information concerning competencies. However, they may not be as equally effective in eliciting other information. They do not provide information about other important aspects of the person like motivations, interests, and depth of experience.

The Next Stage in the Evolution of the Employment Interview – Blended Interviews

So how do we retain the demonstrated power of the behavioral interview while overcoming the various problems associated with it? The answer is to utilize a Blended Interview approach. The Blended Interview is the next stage in the evolution of the modern employment interview.

The Blended Interview is derived from the seminal book, Behavior Description Interviewing. The book outlines various interview question types that are useful for collecting different kinds of information such as:

- Biographical Facts, Credentials, and Achievements
- Technical Knowledge
- Experience/Activity Descriptions
- Self-Evaluative Information
- Behavior Description Questions (behavioral questions)

The authors note that while behavioral questions provide the best predictive information, the other question types have high value for other purposes.

These question types can be used to:

- Establish rapport and put the candidate at ease which makes for a more productive interview
- Provide a conversational flow and context for asking behavioral questions
- Obtain better and more complete behavioral responses to behavioral questions
- Provide information on the whole person including
- o Interests, job experience, impact, and enthusiasm for the position

Behavior description questions are still at the heart of the Blended Interview process but other question types are blended into the interview process to overcome the problems with relying solely on behavioral questions. In order to set the candidate at ease and make them feel comfortable with the interview process, the interviewer starts the questioning process with general activity/experience questions such as, "It would be helpful if you could tell me more about your responsibilities in your last position." These questions are followed by some general self-evaluation questions such as, "What did you like most about the job?"

These other questions types are also used to provide a context for asking the behavior description questions related to target competencies. When introducing questions related to a specific competency, the interviewer will ask activity/experience questions or self-evaluation questions related to the competency before introducing asking the behavior description questions. The conversation flows more naturally if you ask about general experience in a competency area before asking for specific examples of specific past situations they have faced.

Here is an example of how the various questions types can be used to provide a better context for asking a behavioral question related to the competency "Adjusting to Change":

Start with an Activity/Experience Question – Have you had to make many adjustments to changes at work before? What have been some of the biggest changes you have experienced?

Follow with a Self-Evaluation Question – How would you compare your adjustment in those situations to others that faced the same challenges?

Introduce Behavioral Question – It can be challenging to have to adjust to new technologies or tools. Tell me about the time when you were the most successful in adjusting to using a new technology or tool in performing your job.

In this example, one can see how the behavior description question flows naturally in the course of the conversation. One can also see how the candidate is better prepared to answer the behavioral question since they have already been engaged in a less threatening conversation concerning their experiences and reactions to changes in the work environment. They are more likely to give a good behavioral response than if the question had been introduced out of context.

The use of other question types also allows the interviewer to collect information in other areas beyond competencies. In a Blended Interview, the following areas are evaluated in addition to competency performance:

Enthusiasm/Motivation for the Job - Demonstrating a high level of motivation for performing the job duties present in the job as well as a strong affinity for the work environment and culture.

Communication Skills - Clearly conveying information and ideas through a variety of media to individuals or groups in a manner that engages the audience and helps them understand and retain the message.

Impact – Creating a good first impression; commanding attention and respect; showing an air of confidence.

Relevant Job Experience - Describing past experiences that are very similar in both level and scope to the responsibilities and challenges present in the job opportunity.

Organizational Benefits of the Evolution to Blended Interviewing

Through Blended Interviewing, problems with interviewer resistance are overcome. Less interviewer resistance means higher adoption rates across organizations and significant improvements in interview processes across the board.

Blended Interviewing also improves the candidate experience which in turn results in better engagement and identification with those employer brands that utilize Blended Interviewing. An improved employer brand will help those employers attract future candidates and compete more effectively in the war for talent.

Blended Interviewing improves both the breadth and quality of candidate data captured in the interview process which results in higher quality selection decisions. With higher adoption rates, improved selection decision-making can have a very significant impact on both worker productivity and satisfaction on a national or a global scale.

With the introduction of Blended Interviewing, we are anxious to see a new era in the employment interview.

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About OMNIview

OMNIview was created around the belief that talent selection and talent management is critical to the success of any organization. Founded by internationally recognized business leader and leadership talent management authority, Dr. Lowell Hellervik, **OMNIview** is supported by more than 90 years of academic experience by behavior science business experts. We know effective selection and talent management requires measurement and support that drives game-changing talent decisions for organizations.

OMNIview is all about making your life easier by giving you the data you need to make smart, effective decisions regarding talent at a fraction of the cost of other HR software companies.

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