



WHITE PAPER

IF YOU WERE A TREE, WHAT KIND WOULD YOU BE?

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THE SURPRISING TRUTH ABOUT INTERVIEWING

Historically, the interview has been one of the most commonly used, and most liked, selection practices available (Judge, Higgins, & Cable, 2000; Hausknecht, Day, & Thomas, 2004). This was true in spite of two very important facts. First, typical interviews did not provide consistent results. Second, they did not accurately predict which applicants would be high-performers (Judge et al., 2000).

Perhaps most surprising, these historical problems are not just historical. Traditional, unstructured interviews continue to be conducted with alarming regularity (Judge et al., 2000). Moreover, interviewers don't seem to recognize how ineffective they really are. A recent DDI study found that among interviewers who have never been trained, only 7 percent lack confidence in their interviewing ability (Howard, Erker, & Bruce, 2007). Job seekers in the same study reported that interviewers asked questions such as:

- > “What would you do if I gave you an elephant?”
- > How do you make a peanut butter sandwich?”

- > “Do you like knives?”
- > “Do you have a girlfriend for me?”
- > “If you were a tree (or Disney character, fruit, etc.), what kind would you be?”

Available research provides no evidence that these and similar questions can identify who will perform best on the job. Yet, unknowing interviewers continue to waste their own and interviewees' time by asking them. This might not matter so much if the interview played no role in hiring; however, 9 out of 10 interviewers in another DDI study indicated that the interview was important or very important in their hiring decisions. Moreover, 92 percent gave their own hiring decisions a grade of A or B, even though more than half admitted that they based their decisions on instincts (Erker & Buczynski, 2008).

A Turning Point

In the 21st-century marketplace, organizations can no longer afford to bumble through meaningless interviews. Human talent has taken on new strategic importance as organizations depend less on tangible products and more on knowledge and service. In the so-called “war for talent,” too many organizations are chasing too few qualified candidates, a condition that can only worsen as the Baby Boom generation retires. Once qualified candidates are identified, organizations can't necessarily land them. And even if good candidates accept positions, there is less assurance that they will stay with their new organization for very long as job hopping becomes more

common. The extent to which job hopping is a problem was illustrated in a study that found roughly two-thirds of job seekers had been in their current positions less than two years and half had been there less than one year (Erker & Buczynski, 2008).

Among selection methods, the interview is uniquely positioned to tackle each of these 21st-century hiring challenges. But to do so, the interview needs to be designed to predict future job performance reliably and accurately. It also needs to be repositioned as not just a tool for evaluating candidates' fit to the job and organization, but as a vehicle to get the best candidates to accept a job offer.

The best talent management practices are based on evidence, not tradition or instinct. Consistent with this belief, this paper reviews professional research on employment interviews and interprets its lessons on how to turn the interview into a competitive hiring tool.

A BUY-SELL RELATIONSHIP

An interview is, in essence, a dual buy-sell relationship. Both interviewers and interviewees are buying and selling something (see Table 1).

Table 1. The Dual Buy-Sell Relationship

	INTERVIEWER	INTERVIEWEE
BUY	Right talent for job/organization	Right job/organization for me
SELL	The job/organization	Me

Interviewers and organizations want to “buy” the right kind of talent for the organization—someone who will be a top performer and stay with the organization. As for “selling,” the interviewer wants to make the job and organization appear desirable so that the

right person will accept the job offer. The interviewee needs information on whether to “buy” into the job and organization as vehicles to meet personal and professional needs. If the position looks like a good fit, the interviewee wants to “sell” himself or herself and garner a job offer. For interviewers to achieve their own objectives, they need to keep both parties' goals in mind when conducting the interview.

BUYING: HOW DO INTERVIEWERS IDENTIFY THE BEST CANDIDATES?

First and foremost, interviewers need to determine if a candidate will be a high-quality employee. A significant body of research suggests that the way an interview is constructed has a significant bearing on whether it can foretell later job performance. The following characteristics are the most important.

Stay Tuned to the Job

Research teaches that interviews and interview questions need to be job-related (Wiesner & Cronshaw, 1988). This is the best way to ensure that applicants' answers will help the interviewer make an informed “buy” decision. One of the most important functions of the interview is to help interviewers assess the degree to which a candidate has the necessary skills and competencies to be successful on the job. These competencies include those that are behavioral, such as customer orientation or interpersonal skills, as well as technical, which are particularly important for candidates facing international assignments (Shackleton & Newell, 1997). When questions are not job-relevant, and the interviewer begins to wander or ask inappropriate questions, the likelihood of coming away with the best information is reduced dramatically.

Interviews that rely on job-related questions also are less likely to result in claims of unfair discrimination and, if they are questioned in court, are usually more defensible. The job-relatedness of interview questions is especially defensible if a thorough job analysis was the basis for question development (Dipboye, 1997; Gilliland & Steiner, 1999).

To assure that interviews are defensible, interviewers should be trained to not only ask job-related questions, but also avoid asking illegal questions. Recent survey data show that the latter remains a serious problem. Only 68 percent of interviewers were aware that asking a candidate's age was illegal, 60 percent knew that asking whether a candidate was married was illegal, and only 56 percent knew that it was illegal to ask if a candidate planned to have children (Erker & Buczynski, 2008).

Structure Your Questions

One way to keep focused on job requirements is to structure the interview. This process is formally defined as “[consistent] and deliberate application of systematic and predetermined rules of observation and evaluation” (Motowidlo et al., 1992, p. 571). In other words, all candidates for the same position should be interviewed using the same set of rules, developed in advance, in order to gather the information needed to evaluate their potential for success. The more structure an interview has, the more likely applicants are to perceive that there is consistency in administration (signifying fairness) and the less likely an interviewer is to forget or fail to get the necessary comparative information for each candidate (Conway, Jako, & Goodman, 1995; Jelf, 1999; Schmidt & Hunter, 1998). In fact, researchers have demonstrated that an

organization would need to conduct three to four unstructured interviews in order to get the same benefit or predictive power as they would from one structured interview (Schmidt & Zimmerman, 2004).

Structuring an interview results in outcomes or scores that are indicative of how the candidate will actually perform on the job (Jelf, 1999; Moscoso, 2000). Additionally, structured interviews tend to result in very low levels of adverse impact; that is, they are less likely to select significantly smaller percentages of protected group candidates compared to the majority group (Hough, Oswald, & Ployhart, 2001). In particular, there are smaller race differences in interview results than in many other selection methods (Huffcutt & Roth, 1998; Williamson, Campion, Malos, Roehling, & Campion, 1997).

The downside to structured interviews is that they are sometimes less popular with applicants (Latham & Finnegan, 1993). This might be because structured interviews limit free-flowing conversation and thus opportunities for applicants to steer the interview in a particular direction. Interviewers can lessen candidates' negative reactions to a structured interview by explaining and expressing support for the process. Moreover, structured questions don't preclude establishing rapport with candidates and expressing friendliness and warmth, which also are important for interview success.

Ask When, Not If

Two types of highly structured interviews have become increasingly popular as ways of eliciting examples of behavior related to a job or job competency (Huffcutt et al., 2004; Janz, 1989; Pulakos & Schmitt, 1995).

These interviews differ based on the types of questions asked:

- > **Situational interview questions** ask an applicant to describe what he or she would do in a hypothetical situation. For example, “Imagine you were in a situation where your team was under significant time pressure to complete a project. How would you handle that situation?”
- > **Behavior-based interview questions** ask applicants what they did in a specific situation. For example, “Think of a situation where you had to lead a team in a time crunch. Describe the situation, your actions, and the results of your actions.”

Much debate has ensued regarding the merits of these two approaches. Research results have been mixed, with both types shown to be related to later job performance. Key elements of this debate include the following:

- > **Relevance to audience.** Some researchers indicate that situational interview questions are more appropriate for a broader audience because they do not require that individuals have extensive work experience (Pulakos & Schmitt, 1995). Other research, however, tested this assumption and found this not to be the case. Instead, these researchers argued that the nature of behavior-based questions allows for applicants to apply all types of life experiences to the questions (Gibb & Taylor, 2003). For example, the behavior-based question example that asked about leading a team could be answered by describing a work team, a sports team, or a school group. Research also suggests that individuals explaining past behavior are able to give

considerably more information and detail, helping to provide the interviewer with additional insight.

- > **Job complexity.** Some researchers have argued that situational interviews are less able than behavior-based interviews to address complex and high-level jobs. Situational questions must accurately represent potential situations that job applicants might face. The higher one is in an organization, or the more complex the job, the more difficult it is to develop situational questions that fully encompass all parts of that job. This means that while the interviewer may be able to differentiate between those applicants who might be poor performers and those who would be good performers, it will be significantly more difficult for the interviewer to differentiate between those who will be good and those who will be great. Behavior-based interview questions, on the other hand, allow applicants to choose their own examples, elaborate on what might be very complex considerations and actions, and then explain in detail the different ways their actions lead to results (Huffcutt et al., 2004).
- > **Typical or best performance.** Behavior-based interview questions assess typical performance—what happens day to day—and show an applicant’s motivation to carry out the behaviors he or she thinks appropriate. Situational questions assess maximal performance, or what an applicant would do or consider the best option; they do not measure motivation to apply those skills or whether they are likely to actually perform the behaviors (Taylor & Small, 2002). Studies of various groups, including but not limited to federal

organization employees (Pulakos & Schmitt, 1995), security personnel (Moscoso & Salgado, 2001), and paper mill employees (Campion, Campion, & Hudson, 1994), have compared the two types of questioning with later job performance. In each instance, the ability of the past behavior-based questions to predict performance on the job was significantly higher than was found for situational questions.

- > **Figuring out the answer.** Behavior-based question responses tend to be less related to cognitive ability of the applicant than situational questions. In other words, it is easier for people with high intellect to guess at and develop better answers for hypothetical situations, but they cannot change what has already happened. Because selection tools measuring cognitive ability tend to result in significant adverse impact, situational questions also tend to result in higher levels of adverse impact than do past behavior-based questions (Moscoso, 2000).

The preponderance of the evidence favors interview questions that ask about what interviewees actually did (“when” questions) and not what they would do (“if” questions). Although situational questions are not without merit, they might be more appropriately used as a test than in an interview.

DDI has conducted a number of research studies demonstrating that its version of behavior-based interviewing, *Targeted Selection*[®] (*TS*[®]), produces a variety of positive organizational outcomes. For example, hiring with TS has resulted in better hiring decisions, faster speed to productivity, and better job performance. Moreover, it has had a significant long-term

impact, including greater customer satisfaction, reduced employee turnover, and enhanced organization performance (Howard, 2008).

SELLING: HOW DO YOU GET YOUR PREFERRED CANDIDATE TO SAY YES?

Besides helping to identify the most qualified applicant for a job or role, the interviewer is to a large part responsible for getting the candidate to say “yes” to an offer of employment. The interviewer represents the personal side of the organization to the candidate. The interviewer’s attitude and personality not only affect the applicant directly, but also indirectly reflect the general character of others working in the organization (Carless & Imber, 2007).

What Do Interviewees Want?

The interviewer is in a position to figure out what interviewees want in a job and organization. This information is critical for determining if there is a good enough fit that the applicant will want to join the organization, be happy there, and want to stay. It is also important for an interviewer to know what to emphasize in order to win over the preferred candidate.

Like interviewers, applicants come into a selection situation with their own set of buying and selling goals. These overarching goals don’t differ much for people of different demographic backgrounds, such as age, gender, or race (Harris, 1989). Applicants’ reactions to the interview (or other selection tool) are strongly related to their attraction to the organization, intentions to accept a job offer, and likelihood of recommending the organization to others (Hausknecht et al., 2004). The more interviewers are able to sell to these goals, and

the more they work to ensure positive reactions, the more likely they are to see positive outcomes with the best applicants.

1. I want to see if we're a match.

Job characteristics have been demonstrated to have a sizable impact on applicant reactions (Hausknecht et al., 2004). Job characteristics include job requirements and responsibilities as well as more subjective qualities like the job's attractiveness and status. Applicants have different priorities, and they need information to figure out whether their own personal and practical needs will be fulfilled by what the position offers.

Many aspects of a good fit also come from organizational characteristics, such as location, size, opportunity for advancement, and salary and benefits packages. These characteristics also have considerable impact on whether an applicant intends to accept an offer (Carless, 2003; Hausknecht et al., 2004). In fact, researchers in Australia reported that organizational characteristics were the most highly related to the applicant's attraction to an organization and intentions to accept an offer (Carless & Imber, 2007). Other research points to the importance of initial impressions the organization makes as well as the applicant's expectation regarding whether the organization will extend a job offer (Chapman & Webster, 2006).

2. I want to be treated right.

Almost as important as organizational characteristics for impacting applicant reactions was interviewer behavior (Carless & Imber, 2007). Applicants feel most positive toward interviewers who are friendly and warm, knowledgeable about the job and organization, and have a sense of humor (Conway et al., 1995; Harris, 1989). Applicants who were dissatisfied with their interview experience (rating it a D or F) made comments like the following (Erker & Buczynski, 2008):

- > “The interviewers were not knowledgeable.”
- > “Interviewers were arrogant and vague.”
- > “Interviewer was unfriendly and unenthusiastic.”
- > “Interviewer (was) not smiling.”

Candidates also want to be treated fairly. They look for fairness throughout the entire selection process; thus, the interviewer's actions often can undermine human resources' efforts to install and maintain a fair procedure.

Two DDI studies (Erker & Buczynski, 2008; Howard et al., 2007) distilled from the experiences of job seekers some common interviewer mistakes (see Table 2). These examples show how interviewers can unwittingly antagonize applicants, suggest unfairness, and give a negative impression of the organization and how it operates.

Table 2. Interviewers' Deadly Traps*

	DEFINITION	EXAMPLES PROVIDED BY INTERVIEWEES
DEVALUING	Being late, unprepared, acting like there is no time to talk.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > "Can I use your pen?" > Texting, using computer while interviewing. > The interviewer was late and then asked me what I was doing while I was waiting on him to show up.
WITHHOLDING	Not sharing information about the job or organization.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > I didn't learn much of anything about the job and even less about the organization. > Asked me to tell the interviewer what the job was—a guessing game.
DUELING	Grilling applicants with questions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > After cross-examining occurred, [the interviewer] asked if I had experience in a particular software application that was not relevant. > "What is your error rate? We have a zero-tolerance error policy."
EGO-STROKING	Talking about oneself rather than the candidate.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > "I have a masters degree from an Ivy-League university. I see you weren't as lucky as me." > "As a woman, I'm often judged more harshly. Do you like me as a woman?"
WANDERING	Asking irrelevant, inappropriate, or personal questions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > "How strong is your marriage?" > "What do you think of the artwork on the wall?" > "What is your natural hair color?" > "Would [you] be available . . . to watch the supervisor's kids?"

*Adapted from Howard et al., 2007.

Each interviewer mistake in Table 2 can be targeted for training. Organizations that train interviewers on how to accentuate positive behaviors while avoiding the deadly traps are likely to see positive results. This is especially important in light of research noting the considerable importance of first impressions on the likelihood that an applicant would ultimately accept a job offer (Carless, 2003).

3. I want you to want me.

Applicants are expected to try to make a good impression and represent themselves in the best possible light. Unfortunately, some do so by resorting to dishonesty. Applicant cheating or faking during the selection process has been a focus of recent research. There is evidence of faking in employment tools such as personality tests, integrity tests,

and more (Byle & Holtgraves, 2008; McFarland & Ryan, 2000); overt misrepresentation on a resume has been shown to be fairly widespread (Howard et al., 2007). However, some research also suggests that this concern over faking might be somewhat exaggerated (Ellingson, Smith, & Sackett, 2001).

Faking in the interview can be difficult to pinpoint. One definition of such faking is "dishonest impression management or intentional distortion of responses to interview questions or misrepresentation in order to create a good impression" (Levashina, 2005, p. 301). However you define it, faking has been shown to have a significant impact on selection outcomes (e.g., getting a second interview, getting a job offer), and those who fake more (assuming they aren't caught) end up

with more positive outcomes (Levashina & Campion, 2007). Although this may seem to be a problem with applicants, a considerable amount remains to be understood.

Managing Overselling

There are a number of things organizations can do to lessen the frequency and magnitude of faking during the interview. Faking is more likely to occur when the applicant:

- > Has the capacity or ability to fake.
- > Is willing to fake.
- > Is offered the opportunity to fake.

If any of these three factors is not present, the likelihood of faking drops off dramatically (Levashina & Campion, 2006).

Candidates for high-level, complex jobs are more likely to have an increased ability to fake simply because they need increased capacity (cognitive ability) to be considered for the job in the first place (Huffcutt et al., 2004; Levashina & Campion, 2007). Thus, it might be especially important to use behavior-based interview questions rather than situational questions when interviewing candidates for complex jobs.

Interviewees' opportunities to fake can be reduced if interviewers take the following precautions:

Control the Flow

Recent results demonstrate decreased faking in interviews that were highly structured (Levashina & Campion, 2007). When applicants have less ability to determine the flow or direction of the interview, they are less likely to use tactics designed to give the interviewer a biased picture of who they are (Levashina & Campion, 2007; Stevens & Kristof, 1995). By using more structured interviews, interviewers need to attend to less stimuli

from the situation. They can focus instead on applicant responses with less worry about possible response distortion.

Interviewers also need to be careful not to ask leading or suggestive follow-up questions. Keeping these types of questions out of the interview can serve to further decrease faking behavior (Levashina & Campion, 2007).

Ask for Verifiable Answers

Using past-behavior-based questions within a structured interview tends to decrease faking levels even further. Responses to past-behavior-based questions are historical (they have occurred already), external (occurring in real life, not thoughts, attitudes, or opinions; Janz, 1989), objective (recalled, but not interpreted), and lastly, verifiable. On the other hand, answers to situational questions that ask for hypothetical behavior are internal, subjective, and unverifiable (Levashina & Campion, 2007).

Get Multiple Perspectives

Finally, using multiple interviewers helps assure that other interviewers can control what one interviewer might not be able to stop (Dipboye, 1997; Wiesner & Cronshaw, 1988).

FINAL WORDS: AN ELEPHANT? A FRUIT?

Ultimately, unless the job is for the zoo or the circus, interview questions should not include references to elephants. Unless the job is for Disney or a Fruit-of-the-Loom® actor, interview questions should not pursue the type of fruit one wishes to be. Organizations need to train interviewers to avoid inappropriate questions and instead gather the best information on whether a particular candidate would be the right person for the job.

Research around interviewer training is expanding, and important new ways to help ensure quality are plentiful. Traditional interviewing skills include how to avoid bias, how to ask questions without getting into legal trouble, and how to interact interpersonally. Today, training also is readily available for the kind of structured interviewing mentioned here, including past-oriented, behavior-based interviews. With new skills, a better understanding, and organizational support, interviewers can be much more successful in the future than they have been in the past.

Lastly, it is important to remember that the interview can be the first step in an employment relationship. A thorough interview can inform managers about a new hire's strengths and areas where he or she likely needs extra development or support. A high-quality interview helps secure acceptance from the best candidates and serves as a jumping-off point to ensure that new hires have a strong start in the organization.

Table 3. Interviewer Take-Home Points

	BUY	SELL
DO	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Ask job-related questions to help ensure quality of hires and reduce potential for legal trouble. > Structure your interview to target pertinent information and limit faking. > Ask behavior-based questions to get specific information about past actions; especially important for high-level, complex positions. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Sell what the applicant wants to buy: a job and organization that fit personal needs. > Be nice, warm, friendly, humorous. > Be fair, keep the process consistent among all candidates.
DON'T	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Wander by asking irrelevant, inappropriate, or personal questions. > Stroke your ego by talking about yourself rather than the candidate or you won't learn enough about the person. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Devalue the candidate by being late, uninterested, preoccupied, or unprepared. > Withhold information about the job or the organization. > Grill the candidate, which can cause stress and repel the person.

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