

What 85 Years of Research Says about How to Improve the Hiring Interview

Michael A. Campion

Professor of Management
Purdue University, West Lafayette, IN

The employment interview has been the subject of systematic research for 85 years (since 1915). During that time, there have been over 200 scientific articles and books written on the topic. The purpose of this article is to briefly summarize what has been learned about how to improve the interview -- specifically for the purpose of making hiring decisions.

Reviews of this extensive research have shown that there are at least 15 ways of improving the interview. Seven ways influence the content of the interview by improving the quality and quantity of the information gained. Eight ways influence the evaluation process by improving the assessment of the information gathered.

IMPROVING THE CONTENT OF THE INTERVIEW

1. *Base Questions on a Job Analysis*

Basing questions on a job-analysis enhances validity by increasing the job-relevance of the interview and by ensuring that the interview neither includes irrelevant information nor excludes relevant information. A job analysis is also required by both professional and legal testing guidelines.

2. *Ask the Same Questions of Each Candidate*

Well designed interviews either ask every candidate the same questions, or they ask primarily the same questions but allow some discretion (e.g., pick from a list of questions, or have a common core of questions plus discretionary questions, etc.). Asking the same questions is of fundamental importance for accurately measuring and comparing candidates. Asking different questions of different candidates is like comparing apples and oranges. This improvement to the interview prevents irrelevant questions from being asked and important questions from being omitted. It may also increase legal defensibility by ensuring that all candidates are treated the same.

3. *Limit Prompting, Follow-up Questioning, and Elaboration on Questions*

Some people feel that dynamic two-way interaction is an essential feature of the interview, and follow-up questioning facilitates this. However, prompts and follow-up questions are the primary means by which an interviewer might bias the information gathered. The interviewer can actually lead the candidate to the right (or wrong) answer by the follow-up questions asked. A trade-off exists because sometimes follow-up questions may be needed to get full information, explore negative answers, test hypotheses about the candidate, and so on. The best advice is to use follow-up questioning to clarify and gain complete answers, but avoid excessive follow-up questioning or questioning that might change the topic or lead the candidate.

4. *Use Better Types of Questions*

Some types of questions are more structured because they are more specific and measure candidates more precisely than general questions. Examples include questions that require answers describing past behaviors, questions that pose hypothetical situations, questions that test job knowledge, and questions concerning the candidate's work experience and education.

5. Use a Longer Interview or Larger Number of Questions

longer interviews increase the amount of candidate information gained and assessed. However, overly long interviews could be viewed negatively by interviewers and candidates. The vast majority of the interviews studied in the research lasted 30 to 60 minutes and had 15 to 20 questions.

6. Withhold or Control Ancillary Information

Examples of ancillary information include application forms, work histories, personnel files, test scores, letters of reference, transcripts, recommendations, and the results of previous interviews. These sources of information should be used in the evaluation of a candidate. However, they may inadvertently influence the interviewer's perceptions and judgments of the candidates. Furthermore, different information is sometimes available across candidates or is weighted differently by different interviewers. As such, this information should either be withheld or provided consistently for all candidates.

7. Do Not Allow Questions from the Candidate until after the Interview

Allowing uncontrolled questions from the candidate reduces standardization by changing the interview content in unpredictable ways. Many books on how to take interviews recommend that candidates try to take control of the interview by asking questions in order to focus the interview on their strengths and away from their weaknesses. In practice, the interview serves recruitment as well as a selection function. Candidates use the interview to gather information about the job and the organization in order to make job acceptance decisions. To serve this function, time should be allowed outside the interview for the candidate to ask questions.

8. Rate Each Answer or Use Multiple Scales

It is often best to rate each answer as it is given, rather than wait until the end of the interview to make the ratings. This reduces memory requirements and helps ensure that the rating is based on that question only. However, sometimes it is necessary to make ratings at the end of the interview. For example, sometimes answers to several different questions are needed to get full information to make a rating. In those cases, making multiple ratings is better than a single global rating because multiple ratings are more thorough and precise.

9. Use Descriptive Rating Scales

The objectivity of rating scales used in interviews can be improved by clearly describing the meaning of each point on the scales. There are four ways to do this: (1) example answers or illustrations, (2) definitions of answers, (3) evaluative adjectives (e.g., excellent, marginal), and (4) relative comparisons (e.g., top 20% of all candidates).

10. Take Detailed Notes

Note taking enhances the interview because it reduces memory decay and the influence of first (and last) impressions. These benefits may be most apparent when ratings are made at the end of the interview or are based on multiple questions. Notetaking requires justifying the ratings, and this encourages interviewers to attend to candidate answers and to organize their thoughts, thus possibly increasing accuracy, recall, and consistency.

11. Use Multiple Interviewers

Multiple interviewers improve the interview in several ways. They reduce the effects of idiosyncratic biases by balancing out the different viewpoints. Relevant information is less likely to be missed with multiple interviewers. Also, improper questions or evaluations are reduced because multiple interviewers provide a check on each other. Multiple interviewers can conduct interviews together (e.g., panel or board interview), or they can conduct them separately (e.g., serial interview).

12. Use the Same Interviewers Across All Candidates

Using fewer interviewers enhances consistency compared to having a great number of people involved in the interviewing process. This is particularly important when other aspects of the interview are unstructured because different interviewers tend to ask different questions and evaluate answers differently.

13. Do Not Discuss Candidates or Answers Between Interviews

Discussing candidates or answers between interviews may lead to possible problems by introducing irrelevant information into the decision process, by causing standards to change from one interview to the next, or by forming favorites among the candidates. It is better to wait until all the interviews are completed, and then compare all candidates at the same time based on complete information.

14. Provide Extensive Interview Training

Training is probably the most common step taken by organizations to improve their hiring interviews. Interviewing is relatively easily taught. The content of typical training programs include establishing rapport, understanding the job requirements, asking questions and probing, evaluating answers, avoiding rating errors, ensuring equal employment opportunity, and other topics. The training techniques typically include lecturing, modeling, practicing and role-playing, discussing, and videotaping.

15. Use Consistent Hiring Decision Rules

Different interviewers will weigh information differently, thus another way to improve the interview is to use a consistent rule for making hiring decisions based on interview information. The most common approach is to simply sum or average the ratings. This applies to both combining ratings across questions or dimensions, and to combining ratings across interviewers. If different questions or dimensions get different weights, be sure to use the same weights for all candidates. Any consistent rule is better than letting interviewers use different weights for different candidates.

WHICH ASPECTS ARE MOST IMPORTANT?

The best ways to improve the interview will depend on the context, the candidates, and the interviewers. However, based on the strength of the research, we would recommend that the following guidelines always be followed:

- Base questions on a job analysis
- Ask the same or highly similar questions of each candidate
- Use better types of questions
- Rate each answer or use multiple scales
- Use detailed anchored rating scales
- Provide extensive training

It is possible that interviewers and candidates may view some of the ways to improve the interview as limiting their flexibility. But it is also possible that users may appreciate the obvious fairness and job-relatedness of improved interviews, or they may appreciate how such interviews can help interviewers make difficult employment decisions. At present, there is very little research evidence on user reactions either way. Perhaps the best advice is to simply avoid those improvements that might cause a negative reaction in your setting.

CONCLUSIONS

Our conclusions can be summarized as follows: (1) there is clear evidence for how to improve the interview, (2) these improvements are easy to implement, and (3) there seems to be little reason not to improve the interview in these ways given its importance to the hiring process.

RECOMMENDED ADDITIONAL READINGS

Campion, M. A., Palmer, D. K., & Campion, J. E. (1997). A review of structure in the selection interview. *Personnel Psychology*, 50, 655-702.

Dipboye, R. L. (1992). *Selection interviews: Process perspectives*. Cincinnati, OH: South-Western.

Gollub-Williamson, L. R., Campion, J. E., Malos, S. B., Roehling, M. V., & Campion, M. A. (1997). The employment interview on trial: Linking interview structure with litigation outcomes. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 82, 900-912.

Huffcutt, A. I., & Arthur, W. (1994). Hunter and Hunter (1984) revisited: Interview validity for entry-level jobs. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 79, 184-190.