

The Federal Selection Interview: Unrealized Potential



A report to the President and the Congress
of the United States by the
U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board

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THE CHAIRMAN



U.S. MERIT SYSTEMS PROTECTION BOARD
1615 M Street, NW
Washington, DC 20419-0001

February 2003

The President
President of the Senate
Speaker of the House of Representatives

Dear Sirs:

In accordance with the requirements of 5 U.S.C. 1204(a)(3), I am pleased to submit this Merit Systems Protection Board report, "The Federal Selection Interview: Unrealized Potential."

Interviews are widely used and highly influential in Federal employment decisions. How Federal agencies use interviews when selecting employees affects merit-based hiring and effective, efficient Government.

Through our research we found evidence of wide variation in how Federal agencies and managers conduct interviews. While some agencies use carefully-developed structured interviews as an integral part of the selection process, other agencies devote only limited resources and attention to interviewing, resulting in a relatively unstructured approach. Available information suggests that this latter unstructured approach is far more common. This is unfortunate, because research shows that unstructured interviews do not predict job performance as well as good structured interviews, and are vulnerable to bias and complaints.

In an effort to promote change, the report concludes with recommendations to help Federal agencies make better use of selection interviews. In particular, we encourage agencies to make greater use of structured interviews, and to invest the resources needed to support such use.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Susanne T. Marshall".

Susanne T. Marshall

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Executive Summary

Interviews that are used to make personnel decisions—such as hiring and promotion—are assessments, just like written tests and ratings of training and experience.¹ Data from the Board’s Merit Principles Survey² indicate that the use of interviews as an assessment tool is widespread and that managers rely heavily on interviews when making selection decisions. Therefore, it is important that managers conduct good interviews that produce reliable results. The report presents the concept of the structured interview, describes the elements and benefits of structured interviews, discusses the disadvantages of unstructured interviews, and outlines a process for using structured interviews.

This report examines the selection interview,³ an interview whose primary purpose is to serve as an assessment tool; that is, a tool for evaluating a job candidate’s qualifications and abilities. Selection interviews may be used to rank candidates (that is, place them in order or group them based on interview performance), or simply to inform the selecting official’s decision when choosing from a group of available, qualified candidates. Selection interviews are distinct from informational interviews, which are generally used to educate potential candidates about the organization and its employment opportunities.

The report has two primary objectives: (1) to discuss how agencies use selection interviews, and (2) to identify and promote interviewing practices that support merit-based selection. The U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board (the Board) prepared this report pursuant to statutory responsibility to evaluate the Federal civil service and other executive branch merit systems.

¹ Rating of training and experience is most frequently done through review of a written application, but other methods are possible. For example, Service Centers of the U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM) frequently use an automated questionnaire to evaluate applicants’ qualifications and experience.

² The Merit Principles Survey is a Governmentwide survey that MSPB administered in the spring of 2000 to over 17,000 Federal employees. Questions 77A and 77B of the survey asked supervisors about sources of information that they use, including interviews, when selecting entry-level professional and administrative employees.

³ The term “selection interview” is sometimes used to refer to unscored interviews that are used to choose from among a group of candidates. In this report, the term “final selection interview” covers this type of interview, and the term “selection interview” refers to **any** interview that influences the selection decision.

Background

Selection interviews cover a continuum of technique and content. At one end is the unstructured interview—a casual conversation where the questions asked may be unplanned and vary across interviews, and the results are analyzed and applied subjectively. At the other end is the highly structured interview, where trained interviewers ask questions based on job analysis, ask the same questions of each applicant, and score answers using predeveloped rating scales.

Selection interviewing is a nearly universal practice in both the public and private sectors. Over two-thirds of the Federal managers responding to the Board's 2000 Merit Principles Survey stated that they consider interviews to a great extent when selecting a new employee. Despite its prevalence, interviewing in the Federal Government is not highly regimented⁴—at least on the surface. Federal employment laws, regulations, and guidelines emphasize assessments such as written tests, level of education, and evaluation of training and experience, but appear to regard the interview as an afterthought. Nevertheless, interviews must meet the same broad standards as these other assessments: they are covered by the Uniform Guidelines on Employee Selection and Placement,⁵ and should, as part of a merit-based system of employment, support “selection and advancement...determined solely on the basis of relative ability.”⁶

Findings

Federal managers do not merely conduct employment interviews: they rely heavily on them to identify the best candidate. This reliance is appropriate, if managers use a properly developed structured interview. Structured interviews are interviews that use multiple mechanisms, such as questions based on job analysis, detailed rating scales, and trained interviewers to make the interview more job-related and systematic. Research shows that such interviews can increase the odds of selecting good employees.

However, information from the Board's previous studies and surveys suggests Federal managers are not realizing the full potential of the selection interview. Agency investment in assessment tools such as interviews varies substantially, including varying levels of job analysis, interviewer preparation, and rigor in the development, conduct, and

⁴ There are exceptions to this generalization. For example, many agencies have policies that specify the use and content of interviews for selected occupations, and collective bargaining agreements may include provisions describing how interviews will be conducted and scored.

⁵ The Uniform Guidelines on Employee Selection and Placement (Uniform Guidelines) are a set of principles and standards for employment practices. The Uniform Guidelines were developed by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, the Department of Labor, the Department of Justice, and the Civil Service Commission (now the Office of Personnel Management). They provide a framework to help employers make proper use of tests and other selection procedures, meet legal and regulatory requirements, and comply with antidiscrimination laws.

⁶ Merit Principle No. 1 [5 U.S.C. 2301(b)(1)].

use of interviews. Consequently, structured interviewing appears to be the exception rather than the norm, and Federal managers often resort to (relatively) unstructured interviewing because their only other option—which they are understandably unwilling to accept—is not interviewing at all. Unfortunately, unstructured interviewing is problematic. Unstructured interviews are less valid than structured interviews, are subject to bias, and may expose employers to complaints and challenges.

Recommendations

In light of Federal agencies' widespread use of the interview—and its potential to contribute to high-quality selections when properly developed and conducted—we recommend that agencies take steps to optimize their use of the interview.

1. Agencies should decide which purpose(s) the interview will serve, and design and conduct the interview accordingly. Interviews can be purely informational, supporting recruitment efforts by educating candidates about employment opportunities and conditions of employment. Or, interviews can focus purely on assessing candidates' qualifications. Or they can do both. Agencies must make a conscious and informed choice, because that choice has significant implications for the design and conduct of the interview. Interviews that function only as a recruitment tool do not require a high level of structure.⁷ On the other hand, interviews that function as assessment tools—that are used to screen candidates, rank or group candidates, or make a final selection decision—call for careful design and considerable structure, if the organization is to realize their full potential.

2. Agencies that use interviews to assess job candidates should use structured interviews. In making this recommendation, we distinguish between interviews that function as a continuation of the evaluation of training and experience—for example, an interview that simply confirms or elaborates on information in the candidate's application—and interviews that are intended to develop new information. For the former, a high level of structure is neither practical nor necessary, provided that the interviewer asks job-related questions and treats candidates consistently. But for the latter, the case for the structured interview is compelling. Research shows that structured interviews, as part of a systematic candidate assessment process, can increase the likelihood of a good selection by helping managers develop new information on candidates such as past behaviors, in the context of the workplace. Structured interviews can also reduce the costs associated with unsound employment practices, including turn-

⁷ Even here, some structure—such as recruiter training and “talking points”—will help the organization project a clear, consistent image and maximize the effectiveness of the informational interview.

over, poor performance, and grievances and complaints. The alternative—the unstructured interview—is much less desirable. Research indicates that unstructured interviews are, on average, little more than half as effective as structured interviews and unstructured interviews may be subject to bias and challenges.

3. Agencies should invest the resources (time, training, funds, and expertise) needed to add structure to selection interviews. Structured interviewing can be cost-effective, but it is not free. Structured interviews require a coordinated application of thought and expertise. An agency cannot realize the benefits of structured interviewing simply by reading about it. Many Federal agencies understand and have acted on the “business case” for structured interviews. However, our previous studies also indicate that many agencies and managers do not, for varying reasons, use the best available tools when assessing candidates. This failure is not merely inconsistent with the merit principle of selecting from the best-qualified candidates; it is also inconsistent with effective and efficient government. Therefore, we strongly encourage agencies that use selection interviews to move toward structured interviews. This includes investing in both the assessment tool (the interview itself) and the users of that tool (most likely supervisors and managers).

Agencies that may lack the resources to make large, immediate investments in structured interviewing should pursue incremental improvements in their interviewing practices. The body of the report discusses this strategy in more detail, and provides some examples.

Agencies that wish to adopt structured interviewing may contact the Office of Personnel Management, which offers guidance and training on structured interviewing. Agencies may also be able to draw on the expertise and experience of agencies that currently use structured interviews. These include, but are not limited to, the U.S. Customs Service, the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service, and the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.

4. Agencies should evaluate their interview practices for effectiveness and possible improvement. This recommendation, like the first two, reiterates an established position of the Board that is particularly relevant to the structured interview. The structured interview is an adaptable and flexible assessment tool that can be readily modified to accommodate changing job requirements and incorporate “lessons learned.” Evaluation of the interview instrument, process, and outcomes will help ensure that the interview meets the organization’s needs, and that the organization treats candidates fairly and defensibly.

Background

There are two major types of employment-related interviews: informational and selection. Informational interviews provide information to prospective and actual job candidates. The information provided may cover matters such as application procedures, employment opportunities, and working conditions and benefits, and typically supports the recruitment effort. In contrast, selection interviews collect information from job candidates. The information collected may cover education and credentials, work experience, and accomplishments, and is used to help the organization make a selection decision. Appendix A illustrates this distinction, and outlines the various roles the interview can play in the selection process. The two types can be combined; in fact, most selection interviews include an informational component. In this report, the term “interview” refers to an interview, either structured or unstructured, used at any stage of the selection process, whether screening, ranking, or final selection.

Selection interviews are not all alike.

Selection interviews may be placed on a continuum from unstructured to structured. At one end of the continuum, the unstructured interview is completely unplanned—questions are asked spontaneously and responses are not evaluated in any systematic manner. At the other end of the continuum, a highly structured interview uses several elements of structure—mechanisms such as questions based on job analysis, and predeveloped rating scales—to create a clear and strong relationship between performance in the interview and performance on the job. Table 1 provides key characteristics of unstructured and structured interviews:

Table 1. Characteristics of Unstructured and Structured Interviews

Unstructured	Structured
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The factors evaluated by the interview are implicit, and vary across candidates. • Questions are not necessarily job-related. • Questions vary from interview to interview for the same job. • There is no system or guide for evaluating interview results. • Interviewers may be untrained. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The factors evaluated are explicit, based on job analysis, and are the same for each candidate. • Questions are job-related. • The same questions are asked of all candidates for the same job. • There is a predeveloped system for evaluating interview results. • Interviewers have been trained.

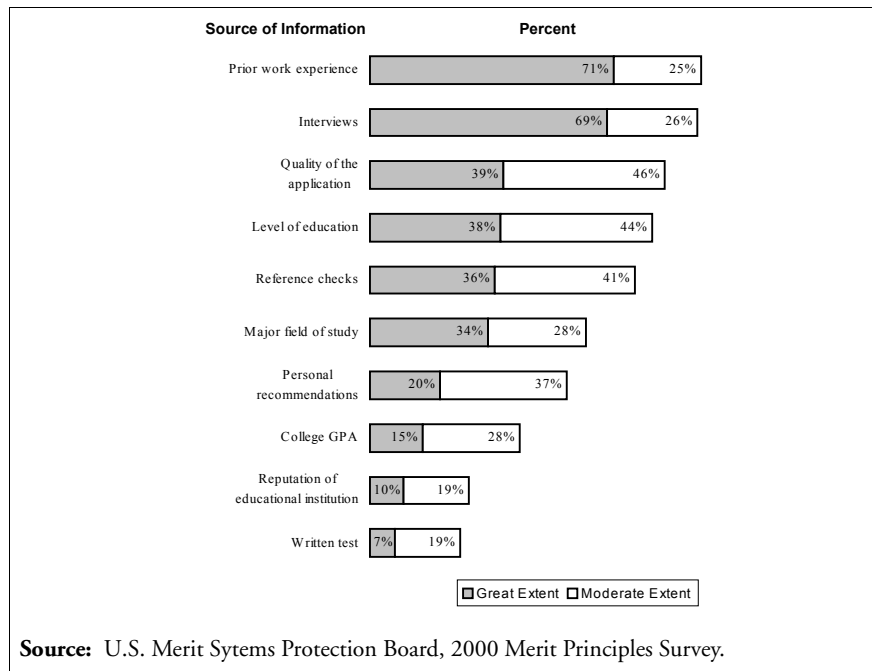
Interviews are widely used.

The Federal Government has over 1.6 million civilian employees, in over 800 different occupations.⁸ To the informed observer, it may seem that there are as many paths to employment as there are employees. These include—to name only a few—competitive examination, intern programs, student employment programs, and veterans employment programs. Yet almost all paths to Federal employment share one element in common. That element is the selection interview, a meeting between employer and applicant during which each assesses the other to determine the possibility and desirability of an employment relationship.

Data confirm that interviews are a standard part of the Government selection process. The Board’s 2000 Merit Principles Survey asked managers about the information they consider when assessing candidates for professional and administrative positions. Responses showed that the interview is a near-universal source of candidate information (see Fig. 1).

⁸ Data are from the U.S. Office of Personnel Management, Central Personnel Data File, as reported in Fedscope (www.fedscope.opm.gov), March 2001. Some 1,641,115 full-time employees are in 814 occupations, including all appointments and pay plans.

Figure 1. Percent of supervisors using information to a “great” or “moderate” extent



Interviews are influential.

Table 2 on the following page provides a simplified model of the typical Federal selection process. Most competitive hiring—whether delegated examining to fill a vacancy with an outside candidate, or merit promotion to advance a current employee—follows this model. As shown, the selection process has several steps. Because Federal agencies generally use interviews as the final major hurdle in the selection process, interviews carry considerable influence in the selection decision.

Because selection interviews are widely used and highly influential, it’s important that they be used effectively. In the following section, we discuss the organizational and fiscal implications of interviews.

Table 2. Typical Steps in the Federal Selection Process

- Step 1 Recruitment**—The agency develops a candidate pool and advertises the vacancy. Candidates’ qualifications are not formally assessed at this stage.
- Step 2 Screening**—This is the first hurdle in the selection process. The agency sorts applicants into two groups: ineligible and eligible. Applicants who do not meet basic requirements, such as citizenship and minimum qualifications, are ineligible and thus “screened out.” Applicants meeting basic requirements are eligible for further consideration. Common assessments used to screen candidates include written tests and ratings of training and experience (usually through review of a written application).
- Step 3 Ranking**—This is the second hurdle in the selection process, in which the agency makes quality distinctions among the eligible candidates. The distinction may be simple sorting (such as assigning candidates into a “qualified” or “best qualified” group) or a rank ordering of candidates. The candidates in the highest group (or the top-ranked candidates) are then referred to the selecting official. The assessment tool used to make these distinction may be the same one used for screening, or it may be different. Common assessments used to rank applicants include ratings of training and experience (such as assigning scores to written descriptions of desired knowledges, skills, and abilities), and interviews.
- Step 4 Selection**—This is the final major hurdle in the selection process.^a The selecting official typically assesses some or all of the referred candidates through interviews (frequently supplemented by reference checks) and chooses an applicant from among the referred candidates.
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a. There may be subsequent hurdles such as a background investigation, and verification of experience and credentials. However, these hurdles are generally applied after the candidate has been selected.

The Business Case for Effective Interviews

As discussed in the preceding section, the interview is typically the last major step in the selection process. Following the interview, the manager will decide which applicant(s) will receive an offer of employment. The stakes are high: a good decision will confer substantial benefits on the organization; a poor decision may impose significant costs.

The benefits of a good selection are straightforward. A good employee will be capable and productive, and work well with customers and colleagues. This outcome, in turn, improves morale and work group cohesion, increasing the employing organization's productivity. These benefits are not merely theoretical: they make a measurable contribution to the organization's bottom line. A recent study by the consulting firm Watson Wyatt Worldwide suggests that identifying and selecting highly qualified candidates is not only consistent with merit principles—it is also good business. The company surveyed the human capital practices of over 400 private-sector companies, and found—not surprisingly—that companies that hired workers well-equipped to perform their duties created more value for their shareholders than less-demanding companies.⁹

On the other hand, organizations that make poor selection decisions will forgo these benefits and bear substantial additional costs. As shown in Table 3, one private sector organization estimates that a poor selection can cost as much as three times the employee's annual salary.

Previous Board studies document additional costs that are borne by Federal agencies that make a poor selection decision. Federal agencies do not have the option of simply terminating a poor performer and “starting over,” unless the employee is serving a trial or probationary period, and the available alternatives are costly. If the agency chooses to pursue an adverse action (i.e., demotion or termination), it must

⁹ Survey report from “The Human Capital Index: Linking Human Capital and Shareholder Value,” Watson Wyatt Worldwide, 1999, p. 5.

Table 3. Estimated costs of hiring the wrong person

For an entry-level full-time employee	\$5,000 to \$7,000
For a \$20,000/year FTE ^a	\$40,000
For a \$100,000/year FTE	\$300,000

Note: Costs include wasted salary, benefits, severance pay, headhunter fees, training costs, and hiring time.

Source: Corporate Leadership Council, Literature Review, “Employee Selection Tests,” Catalog No. 070-198-213, Washington, DC, March 1998, p. 2.

a. FTE stands for full-time equivalent, which means 2087 hours of duty per year.

devote substantial management attention and staff time to that effort. The remaining options—remediation or inaction—are also costly. Remediation entails a potentially extended period of reduced productivity: the organization must devote resources to training and counseling the employee, and have coworkers (or managers) perform the employee’s work or make it acceptable. Inaction means that the agency will bear the costs of a poor selection indefinitely, and may further reduce the productivity of the work unit:

*** inaction can create problems far beyond that of a single incompetent worker. It can turn the unit’s better performers into overworked, resentful employees who, noticing the absence of penalties for inferior performance, may reduce their own efforts as a result.¹⁰

Good selections require good assessments, and interviews can be excellent assessments.

Agencies can significantly improve the likelihood of selecting good employees by using assessment tools with high validity. Validity is the ability of an assessment tool to predict on-the-job performance. (Appendix B provides a fuller discussion of the concept of validity.) The structured interview is among the most valid assessment tools available, comparing favorably with mental ability tests and work sample tests, and surpassing such assessment tools as years of experience, ratings of training and experience, and reference checks.¹¹

Interviews are not all created equal.

Structured interviews use a variety of mechanisms (which we refer to as elements of structure) to help the interviewer constructively differentiate among job candidates. Research shows that structured interviews have a significant edge over unstructured interviews in predicting on-the-job performance:

¹⁰ U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, *Federal Supervisors and Poor Performers*, Washington, DC, July 1999, p. 15.

¹¹ Frank L. Schmidt and John E. Hunter, “The Validity and Utility of Selection Methods in Personnel Psychology: Practical and Theoretical Implications of 85 Years of Research Findings,” *Psychological Bulletin*, The American Psychological Association, Inc., vol. 24, No. 2, September 1998, p. 265.

The average validity of the structured interview is 0.51, vs. 0.38 for the unstructured interview (and undoubtedly lower for carelessly conducted unstructured interviews).¹²

In practical terms, this means that the structured interview is twice as effective as an unstructured interview—and, as suggested above, this is a conservative estimate.¹³ Moreover, research suggests that interviewing without the assistance of structure—interviewers relying on unaided judgment—is ill-advised. Studies have consistently found that interviewers are inappropriately influenced by factors such as the performance of previous candidates¹⁴ and personal feelings.¹⁵ Interviewers are also vulnerable to universal biases in human cognition, such as overreliance on first impressions and the tendency to view a person's behavior in one situation (such as a social gathering) as indicative of how that person will behave in other, dissimilar situations (such as at work).¹⁶

Structure provides a necessary counterweight to problematic influences and to failings in human judgment. Without this counterweight, interviewers will likely have great difficulty accurately assessing candidates' actual abilities and performance.¹⁷ In the following section, we discuss common elements of a structured interview, and how those elements contribute to effective interviewing.

¹² Ibid. p. 267.

¹³ “Unstructured interviews” conducted for research purposes almost certainly contain some elements of structure.

¹⁴ An interviewer who has just interviewed an excellent candidate may rate the next candidate inappropriately low. Conversely, an interviewer who has interviewed a poor candidate may rate the next one inappropriately high. This rating error is known as “contrast effect.”

¹⁵ Richard D. Arvey and James E. Campion, “The Employment Interview: A Summary and Review of Recent Research,” *Personnel Psychology*, vol. 35, 1982, p. 297.

¹⁶ In psychology, this tendency is called the fundamental attribution error. Research shows that people consistently overestimate the role of personality and underestimate the role of context in determining behavior. For a non-technical discussion of this phenomenon and its effects on judgments of aptitude and performance, see Malcolm Gladwell, “The New-Boy Network,” *The New Yorker*, May 29, 2000.

¹⁷ Michael A. McDaniel, Deborah L. Whetzel, Frank L. Schmidt, and Steven D. Maurer, “The Validity of Employment Interviews: A Comprehensive Review and Meta-Analysis,” *Journal of Applied Psychology*, vol. 79, No. 4, 1994, p. 599.

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Elements of a Structured Interview

Below, we discuss eight elements of structure.¹⁸ These elements address all stages of the interview process, from pre-interview, such as job analysis and developing interview questions, to post-interview, such as rating candidates' responses. Taken together, the elements form a "chain" that links the interview to the position being filled.

1. Base questions on job analysis. Job analysis is the process of looking at a position (or, more broadly, the work of an organization) to identify essential functions and duties, and the competencies, knowledges, skills, and abilities needed to perform work.¹⁹

A well-known executive recruiter puts the case for job analysis very succinctly:

Once you know what the real performance needs of the job are, hiring is relatively easy. When you don't know what's required, you substitute your biases, perceptions, and stereotypes.²⁰

Questions based on a sound job analysis will, by definition, be job-related. Job analysis can also identify characteristics that distinguish excellent from average employees,²¹ so that the interview questions will be useful in identifying the best candidates.

Basing questions on job analysis is also an excellent way to avoid asking inappropriate questions, such as those involving marital and family status. For example, for a job that requires face-to-face contact with customers in several states, job analysis will steer the interviewer toward asking whether the prospective employee can travel, and away from asking whether the prospective employee has dependent care responsibilities.

2. Ask effective questions. As we've indicated, effective interview questions are based on job analysis to ensure that they are job-related.

¹⁸ The eight elements are adapted from Michael A. Campion, David K. Palmer, and James E. Campion, "A Review of Structure in the Selection Interview," *Personnel Psychology*, vol. 50, 1997.

¹⁹ Adapted from 5 CFR 300.103 (January 2001).

²⁰ Lou Adler, "Hire With Your Head," John Wiley & Sons, Inc., New York, NY, 1999, p. 5.

²¹ This is often accomplished by identifying and analyzing situations (referred to as "critical incidents") in which an employee demonstrated high performance.

Effective interview questions are also usually open-ended and behavioral, so that they will elicit useful responses.

Open-ended questions are questions that require the candidate to provide details, and cannot be answered in one word (such as “yes” or “excellent”). Such questions are much more effective than closed-ended questions at developing insight into a candidate’s experience and abilities. For example, the closed-ended question, “Can you write effectively?” can be answered with an uninformative “Yes”—a response that sheds little light on the candidate’s level of performance in this area. An open-ended question such as, “Describe the types of documents you have written, reviewed, or edited,” requires the candidate to provide specifics, and provides much more insight into the candidate’s writing accomplishments.

There is a place for the closed-ended question. For example, to learn whether a candidate is willing to travel frequently or can start work on a given date, it is perfectly appropriate to ask a closed-ended question.

Behavioral questions are just that: questions that ask the candidate to describe behaviors—responses, actions, and accomplishments in actual situations. The case for the behavioral question is more subtle than the case for open-ended questions. Although research indicates that both behavioral questions (“What did you do?”) and hypothetical questions (“What would you do?”) can be effective, many researchers and practitioners generally recommend the behavioral question for two reasons. First, behavioral questions can provide greater insight into how the candidate will perform on the job, because the best predictor of future behavior is past behavior. Second, behavioral questions may be more reliable than hypothetical questions. Because the response can be verified through reference checks or other means, it is more difficult to fabricate an inaccurate or untruthful answer to a behavioral question than to a hypothetical one.

However, hypothetical questions, like closed-ended questions, have their uses. For example, hypothetical questions can ask a candidate to respond to a work situation, to yield insight into the candidate’s ability to reason, as well as his or her “soft” competencies such as flexibility and cooperativeness. Such questions can also give the candidate a realistic “job preview.” Unfortunately, it is not easy to develop reliable hypothetical questions²² because the response to a hypothetical question may not reflect what a candidate has actually done or will do on the job. The problem is that knowledge and behavior are often very

²² Developing valid hypothetical questions typically involves extensive fact-finding and professional assistance to develop questions and “benchmark” responses. A discussion of the process can be found in “Developing and Conducting the Structured Situational Interview: A Practical Guide,” U.S. Office of Personnel Management, Washington, DC, January 1994.

How Uniform is Uniform?

Can an interview include questions tailored to individual candidates? The quick answer is “yes.” Our report emphasizes the interview as an opportunity to develop information across candidates, to even-handedly assess their ability in specific competencies.

That approach presumes that the candidates come into the interview more or less “equal”—that they have comparable experience and that the interviewer possesses a relatively uniform level of information about each candidate prior to the interview. But this is often not the case. For example, some candidates may have provided extensive descriptions of relevant training and experience, while others submitted a one-page resume. Or, one candidate’s experience might be primarily private-sector, while another candidate has no non-Federal experience.

In such circumstances, the interviewer may want to use the interview to “fill in gaps” in a candidate’s training and experience—in effect, as an extension of the rating of training and experience. This will often require candidate-specific questions. In our view, this is reasonable and acceptable.

Accordingly, we suggest that interviewers who want to collect information across candidates **and** obtain further information on individual candidates’ training and experience divide the interview into two phases: a structured phase, using a uniform set of questions, and a candidate-specific phase. This preserves the integrity of the structured interview while giving the interviewer some flexibility.

different. For example, we all know that we should drive defensively and exercise regularly—whether we do so is another matter entirely.

3. Ask each candidate the same questions. Using a uniform set of questions helps ensure that candidates are treated fairly, and that each candidate provides comparable information. As we note in the boxed discussion, “How Uniform is Uniform?” this does not mean that interviewers may never ask tailored (candidate-specific) questions to develop more information about an individual candidate’s qualifications. But it does mean that the structured portion of the interview should use a standardized set of questions. The goal is to eliminate variation in the questions as a source of variation in interviewees’ answers. Although this approach may appear unduly mechanical, it ensures that the interviewer does not skip questions, or rephrase them based on potentially inaccurate and harmful assumptions about the candidate’s level of knowledge, listening comprehension, or competence.

Using a uniform set of questions does not preclude repeating or restating questions, if necessary. However, if the interview questions are effective—relevant, clear, and free of jargon and acronyms—this should not be necessary.

4. Use detailed rating scales. A rating scale provides a guide for evaluating candidates’ responses. At their simplest, scales provide levels—numbers, or adjectives such as unacceptable, acceptable, and excellent. More detailed scales supplement the levels with anchors. Anchors typ-

ically include a narrative description of each level, and examples of behavior and accomplishments that are representative of the level. Rating scales are valuable for three reasons. First, they promote objectivity. A predetermined standard guards against the tendency to evaluate candidates based on impressions or against each other—both of which amount to letting the candidate set the standard. Second, they promote consistency across interviews and interviewers, a particularly useful outcome if the same person(s) will not be conducting all interviews. Finally, detailed rating scales can incorporate behaviors of high-performing employees, which helps the interviewer distinguish between acceptable and excellent prospects. Appendix C provides a sample question and detailed rating scale developed by the Office of Personnel Management for use in interviewing candidates for information technology positions.

5. Train interviewers. Training is needed to ensure that people involved in developing and conducting structured interviews understand and know how to apply the associated elements and techniques. Thus, training commonly covers subjects such as:

- Identifying job requirements (job analysis),
- Balancing assessments and judgment,
- Developing interview questions,
- Establishing rapport with candidates,
- Effective questioning,
- Evaluating answers and applying rating scales,
- Avoiding common rating errors,
- Documentation (e.g., note-taking), and
- Making hiring decisions.²³

Although the list of subjects appears long, the essentials can be covered in as little as one or two days. The illustration at right, “Interviewer Training in the U.S. Customs Service,” shows how one Federal agency prepares its managers to conduct good interviews.

6. Use interview panels so that more than one person conducts the interview. Many organizations that use structured interviews have a two- or three-person panel conduct the interview. Using additional interviewers offers several benefits. First, the additional interviewer(s) may ask questions and capture information that a single interviewer might miss or overlook. Second, the additional interviewer can bring a different and valuable perspective to the rating process, resulting in a more balanced picture (rating) of the candidate. Finally, additional

²³ Michael A. Campion, David K. Palmer, and James E. Campion, “A Review of Structure in the Selection Interview,” *Personnel Psychology*, Volume 50, 1997, p. 685.

Interviewer Training in the U.S. Customs Service

The United States Customs Service (USCS) uses a structured interview as part of the selection process for the mission-critical occupations of Customs Inspector and Special Agent. Interviews are conducted by three-person panels composed of managers and senior staff. USCS views trained interviewers as essential: a manager must receive training before serving on an interview panel.

The training, delivered over 2 or 3 days, blends theory and practice. Managers are briefed on potential pitfalls, such as relying on first impressions and the “halo effect” (allowing the candidate's performance in one competency to influence ratings in another competency). Managers also receive practical advice, covering topics such as putting the candidate at ease, asking follow-up questions, dealing with candidates with apparent disabilities, and managing their own “body language.”

The training provides many opportunities for “hands on” learning. For example, managers view videotaped interviews, apply rating scales, and compare and discuss results. The training concludes with a role-playing exercise where managers interview and rate “candidates” (played by other USCS employees). Attendees have given the training excellent reviews, indicating that the it has greatly enhanced their interviewing skills.

interviewers can bring demographic diversity to the interview panel, which can make candidates more comfortable during the interview and more accepting of the outcome of the interview.

7. Take notes. Notes serve two purposes. First, they help the interviewer capture and recall the content of the interview, and rate the candidate's responses accurately. Human memory is imperfect and selective. Without notes, the interviewer may tend to selectively recall the candidate's strengths or weaknesses, or be unable to recall the candidate's responses at all. Second, notes help create an important “paper trail” that is useful if it becomes necessary to reconstruct the interview process or defend an employment decision based on the interview.²⁴

We suggest taking notes with these purposes in mind. With two exceptions, notes should reflect **what** the interviewee says, rather than **how** the interviewee says it. The first exception is when the interview is used to assess a competency such as oral communication, where both content and delivery are relevant. The second exception, which should be rare, is when a candidate's behavior raises questions about his or her qualifications or suitability. For example, if the candidate takes an inordinately long time to respond to questions or does not interact appropriately with the interviewers, this should be noted.

8. Assess candidate responses objectively—use the rating scales, and use the ratings to score candidates. “Assessing responses objectively” does not mean that interviewers should mechanically review candidate responses to determine whether the candidate spoke the

²⁴ Ibid., p. 679.

Balancing Assessments and Judgment

We suggest that agencies use interview results to inform—but not dictate - selection decisions. For example, suppose that a selecting official can choose between five qualified candidates with scores of 65, 84, 86, 90, and 91 (on a 100-point scale) on the interview. The selecting official would be well-advised to eliminate the low-scoring candidate from consideration, even if that candidate made an otherwise good impression. But the selecting official could probably make a merit-based case for selecting any of the four highest scoring candidates.

Assessment tools such as interviews are not a substitute for managerial judgment. First, minor differences in performance on the interview (or any other assessment) are not necessarily significant—even the best assessments are imperfect. Second, selecting officials can and should consider a full range of information when making a selection decision. This information may include things such as past performance, training and experience, test scores, academic and personal achievement, and reference checks. Finally, assessment tools cannot measure and weigh every relevant factor, such as the skills needs and demographic mix of the employing organization.

“magic words,” or give undue weight to interview scores. It is appropriate for interviewers to discuss responses, resolve differences, and apply judgment when applying rating scales.

Judgment also comes into play when using the interview results, as we note in the boxed discussion, “Balancing Assessments and Judgment,” above. The point is that interviewers should not substitute an intuitive global judgment for their ratings.

The Benefits of the Structured Interview

Why go to the time and trouble of adding structure to the interview? Quite simply, because structured interviews work:

In the 80-year history of published research on employment interviewing * * *, few conclusions have been more widely supported than the idea that structuring the interview enhances reliability and validity.²⁵

Structured interviews have several other advantages that contribute to their effectiveness, advantages that are not merely theoretical. As discussed below, structured interviews are not only valid but provide important practical benefits. These include:

Fairness and objectivity. Structured interviews use job-related questions, treat interviewees consistently, and assess interviewees' responses in a thorough, systematic manner. Structured interviews also focus on the interviewees' answers rather than on their behavior during the interview. The result is that a good structured interview treats candidates—and their responses—fairly and objectively, with little or no adverse impact.

Professionalism. Structured interviews are businesslike; they focus strictly on the candidate's qualifications in relation to the job requirements. Such interviews can help “sell” the organization by conveying the message that it is serious about evaluating candidates carefully and selecting the best person for the job.

We recognize that “selling” the job also involves providing information about the job and work environment, and showing a genuine interest in the candidate. Structured interviewing does not preclude doing these things. For example, an interview could begin with the interviewer providing information about the job and the work setting, followed by structured questions, and conclude with an opportunity for the interviewee to ask questions. The interviewer simply needs to ensure that providing information to the candidate does not overshadow collecting information from the candidate.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 655.

Compliance. Laws and regulations set a high standard for Federal employment practices. The statutory merit system principles state that “selection and advancement should be determined solely on the basis of relative ability, knowledge, and skills, after fair and open competition which assures that all receive equal opportunity.”²⁶ To achieve this objective, good intentions are not sufficient. Federal agencies need to ensure that their employment practices, including interviews, are (1) based on job analysis; (2) relevant to the position being filled; and (3) nondiscriminatory.²⁷ A structured interview can meet all these requirements.

Acceptance and defensibility. Candidates expect prospective employers to assess their qualifications thoroughly and fairly—and candidates have recourse against employers who fail to do so. Candidates will tend to accept, and be less likely to challenge, employment practices that are clearly job-related and even-handed. From this perspective, interviews that are objective—even if somewhat impersonal—are to be preferred to interviews that are more sociable and subjective. The structured interview contains several highly visible elements to promote fairness and objectivity, and thus ensure candidate acceptance.

Structured interviews are not only fair and compliant; they are demonstrably so. Documentation (a “paper trail”) is an integral part of the structured interview. A written record of how an interview was developed, conducted, and applied is extremely valuable if it becomes necessary to formally justify an employment decision based on an interview.

²⁶ Title 5, United States Code, Section 2301(b)(1)

²⁷ 5 CFR 300.103.

The Case Against the Unstructured Interview

For most of us, hiring someone is essentially a romantic process * * * We are looking for someone with whom we have a certain chemistry * * * We want the unlimited promise of a love affair. The structured interview, by contrast, seems to offer only the dry logic and practicality of an arranged marriage.²⁸

As noted above, the traditional, unstructured—or loosely-structured—interview is very appealing. It **seems** to provide a counterweight to impersonal, mechanical assessments such as training and experience evaluations and written tests, and (therefore) to provide a less abstract and more realistic picture of the candidate.

Unfortunately, researchers have found that the validity of unstructured interviews is lower than that of structured interviews. At best, performance in an unstructured interview explains only 14 percent of variation in on-the-job performance.²⁹ Unstructured interviews are also risky, even when well-intentioned. The absence of structure leaves the interviewer vulnerable to cognitive biases (that is, patterns in how we receive and process information that can lead to errors in judgment), which include:

- ***Reliance on first impressions.*** Research shows that people make judgments about each other when they first meet—whether in person or on paper—and that those judgments have great staying power. In effect, the handshake (or job application) colors the interviewer’s recollection and evaluation of the subsequent interview. This introduces the possibility that the interview will not add to the selection process, but will simply serve to confirm existing, possibly mistaken impressions of the individual. It also introduces the possibility that the resulting selection may reflect—unintentionally—personal liking, in addition to or instead of ability to do the job.

²⁸ Gladwell, op. cit., p. 86.

²⁹ Schmidt and Hunter, op. cit., p. 37.

- ***Reading too much into the interviewee's behavior.*** Often, people assume that other people behave in ways that reflect their underlying character, and fail to give due weight to the context in which that behavior occurs. Richard Nisbett, one researcher, describes the resulting problem as follows:

When you have an interview with someone * * * you don't conceptualize that as taking a sample of a person's behavior, let alone a possibly biased sample, which is what it is. What you think is that you are seeing a hologram, a small and fuzzy image but still the whole person.³⁰

At best, a lack of structure reduces the value of the interview as an assessment tool. At worst, a lack of structure can lead to perceptions—and quite possibly the reality—of disparate or unfair treatment.

³⁰ Gladwell, op. cit., p. 72.

The Structured Interview Process

Appendix D provides a simplified model of the structured interview process. The model places the elements of the structured interview in the context of the selection process and shows how these elements “fit” together. The ordering of steps in the model is more illustrative than prescriptive. Steps such as job analysis, determining the role of the interview, and interviewer training may be completed before a vacancy occurs. The appendix is not a detailed, “how-to” guide to structured interviewing. As we note in the box below, “Developing Interviews—A Job for Professionals?” Federal employment practices are held to a high standard and agencies must take considerable care when developing any assessment tool.

We believe that the requirement that an assessment tool be professionally developed should be viewed as an ideal rather than as an absolute requirement. It is neither realistic nor desirable for agencies to discontinue using an interview simply because it was not developed by a personnel psychologist or an equivalent professional. However, agencies should take steps to meet the spirit of the requirement, ensure that assessment tools are developed by informed and knowledgeable staff, and make their interviews as good as reasonably possible. With this goal in mind, we offer the following suggestions on how agencies can make better use of interviews, in addition to adding structure.

Developing Interviews— A Job for Professionals?

Agencies are expected to use employment practices—including assessment tools, such as interviews—that are based on job analysis, relevant, and nondiscriminatory. To demonstrate relevance, the agency must show that the employment practice was “professionally developed.”

This does not mean that developing a structured interview is a job for “HR experts” only. The insights and perspectives of knowledgeable managers and subject matter experts are indispensable. But it does mean that agencies should treat interviews with respect, and devote appropriate attention and resources to their development and use.

Determine the purpose of the interview. The hiring organization must determine the role of the interview in the selection process, including:

- Which job-related competencies³¹ the interview will assess. This will depend on several factors, such as the role of other assessments in the selection process, the nature of the candidate pool, and relationship between the competency and high performance. For example, if candidates already have been evaluated on knowledge of accounting principles through review of the written application, asking questions about accounting principles may add little value, unless the interviewer wants to confirm or expand on existing information. On the other hand, if candidates have not been systematically assessed on oral communication—and the organization’s job analysis indicates that excellent oral communication is a characteristic of high performers—then it makes sense to use the interview to assess candidates on this competency.
- How interview results will be used. Interviews may be used to rank or group candidates, and thus narrow the candidate pool, or they may be used to make a selection from a pool of ranked or grouped candidates. The same principles apply to both.³² However, the level of precision needed, resource requirements, and the effect on the candidate pool may be substantially different. For example, an interview used to select from a small group of final candidates may focus on high-level competencies and be relatively lengthy. In contrast, an interview used to sort a large pool of candidates into groups (such as “qualified” and “highly qualified”) may focus on basic competencies and be relatively brief (in the interest of efficiency).
- How the interview will support the organization’s recruiting strategy. Interviews can be used to assess job candidates, or to support recruitment efforts by providing information and generating candidate interest. These two functions are not mutually exclusive, but they must be balanced. That balance will depend on several factors, including the context of the interview, the nature of the candidate pool, and the stage of the selection process. For example, interviews at a visit to a university campus may be primarily informational, intended to educate students about Government employment opportunities. It would make little sense to use interviews to assess

³¹ Here, “competency” refers to all aspects of qualifications (e.g., related knowledges, skills, abilities, behaviors, and other characteristics), other than suitability, that an organization may assess as part of the employment process.

³² Because OPM retains jurisdiction over qualification standards, assessments used to screen candidates (i.e., to determine whether a candidate meets minimum qualification requirements) may be subject to OPM review and approval.

students who have not applied for—and may not even be interested in—a position with the organization. On the other hand, a final interview for a position will most likely center on assessment—identifying the best qualified candidate. However, even interviews of this type should have an informational component in order to keep candidates informed and interested throughout the selection process. There is little point in identifying the best-qualified candidates if the organization cannot sustain those candidates' interest in employment.

Provide background information. Providing background information can serve as an “ice-breaker” and help the candidate understand the interview process and its purpose as well as basics about the job. Appropriate background information includes:

- The current status of the selection process,
- The role of the interview in the selection process,
- The interview format,
- Job duties and responsibilities, and
- Work environment.

We note that many organizations elect to provide background information in advance of the interview. That option makes efficient use of the interviewer and interviewee's time, promotes consistency, and can help put candidates at ease by eliminating the element of “surprise.”

Probe. Candidates' responses are likely to vary in length and level of detail. This is acceptable, as long as the interviewer obtains enough information to rate each candidate fairly and accurately. The interviewer may need to request additional examples or more specifics to fully understand the candidate's answer. Probing, done tactfully, also gives a candidate who is less talkative the opportunity to describe his or her relevant experience.

Answer candidate questions. This report focuses on the interview as an assessment tool for the employer. The interview is also a recruitment tool—or, viewed from the candidate's perspective, a way for the candidate to assess the prospective employer. Providing an opportunity for the candidate to ask questions helps the candidate make a well-informed employment decision, thus increasing the odds of a good fit between employee and employer. It also shows interest in the candidate, which is part of effective recruiting.

Follow up. Interviewers should ensure that they have obtained sufficient and reliable information from the interview. First, the interviewers should verify that the candidate's responses and the record of the interview are sufficiently detailed. (This should rarely be a problem, if

interviewers ask well-designed questions and use appropriate probing.) However, because interviewers' note-taking and memories are not always perfect, it may be appropriate in some cases to contact the candidate for the necessary information. Second, interviewers should determine whether the candidate's responses are consistent with information from other sources, such as the application and reference checks. Inconsistencies may be readily resolved or explained—but they may also raise questions about candidate qualifications and truthfulness which warrant further fact-finding.

Evaluate and refine the interview. We suggest that organizations view the structured interview as a “living assessment.” Periodically evaluating the structured interview process and its outcomes can help identify strengths and opportunities for improvement. (This evaluation need not be as elaborate as a formal validation study, which is a rigorous statistical analysis of the interview and its outcomes to demonstrate that it measures job-related criteria and distinguishes between candidates based on ability to perform. Formal validation may not be feasible or cost-effective for low-volume jobs or occupations. However, organizations should seriously consider validating interviews used for high-volume jobs or occupations, where the cost of validation will be compensated by the interview's increased validity and defensibility.) Some questions to ask could include:

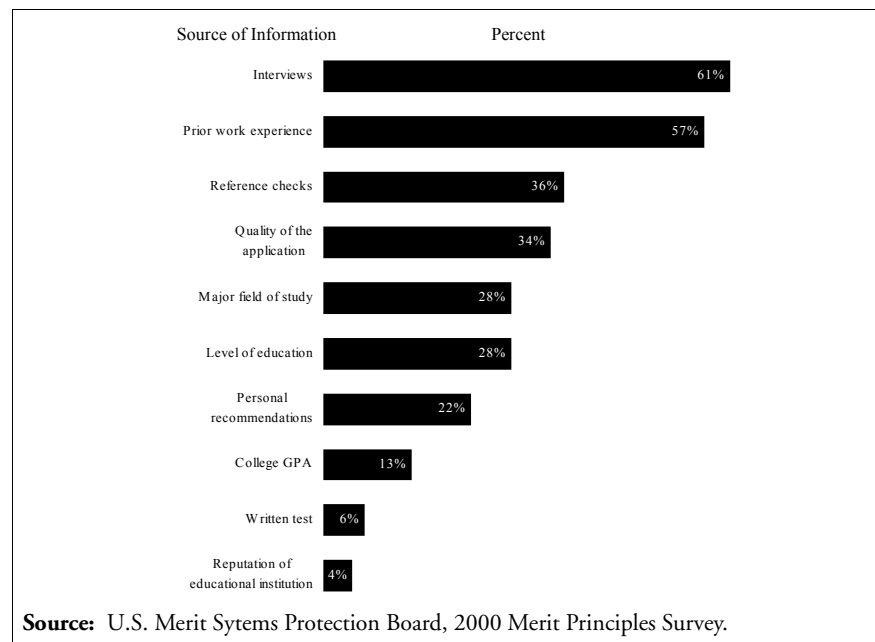
- Do the interview questions make useful job-related distinctions among candidates?
- Are interviewers comfortable with the interview questions and process?
- Are interviewers applying the rating scales consistently?
- How are candidates performing on the interview? Are different groups performing differently?
- How are selecting officials using the results of the interview?
- Do selecting officials believe that the interview is successful at identifying good employees?
- How do candidates perceive the interview?
- Do the benefits outweigh the costs?

Asking such questions—and acting on the answers—will ensure that the structured interview remains relevant, useful, and defensible.

The State of Federal Employment Interviewing

Federal managers make extensive use of interviews, and they believe that interviews are valuable. As shown in Fig. 2, managers responding to our 2000 Merit Principles Survey believed that the interview is an excellent predictor of on-the-job performance, surpassing most other commonly used assessments.

Figure 2. Percent of supervisors indicating that information predicts performance “to a great extent”



As discussed previously, research provides conditional support for the high regard Federal managers have for the interview: a well-designed, properly conducted structured interview is a very good assessment tool. However, information from the Board’s Merit Principles Survey and past studies suggests that many agencies are not taking full advantage of the interview’s potential. Indicators include:

Excessive reliance on personal observation and judgment. The responses to our Merit Principles Survey shown in Figure 2 suggest that managers prefer assessments that allow for “hands on” managerial involvement, such as interviews and reference checks, over “hands off” assessments such as written test scores and college grade-point average. This preference is understandable: we tend to prefer direct observation over indirect observation, and our own perceptions and judgments over those of others. But this preference may also lead managers to be overly confident about their own impressions and judgments, and view the “assistance” of structure as unnecessary to good interviewing—and to be comfortable with a relatively unstructured approach to interviewing. This would be unfortunate, because structure helps interviewers make better judgments about job candidates, and structured interviews are considerably more effective than unstructured interviews.

(We note that this preference may also lead to poor selection of assessment tools. Given the choice, managers are unlikely to use or give appropriate consideration to assessments that they do not value. Unfortunately, managers’ valuations of assessment tools are not consistent with current research on the ability of assessment tools to predict on-the-job performance. For example, managers view the written test with considerable disdain, although it is one of the best assessment tools available—and far better than indicators such as level of education and reference checks.)

A tendency to sacrifice quality for speed in the hiring process. A Board report examining how Federal supervisors are fulfilling their human resource management responsibilities observed that “supervisors too often succumb to the pressures of filling a vacancy quickly by * * * using assessment or selection processes that get fast results, but may not produce the best candidates available.”³³ This suggests that agencies may resort to relatively unstructured interviews when trying to fill jobs quickly. Structured interviews require advance planning and an upfront investment of time and resources—inputs that may be overlooked or dispensed with under pressure. This is not to say that structured interviewing is incompatible with a streamlined hiring process. Structured interviews can be done almost as quickly as unstructured interviews, if the agency has laid the groundwork, such as performing job analysis, developing questions and rating scales, and training interviewers, beforehand. But, as we have noted above, managers may be reluctant to invest much time in the hiring process. And,

³³ U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, “Federal Supervisors and Strategic Human Resources Management,” Washington, DC, June 1998, p. 2.

as we discuss below, agencies are often reluctant to invest resources in the hiring process.

Insufficient resources devoted to developing and using assessments.

The Board's recent studies³⁴ of delegated examining units³⁵ highlight two resource-related issues that could lead to suboptimal interviewing practices. First, primary responsibility for developing and administering assessment tools has been shifted from the Office of Personnel Management to Federal agencies.³⁶ However, this responsibility was not necessarily accompanied by supporting resources needed to meet it. The outcome is that managers may not have access to high-quality assessment tools, such as a good structured interview:

Agencies vary widely in their ability to develop and apply good training and experience (or any other) assessment instruments. Agencies with little in-house expertise in this field, and little or no discretionary money to pay OPM or anyone else for the needed expertise, are at a distinct disadvantage.³⁷

Second—and more troubling—is the fact that some delegated examining units appear to be under great pressure to minimize operating costs. Such delegated examining units may be unable or unwilling to invest in assessment tools, even when the investment could be recovered almost immediately:

* * * almost all of the DEU officials who filled [positions in occupations where written tests are required at lower grade levels] told us that the cost of the certificates is a significant factor in the decision not to fill these positions at the lower grades.³⁸

This suggests that some organizations find it easier to fill positions at higher grades—and incur thousands of dollars in additional salary costs—than to pay for and use an assessment tool that could have increased the likelihood of hiring a good employee at a lower grade level. If this logic is applied to interviews, agencies will tend to use unstructured instead of structured interviews, because structured interviews require a greater initial investment.

³⁴ See U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, "Assessing Federal Job Seekers in a Delegated Examining Environment," Government Printing Office, Washington, DC, December 2001 and U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, "The Role of Delegated Examining Units: Hiring New Employees in a Decentralized Civil Service," Government Printing Office, Washington, DC, August 1999.

³⁵ A delegated examining unit (DEU) is an organization that evaluates (examines) applicants for employment in the Federal competitive service under authority delegated by the U.S. Office of Personnel Management. There are currently nearly 700 DEU's, most located in agency human resources offices.

³⁶ Most written tests currently in use were developed centrally by OPM. However, agencies must now bear the costs of test administration and scoring.

³⁷ U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, "Assessing Federal Job Seekers in a Delegated Examining Environment," Government Printing Office, Washington, DC, December 2001, p. 31.

³⁸ U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, "The Role of Delegated Examining Units: Hiring New Employees in a Decentralized Civil Service," Government Printing Office, Washington, DC, August 1999, p. 13.

Inexpert interviewers. Interviews are typically conducted by supervisors and managers. A 1992 Board study of first-line supervisors found that a vast majority—nearly 90 percent—are involved in selecting new employees.³⁹ Unfortunately, a recent OPM study finds broad deficiencies in how Federal supervisors are prepared for their responsibilities, stating that “[Supervisors] come to the job without leadership development and they get very little after assuming their new responsibilities.”⁴⁰ This suggests that relatively few supervisors are trained in developing or conducting interviews—a specialized and, for many supervisors, infrequently performed task. The situation does not improve greatly at higher levels of management. As part of its study of assessment tools⁴¹, the Board recently surveyed a small sample of senior Federal managers (members of the Senior Executive Service, or their representatives). Barely half of these managers indicated that they had ever received training in conducting interviews.

The lack of training is troubling, because interviewing is neither intuitive nor easy. In fact, it has been characterized as “uniquely difficult among managerial tasks.”⁴² The interviewer must ask questions, be attentive to verbal and nonverbal cues, interpret and record a great deal of information, “sell” the job and the organization, and accurately rate the candidate’s responses—often in the space of one hour or less. An untrained interviewer will be hard-pressed to do all these things well, and realize the full potential of even a well-conceived interview.

There are many good interviewing practices, and improvements are being made.

As we have indicated, selection interviewing in the Federal Government is highly variable. The positive aspect of this variation is that some agencies are making good use of interviews. Some agencies, including the U.S. Border Patrol, the U.S. Customs Service, and the Social Security Administration, have recognized the importance and potential of the interview for many years. The illustration at right, “Investing in Workforce Quality,” discusses how interviews contribute to high-quality selections at the U.S. Border Patrol.

Other agencies have taken steps to make better use of the selection interview. For example, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs has conducted an extensive education and marketing campaign to encour-

³⁹ Data from MSPB survey of Federal first-line supervisors (See U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, “Federal First-Line Supervisors: How Good Are They?,” Government Printing Office, Washington, DC, March 1992).

⁴⁰ U.S. Office of Personnel Management, “Supervisors in the Federal Government: A Wake-Up Call,” Washington, DC, January 2001, p. 16.

⁴¹ U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, “Assessing Federal Job Seekers in a Delegated Examining Environment,” Government Printing Office, Washington, DC, December 2001, p. 34.

⁴² Wayne F. Cascio, “Applied Psychology in Human Resource Management,” fifth ed., Prentice-Hall, Inc., Upper Saddle River, NJ, 1998, p. 195.

Investing in Workforce Quality

The U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) in the U.S. Department of Justice uses structured interviews to assess candidates for entry-level Border Patrol Agent and Immigration Inspector positions. The INS hires an average of 2,000 Border Patrol Agents and 2,000 Immigration Inspectors each year.

After initial screening based on a written test, candidates are interviewed by a three-person panel of Border Patrol Agents who have been trained in interviewing. The interview is designed to complement the written test, and focuses on important competencies such as:

- Judgment and decision-making,
- Interpersonal skills,
- Emotional maturity,
- Cooperativeness and sensitivity to others, and
- Oral Communication.

Responses are evaluated against benchmarks developed by experienced Border Patrol agents and supervisors in cooperation with personnel psychologists. Candidates who perform acceptably on the interview, which is scored on a pass/fail basis, remain eligible for further consideration.

The Border Patrol has used this approach successfully for many years. The Immigration Inspections program implemented its structured interview in the spring of 2002. Managers consider the interview an indispensable part of the assessment and selection process, and view it as an investment in a high-quality workforce.

age managers to use structured interviews. The discussion on page 32, “Improving Selections One Interview at a Time,” highlights key elements of this campaign.

Also, many agencies are using structured interviews as part of their assessment strategy under OPM’s Competency-based⁴³ Information Technology (IT) Job Profile Pilot program.⁴⁴ The pilot program uses a job profile (a competency-based qualifications standard) in lieu of the current qualifications standard, which expresses minimum qualifications in terms of years of experience and/or years of education. Under the pilot, agencies have several assessment options, including ratings of training and experience, structured interviews,⁴⁵ and an on-line objective test. OPM reports positive feedback from agencies that are using structured interviews to assess candidates.

⁴³ OPM defines a competency as “an observable, measurable pattern of knowledge, skills, abilities, behaviors, and other characteristics that an individual needs to perform work roles or other occupational functions successfully.”

⁴⁴ To provide agencies an incentive to join the pilot program, OPM worked with agencies to develop benchmarks for more than 50 general and technical competencies. OPM also developed a structured interview for use with these competencies.

⁴⁵ OPM provided required training in structured interviewing to prospective interviewers in agencies that elected to use structured interviews. OPM offers similar training, on a reimbursable basis, outside the pilot project.

Improving Selections One Interview at a Time

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has a large, diverse, geographically dispersed workforce, employed in occupations ranging from housekeeping aid to loan specialist to physician, in locations ranging from urban offices to rural medical centers. Implementing structured behavioral interviewing (which VA refers to as performance-based interviewing, or PBI) in such an environment is a daunting task—but VA has taken steps to do just that.

VA's size and scope make it impossible to implement PBI through an “act of HR.” Instead, VA's strategy is to “market” PBI directly to the managers and supervisors who will benefit from it, and disseminate the knowledge and tools needed to make interviews more structured. Elements of this strategy include:

- Identifying line and senior managers at each installation who understand the importance of effective interviews and who can champion structured interviewing;
- A satellite broadcast, introduced by a high-level executive, to educate managers on the concept of the structured interview and its benefits. The broadcast was videotaped and distributed to all field installations;
- Purchasing two commercially-available videos on structured interviewing and providing one copy to each Veterans Integrated Service Network (VISN, a field organization with management and operating responsibility for several medical centers and clinics);
- Developing guidance and training materials, which are available on VA's web site and on CD-ROM;
- Training designated staff (typically one manager and one human resources specialist) at each field installation. These staff can train other employees who are involved in developing and conducting interviews;
- Employee training, to make employees familiar with PBI's intent and format so that they can “put their best foot forward” in job interviews; and
- Managerial accountability. Although VISN directors are evaluated primarily on outcome measures, they are also evaluated on steps they have taken to improve organizational performance. This may include promotion and use of PBI.

Although PBI is a work in progress, initial feedback is positive. One long-time user reports that staff quality and the organization's reputation have risen substantially, making the organization a more attractive employer. Another user reports that the PBI techniques can be applied effectively in other areas, such as in discussions with contractors.

Recommendations

This paper focuses on a single aspect of the assessment and selection process—the interview. Over the years, the Board has repeatedly encouraged agencies to use good assessment tools, as in the following statement from 1999:

Agencies need to seriously examine the way they assign people to jobs. They need to devote resources to finding ways to assess job candidates that permit a good fit between worker and work; they need to evaluate how well they accomplish these tasks; and they need to adjust their methods accordingly.⁴⁶

This counsel has particular relevance to interviewing, because interviews are widely used and highly influential in selection decisions. The following recommendations simply place the interview in this broader context.

1. Agencies should decide which purpose(s) the interview will serve, and design and conduct the interview accordingly. Interviews can be purely informational, supporting recruitment efforts by educating candidates about employment opportunities and conditions of employment. Or, interviews can focus purely on assessing candidates' qualifications. Or they can do both. Agencies must make a conscious and informed choice, because that choice has significant implications for the design and conduct of the interview. Interviews that function only as a recruitment tool do not require a high level of structure.⁴⁷ On the other hand, interviews that function as assessment tools—that are used to screen candidates, rank or group candidates, or make a final selection decision—call for careful design and considerable structure, if the organization is to realize their full potential.

2. Agencies that use interviews to assess job candidates should use structured interviews. In making this recommendation, we distinguish between interviews that function as a continuation of the evaluation of training and experience—for example, an interview that

⁴⁶ U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, “Federal Supervisors and Poor Performers,” Washington, DC, July 1999, p. 33.

⁴⁷ Even here, some structure—such as recruiter training and “talking points”—will help the organization project a clear, consistent image and maximize the effectiveness of the informational interview.

simply confirms or elaborates on information in the candidate's application—and interviews that are intended to develop new information. For the former, a high level of structure is neither practical nor necessary, provided that the interviewer asks job-related questions and treats candidates consistently. But for the latter, the case for the structured interview is compelling. Research shows that structured interviews, as part of a systematic candidate assessment process, can increase the likelihood of a good selection by helping managers develop new information on candidates such as a past behaviors, in the context of the workplace. Structured interviews can also reduce the costs associated with unsound employment practices, including turnover, poor performance, and grievances and complaints. The alternative—the unstructured interview—is much less desirable. Research indicates that unstructured interviews are, on average, little more than half as effective as structured interviews and unstructured interviews may be subject to bias and challenges.

3. Agencies should invest the resources (time, training, funds, and expertise) needed to add structure to selection interviews. Structured interviewing can be cost-effective, but it is not free. Structured interviews require a coordinated application of thought and expertise. An agency cannot realize the benefits of structured interviewing simply by reading about it. Many Federal agencies understand and have acted on the “business case” for structured interviews. However, our previous studies also indicate that many agencies and managers do not, for varying reasons, use the best available tools when assessing candidates. This failure is not merely inconsistent with the merit principle of selecting from the best-qualified candidates; it is also inconsistent with effective and efficient government. Therefore, we strongly encourage agencies that use selection interviews to move toward structured interviews. This includes investing in both the assessment tool (the interview itself) and the users of that tool (most likely supervisors and managers).

We realize that managers and supervisors may not be able to immediately make large investments in structured interviewing. In such cases, we suggest a strategy of incremental improvement. Agencies can improve the effectiveness of their interviews by adding structure, or building on elements of structure already in place. For example, providing managers with training can help them develop better questions and become more effective interviewers. In a similar vein, reviewing and revising interview questions—based on an existing or updated job analysis—can sharpen the interview's focus on job requirements, and make the interview better able to identify excellent candidates. Another option is to borrow from existing structured interview questions and formats. For example, a structured interview for a high-level

information technology position cannot be used as is for a human resources position. But a question that deals with a competency shared by the two positions, such as written communication, might be readily adapted.

Agencies that wish to adopt structured interviewing may contact the Office of Personnel Management, which offers guidance and training on structured interviewing. Agencies may also be able to draw on the expertise and experience of agencies that currently use structured interviews. These include, but are not limited to, the U.S. Customs Service, the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service, and the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.

4. Agencies should evaluate their interview practices for effectiveness and possible improvement. This recommendation, like the first two, reiterates an established position of the Board that is particularly relevant to the structured interview. The structured interview is an adaptable and flexible assessment tool that can be readily modified to accommodate changing job requirements and incorporate “lessons learned.” Evaluation of the interview instrument, process, and outcomes will help ensure that the interview meets the organization’s needs, and that the organization treats candidates fairly and defensibly.

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Appendix A — Types of Employment Interview

1. Informational / Recruitment

The interview serves as a recruitment tool. The interview is used primarily to provide information to candidates.

2. Selection / Assessment

The interview functions as an assessment tool and serves as the basis for employment-related decisions. The interview is used primarily to obtain information from job candidates to assess their qualifications. As illustrated below, the interview may be used in any phase of the selection process. The level of structure can range from unstructured to highly structured.

A. Screening

The interview is used to determine whether candidates meet minimum requirements.

B. Ranking

The interview is used to group or rank order candidates.

C. Final Selection

The interview informs the selecting official's decision. Candidates may be scored, but are usually not formally grouped or ranked.

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Appendix B—A Brief Discussion of Selection Tool Validity

In the context of assessments, “validity” typically refers to the relationship between performance on a selection tool (e.g., the score on a written test) and a measure of job performance (e.g., the employee’s performance appraisal).⁴⁸

Validity is expressed as a number between 1.0 and -1.0. A value of 1.0 means that there is a perfect positive relationship between the score received on the selection tool and performance on the job. A value of 0 means that there is no relationship—in practical terms, that the selection tool has no ability to predict job performance. A negative value indicates an inverse relationship: the better the performance on the selection tool, the worse the expected on-the-job performance.⁴⁹

Validity measures are used to estimate how much of the variability in an employee’s performance can be predicted by the selection tool. The estimate is calculated by squaring the validity measure, as illustrated below.

Table 4. Examples—Estimating the Predictive Value of a Selection Tool^a

Example 1—Structured Interviews

- (1) Structured interviews have a validity of 0.51.
- (2) $0.51 \times 0.51 = 0.2601$, or approximately 26 percent.
- (3) Performance on the structured interview predicts 26 percent of the variability in how well people will do on the job.

Example 2—Reference Checks

- (1) Reference checks have a validity of 0.26.
 - (2) $0.26 \times 0.26 = 0.0676$, or approximately 6.8 percent.
 - (3) Reference checks predict 6.8 percent of the variability in how well people will do on the job.
-

a. Source of validity coefficients: Frank L. Schmidt and John E. Hunter, “The Validity and Utility of Selection methods in Personnel Psychology: Practical and Theoretical Implications of 85 Years of Research Findings,” *Psychological Bulletin*, The American Psychological Association, Inc., vol. 24, No. 2, September 1998, p. 265.

⁴⁸ Wayne F. Cascio, “Applied Psychology in Human Resource Management,” fifth ed., Prentice-Hall, Inc., Upper Saddle River, NJ, 1998, p. 103.

⁴⁹ Although assessments with a high negative validity coefficient could conceivably be quite useful, few—if any—are used.

No single selection instrument has achieved a validity measure of 1.0. The best commonly used selection tools in the Federal sector include the work sample test (0.54), the structured interview (0.51), and general mental ability tests (0.51). Ratings of training and experience—the most common assessment—range from 0.11 to 0.45, depending on the rating method used.

Although even the best selection tools are far from perfect, it makes good sense for Federal managers to use the best tools available, in the most appropriate way, to select the highest quality job candidates. Otherwise, managers face an increased risk of making bad selection decisions—and later spending time and resources trying to remedy or remove a poor performer.

Appendix C—Sample Structured Interview Question and Rating Scale

Competency: Interpersonal Skills

Definition: Shows understanding, courtesy, tact, empathy, concern; develops and maintains relationships; may deal with people who are difficult, hostile, distressed; relates well to people from varied backgrounds and situations; is sensitive to individual differences.

Lead Question:

Describe a situation in which you had to deal with people who were upset about a problem.

- Probes:**
- What events led up to this situation?
 - What specific actions did you take?
 - Who was involved?
 - What was the outcome or result?

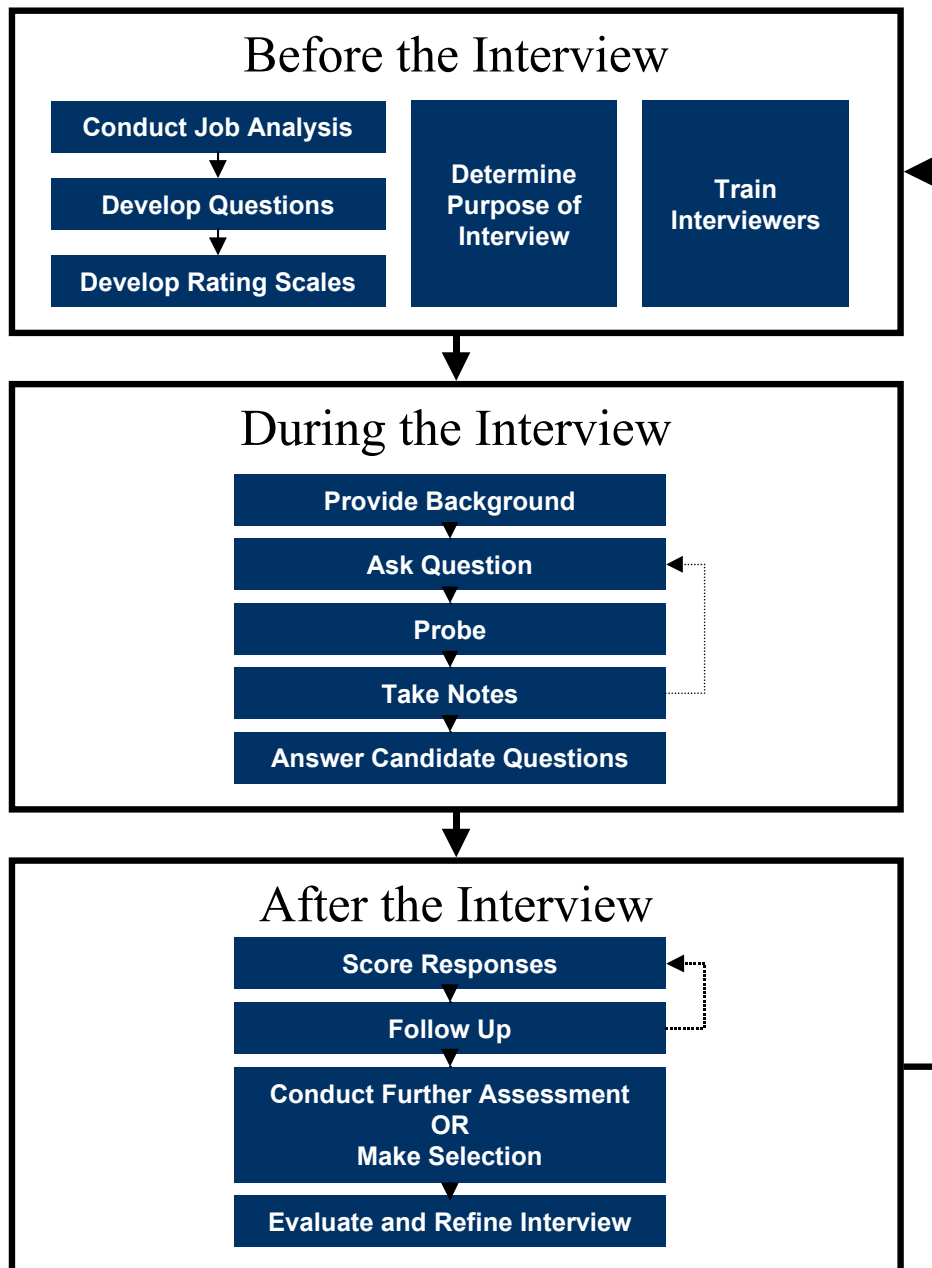
Benchmark Level

Level	Level Definition	Level Examples
5	Establishes and maintains ongoing working relationships with management, other employees, internal or external stakeholders, or customers. Remains courteous when discussing information or eliciting highly sensitive or controversial information from people who are reluctant to give it. Effectively handles situations involving a high degree of tension or discomfort involving people who are demonstrating a high degree of hostility or distress.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Presents controversial findings tactfully to irate organization senior management officials regarding shortcomings of a newly installed computer system, software programs, and associated equipment.
4		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mediates disputes concerning system design/architecture, the nature and capacity of data management systems, system resources allocations, or other equally controversial/ sensitive matters.
3	Cooperates and works well with management, other employees, or customers, on short-term assignments. Remains courteous when discussing information or eliciting moderately sensitive or controversial information from people who are hesitant to give it. Effectively handles situations involving a moderate degree of tension or discomfort involving people who are demonstrating a moderate degree of hostility or distress.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Courteously and tactfully delivers effective instruction to frustrated customers. • Provides technical advice to customers and the public on various types of IT such as communication or security systems, data management procedures or analysis, software engineering, or web development.
2		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Familiarizes new employees with administrative procedures and office systems.
1	Cooperates and works well with management, other employees, or customers during brief interactions. Remains courteous when discussing information or eliciting non-sensitive or non-controversial information from people who are willing to give it. Effectively handles situations involving little or no tension, discomfort, hostility, or distress.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Responds courteously to customers' general inquiries. • Greets and assists visitors attending a meeting within own organization.

Source: United States Office of Personnel Management

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Appendix D—A Model Structured Interview Process



Source: U.S. Merit Systems Protection Board, Washington, DC.

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