Are you hiring the best person for the job?

Is it time to upgrade your competency or behavioral questions to performance-based interviews?

For many organizations, interviews are the only or most important selection tool used to make selection decisions. But many companies that rely heavily on the interview for their selection decisions may not realize that some types of structured behavioral and competency interviews can be problematic and may result in missing out on hiring the best person for the job. It's important to understand the limitations of these types of interviews and how you can effortlessly overcome and "upgrade" them by using performance-based interviews.

Structured interviews are a dramatic improvement over unstructured interviews

Structured and competency interviews with behaviorally-anchored rating scales were introduced years ago and were a vast improvement over the infamous unstructured interview. They were designed to ask and rate each applicant using the same questions and set behavioral responses. This made structured behavioral and competency interviews more defensible than unstructured interviews and minimized or eliminated many types of biases (e.g., contrast effect: where applicants are compared to the person who was interviewed prior to them; first impression effect: where a "gut instinct" decision is made in the first two minutes of the interview; etc.). Structured behavioral and competency interviews were indeed a vast improvement over the dark ages of the unstructured interview because the questions asked were often much more relevant to the job and this frequently resulted in better employees but not always the best.

Problems with structured and competency interviews

At first glance, structured or competency interviews seem pretty thorough. Unfortunately, applicants can now obtain these types of questions and answers from a variety of sources. For example, an online Internet search for "behavioral interviews" will quickly produce many behavioral questions and ideal responses. And almost every bookstore is well stocked with a variety of books that provide questions and answers to behavioral and competency interviews. As well, many career counseling centers also teach applicants how to respond to these questions and I have even seen the odd newspaper article with a quick "how-to" instructional focus on behavioral or competency questions. So clearly, widespread use has led to widespread availability of these materials. And this has led to a wave of well-prepared applicants who may in fact, not hold all of the true knowledge and skills/abilities required on the job but are good at recognizing competency questions and responding with memorized stock answers.

Behavioral and competency-based questions are time-consuming to develop

The reason questions and answers have become so widespread may indeed be due in part to a common complaint I hear from HR professionals: the proper development of structured or competency interview questions can be very time-consuming and this can lead to increased selection cycle time or hiring delays. Thus, once a question is developed, it is often "recycled" for a wide variety of related jobs, with little or no modification. After all, behavioral and competency questions are usually targeted to the transferable skills and traits that make up 75 per cent of each job. Applicants can and do memorize the correct responses to these types of
questions because in the end, there aren't really that many different questions (e.g., decision making, problem solving, time management, conflict resolution, team work, communication, initiative, etc.)! And this seriously impacts the validity of your interview as well as the success of your new recruit when these individuals have just memorized the "right" answers.

**Set responses can lead to hiring party slip ups during the interview**

Even when applicants haven't memorized answers to structured interview questions, many managers (even those trained or with many years experience) unwittingly or subconsciously give applicants help during the interview by asking leading questions. This is especially true with questions where suggested responses are available (e.g., most behavioral and competency interviews). In this case, managers use the suggested responses as a checklist and ask applicants if they have experience with any of the missing points. Applicants almost always say, "Yes, I can do that", "Yes, I'd love to do that," and "Yes, I have lots of experience doing that including..." and nothing more is said. The end result is an elevated score for applicants and this increases their chances of being hired. And if they are, the manager is often disappointed and wonders why the new employees don't meet expectations. Yet these managers know they made the selection decision to hire these individuals and therefore, will reluctantly try to "make do" with them, saying nothing.

A similar problem occurs when managers deviate from the structured interview process. Maybe these managers have favorite questions they want to ask, maybe they think they have a knack for finding a top performer using "gut feel", perhaps they don't feel comfortable with or are unsure about using behavioral or competency interviews and perhaps they just feel that the questions and answers aren't giving them a clear picture of how well each applicant will perform on the job. Whatever the reason, individual managers at many organizations still use unstructured interviews even though their HR departments have officially adopted behavioral or competency interviews for the organization.

**Previous work experience is not the best indicator of performance on the new job**

Another emerging problem with structured behavioral or competency interviews is that they often evaluate applicants based on previous work experience, as opposed to each applicant's ability to apply their knowledge and experience to the performance required on the new job. And since applicants can self-select any situation or scenario when they answer a structured or competency question, they wisely select answers that put them in the best possible light. This is akin to the days of unstructured interviews when applicants learned to answer the question, "What are your weaknesses?" with a list of perceived strengths in disguise ("Oh, I'm a workaholic, a stickler for detail, etc."). A bigger problem is when a false negative occurs. This happens more often than you think because applicants are free to choose one or two examples that seem to best demonstrate their abilities (from many possible examples and experiences). The problem is that applicants have to make their choice without knowing exactly what the manager was looking for and this means a true top performer can be mistakenly screened out the competition.
Evidence of problems with structured and competency interviews

Evidence of interview problems can readily be found in a number of places. First, review some questions from recent interviews in your department or organization. If questions don't exist, I think you will find some managers are using an unstructured approach and are probably winging it. Simply sitting in on a few interviews will confirm this for you. For behavioral and competency interviews, I think you will find the same questions (or types of questions) are being used over and over again for many different jobs with very few changes. After all, many departments or organizations adopt, profile, highlight or require six to eight "core competencies" each year. If you sit in on a few of these structured interviews, I think you will also find that the hiring managers are frequently asking leading questions (as much as 40 per cent of the time). It is almost impossible to get top performers unless you ask the right questions.

The most compelling evidence of these problems can readily be seen by reviewing the on-the-job performance of the people hired by these types of interviews. At one time, structured behavioral and competency interviews improved (compared to an unstructured approach) the chances of hiring an acceptable performer or at least indicated which applicants would be unacceptable performers. Now, I think you will find (even in organizations using behavioral or competency interviews for years) less than 20 per cent of the workforce or new hires to be top performers and at least 25 per cent of the workforce or new hires to be comprised of unacceptable and below average performers. And the remaining workers or new hires will probably be only average performers. It may be time to upgrade your selection process if these numbers are representative of the staff at or hired by your organization.

Performance-based interviews fill the gap and identify the true top performer

Unfortunately, structured behavioral and competency interviews only prove that an applicant can talk the talk. The person hired may not be the top performer but rather the most successful "impression manager," and the most prepared. With structured behavioral and competency interviews, the more preparation applicants make, the more successful they will be (especially if they look up and practice suggested responses to typical questions). Performance-based interviews avoid many or all of the problems listed above and ensure you identify a top performer who meets or exceeds your expectations. Best of all, they are a seamless addition to your process if you are already using any type of structured interview.

Performance-based interview questions are specific to your vacancy, company problems and company culture. This specificity is critical as it enables you to identify the top performer from your applicant pool every time. Just as importantly, it exposes the strengths, weaknesses and organizational, personal and cultural fit of your preferred applicants. It takes only minimal effort to evolve from structured behavioral or competency interviews to performance-based interviews. It just requires human resources professionals who have long been comfortable with competency models and/or have invested thousands if not millions in these types of hiring models, to incorporate performance-based techniques into their current selection practices. Organizations who do so, have found the change to be painless and the results, dramatic (significant time and cost savings and improved hiring decisions that identifies a top performer every time).
Performance-based interviews are similar yet superior to structured interviews

Performance-based interviews are similar, in that each interviewee receives the same set of questions and is scored using suggested responses. A five-point performance-based rating scale is also used to evaluate candidates, but this scale begins at zero (why give a point for a wrong or unacceptable answer?). Furthermore, with the performance-based rating scale, the "correctness" and "completeness" of applicant responses is evaluated (note: top performers are easy to identify because they always give answers that are both fully complete and correct and often give answers that exceed expectations). Performance-based interviews are superior because instead of evaluating applicants on examples of work they provide, applicants are asked to do "work" and/or verbally resolve problems that would be typical of the new job. In other words, applicants are actually performing critical components of the job. This ensures you identify who can do the work and solve your problems, instead of identifying who can only tell you what they did somewhere else. And when you compare responses from different applicants, you will quickly see which applicants are top performers (i.e., those applicants that exceed expectations). Best of all, performance-based interview questions can be quickly developed because they come directly from the job.

Performance-based interviews also enjoy a long shelf life because they can be modified easily without impacting their effectiveness. By changing one or more of the critical dimensions of the background information or questions asked, an entirely different response is required. This prevents applicants from memorizing suggested responses (a major problem with behavioral and competency interviews) and allows the questions to keep pace with positions as they evolve. This means the only way applicants can successfully answer all of the questions is if they can truly perform all aspects of the actual job. If they're fully qualified, the interview will be a breeze. If they're not, no amount of preparation or practice will get them in the door.

Welcome to the new world of performance-based selection

Performance-based interviews have consistently identified top performing applicants for a wide variety jobs including entry level, clerical, service, technical, medical, professional as well as senior and executive management. The use of performance-based interviews also speeds up the selection process (especially when used in conjunction with Micro Assessments which are essentially written performance-based pre-interviews that can be e-mailed to applicants across the country or around the globe and thereby, dramatically improve the quality of applicants and reduce the number of applicants who will be interviewed resulting in additional cost savings). Final selection decisions can usually be reached within one week (sometimes even one day). And this saves companies thousands of dollars in staff time. The only pre-requisites for successful performance-based interviews are complete understanding of the essential qualifications of the job vacancy and interviewer training to ensure the interview and rating scale are correctly administered (but this is very easy and quick to do).

Again, some hiring professionals and managers may initially be reluctant to change to performance-based interviews because they have invested significant time and money in competency or behavioral interviews or they don't want to admit that the existing hiring process takes too long and doesn't always result in top performers. But the change will be painless and
the results, dramatic. In fact, performance-based interviewing is probably the most powerful and
cost-effective approach currently available with advantages including reducing turnover by 20
per cent, reducing selection costs by up to 40 per cent, reducing the number of interviews by up
to 75 per cent and significantly improved quality and productivity of new employees (i.e., the top
performer is identified almost each and every time). So if you are currently using behavioral or
competency interviews, you may want to "upgrade" to performance-based interviews in order to
hire the "best" employees.

Stephen Jackson of the consulting firm HR Strategy, is author of: PERFORMANCE- BASED SELECTION: A STEP-
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