From Science to Practice: Seven Principles for Conducting Employment Interviews

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The purpose of this article is to take findings from the academic research literature and translate them into principles for the practice of conducting interviews in organizations. Seven research-based principles are presented. Specifically, by (1) acknowledging that their judgments are imperfect, (2) knowing as little about candidates as possible, (3) avoiding poor questions, (4) using interview structure, (5) avoiding making early judgments, (6) watching for applicant performance effects, and (7) utilizing multiple sources of evidence, interviewers should become more effective and improve the association that their ratings have with performance on the job.

“Two ships that pass in the night” is a meaningful way to describe the relationship between scientific research on employment interviews and the actual practice of conducting them in organizations. Journals such as Journal of Applied Psychology, Personnel Psychology, and International Journal of Selection and Assessment, and Applied H.R.M. Research routinely publish research studies that investigate important aspects of the interview, such as those pertaining to methodology and outcomes. While some of this research eventually makes its way into practice, unfortunately, too much of it does not. In addition, there are principles and findings from other areas such as social psychology and cognitive psychology (e.g., decision-making tendencies) that could be applied to employment interviews, but for the most part have not.

The purpose of this article is to bridge the gap between science and practice. Seven research-based principles are presented that apply directly to the manner in which employment interviews are conducted in organizations. By incorporating these principles, those who conduct employment interviews and/or rely on their results to make employment decisions should find an improvement in the caliber of those hired, and in the process, find greater satisfaction with the process. However, before presenting these principles, a forewarning might be warranted. It is quite possible that readers may find some of these principles counterintuitive, or at least contrary to long-established practices.
Principle #1: Acknowledge the Inherent Difficulty of Making Judgments From an Interview.

Limited research suggests that employment interviewers tend to have a reasonably high level of confidence in their ability to pick which of the candidates they interview should be hired, particularly when they have past interviewing experience (Furnham & Burbeck, 1989; Keenan, 1978). Unfortunately, outcome-based research clearly indicates that such a level of confidence may be unfounded. For instance, both Wiesner and Cronshaw (1988) and Huffcutt and Arthur (1994) meta-analytically integrated the results of a large number of interview studies and found that ratings from traditional interviews (i.e., unstructured, conducted by a single interviewer) tend to have only a weak association with ratings of performance on the job. Put statistically, on average only around five percent of differences (variance) in job performance appear to be associated with interviewer ratings.

It should be emphasized that the limited association between interviewer ratings and job performance is not a reflection of the mental and social capabilities of interviewers, but rather a statement of the inherent difficulty of the interview process. Consider that applicants spend a lifetime forming attributes such as knowledge, skills, abilities, and personality tendencies, yet the interviewer has only a relatively brief time (e.g., 20-40 minutes) to assess and evaluate them, and very little if any opportunity to verify them. Moreover, many applicants are reluctant to show their attributes in their typical state during the interview, but rather try to present them in their best possible form. Furthermore, as will be described later, some candidates engage in tactics to enhance their standing that are not directly related to the requirements of the position and which can detract from assessment of them. In short, while the interviewer needs thorough and representative information to obtain a full picture of candidates, they often do not get it.

What interviewers should take away from this first principle is a heightened appreciation for the difficulty of the interview process and an increased desire to improve the accuracy of their judgments. There may be a natural tendency for some interviewers to believe that the findings from research do not apply to them, and therefore that no acknowledgement of limitations or changes are needed. Such a reaction is well documented in the social psychology literature, where research has identified a common tendency for people to think that well-established outcomes and trends (e.g., low probability of winning a lottery, high probability of negative health effects from smoking) somehow do not apply to them (Birnbaum 2004; Koehler, 1996). Those who fight this natural tendency and instead strive to improve are the ones who will end up as the most effective interviewers.
In summary, Principle #1 is the starting point in the process of improving the effectiveness of employment interviews. Interviewers who gain a deeper understanding of the inherent difficulty of the interview process and the typically low association that their ratings tend to have with job performance should be more open to change and more likely to engage in continuous improvement. An excellent suggestion for HR managers might be to prepare a training module that emphasizes the inherent difficult of the interview process (and the reasons why it is so) and presents and highlights research findings. Such a module could then be followed up with addition training based on the remaining principles, which in some way all pertain to improving the practice of interviewing.

**Principle #2: Know as Little About The Candidate as Possible.**

Of all the principles, this one may be the most counterintuitive. Why would an interviewer not want to know a lot about candidates before interviewing them? Results of research suggest that an identifiable three-step sequence of events often occurs when interviewers review candidate information beforehand (Dipboye, 1982, 1989). First, they form general impressions of the candidates. For instance, a candidate who graduated from a nationally recognized collegiate program would tend to be viewed more favorably than one who graduated from a lesser known institution. Second, during the interview, there is a tendency to shift from an objective, fact-finding mode into an “impression-confirming” mode. To illustrate, several studies found that interviewers show more positive regard, spend more time selling the organization, and use fewer initial and follow-up questions with candidates for whom they have a positive pre-interview impression (Dougherty, Turban, & Callender, 1994; Phillips & Dipboye, 1989). Third, the general impressions formed beforehand and often confirmed through selective treatment during the interview tend to have fairly strong influence on the final interview ratings and outcomes from those ratings, such as whether an offer is extended (e.g., Dougherty, Ebert, & Callender, 1986; Macan & Hayes, 1995; Phillips & Dipboye, 1989).

Some might believe that those with better credentials should be viewed more positively and hence there is nothing wrong with reviewing candidate information beforehand. There are two dangers to this viewpoint, which in the selection literature are referred to as “false positives” and “false negatives” (Landy & Conte, 2007). It is very easy to picture a candidate who looks good on paper but does not shine on the job (a false positive). The problem with a positive pre-interview impression is that the interviewer might not look deep enough to uncover that the candidate is not be as desirable as his/her paperwork suggests. Rather, they may over-focus on positive attributes that support their initial impressions. Conversely, it is easy to picture a candidate who does not look quite
as good on paper (e.g., had slightly lower grades) but excels on the job (a false negative). The combination of a negative pre-interview impression and differential treatment during the interview may not allow that candidate sufficient opportunity to display the attributes that would make him/her successful on the job.

What then is the ideal strategy? Principle 7 (presented later) relates to accumulating multiple sources of evidence. If extensive review of candidate information is done beforehand, that review and the interview are no longer independent sources, and in fact can become highly similar in what they contribute. If a minimal amount of information is reviewed beforehand, namely only what needs to be known to conduct the interview (e.g., they have a degree that meets the minimal requirements), then these two sources of information remain relatively independent and retain the potential to make unique contributions (Campion, Pursell, & Brown, 1988). In short, the impressions and judgments that result from an interview should come from the interview itself and not from other sources such as candidate paperwork. HR managers can play a key role in the implementation of this principle in that they can help identify what minimal information interviewers actually need, and then ensure that interviewers do not have access to the remaining information.

In summary, Principle #2 helps to define the nature and boundaries of the interview process. By minimizing candidate information, interviewers have a better opportunity to focus on information that arises uniquely from the interview. Of course that information needs to meaningful and job related, and minimizing candidate information by itself does not ensure that it is. Helping to ensure that interview information is meaningful and job related is addressed in the next two principles.

**Principle #3: Avoid Poor Questions.**

The purpose of the interview is to assess the capability or potential of the candidates to perform in the job for which they are being interviewed. Every question that an interviewer asks should in some way contribute to that purpose. Unfortunately, interviewers routinely ask questions that do not contribute to, and in fact can detract from, that purpose. To illustrate, consider the common questions “What are your strengths and weaknesses?,” “Where do you see yourself in five years?,” and “Why do you want to work for our company?” Many applicants anticipate these types of questions and have prepared responses. For instance, answers to the first question can be ones that on the surface sound like a weakness but yet interject an apparent strength (e.g., sometimes I try too hard). Candidates who are totally honest in their responses to questions such as these could actually be at a disadvantage relative to those who give canned responses.
What highlights this principle is the plethora of books on how to interview, which typically describe the most effective way to answer common questions and often provide sample responses. When an interviewer asks a common question such as the one above, what they may be getting as a response is the writing of some interview author, which tells little about a candidate’s capability for that position.

The first suggestion from this principle is that interviewers should carefully consider the questions they ask. Every question should relate directly to the knowledge, skills, abilities, and other characteristics (KSAO’s) associated with a given position, and the best way to ensure that is to base questions on a detailed job analysis. Questions can be generated directly from the KSAO’s. Alternately, questions can be developed from critical incidents, a form of job analysis where current employees and/or their supervisors are asked to describe actual times when they observed someone in that position doing something that was either very good or very bad. HR managers can help by making sure that interviewers either engage in a job analysis or have access to one. Moreover, they might even ask interviewers to submit a list of their questions beforehand so that they can be reviewed for job-relatedness. The second suggestion is that interviewers should continually monitor the effectiveness of their questions. Even questions that appear to be directly job related are not always successful. For instance, some questions may lead to canned responses or be particularly susceptible to applicant performance tactics (Principle #6). Questions that are not working effectively should be modified or eliminated.

As part of the process of improving the quality of their questions, interviewers could consider using additional question types. There are two types that have become common in the interview literature and which have strong research support in their capability to predict job performance. One is behavior description questions (Janz, 1982), where candidates are asked to describe a time in their past when they displayed certain characteristics. For example, a candidate for a leadership position might be asked “Tell me about a time when you led a group of people to a successful outcome.” The other is situational questions (Latham, Saari, Pursell, & Campion, 1980), where candidates are presented with a hypothetical scenario and asked to indicate what they would do if they were in that situation. A common question of this type for a leadership position might be something like “You are managing a work group and notice that one of your employees has become angry and hostile in recent weeks, to the point of disrupting the entire group. What would you do?” Both types of questions are typically developed from critical incidents that are collected either from job incumbents or from those who supervise them.

In summary of Principle #3, interviews are of little value in the selection process as a stand-alone mechanism unless the information that emerges from them relates directly to the requirements of the position. While there may be other
sources of information from interviews (nonverbal behaviors), the questions that are asked typically are the primary source. Use of high-quality questions is essential to ensuring that candidates’ responses provide meaningful insight into their capability to perform on the job.

**Principle #4: Utilize Interview Structure.**

Of all the findings in the interview research literature, perhaps the most consistent and practically meaningful is the effect of structure. Several meta-analyses have collapsed results across a large number of interviews (often hundreds), and they consistently find that ratings from structured interviews have a much stronger association with job performance than ratings from more traditional interviews (e.g., McDaniel, Whetzel, Schmidt, & Maurer, 1994; Wiesner & Cronshaw, 1988). Perhaps the most detailed findings come from Huffcutt and Arthur (1994), who found fully corrected correlations between interview ratings and job performance ratings of .20 for traditional interviews where the interviewer was free to choose the topics, questions, and manner of rating, .35 where the topics / content to be covered was specified prior to the interview, .56 where interviewers could choose from lists of pre-specified questions and rated candidates on multiple dimensions of performance afterward, and .57 where interviewers had to ask the same exact questions of all candidates and rated the response to each question individually using customized rating scales. Put in a different perspective, one study found that it generally takes between three and four traditional interviews to equal the accuracy of one structured interview (Schmidt & Zimmerman, 2004).

One of the more prominent articles on interview structuring techniques is Campion, Palmer, and Campion (1997). They describe 15 ways to improve the interview process, including tying the questions directly to job requirements, asking the same questions of each candidate, limiting the ability of interviewers to do follow-up questioning, using better types of questions (Principle #3 in this article), asking more questions, minimizing review of supplemental information such as vitas and application blanks (Principle #2), and having candidates wait until after the interview is completed and ratings are made to ask questions about the job and/or the organization (for reasons such as those described in Principle #6). We encourage interviewers to read the Campion et al. article as part of their ongoing effort to improve.

How should interviewers incorporate this principle? Results of the meta-analyses cited above suggest that focusing on the questions and the manner in which responses to them are rated may be the best place to begin the transition to a higher level of structure. It is helpful for interviewers to have a number of job-relevant questions written down and at their disposal. Doing so helps prevent the
awkwardness that sometimes arises when trying to come up with questions on the spot, and also helps avoid asking poor questions (especially ones that are susceptible to canned responses and interviewee performance effects). The more consistent interviewers can be in asking these questions across candidates, the better the outcome should tend to be. In terms of rating responses, leaving interviewers to make a general decision (e.g., hire / not hire) does not tend to be as accurate as rating candidates along a set of clearly defined, job-relevant dimensions or rating the response to each question individually. To illustrate the use of question-specific rating with the situational type of question described earlier, we refer to the study of a structured interview for a jewelry sales position by Weekley and Gier (1987). They provided one of their questions and its rating scale as an illustration, which is as follows:

A customer comes into the store to pick up a watch he had left for repair. The repair was supposed to have been completed a week ago, but the watch is not back yet from the repair shop. The customer becomes very angry. How would you handle this situation?

1 - Tell the customer it isn't back yet and ask him or her to check back with you later.
2 -
3 - Apologize, tell the customer that you will check into the problem and call him or her back later.
4 -
5 - Put the customer at ease and call the repair shop while the customer waits.

It should be noted that the (2) and (4) scale points do not have verbal anchors, but rather are used for responses that are better than the one beneath it but not quite as good as the one above it. This question was developed from critical incidents, a job analysis technique that is commonly used to develop highly structured interview questions. Once the questions are written, the scoring anchors for them are developed.

In summary of this principle, incorporating structure into the interview process shifts the perspective of the interview from being “given” to being “developed.” Clearly it takes time to develop structured, job-related questions and the means by which to rate them. However, results of research suggest that the investment is worth it and will result in a greater association between the ratings interviewers make and the performance of the candidates that are hired. HR
managers can assist through means such as providing access to incumbents and/or managers for collection of critical incidents or assigning an HR person to do that.

**Principle #5: Avoid Making Judgments Early in the Interview.**

Researchers in social psychology have found a very natural tendency for people to make evaluations (attributions) of others quickly, even after only brief contact (Hilton, 2007; Weiner, 2005). Early microanalytic research suggested that this happens in the interview, specifically that interviewers often form judgments about candidates during the initial part of the interview (Springbett, 1958; see also Anderson, 1960). Later research collaborated this finding (Baron, 1989; Rodgers, 1987). The problem with early judgments is that they are usually based on a very limited and often unrepresentative information. Brafman and Brafman (2008) refer to the “first-date” effect with employment interviews in their book on decision-making. In the realm of dating, it is not uncommon for people think they have found the right one after one date, only to wonder later what they were thinking. Similarly, interviewers can think they have found the right one early in the interview, only to find out much later that the person is not so stellar on the job.

Why are early judgments in an interview so suspect? A viable explanation comes from an unlikely source, one totally outside the interview area. In 1978, Herbert Simon was awarded the Nobel Prize in Economics for his work on decision-making. One of his key concepts was “bounded rationality” (Simon, 1955). He noted that when making decisions, people can be quite logical and rationale in their evaluative thought processes, but tend to focus on only a limited amount of information when doing so. The result of using logical evaluative strategies on limited information is often a flawed decision. An interviewer who makes a judgment early on may be entirely logical in basing that judgment on actual evidence, but the information that is available at that point is only a fraction of the total information that is available about the candidate. Thus, early interview judgments tend to be flawed, not necessarily because of limitations in the evaluation capability of interviewers, but rather because too little information is involved.

What interviewers should take away from this principle is a realization of their natural tendency to render early judgments, and from that realization make a firm commitment to work on delaying their judgments. Like most skills, learning to delay judgments takes take time and practice. It might be useful for interviewers to think of themselves as “investigative agents,” ones who do not arrive at a conclusion and take action until every nook and cranny has been explored. Once again, HR managers can play a key by incorporating the concept
of delaying judgments (e.g., investigative agent perspective) into a training module.

In summary, Principle #5 (and the next principle) relates more to the interpersonal dynamics and information processing aspects of interviews. To reach maximum effectiveness, interviewers must overcome their natural human tendency to make quick judgments. Hopefully, understanding the dangers of early judgments and viewing themselves as investigation agents should help.

**Principle #6: Watch for Applicant Performance Effects.**

Research clearly indicates that candidates engage in tactics designed to increase their standing with the interviewer. Huffcutt (2009) referred to this concept as *interviewee performance*, defining it specifically as “…interpersonal presentation that raises or lowers interview ratings relative to what candidates merit based solely on their job-relevant qualifications.” Such tactics include complimenting the interviewer and/or the organization (referred to as “ingratiation” in the research literature), overstating accomplishments (referred to as “self-promotion”), and even outright fabrication (see Ellis, West, Ryan, & Deshon, 2002; Levashina & Campion, 2007; McFarland, Ryan, & Kriska, 2003; Stevens & Kristof, 1995; Weiss & Feldman, 2006). One danger of these tactics is that candidates who choose not use them (but rather present themselves fairly and accurately) are likely to be at a disadvantage relative to those who do use them, and may not get hired even though they might be more desirable employees. A second danger is that the wrong person may be hired, which can be costly to an organization.

Some may question how many applicants really do engage in the use of these tactics, and beyond that, how much influence they actually have on the interviewer. Several studies found that the number of candidates who utilize these tactics at least once during an interview range from just under half (McFarland et al., 2003) to virtually all of them (Ellis et al., 2002; Stevens & Kristof, 1995). What may be the most surprising result from this body of research is the frequency to which applicants engage in tactics that are (or at least close to) outright fabrication. To illustrate, Levashina and Campion (2007) found that the percentage of applicants who engaged in what they called “extensive image creation” (e.g., borrowing the experiences of others, inventing credentials) ranged from 28% to 75%.

Further, research suggests that the use of these tactics by applicants can have a significant influence on the outcome of the interview. For instance, several studies found that the frequency to which these tactics are used was one of the components represented in the ratings made by the interviewer (e.g., Ellis et al., 2002; Higgins & Judge, 2004; Kristof-Brown, Barrick, & Franke, 2002;
McFarland et al., 2003; Tsai, Chen, & Chiu, 2005). In a more direct assessment, Levashina and Campion (2007) found that the probability of candidates receiving a follow-up interview or a job offer rose from 31 percent to 77 percent if they used extensive image creation.

What can interviewers do to avoid being influenced by interviewee performance? There are three things. The first is simply to be aware of the extent to which candidate engage in such tactics and the potential influence they can have on the outcome of the interview. The second is to be well versed in the type of tactics that candidates use, including (but not limited to) ingratiation, self-promotion, and extensive image creation. The third is to look for use of these tactics during the interview and to filter out their influence. Some interviewers may believe they already possess the capability to detect when candidates are doing this. Unfortunately, the results of research suggest that even professional interviewers are susceptible to their use. Moreover, given the array of tactics that can be utilized, unless an interviewer is well versed in all them, the possibility that at least one will slip through undetected is high. HR managers could help by putting together an interviewer training module that describes the full array of performance tactics and the resulting effects that have been identified through research, and perhaps even put together practice videos where use of these tactics is illustrated.

There are two final issues that merit mention. First, some may believe that effective use of impression management tactics is a positive attribute, and therefore it is okay that candidates who use them receive higher interview ratings. In truth, there are a number of jobs where social effectiveness skills such as impression management are part of the desired skill set (Ferris et al., 2005; Riggio, 1986). However, a recent and very key study found that use of impression management tactics during the interview relates more strongly to interview outcomes than to actual job performance (Barrick, Shaffer, & DeGrassi, 2009). Thus, while impression management skills may be a legitimate part of some jobs, it seems likely that their use is amplified in interviews given their short duration and importance, to the point where they no longer are as representative of job performance capability.

Second, the issue of candidate self-enhancement is not unique to interviews. Self-enhancement has always been of concern in employment selection, and in particular has been at the forefront in the personality selection literature (Marcus, 2009) and to a lesser extent the literature on resumes (Kaplan & Fisher, 2009). In the former, research clearly shows that scores on personality instruments can be faked to some extent in selection settings (Birkeland, Manson, Kisamore, Brannick, & Smith, 2006). Although predictive validity is not always affected (Hough, 1998), other issues remain such as fairness (Tett & Christiansen, 2007) and the presence of a general desirability factor that results from inflation...
of trait scale intercorrelations (Collins & Gleaves, 1998). In a theoretical treatment of the issue of faking in general selection, Marcus (2009) argues that self-presentation in selection is a natural attempt by candidates to adapt their presented image to situational demands of attracting a potential employer.

In summary of Principle #6, the concept of applicant performance effects is one of the newer lines of contemporary interview research, and holds the potential to be one of the most informative, interesting, and practically relevant. Some may be surprised by the relatively high proportion of candidates who appear to engage in impression management tactics during an interview, by the extent to which some candidates will go (e.g., fabrication), and by the influence that these tactics can have on interview outcomes. Given that the use of these tactics is magnified during interviews relative to performance on the job, modern interviewers must be aware of them and have the capability to filter out their effects.

**Principle #7: Look for Multiple Sources of Evidence.**

The foundation behind this principle is that one piece of evidence is suggestive, while multiple pieces of evidence are confirmatory. In the organizational literature, Rogelberg and Brooks-Laber (2002) refer this principle as “triangulation.” In the social psychology literature, a relevant concept is the covariation model (Kelley, 1972), one aspect of which is that attributions of others (e.g., that they are dependable) tend to be more accurate if they are based on consistent display of that attribute across multiple situations and multiple contexts. The covariation model has been applied to employee selection in a limited way, particularly to applicant perceptions of selection decisions (Ployhart, Holcombe Ehrhart, & Hayes, 2005), but not directly to the interview itself.

Applying both concepts to the interview, interviewers should strive to accumulate evidence for their judgments from as many different sources as possible, evidence that spans multiple situations and multiple contexts. The triangulation principle suggests a minimum of three sources before arriving at a decision. Obtaining such evidence can be done to some extent within the interview. To illustrate, say that a candidate describes a situation in a current job where he/she demonstrated initiative in helping a customer. Rather than simply concluding that this candidate is high on initiative, the interviewer could ask the candidate for other examples of initiative. These examples could come from different contexts within the same job (e.g., initiative in helping a co-worker), from other jobs, and even from other settings (e.g., education, social organizations, hobbies).

Additional sources of evidence outside the interview could then be utilized to corroborate the judgments and perceptions that arise from it. For instance, the
resume can be checked to see if the candidate lists items that suggest initiative, such as voluntarily seeking additional education and training and joining job-relevant organizations. References can be contacted and (among other things) asked specifically to comment on candidate initiative. Letters of reference can be scrutinized for signs or even hints of initiative. Perhaps a psychological test (e.g., a personality test with an initiative scale) can be utilized. Lastly, if other interviewers were involved (either from being present during that interview or from conducting their own interview), they can meet and share their perspectives. Any candidate can shine once, but a consistent pattern of initiative gleaned from all of these sources gives confidence to the assertion that the candidate truly is high on it. However, as was discussed in Principle #2, these sources must be kept as independent as possible in order to ensure that they provide unique information. Thus, based on this logic, the best time to review the resume, application form, and letters of reference is after the interview rather than before it, procedural processes for which can be implemented by HR managers.

In summary, this last principle helps to define the role that interviews play in the overall selection process. Too often the interview is blended with other sources of information, which then reduces the potential for each source to make a unique contribution. The concept of triangulation is particularly meaningful in the overall selection context, and should help to ensure that candidate attributions are as accurate as possible.

**General Summary**

The purpose of this article was to take findings and principles from the academic research literature and translate them into suggestions for the actual practice of conducting interviews in organizations. By acknowledging that their judgments are imperfect, knowing as little about candidates as possible, avoiding poor questions, using interview structure, avoiding making early judgments, watching for applicant performance effects, and utilizing multiple sources of evidence, interviewers should become more effective and improve the association that their ratings have with performance on the job. Doing so will require time and effort and an openness to change, but the results of research suggest that such an investment is worth it. Earlier the perspective was noted that interviews are developed rather than given. Similarly, it can be said that highly effective interviewers are developed rather than found.

*For readers who are interested in delving deeper into the topics addressed in this paper, recommended readings are identified by an asterisk in the following reference list.*
References


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