32

Selection Interviewing

Key concepts and terms

- Behavioural-based interview
- Biographical interview
- Halo effect
- Horns effect
- Situational-based interview
- Structured interview

Learning outcomes

On completing this chapter you should be able to define these key concepts. You should also know about:

- The purpose of an interview
- Advantages and disadvantages of interviews
- The nature of an interview
- Planning the interview – structuring and timing
- Interviewing arrangements
- Interviewing techniques – starting and finishing
- Interviewing techniques – asking questions
- Selection interviewing skills
- Coming to a conclusion
- The basis of an interview

Introduction

The interview forms a major part of what is sometimes called the 'classic trio' of selection techniques, the other two being the application form and references (although the latter mainly serve to confirm factual information – they cannot be used reliably to influence choice). Further evidence may be obtained from psychological tests, as described in Chapter 33.

Interviews are an inevitable part of most if not all selection procedures but they are not always reliable as a means of predicting success in a job. They are difficult to do well – a considerable amount of knowledge of the techniques of interviewing and the skills required to apply them is needed. Interviewers need to know what they are looking for and how to set about finding it. They need to plan their interviews in advance, structure them accordingly and record their analyses of candidates against a set of assessment criteria that will have been spelt out in a person specification.

Purpose

The purpose of selection interviews is to obtain and assess information about candidates that will enable a valid prediction to be made of their future performance in the job for which they are being considered in comparison with the predictions made for other candidates. They aim to answer the following fundamental questions.

Selection interviews – three fundamental questions

1. Can candidates do the job – are they competent?

2. Will candidates do the job – are they well-motivated?

3. How will individuals fit into the organization?

The basis of an interview – the person specification

Interviewing involves processing and evaluating evidence about the capabilities of a candidate in relation to a person specification. This might be set out under the following headings, as described in Chapter 31:

- Knowledge – what the individual needs to know to carry out the role.

- Skills and abilities – what the individual has to be able to do to carry out the role.

- Behavioural competencies – the types of behaviour required for successful perform-ance of the role.

- Qualifications and training – the professional, technical or academic qualifications required or the training that the candidate should have undertaken.

- Experience – the types of achievements and activities that would be likely to predict success.

- Specific demands – anything that the role holder will be expected to achieve in specified areas, eg develop new markets or products, improve sales, productivity or levels of cus-tomer service, introduce new systems or processes.

- Special requirements – travelling, unsocial hours, mobility, etc.

Alternatively, the headings used in the seven-point plan or fivefold grading scheme could be used; these were also given in Chapter 31, in Table 31.1.

The nature of an interview – obtaining the information

Interviews aim to obtain the information required to decide on the extent to which candidates fit a person specification for the job. Some of the evidence will be in the CV and application form, but interviews supplement these data with the more detailed or specific information about experience and personal characteristics that is obtained in a face-to-face meeting. Such a meeting enables judgements to be made by the interviewer on whether the candidate will 'fit' the organization, and by both parties as to how they would get on together. Although these judgements are entirely subjective and are often biased or prejudiced, they will be made.

An interview can be described as a conversation with a purpose. It is a conversation because candidates should be induced to talk freely with their interviewers about themselves, their experience and their careers. But the conversation has to be planned, directed and controlled to achieve the main purpose of the interview, which is to make an accurate assessment of the candidate's suitability for a job.

Interviews can be either structured to a greater or lesser degree, or unstructured. A structured interview is one built around a set of predetermined questions that may be related to the typical situations faced by holders of the role for which the candidate is being considered, or the competencies required as contained in the person specification. An unstructured interview is one that has not been planned by reference to predetermined questions although it may have a sort of structure in the shape of the sequence of areas covered, for example a biographical interview that simply goes progressively through a candidate's education, training and experience.

Interviews focus on experience and personal characteristics to assess the extent to which candidates fit the person specification. They also provide a means of conveying information about the job and the organization.

Experience

Interviews provide an opportunity to establish the extent to which the experience of candidates is useful and relevant. It is necessary to pin people down to obtain explicit statements about what they have been doing and what knowledge and skills they have acquired. Candidates naturally want to present themselves well and this can lead to exaggerated claims about their achievements. Answers to probing questions about what they have done, with examples, must be obtained. Vague statements must not be tolerated.

The extent to which the careers of candidates have progressed smoothly, the reasons for moves between jobs and employers, and any gaps in work experience need to be explored. Redundancy should not be a problem – it can happen to anyone, although if it keeps on happening the interviewer may be tempted to speculate that this is more than just bad luck. Similarly with dismissal, if this comes out. One or perhaps even two dismissals may be understandable if they are attributable to poor performance. But a sequence of them is unacceptable and alarm bells begin to ring if a dismissal was for gross misconduct (although this is unlikely to be revealed, which is where references can be helpful). If candidates have a career history of 'job hopping' (short periods in a number of jobs) it is necessary to find out why. There may be a good explanation when, for example, the candidate has been working on limited-term contracts, but it may indicate instability or consistent failure.

Personal characteristics

Selection interviews provide an opportunity to assess personal characteristics. But impressions, especially first impressions, can make a huge and sometimes misleading impact, although they can be important in jobs where impressing other people is important, eg sales representatives. Intelligence and personality tests can be used to provide more objective information, if they are valid and reliable. Situational and behavioural-based questions in structured interviews, as described later, are also helpful.

Interests and activities outside work

Questions about interests and activities can be useful when interviewing candidates from schools or further and higher education establishments who have had little work experience. They have much less relevance for more experienced candidates although they may give some indication of how well people are motivated if they pursue them actively.

Advantages and disadvantages of interviews

Table 32.1   Advantages and disadvantages of interviews

Advantages of interviews as a method of selection	Disadvantages of interviews as a method of selection
• Provide opportunities for interviewers to ask probing questions about the candidate's experience and to explore the extent to which the candidate's competencies match those specified for the job • Enable interviewers to describe the job (a 'realistic job preview') and the organization in more detail, providing some indication of the terms of the psychological contract • Provide opportunities for candidates to ask questions about the job and to clarify issues concerning training, career prospects, the organization and terms and conditions of employment • Enable a face-to-face encounter to take place so that the interviewer can make an assessment of how the candidate would fit into the organization and what they would be like to work with • Give the candidate the same opportunity to assess the organization, the interviewer and the job	• Can lack validity as a means of making sound predictions of performance, and lack reliability in the sense of measuring the same things for different candidates • Rely on the skill of the interviewer – many people are poor at interviewing, although most think that they are good at it • Do not necessarily assess competence in meeting the demands of the particular job • Can lead to biased and subjective judgements by interviewers

Disadvantages can be alleviated if not entirely removed by, first, using a structured approach that focuses on the competencies required for successful performance and, secondly, by training interviewers. The use of another opinion or opinions can also help to reduce bias, especially if the same structured approach is adopted by all the interviewers. Finally, selection tests, especially those measuring intelligence or general ability, can provide valuable information that supplements the interview (see Chapter 33).

Interviewing arrangements

The interviewing arrangements will depend partly on the procedure being used, which may consist of individual interviews, an interviewing panel, a selection board or some form of assessment centre. In most cases, however, the arrangements for the interviews should conform broadly to the following pattern:

- The candidate who has applied in writing, by e-mail or telephone should be told where and when to come and who to ask for. The interview time should be arranged to fit in with the time it will take to get to the company. It may be necessary to adjust times for those who cannot get away during working hours. If the company is difficult to find, a map should be sent with details of public transport. The receptionist or security officer should be told who is coming. Candidates are impressed to find that they are expected.

- Applicants should have somewhere quiet and comfortable in which to wait for the interview, with reading material available and access to cloakroom facilities.

- The interviewers or interviewing panel should have been well briefed on the programme. Interviewing rooms should have been booked and arrangements made, as necessary, for welcoming candidates, for escorting them to interviews, for meals and for a conducted tour round the company.

- Comfortable private rooms should be provided for interviews with little, if any, distractions around them. Interviewers should preferably not sit behind their desks, as this creates a psychological barrier.

- During the interview or interviews, some time, but not too much, should be allowed to tell candidates about the company and the job and to discuss with them conditions of employment. Negotiations about pay and other benefits may take place after a provisional offer has been made, but it is as well to prepare the ground during the interviewing stage.

- Candidates should be told what the next step will be at the end of the interview. They may be asked at this stage if they have any objections to references being taken up.

- Follow-up studies should be carried out of the performance of successful candidates in their jobs compared with the prediction made at the selection stage. These studies should be used to validate the selection procedure and to check on the capabilities of interviewers.

Briefing interviewers

When making arrangements for an interview it is essential that the people who are going to conduct the interview are properly briefed on the job and the procedures they should use.

Training in interviewing techniques should be an automatic part of the training programmes for managers and team leaders.

It is particularly important that everyone is fully aware of the provisions of the sex, race and disability discrimination Acts and the Age Discrimination Regulations. It is essential that any form of prejudiced behaviour or any prejudiced judgements are eliminated completely from the interview or the subsequent evaluation of the candidate. Even the faintest hint of a sexist, racist or ageist remark must be totally avoided. When recording a decision following an interview it is also essential to spell out the reasons why someone was rejected, making it clear that this was on the grounds of their ability to do the job and not because of their sex, race, disability or age.

Ethical considerations

Another important consideration in planning and executing a recruitment programme is to behave ethically towards candidates. They have the right to be treated with consideration and this includes acknowledging replies, informing them of the outcome of their application without undue delay and responding promptly to requests for information on why they have been turned down.

Planning the interview programme

It is best to leave some time, say 15 minutes, between interviews to allow for comments to be made. There is a limit to how many interviews can be conducted in a day without running out of steam. Holding more than six demanding interviews of, say, one hour each in a day is unwise. Even with less demanding half-hour interviews it is preferable to limit the number to eight or so in a day.

The main dos and don'ts of selection interviews are shown in Table 32.2.

Preparation

Careful preparation is essential and this means a thorough study of the person specification and the candidate's application form and/or CV. It is necessary at this stage to identify those features of the applicant that do not fully match the specification so that these can be probed more deeply during the interview. It can be assumed that the candidate is only being considered because there is a reasonable match, but it is most unlikely that this match will be perfect. It is also necessary to establish if there are any gaps in the job history or items that require further explanation, and to answer the following questions.

Preparing for an interview – four questions

1. What are the criteria to be used in selecting the candidate? These may be classified as essential or desirable and will refer to the knowledge, skill and competency requirements and the experience, qualifications and training that will satisfy those requirements as set out in the person specification.

2. What more do I need to find out at the interview to ensure that the candidate meets the essential selection criteria?

3. What further information do I need to obtain at the interview to ensure that I have an accurate picture of how well the candidate meets the criteria?

4. How am I going to structure the interview in terms of the questions I need to ask and the sequence in which these questions are covered? These may be quite detailed if a highly structured approach is being adopted, as described below. It is essential to probe during an interview to establish what the candidate really can do and has achieved.

Planning an interview

An interview can be divided into the five parts set out below.

The five parts of an interview

1. The welcome and introductory remarks.

2. The major part concerned with obtaining information about the candidate to assess against the person specification.

3. The provision of information to candidates about the organization and the job.

4. Answering questions from the candidate.

5. Closing the interview with an indication of the next step.

Better results will be obtained if the interview is planned using one of the approaches described below or a combination of them. It is also necessary to plan how much time should be taken.

Types of interviews

The basic types of interviews are:

1. Biographical interviews, which either start at the beginning (education) and go on sequentially to the end (the current or last job or the most recent educational experience) or do this in reverse order, ie starting with the current or most recent job and working backwards.

2. Structured interviews built around a set of predetermined questions that may be related to the competencies required as contained in the person specification (structured behavioural-based interviews), or typical situations faced by holders of the role for which the candidate is being considered (structured situational-based interviews) or the headings in the person specification framework.

3. Person specification-based interviews, which are planned to obtain information under each of the headings in the person specification.

1. The biographical interview

The traditional way of structuring an interview is the biographical approach. Many interviewers prefer to proceed in reverse chronological order with experienced candidates, spending most time on the present or recent jobs, giving progressively less attention to the more distant experience, and only touching on education lightly.

There is no one best sequence to follow. What is important is to decide in advance which approach to adopt. It is also important to get the balance right. You should concentrate most on recent experience and not dwell too much on the past. You should allow time not only for candidates to talk about their careers but also to ask probing questions about their experience. You should certainly not spend too much time at the beginning of the interview talking about the company and the job. It is desirable to issue that information in advance to save interview time and to encourage the candidate to ask questions at the end of the interview (the quality of the questions can indicate something about the quality of the candidate).

A biographical approach is logical and provides some element of structure to the interview but it will not produce the desired information unless interviewers are absolutely clear about what they are looking for and are prepared with questions that will elicit the data they need to make a prediction and a selection decision. This means conducting a structured interview as described below in the full sense in which that term is used, ie an interview that is based on situational-based or behavioural-based questions, focusing on one or other or both.

2. Structured behavioural-based interviews

In a behavioural-based interview (sometimes referred to as a 'criterion-referenced interview') the interviewer poses questions or asks for descriptions of how the candidate behaved in

particular situations – how he or she dealt with them and how well that behaviour worked. The behaviour is aligned to a behavioural competency that has been defined as a requirement in the person specification. The aim is to collect evidence about how people behave in typical situations on the grounds that such evidence is the best predictor of future behaviour as long as the criteria fit the specified demands of the job.

A list of points to be covered can be drawn up in advance to cover the key competencies set out in the person specification. The following are examples of behavioural questions that might be posed to a candidate for a recruitment adviser post.

Behavioural questions that might be posed to a candidate for a recruitment adviser post

- Can you tell me about any occasion when you have persuaded your fellow team members to do something that at first they didn't really want to do?

- Do people come to you to help solve problems? If so, tell me about a problem you have solved recently.

- Tell me about a time when you used previous experience to solve a problem new to you.

- Tell me about any occasion when you successfully persuaded a line manager to agree to a course of action (eg the use of a particular medium) or to accept a recommendation (eg on a candidate to be short listed).

- Have you ever had to deal with a candidate who has complained bitterly about the selection procedure? If not, how would you deal with such a situation if it did arise?

- Have you ever been in the position when you have been told to do something differently and you were uncomfortable about it? If so, how did you deal with it? If not, what approach would you adopt?

- Tell me about any time when you had to deal with a large influx of requests for recruitment services from line managers. How did you cope? Or if this has not been your experience, how do you think you would try to cope?

- Have you ever felt under tremendous pressure to achieve a result? If so, how did you deal with it?

- Have you ever made a presentation to a group of colleagues or people outside your organization? If so, what approach did you adopt and how well did it work?

- What sorts of achievements give you the greatest satisfaction at work?

Behavioural-based interviews can provide a clear and relevant framework. But preparing for them takes time and interviewers need to be trained in the technique. A fully behavioural or criterion-referenced structure is probably most appropriate for jobs that have to be filled frequently, but even with one-off jobs, the technique of having a set of competency-referenced questions to ask that will be applied consistently to all candidates will improve the reliability of the prediction.

3. Structured situational-based interviews

In a situational-based interview (sometimes described as a 'critical-incident interview') the focus is on a number of situations or incidents in which behaviour can be regarded as being indicative of subsequent performance. Situational-based questions ask candidates how they would handle a hypothetical situation that resembles one they may encounter in the job. For example, sales assistants might be asked how they would respond to rudeness from a customer. Situational questions can provide some insight into how applicants might deal with particular job demands and have the advantage of being work-related. They can also provide candidates with some insight into the sort of problems they might meet in the job. But, because they are hypothetical and can necessarily only cover a limited number of areas, they cannot be relied on by themselves. They could indicate that candidates understand how they might handle one type of situation in theory but not that they would be able to handle similar or other situations in practice. Follow-up questions are needed to explore the response in more detail, thus gaining a better understanding of how candidates might tackle similar problems. The following is an example of a situational-based set of questions to be posed to a candidate for a recruitment adviser post.

Situational-based questions to be posed to a candidate for a recruitment adviser post

- What would you do if you felt that none of the applicants quite met the specification, although one came fairly close?

- How would you deal with a line manager who you believed was significantly overstating the qualifications and experience required for a job?

- What would you say to a candidate if there was an unexplained gap in his or her employment record?

- A line manager has chosen a candidate who you think is clearly unsuitable. What do you do?

- What do you do in a situation where it has not been possible to find a suitable candidate?

- A senior line manager has suggested that you should rely entirely on online recruiting for managers and professional staff and abandon conventional advertising. How do you respond?

- A manager tells you that he thinks a candidate is too old for the job. How do you respond?

- A colleague has suggested that it would be a good idea to check out short-listed candidates on Facebook or MySpace. How would you react to this idea?

- A candidate responds to your questions with monosyllabic answers. How would you draw him or her out?

- You are interviewing someone for a sales assistant post. She does not make a very good impression, being rather hesitant and lacking in confidence, but her track record in sales is good. What do you do?

Structuring within the person specification framework

Person specifications should be set out under a number of standard headings, examples of which were given earlier in this chapter (page 541–42). An interview can be structured to obtain the information needed under each of those headings. Questions are drawn up in advance to elicit this information. These may be specific questions about experience, qualifications, education and training, or behavioural or situational-based questions as described above. The aim is to ensure that when an assessment of the candidate under these headings is made after the interview, all that needs to be known to make a reliable assessment is available.

Choice of approach

The more the interview can be structured by the use of situational- or behavioural-based questions or within a person specification framework the better. Both situational- and behavioural-based questions can be deployed usefully and, as the above examples show, the distinction between them is sometimes small.

In practice, a mix of approaches can be used as long as this is deliberate and planned. A biographical sequence can be used as a framework and questions on different aspects of the person specification can be injected at appropriate moments. These could be specific questions about experience, qualifications and training. Additionally, situational- or behavioural-based questions could be added to obtain a fuller picture of the candidate. Three or four of each of them could be decided in advance and these could be introduced gradually as the occasion arises when discussing the candidate's experience in relation to the requirements of the job.

The alternative is to go through job experience chronologically to establish what the candidate can do and then produce the questions. The latter approach has the merit of ensuring that there are no diversions from the analysis of experience.

Timing the interview

The length of time allowed for an interview will be related to the seniority and complexity of the job. For relatively routine jobs, 20 to 30 minutes may suffice. For more demanding jobs, up to an hour but no more may be necessary.

The bulk of the time – at least 80 per cent – should be allocated to obtaining information from the candidate. The introduction and conclusion should be brief. Preparation involves deciding on the type of interview to be used.

Interview techniques – starting and finishing

You should start interviews by putting candidates at their ease. You want them to provide you with information and they are not going to talk freely and openly if they are given a cool reception.

In the closing stages of the interview candidates should be asked if they have anything they wish to add in support of their application. They should also be given the opportunity to ask questions. At the end of the interview the candidate should be thanked and given information about the next stage. If some time is likely to elapse before a decision is made the candidate should be informed accordingly so as not to be left on tenterhooks. It is normally better not to announce the final decision during the interview. It may be advisable to obtain references and, in any case, time is required to reflect on the information received.

Interviewing techniques – asking questions

As mentioned earlier, an interview is a conversation with a purpose. The interviewee should be encouraged to do most of the talking – one of the besetting sins of poor interviewers is that they talk too much. The interviewer's job is to draw the candidate out at the same time ensuring that the information required is obtained. To this end it is desirable to ask a number of open-ended questions – questions that cannot be answered by yes or no and which promote a full response. But a good interviewer will have an armoury of other types of questions to be asked as appropriate, as described below.

Open questions

Open questions are phrased generally and give no indication of the expected reply; they cannot be answered by yes or no. They encourage candidates to talk, drawing them out and obtaining

a full response. Single-word answers are seldom illuminating. It is a good idea to begin the interview with some open questions to obtain a general picture of candidates, thus helping them to settle in. Open questions or phrases inviting a response can be phrased as follows.

> ### *Open questions or phrases inviting a response*
>
> - I'd like you to tell me about the sort of work you are doing in your present job.
> - What do you know about…?
> - Could you give me some examples of…?
> - In what ways do you think your experience fits you to do the job for which you have applied?
> - How have you tackled…?
> - What have been the most challenging aspects of your job?
> - Please tell me about some of the interesting things you have been doing at work recently.

Open questions can give you a lot of useful information but you may not get exactly what you want, and answers can go into too much detail. For example, the question, 'What has been the main feature of your work in recent months?' may result in a one-word reply – 'marketing', or it may produce a lengthy explanation that takes up too much time. Replies to open questions can get bogged down in too much detail, or miss out some key points. They can come to a sudden halt or lose their way. You need to ensure that you get all the facts, keep the flow going and maintain control. Remember that you are in charge. Hence the value of probing, closed and the other types of questions, which are discussed below.

Probing questions

Probing questions ask for further details and explanations to ensure that you are getting all the facts. You ask them when answers have been too generalized or when you suspect that there may be some more relevant information that candidates have not disclosed. A candidate may claim to have done something and it may be useful to find out more about exactly what contribution was made. Poor interviewers tend to let general and uninformative answers pass by without probing for further details, simply because they are sticking rigidly to a predetermined list of open questions. Skilled interviewers are able to flex their approach to ensure they get the facts while still keeping control to ensure that the interview is completed on time.

A candidate could say to you something like: 'I was involved in a major exercise that produced significant improvements in the flow of work through the factory.' This statement conveys

nothing about what the candidate actually did. You have to ask probing questions, such as the examples below.

Probing questions

- You've informed me that you have had experience in… Could you tell me more about what you did?
- What sort of targets or standards have you been expected to achieve?
- How successful have you been in achieving those targets or standards? Please give examples.
- Could you give an example of any project you have undertaken?
- What was your precise role in this project?
- What exactly was the contribution you made to its success?
- What knowledge and skills were you able to apply to the project?
- Were you responsible for monitoring progress?
- Did you prepare the final recommendations in full or in part? If in part, which part?
- Could you describe in more detail the equipment you used?

Closed questions

Closed questions aim to clarify a point of fact. The expected reply will be an explicit single word or brief sentence. In a sense, a closed question acts as a probe but produces a succinct factual statement without going into detail. When you ask a closed question you intend to find out:

- What the candidate has or has not done – 'What did you do then?'
- Why something took place – 'Why did that happen?'
- When something took place – 'When did that happen?'
- How something happened – 'How did that situation arise?'
- Where something happened – 'Where were you at the time?'
- Who took part – 'Who else was involved?'

Hypothetical questions

Hypothetical questions are used in structured situational-based interviews when a situation is described to candidates and they are asked how they would respond. Hypothetical questions can be prepared in advance to test how candidates would approach a typical problem. Such questions may be phrased: 'What do you think you would do if…?' When such questions lie well within the candidate's expertise and experience the answers can be illuminating. But it could be unfair to ask candidates to say how they would deal with a problem without knowing more about the context in which the problem arose. It can also be argued that what candidates say they would do and what they actually do could be quite different. Hypothetical questions can produce hypothetical answers. The best data upon which judgements about candidates can be judged are what they have actually done or achieved. You need to find out if they have successfully dealt with the sort of issues and problems they may be faced with if they join your organization.

Behavioural event questions

Behavioural event questions as used in behavioural-based structured interviews aim to get candidates to tell you how they would behave in situations that have been identified as critical to successful job performance. The assumption upon which such questions are based is that past behaviour in dealing with or reacting to events is the best predictor of future behaviour.

The following are some typical behavioural event questions:

- Could you give an instance when you persuaded others to take an unusual course of action?
- Could you describe an occasion when you completed a project or task in the face of great difficulties?
- Could you describe any contribution you have made as a member of a team in achieving an unusually successful result?
- Could you give an instance when you took the lead in a difficult situation in getting something worthwhile done?

Capability questions

Capability questions aim to establish what candidates know, the skills they possess and use and their competencies – what they are capable of doing. They can be open, probing or closed but they will always be focused as precisely as possible on the contents of the person specification, referring to knowledge, skills and competences. Capability questions are used in behavioural-based structured interviews.

Capability questions should therefore be explicit – focused on what candidates must know and be able to do. Their purpose is to obtain evidence from candidates that show the extent to which they meet the specification in each of its key areas. Because time is always limited it is best to concentrate on the most important aspects of the work and it is always best to prepare the questions in advance. The sort of capability questions you can ask are set out below.

Capability questions

- What do you know about…?
- How did you gain this knowledge?
- What are the key skills you are expected to use in your work?
- How would your present employer rate the level of skill you have reached in…?
- Could you please tell me exactly what sort and how much experience you have had in…?
- Could you tell me more about what you have actually been doing in this aspect of your work?
- Can you give me any examples of the sort of work you have done that would qualify you to do this job?
- What are the most typical problems you have to deal with?
- Would you tell me about any instances when you have had to deal with an unexpected problem or a crisis?

Questions about motivation

The degree to which candidates are motivated is a personal quality to which it is necessary to give special attention if it is to be properly assessed. This is usually achieved by inference rather than direct questions. 'How well are you motivated?' is a leading question that will usually produce the response: 'Highly'. You can make inferences about the level of motivation of candidates by asking questions on the following subjects.

Subjects for motivation questions

- Their career – replies to such questions as: 'Why did you decide to move on from there?' can give an indication of the extent to which they have been well-motivated in progressing their career.

- Achievements – not just 'What did you achieve?' but 'How did you achieve it?' and 'What difficulties did you overcome?'

- Triumphing over disadvantages – candidates who have done well in spite of an unpromising upbringing and relatively poor education may be more highly motivated than those with all the advantages that upbringing and education can bestow, but who have not made good use of these advantages.

- Spare time interests – don't accept at its face value a reply to a question about spare time interests which, for example, reveals that a candidate collects stamps. Find out if the candidate is well-motivated enough to pursue the interest with determination and to achieve something in the process. Expressing interest in jazz is not evidence of motivation. Knowing all about Kansas City jazz, especially the contribution made by Lester Young to the Count Basie Orchestra, and publishing articles in the jazz music press on the subject is at least an example of pursuing an interest vigorously, which is evidence of motivation.

Continuity questions

Continuity questions aim to keep the flow going in an interview and encourage candidates to enlarge on what they have told you, within limits. Here are some examples of continuity questions.

Continuity questions

- 'What happened next?
- 'What did you do then?'
- 'Can we talk about your next job?'
- 'Can we move on now to…?'
- 'Could you tell me more about…?'

It has been said that to keep the conversation going during an interview the best thing an inter- viewer can do is to make encouraging grunts at appropriate moments. There is more to inter- viewing than that, but single words or phrases like 'good', 'fine', 'that's interesting', 'carry on' can help things along.

Play-back questions

Play-back questions test your understanding of what candidates have said by putting to them a statement of what it appears they have told you, and asking them if they agree or disagree with your version. For example, you could say: 'As I understand it, you resigned from your last position because you disagreed with your boss on a number of fundamental issues – have I got that right?' The answer might simply be 'Yes' to this closed question, in which case you might probe to find out more about what happened. Or the candidate may reply 'Not exactly' in which case you ask for the full story.

Career questions

As mentioned earlier, questions about the career history of candidates can provide some insight into motivation as well as establishing how they have progressed in acquiring useful and relevant knowledge, skills and experience. You can ask questions such as those given below.

Career questions

- What did you learn from that new job?
- What different skills had you to use when you were promoted?
- Why did you leave that job?
- What happened after you left that job?
- In what ways do you think this job will advance your career?

Focused work questions

These are questions designed to tell you more about particular aspects of the candidate's work history, such as those shown below.

Focused work questions

- How many days absence from work did you have last year?

- How many times were you late last year?

- Have you been absent from work for any medical reason not shown on your application form?

- Do you have a clean driving licence (for those whose work will involve driving)?

Unhelpful questions

Unhelpful questions

- Multiple questions such as, 'What skills do you use most frequently in your job? Are they technical skills, leadership skills, team working skills or communicating skills?' will only confuse candidates. You will probably get a partial or misleading reply. Ask only one question at a time.

- Leading questions that indicate the reply you expect are also unhelpful. If you ask a question such as: 'That's what you think, isn't it?' you will get the reply: 'Yes, I do.' If you ask a question such as: 'I take it that you don't really believe that…?' you will get the reply: 'No, I don't.' Neither of these replies will get you anywhere.

Questions to be avoided

Avoid any questions such as those given below that could be construed as being biased on the grounds of sex, race, disability or age.

Don't ask

- Who is going to look after the children?

- Are you planning to have any more children?

- Are you concerned at all about racial prejudice?

- Would it worry you being the only immigrant around here?

- With your disability, do you think you can cope with the job?

- Do you think that at your time of life you will be able to learn the new skills associated with this job?

Useful questions

Ten useful questions

1. What are the most important aspects of your present job?

2. What do you think have been your most notable achievements in your career to date?

3. What sort of problems have you successfully solved recently in your job?

4. What have you learnt from your present job?

5. What has been your experience in…?

6. What do you know about…?

7. What particularly interests you in this job and why?

8. Now you have heard more about the job, would you please tell me which aspects of your experience are most relevant?

9. What do you think you can bring to this job?

10. Is there anything else about your career that hasn't come out yet in this interview but you think I ought to hear?

Selection interviewing skills

The key interviewing skills are establishing rapport, listening, maintaining continuity, keeping control and note taking.

Establishing rapport

Establishing rapport means establishing a good relationship with candidates – getting on their wavelength, putting them at ease, encouraging them to respond and generally being friendly. This is not just a question of being 'nice' to candidates. If you achieve rapport you are more likely to get them to talk freely about both their strengths and weaknesses.

Good rapport is created by the way in which you greet candidates, how you start the interview and how you put your questions and respond to replies. Questions should not be posed aggressively or imply that you are criticizing some aspect of the candidate's career. Some people like the idea of 'stress' interviews but they are counterproductive. Candidates clam up and gain a negative impression of you and the organization.

When responding to answers you should be appreciative, not critical: 'Thank you, that was very helpful; now can we go on to…?' not 'Well, that didn't show you in a good light, did it?'

Body language can also be important. If you maintain natural eye contact, avoid slumping in your seat, nod and make encouraging comments when appropriate, you will establish better rapport and get more out of the interview.

Listening

If an interview is a conversation with a purpose, as it should be, listening skills are important. You need not only to hear but also to understand what candidates are saying. When interviewing you must concentrate on what candidates are telling you. Summarizing at regular intervals forces you to listen because you have to pay attention to what they have been saying in order to get the gist of their replies. If you play back to candidates your understanding of what they have told you for them to confirm or amend, it will ensure that you have fully comprehended the messages they are delivering.

Maintaining continuity

So far as possible link your questions to a candidate's last reply so that the interview progresses logically and a cumulative set of data is built up. You can put bridging questions to candidates such as: 'Thank you, that was an interesting summary of what you have been doing in this aspect of your work. Now, could you tell me something about your other key responsibilities?'

Keeping control

You want candidates to talk, but not too much. When preparing for the interview you should have drawn up an agenda and you must try to stick to it. Don't cut candidates short too brutally but say something like: 'Thank you, I've got a good picture of that, now what about…?'

Focus on specifics as much as you can. If candidates ramble on a bit, use a pointed question (a 'probe' question) that asks for an example illustrating the particular aspect of their work that you are considering.

Note taking

You won't remember everything that candidates tell you. It is useful to take notes of the key points they make, discreetly, but not surreptitiously. However, don't put candidates off by frowning or tut-tutting when you are making a negative note. It may be helpful to ask candidates if they would mind if you take notes. They can't really object but will appreciate the fact that they have been asked.

Coming to a conclusion

It is essential not to be beguiled by a pleasant, articulate and confident interviewee who is all surface without substance. Beware of the 'halo' effect that occurs when one or two good points are seized upon, leading to the neglect of negative indicators. The opposite 'horns' effect of focusing on the negatives should also be avoided.

Individual candidates should be assessed against the criteria. These could be set under the headings of knowledge and skills, competencies, education, qualifications, training, experience and overall suitability. Ratings can be given against each heading, for example: very acceptable, acceptable, marginally acceptable, and unacceptable. If you have used situational- or behavioural-based questions you can indicate against each question whether the reply was good, just acceptable or poor. These assessments can inform your overall assessment of knowledge, skills and competencies.

Next, compare your assessment of each of the candidates against one another. You can then make a conclusion on those preferred by reference to their assessments under each heading.

In the end, your decision between qualified candidates may well be judgmental. There may be one outstanding candidate but quite often there are two or three. In these circumstances you have to come to a balanced view on which one is more likely to fit the job and the organization and have potential for a long-term career, if this is possible. Don't, however, settle for second best in desperation. It is better to try again.

Remember to make and keep notes of the reasons for your choice and why candidates have been rejected. These together with the applications should be kept for at least six months just in case your decision is challenged as being discriminatory. An example of an interview rating form is given in Figure 32.1.

	very acceptable	acceptable	marginally acceptable	unacceptable	comments
knowledge and skills					
competencies					
education and qualifications					
training					
experience					
overall suitability					

Figure 32.1   Example of an interview rating form

Table 32.2   Dos and don'ts of selection interviewing

Do	Don't
• Plan the interview • Give yourself sufficient time • Use a structured interview approach wherever possible • Create the right atmosphere • Establish an easy and informal relationship – start with open questions • Encourage the candidate to talk • Cover the ground as planned, ensuring that you complete a prepared agenda and maintain continuity • Analyse the candidate's career to reveal strengths, weaknesses and patterns of interest • Ask clear, unambiguous questions • Get examples and instances of the successful application of knowledge and skills and the effective use of capabilities	• Start the interview unprepared • Plunge too quickly into demanding (probe) questions • Ask multiple or leading questions • Pay too much attention to isolated strengths or weaknesses • Allow candidates to gloss over important facts • Talk too much or allow candidates to ramble on • Allow your prejudices to get the better of your capacity to make objective judgements • Fall into the halo or horns effect trap • Ask questions or make remarks that could be construed as in any way discriminatory • Attempt too many interviews in a row

Table 32.2 *continued*

Do	Don't
• Make judgements on the basis of the factual information you have obtained about candidates' experience and attributes in relation to the person specification • Keep control over the content and timing of the interview	

Selection interviewing – key learning points

The purpose of an interview

The purpose of selection interviews is to obtain and assess information about candidates that will enable a valid prediction to be made of their future performance in the job for which they are being considered in comparison with the predictions made for other candidates.

The nature of an interview

Interviewing involves processing and evaluating evidence about the capabilities of a candidate in relation to a person specification. An interview can be described as a conversation with a purpose.

Interviewing arrangements

The interviewing arrangements will depend partly on the procedure being used, which may consist of individual interviews, an interviewing panel, a selection board or some form of assessment centre.

Preparing for the interview

Careful preparation is essential and this means a careful study of the person specification and the candidate's application form and/or CV. It is necessary at this stage to identify those features of the applicant that do not fully match the specification so that these can be probed more deeply during the interview.

Structuring the interview

The five parts are:

1. The welcome and introductory remarks.

2. The major part concerned with obtaining information about the candidate to assess against the person specification.

3. The provision of information to candidates about the organization and the job.

4. Answering questions from the candidate.

Selection interviewing – key learning points (continued)

5. Closing the interview with an indication of the next step.

Types of interviews

Biographical, structured situational-based interviews, structured behavioural-based interviews, person specification framework interviews.

Timing the interview

The length of time allowed for an interview will be related to the seniority and complexity of the job. For relatively routine jobs, 20 to 30 minutes may suffice. For more demanding jobs up to an hour but no more may be necessary.

Interviewing techniques – starting and finishing

Start by putting candidates at their ease. You want them to provide you with information and they are not going to talk freely and openly if they are given a cool reception. In the closing stages of the interview candidates should be asked if they have anything they wish to add in support of their application. They should also be given the opportunity to ask questions. At the end of the interview the candidate should be thanked and given information about the next stage.

Interviewing techniques – asking questions

The interviewer's job is to draw the candidate out, at the same time ensuring that the information required is obtained. To this end it is desirable to ask a number of open-ended questions – questions that cannot be answered by yes or no and that promote a full response. But a good interviewer will have an armoury of other types of questions to be asked as appropriate, ie probing, closed, hypothetical, behavioural event, motivation, playback, continuation, career and focused work questions.

Selection interviewing skills

The key interviewing skills are establishing rapport, listening, maintaining continuity, keeping control and note taking.

Coming to a conclusion

Candidates should be assessed against the criteria. These could be set under the headings of knowledge and skills, competencies, education, qualifications, training, experience and overall suitability.

Questions

1. From a line manager: 'I have heard that the use of structured interviews when selecting people is the most effective method. What are they exactly and how should I use them?'

2. From a fellow member of your CIPD branch: 'It's been decided here that line managers will shortly take more personal responsibility for staff selection. We want to ensure that they do not say things that could lead to claims of discrimination by applicants. Please summarize for me the major dos and don'ts we should warn our managers about.'

3. From a line manager: 'I have heard that it is a good idea to test candidates by asking them hypothetical questions that ask them to say what they would do in a given situation. What are the arguments for and against this?'