INTERACTIVE SKILL 2: SELECTION INTERVIEWING

Central to all resourcing is the selection interview, which is also one of the most familiar and forbidding encounters of organisational life. Most people have had at least one experience of being interviewed as a preliminary to employment and few reflect with pleasure on the experience. HR specialists have a critical role in selection interviewing, carrying out many of the interviews and encouraging good interviewing practice in others by example, support and training.

In this Focus on skills our objectives are to:

1 Review the varieties of selection interview and its purpose

2 Explain interview strategy and to consider the number of interviews and interviewers

3 Explain interview structure and the five key aspects of method

Varieties of interview

There are various practices in selection interviewing. At one extreme we read of men seeking work in the docks of Victorian London and generally being treated as if they were in a cattle market. They had to queue up in a series of gangways, similar to those used today to corral cattle at market, and had to vie with each other for the attention of the foreman hiring labourers for the day. Some of the older men apparently used to dye their hair in a pathetic attempt to appear younger and fitter than they really were and thereby catch the foreman's eye. At the opposite extreme we hear of people being telephoned by complete strangers and being offered handsome contracts to work in Hollywood studios.

There is a neat spectrum of employee participation in the employment process which correlates with social class and type of work. While the London docks situation of the 1890s is not found today, there are working situations where the degree of discussion between the parties is limited to perfunctory exchanges about trade union membership, hours of work and rates of pay: labourers on building sites and extras on film sets being two examples. As interviews move up the organisational hierarchy there is growing equilibrium, with the interviewer becoming more courteous and responsive to questions from the applicant, who will probably be described as a 'candidate' or someone who 'might be interested in the position'. For the most senior positions it is less likely that people will be invited to respond to vacancies advertised in the press. Individuals will be approached, either directly or through consultants, and there will be an elaborate pavane in which each party seeks to persuade the other to declare an interest first.

Another indication of the variety of employment practice is in the titles used. The humblest of applicants seek 'jobs' or 'vacancies', while the more ambitious are looking for 'places', 'posts', 'positions', 'openings' or 'opportunities'. The really high-flyers seem to need somewhere to sit down, as they are offered 'seats on the board', 'professorial chairs' or 'places on the front bench'.

The purpose of the selection interview

The interview is a controlled conversation with a purpose. There are more exchanges in a shorter period related to a specific purpose than in an ordinary conversation. In the selection interview the purposes are:

- to collect information in order to predict how well the applicants would perform in the job for which they have applied, by measuring them against predetermined criteria;
- to provide candidates with full details of the job and organisation to facilitate their decision making;
- to conduct the interview in such a way that candidates feel that they have been given a fair hearing.

The selection interview has been extensively criticised as being unreliable, invalid and subjective, although such criticism is directed towards the decisions made and ignores the importance of the interview as a **ritual** in the employment process. Recent comprehensive analysis of selection interview effectiveness, however, concludes that their validity is now much greater than previously believed (McDaniel *et al.* 1994 and Judge 2000), provided that the interview is structured.

Handling this most crucial of encounters is a key skill for personnel and other managers as the interview provides a number of important advantages which cannot be provided by any other means.

The selection interview cannot be bettered as a means of exchanging information and meeting the human and ritual aspects of the employment process.

Exchanging information

The interview is a flexible and speedy means of exchanging information, over a broad range of topics. The employer has the opportunity to sell the company and explain job details in depth. Applicants have the chance to ask questions about the job and the company in order to collect the information they require for their own selection decision. The interview is also the logical culmination of the employment process, as information from a variety of sources, such as application forms, tests and references, can be discussed together.

Human and ritual aspects

In an interview some assessment can be made of matters that cannot be approached any other way, such as the potential compatibility of two people who will have to work together. Both parties need to meet before the contract begins, to 'tune in' to each other and begin the process of induction. The interview is valuable in that way to both potential employee and potential employer. It gives interviewees the feeling that they matter, as another person is devoting time to them and they are not being considered by a computer. Also, giving applicants a chance to ask questions underlines their decision-making role, making them feel less helpless in the hands of the all-powerful interviewer. Selection interviewing has powerful ritual elements, as the applicant is seeking either to enter, or to rise within, a social system. This requires the display of deferential behaviours:

> upward mobility involves the presentation of proper performances and . . . efforts to move upward . . . are expressed in terms of sacrifices made for the maintenance of front. (Goffman 1974, p. 45)

At the same time those who are already inside and above display their superiority and security, even unconsciously, in contrast with the behaviour of someone so obviously anxious to share the same privileged position. Reason tells us that this is inappropriate at the beginning of the twenty-first century as it produces an unreasonable degree of dependency in the applicant; and the books are full of advice to interviewers not to brandish their social superiority, but to put applicants at their ease and to reduce the status differentials. This, however, still acknowledges their

superiority as they are the ones who take the initiative; applicants are not expected to help the interviewer relax and feel less apprehensive. Also the reality of the situation is usually that of applicant anxious to get in and selector choosing among several. Status differentials cannot simply be set aside. The selection interview is at least partly an initiation rite, not as elaborate as entry to commissioned rank in the armed forces, nor as whimsical as finding one's way into the Brownie ring, but still a process of going through hoops and being found worthy in a process where other people make all the rules.

ACTIVITY II.1

For a selection interview in which you recently participated, either as selector or as applicant, consider the following:

1 What were the ritual features?

2 Were any useful ritual features missing?

3 Could ritual have been, in any way, *helpfully* reduced?

No matter what other means of making employment decisions there may be, the interview is crucial, and when worries are expressed about its reliability, this is not a reason for doing away with it: it is a reason for conducting it properly.

Interview strategy

The approach to selection interviewing varies considerably from the amiable chat in a bar to the highly organised, multi-person panel.

Frank and friendly strategy

By far the most common is the approach which has been described as frank and friendly. Here the interviewer is concerned to establish and maintain rapport. This is done in the belief that if interviewees do not feel threatened, and are relaxed, they will be more forthcoming in the information that they offer. It is straightforward for both interviewer and interviewee and has the potential advantage that the interviewees will leave with a favourable impression of the business.

Problem-solving strategy

A variation of the frank and friendly strategy is the problem-solving approach. It is the method of presenting the candidate with a hypothetical problem and evaluating his or her answer, like the king in the fairy tale who offered the hand of the princess in marriage to the first suitor who could answer three riddles.

These are sometimes called situational interviews. The questions asked are derived from the job description and candidates are required to imagine themselves as the job holder and describe what they would do in a variety of hypothetical situations. This

method is most applicable to testing elementary knowledge, such as the colour coding of wires in electric cables or maximum dosages of specified drugs. It is less effective to test understanding and ability.

There is no guarantee that the candidate would actually behave in the way suggested. The quick thinker will score at the expense of the person who can take action more effectively than they can answer riddles. A useful analysis and commentary on situational interviews is in Latham *et al.* (1980).

Biographical strategy

Similar to the problem-solving strategy is the biographical method. The focus is on the candidate's past behaviour and performance, which is a more reliable way of predicting future performance than asking interviewees what they would do in a certain situation. Candidates are requested to describe the background to a situation and explain what they did and why; what their options were; how they decided what to do; and the anticipated and real results of their action. The success of this method depends on in-depth job analysis, and preferably competency analysis, in order to frame the best questions. Bearing in mind the importance of structure in selection interviewing, the biographical approach is an excellent method.

Stress strategy

In the stress approach the interviewer becomes aggressive, disparages the candidates, puts them on the defensive or disconcerts them by strange behaviour. The advantage of the method is that it may demonstrate a necessary strength or a disqualifying weakness that would not be apparent through other methods. The disadvantages are that evaluating the behaviour under stress is problematic, and those who are not selected will think badly of the employer. The likely value of stress interviewing is so limited that it is hardly worth mentioning, except that it has spurious appeal to many managers, who are attracted by the idea of injecting at least some stress into the interview 'to see what they are made of', or 'to put them on their mettle'. Most candidates feel that the procedures are stressful enough, without adding to them.

Number of interviews and interviewers

There are two broad traditions governing the number of interviewers. One says that effective, frank discussion can only take place on a one-to-one basis, so candidates meet one interviewer, or several interviewers, one at a time. The other tradition is that fair play must be demonstrated and nepotism prevented so the interview must be carried out, and the decision made, by a panel of interviewers. Within this dichotomy there are various options.

The individual interview

The individual interview gives the greatest chance of establishing rapport, developing mutual trust and is the most efficient deployment of time in the face-to-face encounter, as each participant has to compete with only one other speaker. It is usually also the most satisfactory method for the candidate, who has to tune in to only one other person instead of needing constantly to adjust to different interlocutors.

The candidate can more readily ask questions, as it is difficult to ask a panel of six people to explain the workings of the pension scheme, and it is the least formal type of interview. The disadvantages lie in the reliance the organisation places on the judgement of one of its representatives, although this can be mitigated by a series of individual interviews, and the ritual element is largely missing. Candidates may not feel they have been 'done' properly. A sole interview with the line manager is very popular in the selection of blue-collar staff, being used in over one-third of cases. It is less popular for white-collar and management staff.

Sequential interviews

Sequential interviews are a series of individual interviews. The series most often consists of just two interviews for blue- and white-collar staff, but more than two for managerial staff. The most frequent combination is an interview with the line manager and one with a representative of the HR department. For managerial posts this will be extended to interviews with other departmental managers, top managers and significant prospective colleagues. Sequential interviews can give the employer a broader picture of the candidate and they also allow the applicant to have contact with a greater number of potential colleagues. However, for the advantages of sequential interviews to be realised there is a need for effective organisation and for all interviews to be held on the same day. It is important that all interviewers meet beforehand to agree on the requirements of the post and to decide how each will contribute to the overall theme. Immediately following the interviews a further meeting needs to take place so that the candidates can be jointly evaluated. One disadvantage of the method is the organisation and time that it takes from both the employer's and the candidate's point of view. It requires considerable commitment from the candidate who may have to keep repeating similar information and whose performance may deteriorate throughout the course of the interviews due to fatigue.

Panel interviews

The panel interview method has the specious appeal of sharing judgement and may appear to be a way of saving time in interviewing as all panel members are operating at once. It is also possible to legitimise a quick decision, always popular with candidates, and there can be no doubt about the ritual requirements being satisfied. Panel interviews reduce the likelihood of personal bias in interviewing, particularly in guarding against possible infringements of legal requirements. They can also ensure the candidate is acceptable to the whole organisation, and allow the candidate to get a good feel for the business and its organisation. The drawbacks lie in the tribunal nature of the panel. They are not having a conversation with the candidates; they are sitting in judgement upon them and assessing the evidence they are able to present in response to the panel's requests. There is little prospect of building rapport and developing discussion, and there is likely to be as much interplay between members of the panel as there is between the panel and the candidate.

Panel interviews tend towards over-rigidity and give ironic point to the phrase, 'it is only a formality'. They are ritualistically superb, but dubious as a useful preliminary to employment. However, the benefits of the panel interview can be increased, and the disadvantages reduced, if the interviewers are properly trained and the

interview well organised, thoroughly planned and made part of a structured selection process.

The selection interview sequence

Preparation

We assume that the preliminaries of job analysis, recruitment and shortlisting are complete and the interview is now to take place. The first step in preparation is for the interviewers to brief themselves. They will collect and study a job description or similar details of the post to be filled, a candidate specification or statement of required competencies and the application forms or curricula vitae of the candidates.

If there are several people to be interviewed the interview timetable needs greater planning than it usually receives. The time required for each interview can be determined beforehand only approximately. A rigid timetable will weigh heavily on both parties, who will feel frustrated if the interview is closed arbitrarily at a predetermined time and uncomfortable if an interview that has 'finished' is drawn out to complete its allotted timespan. However, the disadvantages of keeping people waiting are considerable and underrated.

The experience of Barbara Trevithick reflects the thinking of some selectors that candidates are supplicants waiting on interviewers' pleasure, they have no competing calls on their time and a short period of waiting demonstrates who is in charge. There are flaws in this reasoning. Most candidates will have competing calls on their time, as they will have taken time off to attend and have earmarked the anticipated interview time to fit in a busy schedule. Some may have other interviews to go to. An open-ended waiting period can be worrying, enervating and a poor preliminary to an interview. If the dentist keeps you waiting you may get distressed, but when the waiting is over you are simply a passive participant and the dentist does not have the success of the operation jeopardised. The interview candidate has, in a real sense, to perform when the period of waiting is over and the success of the interaction could well be jeopardised.

WINDOW ON PRACTICE

Barbara Trevithick applied for a post as personnel officer at a hospital and was invited for interview at 2.00 p.m. On arrival she was ushered into a small, windowless room where four other people were waiting. At 2.20 a secretary came in and asked Mr Brown to come with her. At 3.00 Mr Jones was called for. At 3.45 the remaining

three candidates went out in search of the secretary to ask what the remaining timetable for the day was to be. The secretary replied that she did not know but the panel members had just gone to the canteen for a cup of coffee. By now Barbara had figured out that her surname was the last in alphabetical order. Miss Mellhuish was called for interview at 4.10 and Miss Roberts left because her last train home to Scotland was due in 20 minutes. Barbara Trevithick went in for interview at 4.45 to find that two members of the panel 'had had to leave', so she was interviewed by the two surviving members: a personnel officer and a nursing officer. At the close of the interview she asked when the decision would be made and was told that the two interviewers would have to consult with their two absent colleagues in the morning. Three weeks later Barbara rang to ask the outcome, as she had not received a letter, to be told that Mr Brown had been appointed and 'I'm surprised they didn't tell you, as it was offered to him that afternoon, after the coffee break'.

The most satisfactory timetable is the one that guarantees a break after all but the most voluble candidates. If candidates are asked to attend at hourly intervals, for example, this would be consistent with interviews lasting between 40 and 60 minutes. This would mean that each interview began at the scheduled time and that the interviewers had the opportunity to review and update their notes in the intervals.

Reception

Candidates arrive on the premises of their prospective employer on the lookout for every scrap of evidence they can obtain about the business, what it looks like, what the people look like and what people say. A candidate is likely to meet at least one and possibly two people before meeting the interviewer. First will be the commissionaire or receptionist. There is frequently also an emissary from the HR department to shepherd them from the gate to the waiting-room. Both are valuable sources of information, and interviewers may wish to prime such people so that they can see their role in the employment process and can be cheerful, informative and helpful.

The candidate will most want to meet the interviewer, the unknown but powerful figure on whom so much depends. Interviewers easily forget that they know much more about the candidates than the candidates know about them, because the candidates have provided a personal profile in the application form.

Interviewers do not reciprocate. To bridge this gap it can be very useful for interviewers to introduce themselves to the candidate in the waiting-room, so that contact is made quickly, unexpectedly and on neutral territory. This makes the opening of the interview itself rather easier.

Candidates wait to be interviewed. Although there are snags about extended, open-ended waiting periods, some time is inevitable and necessary to enable candidates to compose themselves. It is a useful time to deal with travelling expenses and provide some relevant background reading about the employing organisation.

Setting

The appropriate setting for an interview has to be right for the ritual and right from the point of view of enabling a full and frank exchange of information. It is difficult to combine the two. Many of the interview horror stories relate to the setting in which it took place. A candidate for a post as Deputy Clerk of Works was interviewed on a stage while the panel of 17 sat in the front row of the stalls, and a candidate for a Headteacher post came in to meet the interview panel and actually moved the chair on which he was to sit. He only moved it two or three inches because the sun was in his eyes, but there was an audible frisson and sharp intake of breath from the members of the panel.

Remaining with our model of the individual interviewer, here are some simple suggestions about the setting:

- The room should be suitable for a private conversation.
- If the interview takes place across a desk, as is common, the interviewer may wish to reduce the extent to which the desk acts as a barrier, inhibiting free flow of communication.
- All visitors and telephone calls should be avoided, as they do not simply interrupt: they intrude and impede the likelihood of frankness.
- It should be clear to the candidates where they are to sit.

Interview structure

There are several important reasons why the employment interview should be structured, making use of the application or CV:

- The candidate expects the proceedings to be decided and controlled by the interviewer and will anticipate a structure within which to operate.
- It helps the interviewer to make sure that they cover all relevant areas and avoid irrelevancies.
- It looks professional.
- Structure can be used to guide the interview and ensure that it makes sense.
- It assists the interviewer in using the time available in the most effective way.
- The application form can be used as a memory aid by the interviewer when making notes directly after the interview.
- It makes it easier to compare candidates.

The interview

There are several different ways to structure the interview. We recommend the form set out in Table II.1. This divides activities and objectives into three interview stages: opening, middle and closing. While there are few, if any, alternative satisfactory ways for conducting the beginning and the end of the interview, the middle can be approached from a number of different angles, depending on the circumstances.

The interviewer needs to work systematically through the structure that has been planned but the structure does not have to be adhered to rigidly. Interviewers should abandon their own route whenever the candidate chooses one that seems more promising.

Table II.1	**Stage**	**Objectives**	**Activities**
Interview structure: a recommended pattern	Opening	To put the candidate at ease, develop rapport and set the scene	Greet candidate by name Introduce yourself Explain interview purpose Outline how purpose will be achieved Obtain candidate's assent to outline
	Middle	To collect and provide information	Asking questions within a structure that makes sense to the candidate, such as biographical, areas of the application form, or competencies identified for the job Listening Answering questions
	Closing	To close the interview and confirm future action	Summarise interview Check candidate has no more questions Indicate what happens next and when

The opening of the interview is the time for mutual preliminary assessment and tuning in to each other. A useful feature of this phase is for the interviewer to sketch out the plan or procedure for the interview and how it fits in with the total employment decision process. It is also likely that the application form will provide an easy, non-controversial topic for these opening behaviours.

One objective is for the two parties to exchange words so that they can adjust their receiving mechanism to be mutually intelligible. It also provides an opportunity for both to feel comfortable in the presence of the other. Interviewers able to achieve these two objectives may then succeed in developing a relationship in which candidates trust the interviewer's ability and motives so that they will speak openly and fully. This is known as 'rapport', which was dealt with in the Part I Focus on skills. The interviewer's effectiveness will greatly depend on their being skilled at this process.

We are working on the assumption that candidates will behave in a reasonably genuine way, provided the interviewer can convince them that the process is fair. Some candidates do not and such people have been labelled as 'white collar psychopaths', although it has to be said that they are rare. They are very good at presenting themselves as being exactly what the interviewer is looking for. Not only are they manufacturing the truth about their experience, the trait (or psychopathic tendency) that drives them causes them to wreak havoc once they are appointed. A New York psychologist cites the example of 'Ron' who was appointed to a sales post in a pharmaceuticals company:

> Ron fiddled his sales figures, charged call girls to the company and nearly succeeded in using his charm to get his new boss fired when he was questioned about his behaviour. Psychopaths are motivated by three things: thrill-seeking, game-playing and hurting people. Once inside the organization they build networks of influence that make it very difficult to get rid of them and can help them join the management fast track. (Paul Babiak, quoted in *Financial Times*, 12 January 2004)

For the middle of the interview the biographical approach is the most straight-forward. It works on the basis that candidates at the time of the interview are the product of everything in their lives that has gone before. To understand the candidate the interviewer must understand the past and will talk to the candidate about the episodes of his or her earlier life, education, previous employment, etc.

The advantage of this is that the objectives are clear to both interviewer and interviewee, there is no deviousness or 'magic'. Furthermore, the development can be logical and so aid the candidate's recall of events. Candidates who reply to enquiries about their choice of A level subjects will be subconsciously triggering their recollection of contemporaneous events, such as the university course they took, which are likely to come next in the interview. The biographical approach is the simplest for the inexperienced interviewer to use as discussion can develop from the information provided by the candidate on the application form. Some version of sequential categories, such as employment, education and training, seems the most generally useful, but it will need the addition of at least two other categories: the work offered and the organisational context in which it is to be done. The middle of the interview can be structured by systematically working through items of the job description or the person specification. Increasingly, where competencies have been identified for the job, these are used as the basis of the structure.

In the preparatory stage of briefing, the interviewer will also prepare notes on two elements to incorporate in their plan: key issues and checkpoints.

Key issues will be the two or three main issues that stand out from the application form for clarification or elaboration. This might be the nature of the responsibilities carried in a particular earlier post, the content of a training course, the reaction to a period of employment in a significant industry or whatever else strikes the interviewer as being productive of useful additional evidence.

Checkpoints are matters of detail that require further information: grades in an examination, dates of an appointment, rates of pay, and so forth.

At the close of the interview the explanation of the next step needs especial attention. The result of the interview is of great importance to the candidates and they will await the outcome with anxiety. Even if they do not want the position they will probably hope to have it offered. This may strengthen their hand in dealings with another prospective employer, or with their present employer, and will certainly be a boost to their morale. The great merit of convention in the public sector is that the chosen candidate is told before the contenders disperse: the great demerit is that they are asked to say yes or no to the offer at once.

In the private sector it is unusual for an employment offer to be made at the time of the interview, so there is a delay during which the candidates will chafe. Their frustration will be greater if the delay is longer than expected and they may start to tell themselves that they are not going to receive an offer, in which case they will also start convincing themselves that they did not want the job either! It is important for the interviewer to say as precisely as possible when the offer will be made, but ensuring that the candidates hear earlier rather than later than they expect, if there is to be any deviation.

The interviewer will need to call into play at least five key aspects of method.

1 Some data can be collected by simple observation of the candidate. Notes can be made about dress, appearance, voice, height and weight, if these are going to be relevant, and the interviewer can also gauge the candidate's mood and the

appropriate response to it by the non-verbal cues that are provided. The study of body language has achieved great popularity in the last twenty years, largely because of its alleged potential for interpreting the thoughts and intentions of members of the opposite sex in social situations. Although the available books are designed for a popular market, they are usually sound and contain useful advice for the selection interviewer.

2   The remainder of the evidence will come from listening to what is said, so the interviewer has to be very attentive throughout; not only listening to the answers to questions, but also listening for changes in inflection and pace, nuances and overtones that provide clues on what to pursue further. The amount of time that the two spend talking is important, as an imbalance in one direction or the other will mean that either the candidate or the interviewer is not having enough opportunity to hear information.

   Being silent and deliberately leaving verbal lulls in face-to-face situations provide the opportunity for the other person to say more, perhaps more than was initially intended. Silence still has to be attentive and the longer the silence, the harder it is to be attentive.

3   In order to have something to hear, the interviewer will have to direct the candidate. This, of course, is done by questioning, encouraging and enabling the candidate to talk, so that the interviewer can learn. The art of doing this depends on the personality and style of the interviewer who will develop a personal technique through a sensitive awareness of what is taking place in the interviews.

   The selection interviewer needs to distinguish between different types of question. In the Part I Focus on skills we explained the difference in nature and usage of various questioning methods.

4   The best place for the interviewer to make notes is on the application form or CV. In this way they can be joined to information that the candidate has already provided and the peculiar shorthand that interviewers use when making notes during interviews can be deciphered by reference to the form and the data that the note is embellishing. It also means that the review of evidence after the interview has as much information as possible available on one piece of paper. An alternative is to record notes on the interview plan where the structure is based on job specification, person specification or competencies. Interviewers are strangely inhibited about note taking, feeling that it in some way impairs the smoothness of the interaction. This apprehension seems ill founded as candidates are looking for a serious, businesslike discussion, no matter how informal, and note taking offers no barrier, provided that it is done carefully in the form of jottings during the discussion, rather than pointedly writing down particular comments by the candidate which make the interviewer seem like a police officer taking a statement.

5   Data exchange marks a change of gear in the interview. Rapport is necessarily rather rambling and aimless, but data exchange is purposeful and the interviewer needs to control both the direction and the pace of the exchanges. Candidates will be responsive throughout to the interviewer's control, and the better the rapport the more responsive they will be. Skilled interviewers close out areas of discussion and open fresh ones. They head off irrelevant reminiscences and probe where matters have been glossed over. They can never abandon control. Even when the time has come for the candidates to raise all their queries, they will do this at the

behest of the interviewer and will look to him or her constantly for a renewal of the mandate to enquire by using conversational prefixes such as, 'Can I ask you another question?' 'If it's not taking up your time, perhaps I could ask . . . ?' 'I seem to be asking a lot of questions, but there was just one thing . . .'

6 Closing the interview can be as skilful as opening it. Most of the suggestions so far have been to encourage a response, but it is easy to nod and smile your way into a situation of such cosy relaxation that the respondent talks on and on . . . and on. A surprising number of interviewers have great difficulty closing.

Braking slows the rate of talking by the candidate by working through a series of steps. You will seldom need to go beyond the first two or three, but five are described in case of you having to deal with a really tough case. (a) One or two closed questions to clarify specific points may stem the tide. (b) The facial expression changes with the brow furrowed to indicate mild disagreement, lack of understanding or professional anxiety. The reassuring nods stop and the generally encouraging, supportive behaviours of reward are withdrawn. (c) Abstraction is when the eyes glaze over, showing that they belong to a person whose attention has now shifted away from the respondent and towards lunch. (d) To look at one's watch during a conversation is a very strong signal indeed, as it clearly indicates that time is running out. Other, milder ways of looking away are: looking for your glasses, looking at your notes or looking at the aircraft making a noise outside the window. A rather brutal variant is to allow your attention to be caught by something the respondent is wearing, a lapel badge, a tie, a ring or piece of jewellery, maybe. Putting on your glasses to see it more clearly is really going too far! (e) If all else fails, you simply have to interrupt.

Closing requires the interview to end smoothly. Future action is either clarified or confirmed. Also, candidates take a collection of attitudes away with them, and these can be influenced by the way the interview is closed. There is a simple procedure. (a) First signal, verbal plus papers. The interviewer uses a phrase to indicate that the interview is nearing its end ('Well now, I think we have covered the ground, don't you? There isn't anything more I need to ask you. Is there anything further you want from me?'). In this way you signal the impending close at the same time as obtaining the candidate's confirmation. There is additional emphasis provided by some paper play. A small collection of notes can be gathered together and stacked neatly, or a notebook can be closed. (b) Second signal, the interviewer confirms what will happen next ('There are still one or two people to see, but we will write to you no later than the end of the week'). (c) The final signal is to stand up: the decisive act to make the close. By standing up the interviewer forces the candidate to stand as well and there remain only the odds and ends of handshakes and parting smiles.

PRACTICAL EXERCISE IN SELECTION INTERVIEWING

For this exercise you need a cooperative, interested relative, or a very close friend, who would welcome interview practice.

1 Follow the sequence suggested in Table II.1 to give your partner practice in being interviewed for a job, and giving yourself practice in interviewing and note taking.

2 After the interview, discuss your mutual feelings about the process around questions such as:

Selector	Did you ever feel you were being misled? When? Why?
	Did you feel the interview got out of your control? When? Why?
	How could you have avoided the problem?
	How was your note taking?
	What, if anything, made you bored or cross?
	What did you find most difficult?
	How comprehensive are the data you have collected?
Candidate	Were you put at your ease?
	Were you at any time inhibited by the selector?
	Did you ever mislead the selector? When? How?
	Did the selector ever fail to follow up important points? When? Which?
	Were you in any way disconcerted by the note taking?
	Has the selector got a comprehensive set of data about you, so that you could feel any decision made about you would be soundly based?
	What did you think of the interview experience?

3 Now swap roles.

SUMMARY PROPOSITIONS

II.1 Despite criticisms and shortcomings, the selection interview remains a central feature of the recruitment and selection process.

II.2 Typical interview strategies are frank and friendly, problem solving, behavioural event and stress.

II.3 Aspects of interview preparation are timetabling, reception and deciding the right setting.

II.4 Features of the interview itself are the opening for preliminary mutual assessment; data gathering, involving a logical sequence, key issues and checkpoints; and the closure, which prepares candidates for the next step in the process.

II.5 The main types of questions are closed, open ended, probes and reflection. Questions to avoid are leading, multiples or taboo questions.

GENERAL DISCUSSION TOPICS

1 Our examination of the selection interview assumes that the candidate is seeking to become an employee. How would the interview be different if the candidate was being interviewed with a view to becoming a freelance consultant doing work for the organisation rather than being an employee in it?

2 'HR are constantly wanting to "involve me" in their recruitment and selection of staff. I'm too busy to spend time doing that. I want HR to do their job properly and send the people through to me when everything is sorted out and a new recruit is ready to start.' How do you react to that comment from an operations manager in an airline?

FURTHER READING

Anderson, N. and Shackleton, V. (1993) *Successful Selection Interviewing*. Oxford: Blackwell

Newell, S. and Shackleton, V. (2000) 'Recruitment and Selection', in S. Bach and K. Sisson (eds) *Personnel Management: A Comprehensive Guide to Theory and Practice*. Oxford: Blackwell

Both of these books provide full treatment of the selection interview in all its forms.

Brewster, C. and Tyson, S. (eds) (1991) *International Comparisons in Human Resource Management*. London: Pitman

Lawler, J.J., Zaidi, M.A. and Atriyanandana, V. (1989) 'Human Resources Strategies in South East Asia: the Case of Thailand', in A. Nedd, G.R. Ferris and K.M. Rowland (eds) *Research in Personnel and Human Resources Management* Supplement 1, Greenwich, Conn.: JAI Press, pp. 201–23

Tan, K.H. (1995) *Planning, Recruiting and Selecting Human Resources*. Shah Alam, Malaysia: Federal Publications

Each of these works provides research findings on interview validity.

McDaniel, M.A., Whetzel, D.A., Schmidt, F.L. and Maurer, S.D. (1994) 'The validity of the employment interviews', *Journal of Applied Psychology*, Vol. 79, No. 19, pp. 599–616

Smith, M. (2002) 'Personnel Selection Research', *International Journal of Organizational and Occupational Psychology*

Williamson, L.G. *et al.* (1996) 'Employment Interview on Trial', *Journal of Applied Psychology*, Vol. 82, No. 6

Selection interviewing varies considerably across different cultures. This Focus on skills and most of the available literature is rooted in Anglo-American practice. Some insights into practice in other situations can be found in the three works given above.

WEB LINKS

Apart from material on the companion website for this book, plenty of material from consultants can be reached.

www.thedevco.com (the Development Company).
www.bps.org.uk (British Psychological Society).
www.opp.co.uk (Oxford Psychologists Press).
www.shlgroup.com/uk (Saville and Holdsworth, test developer/supplier).
www.psl.net (test developer).

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Babiak, P. (2004) quoted in Butcher, S., 'When the ideal applicant is too good to be true', *Financial Times*, 12 January 2004, p. 12.

Billsberry, T. (2000) *Finding and Keeping the Right People*, London: Pearson Education.

Goffman, E. (1974) *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. London: Penguin Books.

Judge, T. (2000) 'The Employment Interview: A Review of Recent Research', *Human Resource Management*, Vol. 10, No. 4.

Latham, G., Saari, L.M., Pursell, E.D. and Campion, M.A. (1980) 'The Situational Interview', *Journal of Applied Psychology*, Vol. 65, No. 4, pp. 422–7.

McDaniel, M.A., Whetzel, D.A., Schmidt, F.L. and Maurer, S.D. (1994) 'The validity of the employment interview', *Journal of Applied Psychology*, Vol. 79, No. 19, pp. 599–616.

REVIEW OF PART II

'Angela's leaving – quick, we must make sure to get the ad in this month's journal.'
'It's hopeless – they all leave just as soon as we've trained them. What's the point?'
'It's not my fault – we just can't get the staff. No wonder quality is so poor.'
'That's it. The results are so bad we'll have to let some of them go. Tony, draw up a shortlist of possibles and we'll try and get it sorted this week.'

We opened Part II with that hypothetical conversation in a business that clearly had not even the most basic grasp of HR realities and the last six chapters have been taken up with how best to avoid that sort of unsatisfactory situation. With any staffing situation there is potentially the basic question, should we recruit an employee to do this work, should we reorganise things to cover the duties with existing personnel, or should we contract the work out to a supplier, a subcontractor or a consultant? Answers to that question come from the facts of the particular situation in the context of the resourcing strategy and the plans that have been developed along the lines outlined in Chapter 3.

Whenever a new employee is to be recruited a further set of actions is triggered to decide the method of approach to the labour market, including an assessment of which labour market you are working in, the approach that is best to use, specifying the vacancy for the benefit of the potential applicants as well as to guide the selectors, and working up a shortlist of people from among whom you hope to select.

Various methods of selection can be used to get as close as possible to the ideal match between the work that is being offered and the person best suited to do the job in its particular context. Central to that is the face-to-face situation of the selection interview, where the two-way discussion needs to ensure that the selected person is the most suitably equipped for the job and for the organisational position and the culture in which it is set, as well as making sure that that same person will derive from the appointment the satisfactions and rewards of the psychological contract that the post provides.

After being appointed employees need to be retained as long as they are doing what is required of them, so work has to be done to ensure that their expectations of the employment contract continue to be met. Eventually employees leave and HR people need to understand the various ways in which the contract can be terminated with as little difficulty as possible. It would be unrealistic to suggest that every termination leaves the ex-employee content, but the level of any discontent can always be reduced by treating matters thoroughly, fairly, with consideration and, of course, within the law.

We close this review with a metaphor or parable slightly abridged from the original by Jon Billsberry:

A gardener wakes up one morning to find that, overnight, thieves have stolen the ornamental pot containing a number of plants that formed the centrepiece in a prize-winning border. The BBC programme *Gardener's World* is due to visit in a few months to film the garden in full bloom, so he has to do something about it. He needs to find a replacement.

Looking at the border, he realises that he has several options. His initial reaction is to rush to the garden centre to purchase another ornamental pot, replant it in a similar fashion and thereby re-create what had existed. But he pauses; he has a 'development opportunity'. Could he make things even better? Have the thieves done him a favour? That pot had always been a bit of a problem, it had come with the garden and had always seemed such a formidable, if impressive, thing. Now the pot's gone, the other plants in the border seem much more prominent and much more attractive. Perhaps, rather than finding another centrepiece, he could replace the pot with something that helps the others stand out even more. Eventually he chooses this option and decides to buy some smaller shrubs that will enhance the other plants in the border. His choice is limited by the nature of the soil and the sunlight, so he carries out a lot of analysis to identify suitable plants.

Where to buy the plants? He has several options, but as time is tight, he decides to get in the car and go straight to his local garden centre which he knows has the sort of shrubs he is looking for. At the garden centre his choice of plants is easy as he knows exactly what he is looking for. He also buys the right fertiliser and compost to ensure that the new plants bed in properly.

Before planting the shrubs he spends a lot of time preparing the border and getting the conditions just right. When the new plants are in he waters them daily and keeps predatory birds away. He continues to tend the new plantings carefully to make sure they develop in the way he wants to complement the other plants in the border.

When the *Gardener's World* team come to film the producer says that the border is much different from when he saw it before, but just as good; perhaps even better.
(Based on Billsberry (2000), pp. 225–6)

You are the Human Resources Manager for a large insurance company with 2,000 employees based in a large city in the north of England and your company has just taken over another insurance company in the south of England which currently employs 1,100 staff. Both firms have a long history and to some extent cover the same insurance markets, although the company in the south of England covers two fairly large specialist areas which are not covered in the north. This was one of the reasons for the takeover, as such specialist staff require a long training and need to acquire high levels of expertise. There are 300 staff in the south who are dedicated to these specialist insurance services.

The takeover did not go smoothly as there was resistance from the southern company, and now it is complete there is considerable uneasiness. Only three years ago the southern company was party to a merger with another local firm and as a result 20 per cent of staff were made redundant. There had been promises of a bright future after these difficult times.

For financial and pragmatic reasons it has been decided that the southern office will close almost immediately and all staff will be located in newly built offices 15 miles out of the northern city. Many of the southern staff are alarmed at the idea of moving and equally alarmed that they may not be invited to move due to another round of redundancies. This especially applies to those who are over 50. The northern staff are divided in their views about the move out of the city centre. Those who live on the western side of the city where the new offices are located are generally delighted to be able to work near to home in an exclusive part of the county. Staff who live on the other side of the city are concerned – some are not happy to travel long distances each day, and for a variety of reasons do not want to move to the other side of the city. Some would like to move, but find that the difference in house prices is too great. Many are disappointed that they will no longer work in the city centre, which is something they had valued. Redundancy is not a possibility which was seriously considered by the northern staff.

The required profile is broadly as set out in the following table:

A   Senior and middle management   35
B   Professional/junior management   1,700 (to include 300 specialist staff)
C   Clerical/administrative   600
D   Manual/ancillary   65

Current staffing

	Northern	Southern	Total
A	30	20	50
B	1,400	700	2,100
(there are no specialist professional staff in the north and 300 in the south)			
C	540	370	910
D	30	10	40

In terms of staffing demand it has been estimated that a total staffing of 2,400 is required for the next three-year period with hopes of some increase after this period, based on growth.

The reduction in the number of professional/junior management staff required reflects a general reduction of all types of professional staff due to the economies of scale and more sophisticated IT use. The only professional staff group to increase in size is the IT group.

The reduction in clerical/administrative staff is due largely to the use of more sophisticated IT systems.

The increase in the number of manual/ancillary staff is due to the move to a much larger site with substantial grounds, including a range of on-site facilities due to a non-city centre location.

You are informed that staffing levels and the move should be complete in six months' time and that, as HR Manager, you are to have a high-profile role. You have initially been asked for a recommended strategy and plan to achieve the target resourcing figures with the least possible disruption and damage to morale.

Required

1 What information would you gather before putting your proposal together?

2 What issues would you address in the proposal?

3 What options are there for achieving the target, what impact might each have, and which would you recommend and why?

1 How is the labour force changing and what are the implications of these changes for human resource management?

2 Outline the advantages and disadvantages of (a) panel interviews, and (b) serial interviews in selection. In which circumstances would you recommend each approach?

3 What techniques can managers adopt to improve their recruiting and interviewing practices?

4 Describe and explain the management practices necessary to avoid a claim at a tribunal for unfair dismissal.

5 Outline the major factors that influence the use of part-time work in Britain, and discuss the implications of part-time work for part-time workers.

6 Under what conditions may annualised hours systems provide employers with the 'flexibility they require'?

7 XYZ plc recruits about 15 graduates and MBAs each year, using application forms, references and the selection interview. The HR Director is thinking of introducing assessment centres for this process. What factors should be considered in approaching this decision?

8 If there appears to be a problem of retaining employees in the business, how would you set about deciding whether or not this is a soluble problem, and what sort of strategies would you adopt if you decided it could be solved?