

Selection interviewing

The techniques and skills of selection interviewing are described in this chapter under the following headings:

- purpose;
- advantages and disadvantages of interviews;
- nature of an interview;
- interviewing arrangements;
- preparation;
- timing;
- planning and structuring interviews;
- interviewing approaches;
- interview techniques – starting and finishing;
- interviewing techniques – asking questions;
- selection interviewing skills;
- coming to a conclusion;
- dos and don'ts of selection interviewing.

PURPOSE

The purpose of the selection interview is to obtain and assess information about a

candidate which will enable a valid prediction to be made of his or her future performance in the job in comparison with the predictions made for any other candidates. Interviewing therefore involves processing and evaluating evidence about the capabilities of a candidate in relation to the person specification. Some of the evidence will be on the application form, but the aim of the interview is to supplement this data with the more detailed or specific information about competencies, attitudes, experience and personal characteristics that can be obtained in a face-to-face meeting. Such a meeting also provides an opportunity for judgements by the interviewer on whether the individual 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, it has to be recognized that they will be made.

In particular, selection interviews aim to provide answers to these questions:

- *Can* individuals do the job – are they competent?
- *Will* individuals do the job – are they well motivated?
- *How* will individuals fit into the organization?

The interview forms a major part of the 'classic trio' of selection techniques, the other two being the application form and references. Further evidence may be obtained from psychological tests as described in Chapter 29 but, in spite of the well-publicized inadequacies of interviews as reliable means of predicting success in a job, they are still an inevitable part of a selection procedure for most people. This chapter focuses on the advantages and disadvantages of interviews, the nature of an interview and methods of carrying out effective interviews, effective in that they provide reliable and valid predictions.

ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF INTERVIEWS

The advantages of interviews as a method of selection are that they:

- provide opportunities for interviewers to ask probing questions about the candidate's experience and to explore the extent to which the candidate's competences match those specified for the job;
- enable interviewers to describe the job (a 'realistic job preview') and the organization in more detail, suggesting some 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 he or she would be like to work with;
- give the candidate the same opportunity to assess the organization, the interviewer and the job.

The disadvantages of interviews are that they:

- 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; but 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.

However, these disadvantages can be alleviated if not entirely removed, first, by using a structured approach that focuses on the competences and attitudes required for successful performance and, secondly, by training interviewers. The use of another opinion or other opinions can also help to reduce bias, especially if the same structured approach is adopted by all the interviewers.

THE NATURE OF AN INTERVIEW

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 prediction of the candidate's future performance in the job for which he or she is being considered.

However, interviews also provide a valuable opportunity for an exchange of information, which will enable both parties to make a decision: to offer or not to offer a job; to accept or not to accept the offer. It may be better for the candidates to 'de-select' themselves at this stage if they do not like what they hear about the job or the company rather than take on a disagreeable job. Interviews are often used to give the candidates a favourable impression of the organization and the job. But this must be realistic – a 'realistic job preview' will spell out any special demands that will be made on the successful applicant in terms of the standards they will be expected to achieve, the hours they may have to work, the travelling they have to do and any

requirement for mobility in the UK or abroad. Clearly, if these are onerous, it will be necessary to convince good candidates that the rewards will be commensurate with the requirements. If poor candidates are put off, so much the better.

Good interviewers know what they are looking for and how to set about finding it. They have a method for recording their analyses of candidates against a set of assessment criteria, which will be spelt out in a person specification.

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, sometimes referred to as a group selection procedure. In most cases, however, the arrangements for the interviews should conform broadly to the following pattern:

- The candidate who has applied in writing or by telephone should be told where and when to come and for whom to ask. 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 guard 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, comparing the performance of successful candidates in their jobs 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. There is everything to be said for including training in interviewing techniques as 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. It is essential that any form of prejudiced behaviour or any prejudiced judgements are eliminated completely from the interview and the ensuing discussion. Even the faintest hint of a sexist or racist 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 absolutely on the grounds of their qualifications for the job and had nothing to do with their sex, race or disability.

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 and informing them of the outcome of their application without undue delay.

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, and 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.

PREPARATION

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. 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.

There are three fundamental questions that need to be answered at this stage:

- What are the criteria to be used in selecting the candidate – these may be classified as essential or desirable and will refer to the experience, qualifications, and competency and skill requirements as set out in the person specification.
- What more do I need to find out at the interview to ensure that the candidate meets the essential selection criteria?
- 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?

The preparation should include making notes of the specific questions the interviewer needs to ask to establish the relevance of the candidate's experience and the extent to which he or she has the skills, knowledge, levels of competency and attitudes required. 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. Applicants will generally aim to make the most of themselves and this can lead to exaggerated, even false, claims about their experience and capabilities.

TIMING

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 may be necessary. Interviews should rarely, if ever, exceed an hour.

PLANNING AND STRUCTURING INTERVIEWS

The problem with interviews is that they are often inadequate as predictors of performance – an hour's interview may not cover the essential points unless it is carefully planned and, sadly, the general standard of interviewing is low. This is not simply a result of many people using poor interviewing techniques (eg they talk rather than listen). More importantly, it is a result of not carrying out a proper

analysis of the competencies required, with the result that interviewers do not know the information they need to obtain from the candidate as a basis for structuring the interview.

There are a number of methods of conducting interviews. At their worst, interviewers adopt an entirely unstructured approach, which involves asking random questions that are not based on any understanding of what they are looking for. At best, they are clearly structured and related to a thorough analysis of role requirements in terms of skills and competencies.

Generally, an interview can be divided into five parts:

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.

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, though friendly.

The two traditional ways of planning an interview are to adopt a biographical approach or to follow the assessment headings in, for example, the seven-point plan. These approaches are sometimes classified as ‘unstructured interviews’ in contrast to the ‘structured interview’, which is generally regarded as best practice. The latter term usually has the special meaning of referring to interviews that are structured around situational-based or behavioural-based questions, focusing on one or other or both. The common element is that the questions are prepared in advance and are related to the role analysis and person specification in terms of the things candidates will be expected to do and/or the behaviour they will be expected to demonstrate. But it could be argued that a biographical or assessment heading approach is ‘structured’, although they may not relate so specifically to identified role requirements. A further but less common variety of structured interview is psychometric-based. All these approaches are examined below.

INTERVIEWING APPROACHES

The biographical interview

The traditional biographical interview either starts at the beginning (education) and

goes on in sequence to the end (the current or last job or the most recent educational experience), or proceeds in the opposite direction, starting with the present job and going backwards to the first job and the candidate's education or training. Many interviewers prefer to go backwards with experienced candidates, spending most time on the present or recent jobs, giving progressively less attention to the earlier experience, and only touching on education lightly.

There is no one best sequence to follow but it is important to decide in advance which 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 distant past. You should allow time not only to the candidate to talk about his or her career but also to ask probing questions as necessary. You should certainly not spend too much time at the beginning of the interview talking about the company and the job. It is highly desirable to issue that information in advance to save interview time and simply 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).

This form of plan is logical 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 selection decision.

Interview planned by reference to a person specification

The person specification as described in Chapter 27 provides a sound basis for a structured interview. The aim is to obtain information under each of the main headings to indicate the extent to which the candidate matches the specification. Typical headings are:

- *knowledge, skills and expertise* – what the candidate is expected to know and be able to do as a result of experience, education and training (work-based competencies), for example, technical or professional knowledge, numeracy, manual skills, and experience at the appropriate level in carrying out relevant work;
- *personal qualities* – how the candidate will be expected to behave in carrying out the job, such as working with other people, exercising leadership, influencing people, communicating (eg report writing, making presentations) achieving results, decision-making, taking the initiative, and being self-reliant (behavioural competencies);
- *qualifications* – essential academic or professional qualifications.

A 'person specification' setting out such requirements can be sent to candidates (or posted on an online recruitment site). The applicant is asked to respond with infor-

mation on how they believe they match these requirements. This approach can make it much easier to sift applications.

Interviews planned by reference to assessment headings

Assessment headings such as those described in Chapter 27 can be used. They define a number of areas in which information can be generated and assessed in a broadly comparable way. But as Edenborough (1994) points out, they do not provide any clear indication of which items of the data collected are likely to predict success in a job.

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 particularly indicative of subsequent performance. A typical situation is described and candidates are asked how they would deal with it. Follow-up questions are asked to explore the response in more detail, thus gaining a better understanding of how candidates might tackle similar problems.

Situational-based questions ask candidates how they would handle a hypothetical situation that resembles one they may encounter in the job. For example, a sales assistant might be asked how he or she would react to rudeness from a customer. Situational questions can provide some insight into how applicants might respond to 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.

An example of part of a situation-based set of questions is given in Figure 28.1.

Structured behavioural (competency) based interviews

In a behavioural-based interview (sometimes referred to as a criterion-referenced interview) the interviewer progresses through a series of questions, each based on a criterion, which could be a behavioural competency or a competence in the form of a fundamental skill, capability or aptitude that is required to achieve an acceptable level of performance in the job. These will have been defined by job or competency analysis as described in Chapter 13 and will form the basis of a person specification. The aim is to collect evidence about relevant aspects of experience in using skills and competencies on the assumption that such evidence of past performance and

<p>LISTENING</p> <p>Sometimes a customer won't say directly what they want and you have to listen to the messages behind the words. Tell me about a time when you were able to help the sale along.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Why was the customer reluctant to say what was wanted? ● How did you check that you really did understand? ● How did you show that it was OK for the customer to have the concerns shown in the hidden message? ● Did you actually do a deal that day? ● Is the customer still on your books? ● Had others experienced difficulty with that particular customer?

Figure 28.1 Part of a critical-incident interview for sales people

(Source: R Edenborough (1994) *Using Psychometrics*, Kogan Page)

behaviour is the best predictor of future performance and behaviour as long as the criteria are appropriate in relation to the specified demands of the job.

Behavioural-based questions ask candidates to describe how they dealt with particular situations they have come across in their past experience. In effect they are asked to indicate how they behaved in response to a problem and how well that behaviour worked. Questions are structured around the key competencies identified for the role. The definitions of these competencies should identify what is regarded as effective behaviour as a basis for evaluating answers. A list of questions can be drawn up in advance to cover the key competencies set out in the person specification. For instance, if one of these competencies is concerned with behaviour as a team member, questions such as: 'Can you tell me about any occasions when you have persuaded your fellow team members to do something which at first they didn't really want to do?' An example of a set of behavioural questions is given in Figure 28.2.

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, which will be applied consistently to all candidates, will improve the reliability of the prediction.

Structured psychometric interviews

Another type of structured interview consists of entirely predetermined questions as

PRACTICAL CREATIVITY	
The ability to originate and realize effective solutions to everyday problems	
1.	Tell me about a time when you used previous experience to solve a problem new to you.
2.	Do you ever make things, perhaps in your spare time, out of all sorts of odds and ends? (if necessary) Tell me what you have done.
3.	Tell me about a time when you got a piece of equipment or a new system to work when other people were struggling with it.
4.	Have you ever found an entirely new use for a hand or power tool? Do you often do that sort of thing? Tell me more.
5.	Do people come to you to help solve problems? (if so) Tell me about a problem you have solved recently.

Figure 28.2 Behavioural-based interview set

(Source: R Edenborough (1994) *Using Psychometrics*, Kogan Page)

in a psychometric test (see Chapter 29). There is no scope to follow through questions as in the other types of structured interviews referred to above. Responses to the questions are coded so that results can be analysed and compared. The aim is to obtain consistency between different interviews and interviewers. A typical question would be: 'Have you ever been in a situation where you have had to get someone to do something against their will?'; (if yes) 'Please give me a recent example.' This is a highly structured approach and, because of the research and training required, it is probably only feasible when large numbers of candidates have to be interviewed.

Choice of approach

The more the approach can be structured by the use of situational or behavioural-based questions, the better. If the criteria have been properly researched, much more insight will be obtained about candidates' capabilities by reference to analysed and specified role requirements. It is still useful, however, to review candidates' sequence of experience and the responsibilities exercised in successive jobs. It may be important, for example, to establish the extent to which the career of candidates has progressed smoothly or why there have been gaps between successive jobs. It is useful to know what responsibilities candidates have had in recent jobs and the extent to which this experience is useful and relevant. Candidates should also be given the chance to highlight their achievements. This review provides a framework within which more specific questions that refer to behavioural criteria or critical incidents can be asked. It was noted by Latham *et al* (1980) that interviews using this technique produced reasonably reliable and consistent assessments. A typical

interview may include about 10 or more, depending on the job, pre-prepared behavioural event or 'situational' questions.

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

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 that 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 the best ones to use to get candidates to talk – to encourage a full response. Single-word answers are seldom illuminating. It is a good idea to begin the interview with one or two open questions, thus helping candidates to settle in.

Open questions or phrases inviting a response can be phrased as follows:

- 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 are used to get further details or 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 business process re-engineering 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:

- 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?

The following are some other examples of probing questions:

- You've informed me that you have had experience in.... Could you tell me more about what you did?
- Could you describe in more detail the equipment you use?

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 to put a situation to candidates and ask them how they would respond. They 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 made 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 competencies. 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 from candidates evidence that shows 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:

- 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 usually necessary to give special attention if it is to be properly assessed. This is best 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 about:

- 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?'
- Triumphant 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 that, 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. Simply sticking stamps in an album is not evidence of motivation. Becoming a recognized expert on 19th-century stamps issued in Mexico is.

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:

- 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 interviewer can do is to make encouraging grunts at appropriate moments. There

is more to interviewing 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 such questions as:

- 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:

- 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?
- Have you a clean driving licence? (For those whose work will involve driving.)

Questions about outside interests

You should not spend much time asking people with work experience about their outside interests or hobbies. It is seldom relevant, although, as mentioned earlier, it can give some insight into how well motivated candidates are if the depth and vigour with which the interest is pursued is explored.

Active interests and offices held at school, colleges or universities can, however, provide some insight into the attributes of candidates in the absence of any work history except, possibly, vacation jobs. If, for example, a student has been on a long back-pack trip, some information can be obtained about the student's initiative, motivation and determination if the journey has been particularly adventurous.

Unhelpful questions

There are two types of questions that are unhelpful:

- *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 that could be construed as being biased on the grounds of sex, race or disability. Don't ask:

- Who is going to look after the children? This is no concern of yours, although it is reasonable to ask if the hours of work pose any problems.
- Are you planning to have any more children?
- Would it worry you being a member of an ethnic minority here?
- With your disability, do you think you can cope with the job?

Ten useful questions

The following are 10 useful questions from which you can select any that are particularly relevant in an interview you are conducting:

- What are the most important aspects of your present job?
- What do you think have been your most notable achievements in your career to date?
- What sort of problems have you successfully solved recently in your job?
- What have you learned from your present job?
- What has been your experience in...?
- What do you know about...?
- What is your approach to handling...?
- What particularly interests you in this job and why?
- Now you have heard more about the job, would you please tell me which aspects of your experience are most relevant?
- Is there anything else about your career that hasn't come out yet in this interview but that you think I ought to hear?

SELECTION INTERVIEWING SKILLS

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 their 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 always counter-productive. 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 that 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, ask 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 in fact surface without substance in the shape of a good track record. 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 should also be avoided.

Individual candidates should be assessed against the criteria. These could be set under the headings of competence/skills, qualifications, experience, and overall suitability. Ratings can be given against each heading, for example: very acceptable, acceptable, marginally acceptable, unacceptable. The person specification should indicate which of the requirements are essential and which are only desirable. Clearly, to be considered for the job, candidates have to be acceptable or, perhaps stretching a point, marginally acceptable, in all the essential requirements. 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 judgemental. 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.

DOS AND DON'TS OF SELECTION INTERVIEWING

To conclude, here is a summary of the dos and don'ts of selection interviewing:

Do

- give yourself sufficient time;
- plan the interview so you can structure it properly;
- 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, skills and the effective use of capabilities;

- 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.

Don't

- attempt too many interviews in a row;
- fall into the halo or horns effect trap;
- 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.