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Maximizing the Benefits of Face-to-Face Interviews

The term *selection* suggests that the individuals who make decisions have the tools they need to gather material to make informed choices. The interview comes second only to the employment application in terms of being the most commonly used way to evaluate applicants (Schmidt & Rader, 1999). In making the actual hiring decision, business organizations use interviews the vast majority of the time (Delaney, 1954; Dessler, 1997). More specific to educators' purposes, school administrators use interviews at least 85 percent of the time (Emley & Ebmeier, 1997). School district personnel use various types of interview formats, including telephone, face-to-face, and online interviews. Pros and cons of these formats are addressed in Figure 2.1.

This chapter emphasizes the ways and means of conducting reliable and valid face-to-face interviews. Given the importance of the employment interview in the teacher hiring process, we consider the following issues:

- The history of the employment interview
- The advantages and disadvantages of interviews
- Influences on interview outcomes
- Differentiating factors for success
- Improving teacher selection through better interviewing

The History of the Employment Interview

In 1884, an English newspaper reported, "Interviewing is an instance of the division of labour. . . . The interviewee supplies the matter, the interviewer

FIGURE 2.1
Employment Interview Formats

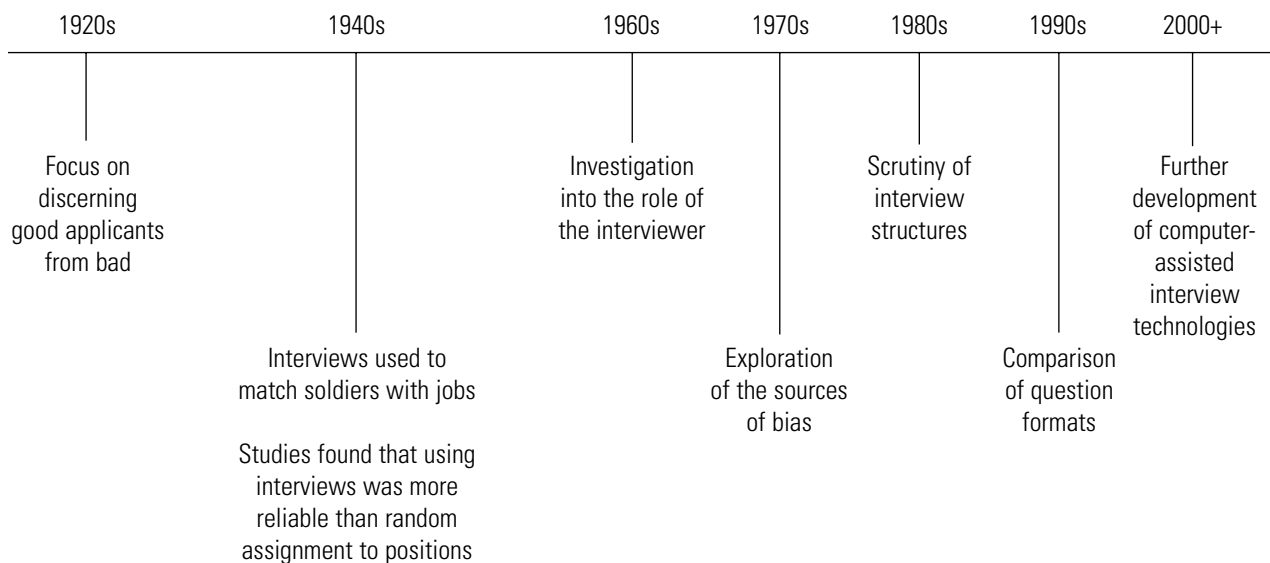
Interview Format	Purpose	Description	Advantages(s)	Disadvantage(s)
Computer/Online	Screening	Can be designed to eliminate unqualified applicants, assess computer skills, and record reaction time/response to stimulus	Collects information and stores it in a database for searches; saves time and money	Is biased against individuals who are not adept with a computer or information technology
Impromptu Face to Face	Screening	Occurs at job fairs, recruitment parties, and in short interviews with a gatekeeper who decides if the candidate is viable	Reduces the interview load on administrators	Has a first impression bias; is of short duration
Telephone	Screening	Designed to eliminate unqualified applicants	Collects information on skills; saves time and money	Relies on the judgment of one person
Group Interview	Selection	Pairs several interviewers with several job candidates	Views interaction; collects input and ratings from several interviewers	May not allow interviewers to get to know one single candidate well
Panel/Committee	Selection	Occurs with two or more interviewers asking job-related questions, often in a structured interview format	Lets those who will be working with the candidate know what the individual has to offer; lessens Equal Employment Opportunity Commission exposure	Is affected by candidate's comfort level and the skill of the interviewer(s)
Proficiency	Selection	Checks the candidate's ability to perform tasks such as speaking a foreign language or teaching a sample lesson	Sample performance demonstrates what may occur on the job	There may be no correlation between showing a skill and using it in a classroom*
Structured	Selection	Questions take a variety of formats (experience-based, situational, informational); in general, all questions are asked of each candidate in either a one-on-one or panel setup	Encourages active listening by interviewer(s); is more predictive of job performance when valid questions are used	Does not give much feedback to the candidate; depending on the format, follow-up questions may not work

*If performance is evaluated with actual students, this bias is not an issue.

the form” (cited in Edenborough, 1999, p. 16). Interviewing has evolved as a way to get more information about an applicant than the basic information revealed on the job application. It “is the most readily available way of taking account, not merely of the facts of the candidate’s career, but of those attitudes, interests . . . that may be supremely important for his subsequent success in the work for which he is being considered” (Anstey & Mercer, 1956, p. 7).

Researchers have been conducting studies for over a century to determine best practices for interviewing (see Figure 2.2). The studies have dissected the various factors that influence an interview, such as legal issues, predictor variables, protocol, structure and questioning. Meta-analysis studies began to emerge near the end of the 20th century. The current research on interviewing shows a trend toward refining the interview process to make it a more valid and reliable tool that is less susceptible to personal interpretation and bias.

FIGURE 2.2
Developments in Interviewing



Created using information from Eder & Harris, 1999.

The Advantages and Disadvantages of Interviews

Do interviews always work? The definitive answer: yes and no! Interviews can be—and have proven to be—an excellent tool for decision makers to use in the hiring process. However, unless developed along solid, research-based design principles and then implemented with fidelity, the interview is no general prescription for success. Thus, it might be prudent to consider the inherent pros and cons of the interview, as outlined in Figure 2.3.

Educators are adept at recognizing potential and adapting ideas to better serve students. The TQI interview protocol we will detail later was developed from research conducted in other fields.

FIGURE 2.3
Advantages and Disadvantages of Interviewing

Advantages

- May produce in-depth data not obtainable from an application
- Provides a forum for asking questions that require lengthy responses
- Is flexible and adaptable (with certain parameters) to the situation
- May result in more accurate and honest responses because the interviewer can ask for clarification
- Allows for probing with follow-up questions to incomplete or unclear responses
- Provides an opportunity to hear how an applicant communicates
- Offers interviewers a glimpse of how an applicant interacts with others
- Gives an applicant a forum to ask questions
- Lets an applicant “feel out” the organization by meeting representatives of the school (e.g., members of the interview team) during the interview

Disadvantages

- Is expensive in terms of personnel hours
- Is time consuming when compared to a review of applications or testing data
- Involves fewer candidates being reviewed compared with other screening devices (e.g., applications)
- Requires a variety of communication and interpersonal skills
- Is subject to bias:
 - An applicant’s response may be positively or negatively affected by a personal reaction to the interviewer
 - An interviewer’s first impression may be influenced by an applicant’s appearance or initial interaction

Influences on Interview Outcomes

The purpose of the employment interview is to exchange information so that the interviewer can determine if a candidate is a good fit for a given position. Yet many factors complicate this rather straightforward purpose. For example, the applicant may be nervous. The interviewer might have conducted several interviews before meeting the applicant and may be tired or already have a “favorite” in mind. First impressions may cloud the interviewer’s judgment. For all these reasons and more, the validity (i.e., appropriateness) and reliability (i.e., consistency) of interview-based selection decisions may be highly variable due to influences of several factors.

Accountability. If interviewers are held accountable for *how* they conduct interviews, then their recall of details relating to the applicant is better than if interviewers are accountable only for the outcome of the interview (Brtek & Motowidlo, 2002).

Halo Effect. Interviewers may be influenced by the strength of a previous response to a question when assessing a subsequent question. Using a rating strategy reduces the halo effect by focusing the interviewer on each question (Kiker & Motowidlo, 1998).

Interviewer Training. When interviewers receive training on how to collect job-related information during an interview, they are more effective (Stevens, 1998).

Note Taking. When interviewers voluntarily take notes, their recall of interview-related information is better than if they cannot take notes (Burnett, Fan, Motowidlo, & DeGroot, 1998; Macan & Dipboye, 1994; Middendorf & Macan, 2002).

Personal Interactions. Interviewees may use soft tactics such as ingratiation to make a positive connection with interviewers (Ellis, West, Ryan, & DeShon, 2002; McFarland, Ryan, & Kriska, 2002).

Question Format. The way an interview question is phrased influences the type of information that is gathered. Prompts asking candidates about hypothetical situations result in more consistent ratings than ones asking about opinions or facts (Maurer & Fay, 1988). However, experience-based questions, which ask about actual performance, are more predictive

of future job performance than situational questions (Huffcutt, Weekley, Wiesner, DeGroot, & Jones, 2001; Pulakos & Schmitt, 1995; Schmidt & Rader, 1999).

Scoring Method. The use of a scoring mechanism (e.g., rankings, rubrics) is likely to reduce errors in the interview process (Pulakos, Schmitt, Whitney, & Smith, 1996). Rating scales may reduce bias and enhance interviewers' consistency of judgments about candidates' responses (Campion, Palmer, & Campion, 1997).

Structure. A highly structured interview emphasizes job-related constructs, while a less structured interview is better at gathering information about the interviewee as a person (Huffcutt, Conway, Roth, & Stone, 2001). Generally, the structured interview is more valid than its unstructured counterpart (McDaniel, Whetzel, Schmidt, & Maurer, 1994).

Differentiating Factors for Success

In designing a teacher-selection interview protocol, specific consideration should be given to the properties of the interview that research has shown to have greater value. Structured interviews, question format, and rating scales are three mechanisms that enhance the likelihood of an interviewer getting the necessary information and evaluating it to make the best hiring decision.

Structured Interviews

As noted, there are two main types of selection interviews: unstructured and structured. Unstructured interviews tend to emphasize background credentials, personality, and general mental ability. Structured interviews consist of questions related to applied mental skills, direct job knowledge, applied social skills, and organizational fit. They tend to be better predictors of on-the-job success than unstructured interviews (Huffcutt, Conway, Roth, & Stone, 2001).

Common issues that can be considered for structured interviews in education include the teacher's relationship with students, colleagues, and

parents; knowledge of instructional techniques and their applications; and general background information (Pawlas, 1995). To increase the validity of the structured interview, all questions should be based on job-related criteria, have anchored rating scales, and use multiple trained interviewers (Campion et al., 1997; Castetter, 1996). This standardized format helps ensure that each candidate responds to the same set of questions and is rated in a common fashion.

Question Format

There is both an art and a science to interview questioning. The way a prompt is phrased predetermines the type of response that will be given. Figure 2.4 presents three question formats, their purposes, and a sample prompt. Which format do you think would be best for getting information about an applicant?

FIGURE 2.4
Types of Interview Questions

Question Type	Description	Sample Prompt
Informational	Candidates are prompted to elaborate on application or résumé information or to recount what they know (e.g., facts, readings)	"What makes a positive and productive classroom climate?"
Situational	Candidates are prompted to explain how they would handle certain hypothetical situations	"School is starting in a week, and you have just received your class list. Another teacher tells you that you have several challenging students assigned to your class. What would you do to ensure that you will foster a positive and productive classroom climate?"
Experience-Based	Candidates are prompted to discuss past performance in a specific case	"Share with me what you do to foster a positive and productive classroom climate."

The *informational* question format asks applicants to tell the interviewer what they know, not specifically what they do. The *situational* question format provides all candidates with the same starting point and lets them determine the outcome. However, research has shown that responses to situational questions often relate more to job knowledge than to performance (Conway & Peneno, 1999). The *experience-based* question requires that applicants tell what they actually can do or have done.

So what question format is best in an interview? The short answer is that experience-based questions tend to be best (see, for example, Huffcutt et al., 2001), and situational questions are better than informational questions (Maurer & Fay, 1988). If you want to know about future performance, ask what the person has done in the past.

Pulakos and Schmitt (1995) considered the predictive validity of experience-based and situational structured interviews with a sample of 216 government employees who had at least three years of work experience and a college degree. The authors trained interviewers to conduct both kinds of interviews in a panel setup with randomly assigned candidates. When the panel's composite rating was compared to the candidate's supervisor's performance rating, only the experience-based interview correlated with actual job performance. Thus, experience-based interviewing was the better predictor of job performance.

In applying this research to teacher selection, one would surmise that experience-based questions would do a better job than other question formats at soliciting information about past performance in the classroom. This makes sense for experienced teachers, but what about novices with limited classroom experience? Would situational questions level the playing field by giving everyone a common baseline? A team of researchers investigated whether a relationship existed between interview ratings and supervisors' performance ratings of trainees who had not yet assumed their job responsibilities. In the interviews, trainees were asked a series of questions that were phrased using either a situational or an experience-based format. The researchers found that interview ratings for the group in which trainees were asked about their experiences significantly correlated with the performance ratings, whereas the ratings for the group asked situational

questions did not (Huffcutt et al., 2001). The interviewees were more effective at conveying information about their performance when given an experience-based question than when they were given a hypothetical situation—even when they were novices.

The experience-based question format may challenge interviewees. As part of the interviewer's introduction to the interviewee, it may be helpful to share the interview format in advance of the interview. Let the interviewee know the interviewer wants to learn about how the interviewee has performed in the past. For individuals new to the teaching profession or returning after an extended hiatus, the interviewer might prompt the interviewees to give examples from other situations. In the case of the sample experience-based question in Figure 2.4 ("Share with me what you do to foster a positive and productive classroom climate."), a newly minted teacher might discuss how he created a positive environment for an incoming fraternity pledge class. A career switcher might explain how she got to know each of her employees and empowered them to have ownership in the office environment. A returning teacher might relate an example of volunteer work.

Rating Scales

The use of a scoring guide grounds interviewers so that they use the same criteria to evaluate responses. As we well know, one person's "excellent" may be another person's "good." Using a common scale with behavioral examples can enhance consistency. A well-developed scoring guide specifies points for good, average, and poor answers (Eder & Harris, 1999). The use of such a scale is assumed to enhance reliability by reducing subjectivity (Campion et al., 1997).

Improving Teacher Selection Through Better Interviewing

Despite longstanding criticism of interviews' validity, they remain the second most commonly used tool for teacher hiring. Research has found that interviews are vital to establishing an organizational match between the

candidates' knowledge, skills, and abilities and the culture and needs of the school system (Eder & Harris, 1999). It seems obvious, then, that interviewers (e.g., administrators, teachers, parents, personnel directors) must be trained to conduct more effective interviews and make the best selections.

Questions

Administrators need to consider what they want in a teacher and ask interview questions that will gather information to help them judge whether the interviewee possesses those qualities. In one study, the actual questions asked by middle school principals ($N = 7$) in a school district were analyzed by tape recording teacher employment interviews (with the permission of the parties involved) to determine the content and type of questions being asked of teacher applicants (Perkins, 1998). A significant number of the questions (43 percent) elicited responses of factual knowledge. A follow-up e-mail questionnaire found that the principals' questions and what the principals said they were looking for did not always align. Each principal asked about credentials, instruction, and classroom management, yet noticeably absent were questions about instructional planning, assessment, and the teacher as a person, all qualities relevant to effective teaching.

Accountability for Interview Decisions

A procedure for assessing applicants' responses to interview questions offers the potential for improving teacher hiring decisions. When schools and classrooms are scrutinized for what makes powerful learning experiences, significant effect sizes are found on a variety of items—ranging from the curriculum to the building—but what makes the greatest impact is the teacher. In practice, teacher job descriptions often focus on the knowledge and skills of the profession, which are easier to evaluate than other attributes of effective teachers. A face-to-face interview provides a forum for school personnel to assess the interviewee's disposition, which is more difficult to discern from a résumé and application (Delaney, 1954; Eder & Harris, 1999). However, the interview is susceptible to errors; for example,

effective communicators may appear stronger in an interview where questions isolate specific items, whereas in a classroom, knowledge, skills, and dispositions work in combination. Conversely, an outstanding teacher may seem nervous in an interview and lack the confidence that is predominant in his or her work with students. Therefore, an interview protocol must be sensitive to these concerns and help interviewers triangulate a variety of sources of information to make an informed judgment.

Making the Interview Process Better

School districts' human resource departments are under continual pressure to provide school administrators with a pool of qualified teacher candidates. No Child Left Behind simplifies the process of identifying "highly qualified" teachers: it's primarily a matter of looking at certification. Therefore, the challenge for HR departments is not searching for highly *qualified* teachers, but rather enhancing the likelihood that they are screening for and selecting highly *effective* teachers. The literature on teacher effectiveness and interviewing provides the basis for the Teacher Quality Index interview protocol, which is designed to support interviewers in distinguishing promising teachers from those with less potential to be effective. The TQI protocol asks teacher applicants about their past performance, and the interviewer or interview team uses an anchored rubric to evaluate responses. Figure 2.5 illustrates the alignment of some sample TQI prompts to the qualities of effective teachers.

What is important to note is the distribution of prompts across the range of qualities of effective teachers. It is not an equal distribution; the quality associated with instructional delivery is more heavily weighted. One key feature of the TQI protocol that is different from many published sets of interview question sets is its emphasis on instruction. Classroom management, planning, assessment, and personal characteristics also influence what occurs in the classroom; these factors are represented by multiple questions. Further information on TQI prompts and the interview formats is presented in Chapter 4.

FIGURE 2.5
TQI Prompt Alignment with the Qualities of Effective Teachers

Sample TQI Prompt	Personal Characteristics	Classroom Management	Planning for Instruction	Instructional Delivery	Assessment
1. What do you find most rewarding about teaching?	◆				
2. Tell me what you do with students during the first few weeks you are working with them to establish a positive classroom environment.		◆			
3. Share with me your long- and short-term planning process for instruction.			◆		
4. Describe how you engage students in their learning.				◆	
5. Share with me a time you had difficulty with a particular student's behavior and what you did to address it.		◆			
6. Explain your grading system to me.					◆
7. Think about an instructional unit you have taught. Tell me why you selected particular instructional strategies to teach the curriculum.				◆	
8. Tell me how your assessments accommodate students' learning needs.					◆
9. Give me an example of how you establish and maintain rapport with your students.	◆				
10. Describe how you promote high expectations for student achievement.				◆	
11. How does your use of instructional time demonstrate that learning is students' primary purpose?				◆	
12. How do you use technology as part of your instruction?			◆		
13. Pick a topic in your subject area that is often difficult for students to understand. Tell me what the topic is and how you explain it to students, and share with me directions for an activity you do to help further students' understanding of that topic.				◆	
14. Think about a lesson that did not meet your expectations, despite planning and preparation. Tell me what you considered when planning to readdress the topic with your students and describe how you altered your approach.	◆				