Structured Interviewing:

Interview Board Guide

*How to conduct structured interviews in the appointment
process*

Assessment Oversight and Personnel Psychology Centre

Canada

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INTRODUCTION

Employment interviews are one of the most widely used and influential assessment tools in the appointment process. They are a significant source of information on which to base fair and accurate hiring decisions. Therefore, it is critical that interview boards use the structured interview effectively to ensure that hiring decisions are based on merit as defined by the *Public Service Employment Act* (PSEA).

This document provides interview board members with instructions on how to conduct structured interviews. The ultimate goal is to enhance the quality of the information gathered while strengthening the fairness and defensibility of this part of the assessment process.

The Guide consists of the following four main sections:

Section 1: The Structured interview. This section provides information on the characteristics of a structured interview, a description of the different types of structured interview questions and an overview of the interview process.

Section 2: Conducting the interview. This section presents an overview of the structured interviewing process. It includes recommended procedures in the administration of the structured interview, from preparation through to closing. In this section, the reader will learn essential interviewing strategies such as putting applicants at ease, asking questions and note-taking.

Section 3: Assessing the qualifications. This section provides specific instructions for assessing qualifications, including an overview of how to assess and apply the criteria that are used and an example of a qualification-based rating scale.

Section 4: Avoiding common assessment errors. This section describes common assessment errors and gives guidance on how to minimize them.

We strongly recommend that the practices outlined in this Guide be followed by all interview board members to help ensure a fair and equitable interview process. In addition, the interested reader may wish to review Structured Interviewing: How to Design and Conduct Structured Interviews in the Appointment Process for more information on developing and conducting structured interviews.

Structured versus unstructured interviews

Structured interviews consist of a series of job-related questions that are consistently asked of all applicants in order to staff a particular job. The responses are then subject to a rigorous assessment by the interview board members, based on predetermined criteria related to the assessed qualifications.

Research shows that structured interviews are more effective than unstructured ones for predicting on-the-job performance.

Structured interviews are:

- ✓ **Job-related.** The carefully planned, structured interview focuses on an applicant's ability to perform the qualifications for the job, as outlined in the Statement of Merit Criteria. Questions are based on job-relevant qualifications and are designed to elicit job-related responses that provide a more accurate prediction of future job performance.

- ✓ **Standardized administration.** Each applicant is asked the same questions. Prompting/follow-up questions are controlled. Extraneous information is eliminated and detailed notes are taken. This consistency in approach helps to ensure that all applicants are treated equally and that comparable information is obtained for each applicant.

- ✓ **Focussed on behaviour.** There is a pre-developed, behavioural basis for evaluating interview responses. By focussing on job-related behaviours, the process becomes more objective and errors in judgement are minimized.

Unstructured interviews are more likely to be less accurate and reliable, are more subject to bias and may expose employers to complaints and legal challenges.

Types of interview questions

There are different types of questions that are suitable for a structured interview. These include situational, behavioural and job knowledge questions.

Situational questions
Situational questions present applicants with a hypothetical situation relevant to the position and ask how they would respond.

The situational interview question is based on the premise that people's intentions are predictive of their future behaviour. The applicant is asked to respond by indicating how

they would handle the issue presented in the question, given the resources and the job context outlined.

> **Example situational question to assess teamwork:**
> Suppose you had an idea for a change in procedures that would enhance work quality but some of your team members were against this change.
> What would you do in this situation? What factors would you consider? Who would you involve?

Behavioural questions

Applicants are asked to describe a previous work or life event that is relevant to the job in question. It is usually about a time when they had to demonstrate a particular qualification that is key for the job.

The underlying assumption of behavioural questions is that the best predictor of future performance is past performance in similar situations. Thus, their purpose is to evaluate the applicant's past behaviour for evidence that the relevant qualifications have been demonstrated. Behavioural questions are usually straightforward.

When asking behavioural questions, ascertain the following:

1) The particulars of the situation, task, problems or context.

2) The actions that the applicant took in response to the situation.

3) The achieved results or the impact of the actions taken (or not taken).

> **Sample behavioural question to assess creativity:**
> Tell me about a time when you proposed an innovative solution to a difficult problem. What was the situation? How did you handle it? What was the outcome?

Job knowledge questions

These questions deal with the technical or basic knowledge required to perform the duties of the position. With these questions, applicants are asked to describe or demonstrate their knowledge.

Assessing job knowledge in an interview is recommended when the position requires the verbalization of technical information or work procedures. It is recommended that job knowledge questions assess applicants' knowledge of information that is important to the overall performance of the job and not knowledge that is only peripheral to the job at hand.
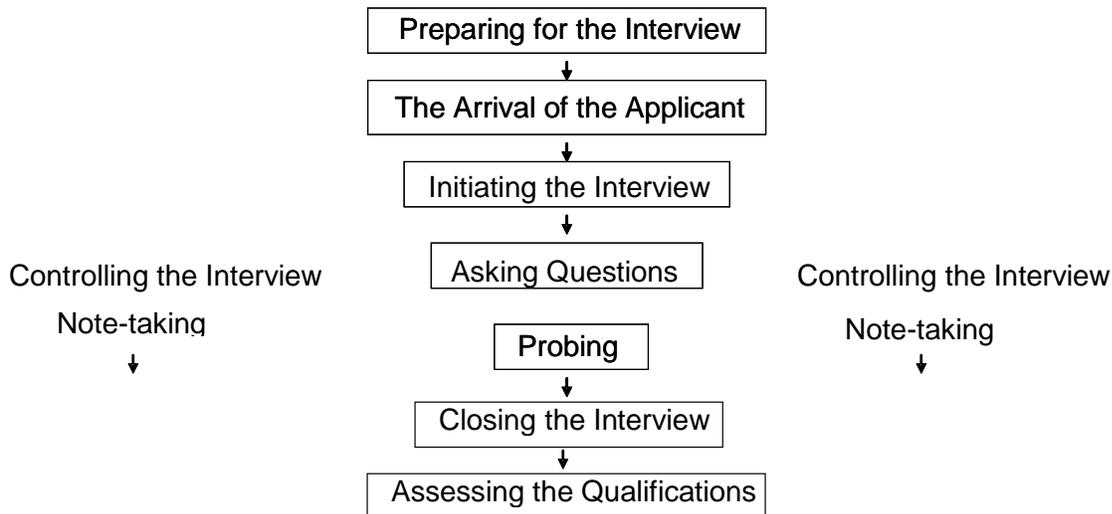
> **Sample of a job knowledge question:**
> Description: How has the new *Public Service Employment Act* changed the hiring process in the public service?
> Demonstration: How would you go about designing interview questions that ensure the assessment of applicants is based on merit?

Overview of the interview process

The interview process includes the following steps:

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Preparing for the interview includes: reviewing all available information regarding the position, the Statement of Merit Criteria and the questions that will be asked and determining who is going to do what and in what order. It also involves making sure that the required material, such as interview booklets and assessment guides, are ready and ensuring that the interview room is adequate and that the applicant will receive the necessary instructions upon arrival. The interview protocol must be followed if applicants are to be given time to prepare for the questions prior to the interview.

The main portion of the interview begins with a warm-up period during which the lead interviewer sets the applicant at ease and establishes a rapport. This part of the interview is important because it ensures that the applicant has the best opportunity to demonstrate their qualifications.

During the interview, the lead interviewer should be responsible for the following:
- opening the interview;
- asking a certain number of the predetermined questions; and
- closing the interview.

Each board member may be in charge of asking specific questions. Each question is to be read aloud, as is each follow-up question, as required.

All interviews should follow the same precise timing for providing instructions, preparation time, the "warm-up" portion of the interview and the interview questions themselves. All board members should be taking notes throughout the interview.

Once the interview is finished, board members are to assess the applicant's responses and reach consensus on a final evaluation on each qualification. These evaluations must be documented.

SECTION 2: CONDUCTING THE INTERVIEW

The importance of the interview board

A board interview is one that is administered by two or more individuals, usually the hiring manager and other people who are knowledgeable about the job. Using more than one interviewer is preferred for the following reasons:

− An interview board can reduce the impact that personal biases may have on the selection decision;

− Multiple interviewers may capture information that a single interviewer might miss or overlook, thus ensuring a more balanced, complete picture of the applicant; and

− Additional interviewers can bring demographic diversity to the interview board, which can make applicants more comfortable during the interview process and more accepting of the outcome.

To the extent possible, it is important to use the same interviewers for all applicants in a given appointment process. This practice increases consistency and standardization of the assessment.

The members of an interview board must:

− Be familiar with the structured interview process and the merit criteria that will be assessed;

− Objectively assess applicants and treat them all equally;

− Be free from real or apparent conflicts of interest that may affect the outcome of the process;

− Be qualified in the language of the applicant's choice, in order for effective communication;

− Collect, integrate and document assessment information; and

− Provide feedback to the applicants and/or participate in informal discussions, as required.

In addition, interview board members might be asked to develop questions, answer keys and parts of the interview process such as the standardized introduction and conclusion, the time limit and sequence of questions.

Preparing for the interview

Here are a some recommendations that will help the interview board prepare for the interview:

1. Know the major duties and responsibilities of the job, as well as the definitions of the qualifications and assessed behavioural indicators.

2. Receive adequate training and be familiar with this Guide. For considerations such as employment equity, consult the Guidelines on Fair Assessment.

3. Assign one member of the interview board to the role of lead interviewer.

4. Determine the order of the questions as well as who is expected to ask each one. Ensure a relatively equal division of questions among the board members.

5. Ensure that any required accommodation for applicants with disabilities has been made. For more information, consult the Guide for Assessing Persons with Disabilities.

6. Know the interview schedule. Ensure that enough time has been allotted to greet the applicant, conduct the interview, thank the applicant, complete notes and assess the qualifications and allow for a break, if required, before proceeding to the next applicant.

7. Arrive plenty of time in advance to ensure that all preparations have been made. These preparations include, but are not limited to, ensuring that the room is well-lit and free from noise and other distractions, water, pens/pencils and paper are provided, etc.

The arrival of the applicant

Once the applicant arrives, the lead interviewer:

− Greets the applicant.

− Gives the applicant a copy of the interview questions and leaves the applicant to prepare, if applicable.

− If applicants are given time to prepare, they should be permitted to bring the interview questions and their notes to the interview so that they can refer to them throughout.

Each board member should have an Interview Note-taking Booklet and an Interview Assessment Booklet for each applicant.

The Interview Note-taking Booklet contains detailed information about the interview process, including:

- the applicant's name or identification number;

- the board members' names;

- the date of the interview;
- the information relevant to the introduction;
- the structured interview questions;
- reserved spaces for note-taking; and
- information regarding the conclusion of the interview.

The Interview Assessment Booklet contains the assessed qualifications and behavioural indicators, as well as rating scales (if applicable), and is used to record the assessment of the applicants.

Initiating the interview

As with any selection interview, it is important to begin the interview in an informal and friendly manner to help put the applicant at ease. This is a particularly important step since an interview can be a stressful experience for some applicants. This informal dialogue may make the applicant more amenable to being open, frank and transparent in providing personal information.

The lead interviewer should begin by welcoming the applicant, thanking them for attending and introducing the other board members. Then, an introduction to the structured interview should be provided, covering the following points:

– Welcoming remarks;

– The goal of the interview;

– The role of the interview board;

– How the interview will unfold and an approximate duration;

– That the board members will take turns asking questions and all will take notes. Even though they may not be making eye contact, they are listening;

– That the applicant will have the opportunity to ask questions at the completion of the formal interview questions; and

– A clear signal that the interview is about to begin.

A script that outlines the points to be covered when initiating the interview is included in the Interview Note-taking Booklet.

Asking questions

Here are some important points to consider when asking questions to applicants:

- Make sure applicants have their copy of the interview questions and ask them to follow along;

- Be sure to read each question aloud to the applicant slowly and clearly;

- To the extent possible, ask each board member to ask the same questions, in the same order, to all applicants in a given appointment process; and

- Respond to reasonable requests for clarification of a question. Do not divulge the specific behavioural indicators being assessed by any question since doing so could lead the applicant's response, thus giving an unfair advantage.

Probing

The board may need to request additional examples or more specific details to more fully understand the applicant's answers. Asking probing or follow-up questions is a necessary component of the interview as doing so helps to ensure that sufficient data is obtained for all qualifications being assessed. However, do not introduce new topics or issues when probing because the structured interview is intended to ask the same questions of each applicant. Probing questions should be standardized; otherwise you may inadvertently give an advantage to some applicants, while disadvantaging others. Do not to reveal the behavioural indicators of interest to the applicant through probing questions.

To ensure standardization for each question, read the question and the follow-up questions verbatim as they are written in the Interview Booklet.

Applicant responses are likely to vary in length and level of detail, which is acceptable as long as enough information to assess each qualification fairly and accurately is obtained. However, if any of the scenarios listed below occur, the suggested probing questions may be used to ensure that sufficient information is obtained or to get the applicant back on track.

SUGGESTED PROBES

Applicant		Board
Asks for clarification on a question.	➜	Repeat the question, no explanation or paraphrasing.
Wanders to irrelevant topics or takes too long to make a point.	➜	"Sorry to interrupt, in the interest of finishing the interview within the allotted time, we need to move to the next question."
Is silent for more than 15 seconds after a question has been asked.	➜	"I realize that it is sometimes difficult to come up with an answer. Most people take some time to think about their responses. Don't worry about it and take the time you need."
Responses are too brief and there is still plenty of time left at the end of the interview.	➜	"Do you have anything to add to your responses to any question?"
Describes what he or she did in similar situations in the past for a situational question.	➜	"Please tell us what you would do given the hypothetical situation provided in the question."
Speaks in generalities (e.g., "usually, I approach it by…").	➜	"What did you do specifically?"
Speaks in the present tense for a behavioural question.	➜	"Please describe a specific example that happened to you in the past."
Speaks more about a team (e.g., uses "we" instead of "I").	➜	"What was your individual role in this situation?"
Expresses opinions or provides a theoretical response, rather than behaviours (e.g., "I think it's important to listen to my staff.").	➜	"Tell us about a particular situation when you did this."
Jumps to the end of the story (the result).	➜	"Tell us what you did to achieve this result."

Controlling the interview

While it is important to ensure that you have the information that you need from the applicant's responses, time limits must also be considered. Some applicants may be quite verbose. If this is the case, time may expire before all qualifications are addressed and the board will not have extracted all of the necessary information to evaluate the applicant. It is essential, therefore, to control the flow of the interview.

Although the interview is designed to allow the applicant to do most of the talking, the board members must judge whether or not the applicant is providing information relevant to the qualifications. When the applicant is providing redundant or irrelevant information, there may be a need to interrupt the individual to help bring their response to a conclusion.

Note-taking

Taking detailed and comprehensive notes is an extremely important element of the interview process for two reasons:

1. Notes help the board capture and recall the content of the interview and accurately assess the applicant's responses. Without notes, there may be a tendency to selectively recall the applicant's strengths and weaknesses, or be unable to recall the responses at all.

2. Notes create a record to reconstruct the interview process or defend an appointment decision.

A number of essential steps can be taken to maximize the utility of notes. Specifically, notes should be:

− As complete and as close to verbatim as possible;

− An accurate record of what the applicant said or did; and

− Free from the board members' inferences or judgements.

Since some applicants may not be accustomed to note-taking during an interview, it is important to explain the reason for taking notes. That is, you want the interview board to be able to remember, and give full credit to, all of the knowledge, skills, and abilities demonstrated during the interview.

Closing the interview

It is recommended that an explicit conclusion be provided at the end of the interview. A number of points may be covered by the lead interviewer to bring the meeting to an end. Specifically, the lead interviewer should:

− Provide a clear signal of the end of the interview;

− Provide an opportunity for the applicant to ask questions and for the board to respond;

− Explain the next steps in the appointment process and the approximate time frame;

− Collect the interview questions and notes from the applicant;

− Remind the applicant not to discuss the interview questions with anyone; and

− Thank the applicant for participating in the interview and escort them out of the room.

The interview questions and related documents, as well as the applicant's responses, are protected materials and should be handled and stored according to departmental/agency guidelines.

Section 3: ASSESSING THE QUALIFICATIONS

After each interview, it is recommended that the board assess the qualifications of the applicant prior to moving on to the next interview. Board members then have an opportunity to discuss the observations they made during the interview and to arrive at a consensus regarding each applicant's performance.

It is important to ensure that there is sufficient time allotted to assess qualifications between each interview. This interval may last up to one hour depending on the number of questions asked and the number of qualifications being assessed. It is recommended that one board member lead the assessment process.

For this exercise, the interview board members will need the following:

− Notes taken during the interview in the Interview Note-taking Booklet.

− The Interview Assessment Booklet, which includes the qualifications and effective behavioural indicators or expected answers.

Each of the interview questions is designed to assess one or more qualifications. However, during the interview, it may be observed that an applicant's response to a question targeting one qualification also provides behavioural evidence for another one. When making their assessments, interview board members should use all of the behavioural evidence provided by the applicant, even if it appears in responses to questions targeting other qualifications.

Each qualification may be assessed using a rating scale. For example:

ENGAGEMENT
Effective behavioural indicators

- Solicits input from and listens to staff, partners, and stakeholders
- Communicates vision and division plans with clarity and commitment
- Establishes regular and comprehensive exchanges of ideas

Doesn't meet the qualification		Meets the qualification		
1 Very weak. Unacceptable.	**2** Weak. Below average.	**3** Moderate. Good. Acceptable. Satisfactory. Average.	**4** Strong Above average.	**5** Very Strong. Excellent.

The purpose of the rating scale is to assess the demonstration of:

- the scope of the behaviours that constitute the qualification; and
- the depth to which the behaviours were demonstrated during the interview.

The scope of the behaviours is the primary consideration and refers to how many of the behaviours for a given qualification were evident in the applicant's responses.

The depth of the observed behaviours refers to how these behaviours were demonstrated. It may be evaluated by the degree of complexity, soundness and precision with which the behaviours were demonstrated in the applicant's responses.

The interview board must agree and assign a single assessment for each qualification. The following seven steps are recommended to assist the board in reaching consensus:

Step 1: All members of the board review the definition of the first qualification to be assessed and its behavioural indicators.

Step 2: For the first qualification, the board members independently review their notes and determine which of the behavioural indicators associated with the qualification under review were demonstrated by the applicant. Board members should record examples of the applicant's demonstration of the behavioural indicators that reflect the scope and depth with which they were demonstrated..

Step 3: Each board member independently assesses the applicant on the first qualification.

Step 4: The board members then discuss their individual assessments of that qualification and determine a single group evaluation for the applicant. This discussion continues until a consensus is reached.

Step 5: The final consensus assessment is recorded. The rationale for the evaluation is also recorded in terms of examples of the behaviours that the applicant demonstrated, along with the scope and depth to which the behaviours were demonstrated.

Step 6: Having reached consensus on the first qualification, the board then proceeds to assess the remaining qualifications in turn.

Step 7: The final group assessments and notes for the rationale along with the interview board notes are kept in the applicant's file.

SECTION 4: COMMON ASSESSMENT ERRORS

Assessment is a difficult and delicate process, yet the success and value of the interview relies on the quality of this process. The following is a list of common assessment errors with suggestions on how to minimize them. This list is intended to help board members recognize and guard against these errors when assessing applicants, thereby maximizing the accuracy, consistency and fairness of their assessments.

First impressions: This is the tendency to let a first impression influence the assessment of the applicant's responses. Interviewers must be aware that they may unconsciously judge an applicant positively or negatively from the outset, which may result in an assessment of the applicant according to their own beliefs rather than according to the applicant's true performance on the qualifications being assessed.

Leniency and stringency: These errors involve the general tendencies to assess applicants consistently high (leniency effect) or low (stringency effect). Board members need to be aware that they might have a different understanding of the requirements for the job and the assessed qualifications, but also that they need to be fair in assessing applicants. The result is that the interviewer consistently assesses all applicants either higher or lower than warranted.

Central tendency: This is the tendency to use only the middle points on a rating scale and avoiding the extreme points. Interviewers may be reluctant to rate applicants high or low and, therefore, end up rating all applicants as average and not differentiating among them.

"Halo" and "horn" effects: These errors involve the tendency to allow one good (halo) or bad (horn) characteristic of an applicant or qualification influence the evaluation of all other qualifications. Board members need to monitor themselves when they are so impressed by an applicant on one qualification so that they do not attribute positive qualities for all other criteria regardless of the evidence provided. Conversely, when an applicant does poorly in one area, they may be under-rated in other assessed areas.

Contrast effect: This is the tendency to assess an applicant in comparison to the performance of a previous applicant instead of using the assessment guide. Board members have to be aware that they might encounter applicants who will stand out, positively or negatively, and that subsequent applicants may be under- or over-assessed as a result. In this situation, board members must not compare the applicants. Instead, they should focus on evaluating each applicant relative to the assessment criteria.

Fatigue: This is the tendency for assessors, as they become fatigued during a lengthy interviewing process, to become less consistent or less stringent in their note-taking, listening or application of the assessment criteria.

Stereotypes: This is an error that occurs when an interviewer's own personal biases and preconceptions of a good employee influence their evaluation. Stereotyping is often based on demographics such as sex, race, ethnicity or age, but can also involve other variables such as degree of education, politics or interests. Board members must be aware that their personal beliefs and perceptions of what is needed for the job may affect their evaluation of applicants, even those who are equally qualified for the job.

Similar-to-me: This error occurs when an applicant is given more favorable evaluations than warranted because of a similarity with the interviewer in some way (e.g., race, sex, age, attitudes or background). The reverse, dissimilar-to-me, can also occur where an applicant is given less favorable evaluations than warranted due to a difference in one or more of these areas.

Tips for interview board

- ✓ Avoid judgment during the listening and note-taking stage of the assessment.

- ✓ Document the information that was gathered during the interview and use it as the basis to assess applicants on the qualifications.

- ✓ When using a rating scale, use it as intended (for example, do not use half points) and use the full range of the scale.

- ✓ Consistently and continually apply your assessment procedure across all applicants. If you realize that your assessments have changed along the way, review previous assessments in light of the new information and adjust accordingly.

- ✓ Assess the qualifications separately, one at a time.

- ✓ Have the decisiveness to allocate a particular rating when warranted.

- ✓ Be aware that errors may influence your judgement.

For more information

The PSC's Personnel Psychology Centre is a valuable professional resource to consult for designing and conducting structured interviews. To find out more about best practices on structured interviewing, please consult the document "*Structured Interviewing: How to Design and Conduct Structured Interviews in an Appointment Process*" containing:

- Additional resources

- Annexes:

    o Template of Interview Note-taking Booklet

    o Template of Interview Assessment Booklet

    o Checklist for the structured interview in an appointment process

    o Train-the-trainer PowerPoint Presentation

Comments?

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