



Designing and Conducting Structured Interviews: An Overview

Train-the-Traineur Presentation

Personnel Psychology Centre and Assessment Oversight

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Competency-Based Interviewing

Appointments in the Public Service

- The Public Service Commission's Appointment Framework states that appointments to the public service must uphold the core values of **merit** and **non-partisanship** and the guiding values of staffing: access, fairness, representativeness and transparency.
- Merit is served when selected applicants meet the **essential qualifications** of the job, including language proficiency. In addition, managers may take into consideration other merit criteria such as asset qualifications, operational
- requirements and future or present organizational needs.
- The assessment processes and methods used to evaluate applicants must effectively assess the essential qualifications and other merit criteria identified.
- One method of assessment is the **STRUCTURED INTERVIEW**:
 - Serves as a robust assessment tool
 - Can be used to evaluate applicants' essential and asset qualifications

Competency-Based Assessment

- The structured interview can be used to assess the qualifications required to perform a job.
- Qualifications or competencies are:
 - Characteristics of the individual including knowledge, abilities and skills that:
 - Underlie effective performance of work
 - Are linked to the organization's objectives and issues
 - Labelled, defined in narrative description and translated into behavioural indicators.
- A competency profile is a set of qualifications needed to be proficient in a particular job.

Behavioural Indicators

- Behavioural indicators (BIs) translate the definition of a qualification into operational or concrete examples of what persons who possess the qualification actually do or how they behave.

- BIs must be:
 - Specific: reflect the specific context of the job

 - Observable: readily observable and objective, not assumed or inferred by an observer (no judgment)

 - Measurable: rateable either by frequency, clear criteria of effectiveness, etc.

Example Qualification Definition and Behavioural Indicators

Values and Ethics – Serving Through Integrity and Respect

Public service (PS) leaders serve Canadians, ensuring integrity in personal and organizational practices and respect people and PS principles, including democratic, professional, ethical and people values. They build respectful, bilingual, diverse and inclusive workplaces where decisions and transactions are transparent and fair. They hold themselves, their employees and their organizations accountable for their actions. The expectations regarding Values and Ethics for Directors could be described as follows:

Behavioural indicators

- Demonstrates Values and Ethics, including the Code, in personal behaviour
- Integrates Values and Ethics, including the Code, into division practices
- Reflects a commitment to citizens and clients in own and division activities

The Structured Interview

- An interview is a meeting between the board consisting of two or more persons and an applicant seeking appointment to a job.
- A structured interview consists of a series of job-related questions that are consistently applied across all applicants for a particular job and are subjected to a systematic assessment protocol.
- In comparison, unstructured interviews are somewhat random in nature. Applicants may get different sets of questions and be assessed by different criteria.

Interview Characteristics

Unstructured

- No systematic analysis of job requirements
- Applicants are asked different questions in a disorganized manner
- The questions are not always job-related
- Answers are not scored in a systematic way
- The interview board doesn't formally prepare

Structured

- Based on a thorough understanding and articulation of job requirements
- All candidates are asked the same questions, in the same order
- Questions are job-related and competency-based
- Answers are scored in a systematic way
- The interview board is trained in how to conduct structured interviews

Why use Structured Interviews?

- **Job-related:** The focus is on the extent to which applicants demonstrate the essential and asset qualifications required for successful performance on the job. The questions are based on a thorough understanding and articulation of the requirements of the job.
- **Standardized:** The same questions are asked of all applicants. Consistency in approach helps ensure that applicants are treated equally and that comparable information is gathered for each applicant. Also, responses are systematically evaluated against established criteria.
- **Focused on behaviours:** more objective
- **Valid and reliable:** in contrast to unstructured interviews
- **Legally defensible:** enhanced accuracy, consistency, and procedural rigour

Designing a Structured Interview

Designing a Structured Interview

- Step 1: Review job analysis and Statement of Merit Criteria
 - Identify the qualifications to be assessed and their behavioural indicators (BIs)

- Step 2: Develop questions
 - Identify activities or challenges on the job, choose among behavioural, situational or knowledge questions, including standardized probing questions

- Step 3: Develop the assessment criteria
 - Identify the expected responses and how to assess them

1. Review Job Analysis and Statement of Merit Criteria

- The process of identifying the essential functions and duties of the position and the qualifications needed to perform the work.
 - Interview questions based on a job analysis and Statement of Merit Criteria will, by definition, be job-related.

- Job analysis can also identify the characteristics that distinguish excellent, average, and below-average employees.
 - Interview questions designed from this information will be useful in differentiating among applicants.

2. Develop Questions

Types of questions

- **Behavioural questions:** Applicants are asked to describe past events or experiences.
- **Situational questions:** Applicants are asked what they would do in a hypothetical situation.
- **Knowledge questions:** Applicants are asked to demonstrate knowledge or a skill required to successfully perform the duties of the job.

Behavioural Questions

- The premise of this type of question is that past behaviour is the best predictor of future behaviour.
- This type of question is usually phrased as: “Tell us about a time when ...”
- Responses sought include detailed descriptions of:
 - The situation or task
 - What the applicant actually did - the actions taken
 - The outcome

Example of a Behavioural Question

Example to assess strategic thinking

Question: Tell us 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?

Situational Questions

- Applicants are asked what they would do in a hypothetical, job-related situation. The premise of this type of question is that stated intentions predict future behaviour.
- This type of question is usually phrased as: “What would you do if ...?”
- Responses sought:
 - Detailed descriptions of what the candidate would do
 - Evidence of the kinds of behaviours the candidate would demonstrate in the presented situation

Example of a Situational Question

Example - to assess teamwork

What would you do if you intended to change procedures to enhance the quality of work 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?

Knowledge Questions

- Applicants are presented with questions related to the technical or basic knowledge required to perform the job and are asked to demonstrate their knowledge.
- Useful in situations where the position for which you are hiring requires the verbalization of technical information or work procedures.
- Responses sought:
 - Detailed descriptions of the applicant's knowledge of information that is important to overall performance on the job

Example of a Knowledge Question

Example to assess knowledge of the hiring process within the public service

How would you go about designing a process that ensures that the assessment of applicants is based on merit?

Question Development

- A good source to consult for questions is the people who work in positions similar to the one you are staffing.
 - Ask people to write out real-life scenarios that have happened to them and that permitted them to show the qualifications in question.
- These scenarios can then be written as situational or behavioural questions.
- Develop probing and follow-up questions that will be used to redirect the applicants' responses, as required.

Sample Follow-up Questions

Behavioural Questions

- What was the context and the situation?
- Who was involved?
- What specifically did you do?
- What was the outcome?

Situational Questions

- How would you accomplish that?
- Why would you do that?
- When would you do that?
- Who would you involve?

Question Development, Cont'd

- Ensure that questions provide opportunities for applicants to demonstrate the behaviours being assessed.
- May require more than one question to “cover” all of the behaviours associated with a qualification.
- One question can assess more than one qualification.

Appropriate Interview Questions

- Interview questions should be kept to job-related topics and should avoid **prohibited topics** such as:
 - Race
 - Colour
 - Age
 - Sexual orientation
 - Family status
 - Conviction (when a pardon has been granted)
 - Sex (including pregnancy and childbirth)
 - National or ethnic origin
 - Religion
 - Disability
 - Marital status

- It is inappropriate to inquire about areas that are unrelated to actual job performance such as:
 - Hobbies
 - Political beliefs
 - Medical status
 - Social activities
 - Residence
 - Past legal actions

Exercise

Instructions: Read each item as though you were conducting an interview. Ask yourself, “May I ask this question?” Check those you feel are not appropriate.

- 1. How many children do you have?
- 2. Do you plan to start a family soon?
- 3. This job frequently requires overtime work. Would this be a problem for you?
- 4. What language do you speak at home?
- 5. Were you born in this country?
- 6. Are you a Canadian citizen?
- 7. Do you live with relatives?
- 8. What health problems do you have?
- 9. Are you capable of performing the essential responsibilities of the job?
- 10. Have you ever been convicted of a crime?
- 11. What clubs or organizations do you belong to?
- 12. Have you ever had trouble obtaining credit?
- 13. That’s an unusual name. What nationality is it?
- 14. Do you own your own home or are you renting?
- 15. Are you married?
- 16. This job requires a lot of heavy lifting. Do you think you can do it?
- 17. What is your church affiliation?

Exercise

Identify which questions would provide fair, meritorious assessment:

- What are your strengths and weaknesses?
- Handling conflict is a part of any manager's job. What was the most challenging conflict situation that you faced and how did you handle it?
- Suppose you went to the North Pole for 6 dark months of solitude. You would have all the provisions necessary to sustain life, but could take only 3 books with you. What would you take and why?
- Suppose you had an idea for a change in work procedures that would enhance efficiency, but some of our team members were against this change. What would you do?
- Give me 3 reasons why manhole covers are round?
- Sometimes a supervisor is not in the office but a decision has to be made to complete a task. Tell me about an important decision that you had to make under these circumstances?
- If you had the opportunity to do the last 10 years of your career over again, what would you do differently?

Exercise – Answers

☒ What are your strengths and weaknesses?

- This question is unlikely to provide any information related to the qualifications required to perform a job. It is a favourite question of most interviewers. Most applicants are prepared and coached to respond by picking a strength that they think the interviewer values and talking about it in semi-negative terms.

☒ Handling conflict is a part of any manager's job. What was the most challenging conflict situation that you faced and how you did you handle it?

- This question would be fair and meritorious for management positions that entail dealing with conflict. It assesses how an applicant would approach and deal with conflict situations.

☒ Suppose you went to the North Pole for 6 dark months of solitude. You would have all the provisions necessary to sustain life, but could take only 3 books with you. What would you take and why?

- Many interviewers have a “magic question” they like to ask. The assumption is that this will provide information on the applicant's psyche, personality, and/or general attitude towards life. However, such a question will not provide any work-related information or any information on the qualifications required to do the job.

Exercise – Answers, Cont’d

- ☑ Suppose you had an idea for a change in work procedures that would enhance efficiency, but some of your team members were against this change. What would you do?
 - This question would be fair and meritorious for positions that entail teamwork. It assesses how an applicant would approach and deal with difficult team situations that are likely to arise on the job.

- ☑ Give me 3 reasons why manhole covers are round?
 - Some interviewers like this type of “off-the-wall question” which they believe assesses how applicants “think on their feet” and/or their analytical skills. However, this type of question is not job-related nor does it provide any information on the ability or job-related qualifications of an applicant.

- ☑ Sometimes a supervisor is not in the office but a decision has to be made to complete a task. Tell me about an important decision that you had to make under these circumstances?
 - This question would be fair and meritorious for positions that entail decision-making. It assesses how an applicant would make decisions in difficult situations that are likely to arise on the job.

Exercise – Answers, Cont'd

- ☒ If you had the opportunity to do the last 10 years of your career over again, what would you do differently?
 - Interviewers sometimes like this type of question as they believe it will provide insight into how an applicant feels about their chosen career. However, this type of question is not job-related.

Competency Assessment

- The interview should focus on several aspects of the job, while giving the person the opportunity to demonstrate their capacity to respond to relevant incidents.
- However, no more than 7 qualifications should be assessed in an interview.
 - Otherwise, trying to assess more qualifications may lead to superficial evaluation
- Verify, using a qualification by question grid, that your interview covers all of the qualifications that you intended to assess.

3. Developing the Assessment Criteria

- The expected responses or behavioural indicators and the way the answers will be assessed have to be predetermined and applied consistently during the process.

- Using a rating scale:
 - Standardizes the assessment process
 - Maximizes the consistency of evaluation across applicants
 - Leads to valid assessment of qualifications, and fair, equitable assessment for all applicants

Rating Scale Development

- Each qualification to be assessed using the pre-established rating scale - with clear criteria
- The rating scale should assess the **scope** and **depth** of the behaviours observed
- To define the points on the rating scale:
 - Consider the kinds of actions, responses and efficient behaviours that are relevant to the qualifications being assessed
 - Identify examples of behaviours that differentiate different levels of effectiveness, ranging from ineffective to superior. The scale must clearly differentiate among applicants exhibiting weak, moderate and strong instances of the qualification being assessed

Sample Rating Scale

STRATEGIC THINKING – ANALYSIS

Behavioural Indicators:

1. Coordinates information from multiple projects to form a comprehensive perspective
2. Identifies interdependencies across unit projects
3. Analyzes setbacks and seeks honest feedback to learn from mistakes

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

Interview Protocol

- It should be decided whether applicants will have time to prepare with the interview questions on-site before meeting with the board members. The amount of time given must be the same for each applicant.
- It takes generally 10 minutes to answer each question. The interview shouldn't last more than an hour and half; therefore, the number of questions should be limited.
- Decide who is going to lead the interview, provide a standardized introduction and conclusion.
- Decide the order in which the questions will be asked and who is going to ask what questions.
- The interview schedule should allow for breaks and time to assess candidates' qualifications between interviews.

Conducting a Structured Interview

Conducting a Structured Interview

1. Preparation
2. Arrival of the applicant and initiating the interview
3. Asking the questions
4. Controlling the interview
5. Note-taking
6. Closing the interview
7. Assessing the qualifications

1. Preparing for the Interview

- Each member of the interview board should be thoroughly familiar with:
 - The major duties of the position to be staffed
 - The related qualification definitions and behaviours
 - Interview schedule
 - Assessment of persons with disabilities : http://www.psc-cfp.gc.ca/ppc/disability/disability_preface_e.htm
 - Fair assessment : http://www.psc-cfp.gc.ca/ppc/removing_barriers_message_e.htm

Preparing for the Interview, Cont'd

- Each interview board member should have a copy of the following :
 - Interview Note-taking Booklet
 - Interview Assessment Booklet
- Each interview board member should be clear on their roles and on which question(s) they will be asking during the interview.

2. Arrival of Applicant

- Members of the interview board should arrive in plenty of time to prepare and set up prior to the applicant's arrival.
- When applicants arrive for the interview, they should be greeted by a member of the board or a person familiar with the interview protocol.
- If time is allocated to prepare with the interview questions before meeting the board:
 - The instructions for preparing as well as the interview questions should be provided to the applicant. The instructions for preparing can be provided orally to the applicant. A standard script that outlines the points to be covered should be prepared.
 - The applicant should be permitted to bring the interview questions and notes to the interview so as to refer to them throughout.
- The applicant should be provided with water, pencils/pens and paper for the interview.

Initiating the Interview

Suggestions for the lead interviewer to help put applicants at ease:

- Introduce self, welcoming remarks, thank the applicant for attending.
- Introduce members of the board.
- A few moments of informal conversation*.
 - For example, asking applicants “Did you have any trouble finding the place?”

* Informal conversation should not infringe on prohibited topics or non-work related activities.

3. Asking Interview Questions

- Ask each question slowly and clearly.
- Read each question **verbatim**.
- Ask all questions in order.
- Ask follow-up/probing questions as required.

Asking Interview Questions, Cont'd

- The structured interview uses a highly standardized format. All applicants should be given the same instructions and asked the same set of questions in the same order.
- Applicants' responses will vary in length and level of detail. This is acceptable as long as the interviewers obtain enough information to assess each qualification fairly and accurately.

Asking Interview Questions, Cont'd

- Interviewers should use standardized probes to ensure that sufficient information is obtained or to get the applicant back on track.
 - Example of a standardized probe:
“Specifically, what did you do?”

- The same follow-up questions should be used to avoid inconsistency and to control for inappropriate probing (e.g., leading questions, paraphrasing, yes-no questions, over-probing, etc.) so that no applicant is advantaged or disadvantaged.
 - In instances where an applicant has provided all required information, it might not be necessary to ask a follow-up question.

4. Controlling the Interview

- Use standardized probes
- Get the whole story
- Keep track of the time
- Control the flow of the interview

5. Note-Taking

- All interviewers take notes – important for reliability.
- Make sure to capture the following in your notes:
 - Situation
 - Timing (i.e., when)
 - Actions taken
 - Results
- As close to verbatim as possible.
- Based on careful observations of behaviours related to the qualifications being assessed.

Note-Taking, Cont'd

- The notes should be an accurate record of what the applicant said or did, not the interviewer's inferences or judgements.
 - Record only what the applicant says, not your opinion or feelings about what they say
- Two-stage process:
 - Collect the data (i.e., verbatim notes) during the interview
 - Evaluate the data after the interview
- Interview notes are accessible to applicants, should they request them.

6. Closing the Interview

The lead interviewer should:

- Give information concerning the next steps in the appointment process.
- Give the applicant an opportunity to ask questions.
- Collect all materials (questions, notes).
- Thank the applicant and escort them out of the room.

7. Assessment of Qualifications

- Do not assess until after the interview; it is important to separate observation from evaluation.
- After the interview, the interview board members are ready to assess the qualifications for the applicant. One board member is to be the chair of the process.

Assessment of Qualifications, Cont'd

- The interview board members will need the following:
 - Notes taken during the interview in the Interview Note-taking Booklet
 - Interview Assessment Booklet, which includes the qualifications and behavioural indicators assessed during the interview
- Evaluating applicant responses based on:
 - qualifications/behaviours being assessed
 - Evidence - what the applicant demonstrated
 - **Scope** and **depth** of demonstrated behaviours

Assessment of Qualifications, Cont'd

- The SCOPE of the behaviours that constitute the qualification:
 - **How many** behavioural indicators for a given qualification are evident in the candidate's responses.
 - **To what extent** most or all of the behaviours for a given qualification were demonstrated.

- The DEPTH to which they were demonstrated during the interview:
 - **How** these behaviours were demonstrated.
 - Evaluated by the degree of ***complexity, soundness and precision*** with which the behaviour is demonstrated in the candidate's responses.

Assessment of Qualifications, Cont'd

- When assessing the qualifications, use all of the behavioural evidence provided, even if it appears in responses to questions targeting other qualifications.

- Document evaluation decisions
 - Provide rationale for decisions, making explicit links to established behavioural indicators/criteria and the behaviours demonstrated by the candidate.

The Evaluation Process

- Step 1: All members of the board review the definition of the first qualification to be assessed and its behavioural indicators.
- Step 2: Each member reviews their interview notes individually.
- Step 3: Each member assesses the qualification independently.
- Step 4: A group discussion on the assessment starts, to reach consensus on the rating of the qualification.
- Step 5: The final group assessment with the rationale is recorded.
- Step 6: The remaining qualifications are assessed in turn.
- Step 7: The final group assessments and notes providing the rationale are placed in the applicant's file.

Assessment Errors

- The process of assessment is a difficult and delicate job, yet the success and value of the interview hinges on the quality of these ratings.
- **Assessment errors** occur when an assessor's evaluation is influenced by other factors than the information provided by the applicant during the interview.

Common Assessment Errors

- **First Impressions:** Unconsciously, you may judge an applicant positively or negatively from the outset, resulting in an assessment of the applicant according to your own beliefs rather than according to the qualifications required for the job and their true performance.
- **Leniency and Stringency:** These are the general tendencies to assess applicants consistently high (leniency effect) or low (stringency effect). The understanding of the requirements for the job and the qualifications assessed may differ from one assessor to another. The assessment needs to be fair to all applicants. The result of this error is that the assessment of applicants is either higher or lower than warranted.
- **Central Tendency:** This is the tendency to use only the middle points of the rating scale, while avoiding the extreme points. You may be reluctant to rate applicants high or low and, therefore, rate all applicants as average, not differentiating among them.
- **“Halo” and “Horn” Effects:** These errors involve the tendency to allow one good (halo) or bad (horn) characteristic or qualification influence the evaluation of all other qualifications of an applicant. 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.

Common Assessment Errors, Cont'd

- **Contrast Effect:** This is the tendency to assess an applicant relative to the performance of a previous applicant instead of using the assessment guide. You have to be aware that you might encounter applicants who will stand out, positively or negatively, and that subsequent applicants may be under- or over-assessed as a result.
- **Fatigue:** This is the tendency among board members to become fatigued during a lengthy interviewing process and 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 your own personal biases and preconceptions of a good employee influence your evaluations. 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. You must be aware that personal beliefs and perceptions of what is needed for the job may affect evaluations of applicants.
- **Similar-to-me:** This error occurs when an applicant is given more favourable evaluations than warranted because they are similar to 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 favourable evaluations than warranted because of perceived differences.

Tips to Minimize Assessment Errors

- Train all interviewers on how to assess applicants.
- Document the information that was gathered during the interview and use it as the basis to assess applicants on the qualifications.
- Consistently and continually apply your assessment procedure across all applicants. After all applicants have been interviewed, review your assessments for each question to ensure consistent treatment of responses.
- When using a rating scale, use it as intended – use the full range of the scale.
- Have the decisiveness to allocate a particular rating when warranted by the rating scale.
- Be flexible in accepting correct responses from applicants and, in doing so, keep in mind all applicants' previous responses.
- Try not to place undue weight on isolated incidents.
- Consistently justify your assessment by the job requirements, the assessed qualifications and behavioural indicators and the notes that you have taken on the applicant's performance.
- Discuss the assessment as a group and question each other's individual assessments.

Useful Resources

- Structured Interviewing: How to Design and Conduct Structured Interviews for an Appointment Process
 - An exhaustive guide for HR practitioners and managers wanting to use a structured interview to assess applicants in an appointment process
- Structured Interviewing: Interview Board Guide
 - The reference for board members conducting structured interviews in an appointment process.
- Personnel Psychology Centre
 - A valuable resource on structured interviews.