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Improving selection interviews with structure: organisations' use of "behavioural" interviews

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Abstract *Explains the advantages of behavioural interviewing as a method of employee selection. Reports on a survey of UK organisations' use of behavioural interviewing in selection. Both interviewers and candidates were positive about the technique. Benefits identified were better quality information gathering leading to improved selection decisions, more consistency and improved skills of interviewers, as well providing candidates with better opportunities to explain their skills. Concerns were raised regarding the training, practice and time required, scoring procedures and possible limitations in respect of certain candidates. Links with wider use of competencies in HRM are examined as well as links with other selection methods. Concludes that behavioural interviewing has significant benefits in improving selection and can also be applied to other interviewing situations such as discipline and grievance. Discusses implications for interviewers, candidates and trainers. Issues for further research are outlined.*

Introduction

Many studies have reported the limitations of interviews as a means of employee selection (summarised in Anderson, 1992).

Nevertheless interviews remain popular in selection, because of:

- their social functions in selection, such as selling, persuading, and negotiating;
- their acceptability to interviewers (especially line managers), and candidates; and
- the time and cost constraints of other methods such as tests and assessments centres.

Structured interviewing techniques have been reported as more reliable and more valid predictors of likely candidate job success than "traditional interviews". Of these structured techniques the "behavioural" interviewing approach is particularly useful.

This paper reports on a study of the application of behavioural interviewing by 49 organisations. Previous research on behavioural interviewing has tended to be experimental in nature, and little is known about how it is used in practice. Previous surveys of organisations' recruitment and selection practices have not explored the use of this technique (Robertson and Makin, 1986; Shackleton and Newell, 1991; Williams, 1992), hence this study is the first to investigate how and why organisations use it and to examine their experiences of it.

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The paper begins by exploring the various elements which can provide "structure" in interviewing. From this, the use of different types of question are identified, especially "behavioural" and "situational" questions. The evidence of validity of behavioural questions is then reviewed, as well as their advantages in practice. The paper then goes on to describe the research survey into the use of behavioural interviewing and its results, and discusses learning points and implications for interviewers, candidates and trainers. Finally, the paper highlights areas for further research.

Structured interviewing

It is often suggested that "structure" improves interviews. However, it is not always clear as to what is meant by a "structured" interview. Campion *et al.* (1997) have conducted a very thorough review of the literature to describe and evaluate the many ways interviews can be structured. They identify 15 components of structure, divided into two categories: those that influence the content of the interview, or the nature of the information elicited, and those that influence the evaluation process, or the judgement of the information elicited. They critique each of these in terms of their impact on various aspects of validity and user reactions. These are listed in Table I.

Whilst many of the components have been shown to improve reliability or validity, some of these also have a negative impact on interviewers or candidates. For example, limited prompting, longer interviews, control of ancillary information and no questions from candidates may cause unfavourable reactions from both candidates and interviewers. Being required to take detailed notes and being prohibited from discussing candidates may be

Components influencing content
1. Base questions on job analysis
2. Ask exact same questions of each candidate
3. Limit prompting, follow-up questioning and elaboration on questions
4. Use better types of questions
5. Use longer interview or larger number of questions
6. Control ancillary information
7. Do not allow questions from candidate until after the interview
Components influencing the evaluation process
8. Rate each answer or use multiple scales
9. Use detailed anchored rating scales
10. Take detailed notes
11. Use multiple interviewers
12. Use same interviewer(s) across all candidates
13. Do not discuss candidates or answers between interviews
14. Provide extensive interview training
15. Use statistical rather than clinical prediction

Note: Reviewed by Campion *et al.* (1997)

Table I.
Components of interview structure

resented by interviewers. The interview serves recruiting and public relations roles in addition to the selection role, and potential trade offs between the psychometric properties and user reactions must be recognised. (Campion *et al.*, 1997).

From their analysis of the research, Campion *et al.*'s conclusions are that regarding content, the use of job analysis, same questions and better types of questions appear more important in improving interviews than other components. Regarding evaluation, rating each answer, or having multiple scales, using anchored scales and training appear more important.

Better types of question

In terms of the types of question which might be used to structure the interview, two particular types of question which have been widely studied are situational questions and past behaviour type questions. Situational questions pose hypothetical situations that may occur on the job and candidates are asked what they would do. In contrast, past behaviour (or behavioural) questions focus on past behaviour by asking candidates to describe what they did in past jobs. For example, where a job requires persuasiveness, behavioural questions ask candidates to describe a situation where they had to persuade someone to change their view or gain support for something. The interviewer seeks evidence of successful persuasive skills from past events, the inference being that having been successful in the past, such a candidate would be likely to also be successful at persuading in the future, given a similar situation. Both past behaviour questions and situational questions require interviewers to have a clear idea of the competencies required for the job and to focus questions on these competencies, which improves the likelihood of selecting the right person for the job.

Other question types include those on opinions or attitudes, goals and aspirations, and self-descriptions and self-evaluations. These are weaker because they allow candidates to present their credentials in an overly favourable manner or avoid revealing weaknesses (Campion *et al.*, 1997)

Both situational questions and past behaviour questions have demonstrated improved validity over less structured questions. It is suggested that situational questions may predict future behaviour because of the relationship between intentions and future behaviour (Locke and Latham, 1984). Past behaviour questions may predict because of the adage that "the best prophet of the future is the past" (Byron), or "behaviour consistency theory" (Cronshaw and Wiesner, 1989).

Evidence of validity

Janz (1982) compared the validity of behavioural interviews with the validity of "standard" interviews using undergraduates as interviewers and found that the former produced a validity correlation coefficient of 0.54, whereas the correlation for the latter was only 0.07. Orpen (1985) conducted a similar study using interviewers and existing employees in an insurance company. Here, the

behavioural interviews also produced statistically higher validity coefficients than the standard interview format: 0.48 compared to 0.08 when using supervisors' ratings of employees as the criterion, and 0.61 compared to 0.05 when using value of sales as a more objective measure of employee performance.

Campion *et al.* (1994) compared the use of behavioural type interviews with situational type interviewing, and found that behavioural questions had slightly higher validity (0.51) than the situational questions (0.39), when correlated with supervisory ratings of performance. Pulakos and Schmitt (1995) commented that questions used in the Campion study tended to focus on cognitive aspects of the job, rather like a cognitive ability test. Using a sample of more than 200 employees in professional posts, they also compared experience-based and hypothetical questioning approaches, tapping a broader range of job related skills and abilities. In this study, only the behavioural interview showed a significant relationship (0.32) with performance (Pulakos and Schmitt, 1995).

The validity of the behavioural interviewing approach demonstrated in these studies (0.32-0.61) compares very well with that demonstrated elsewhere for assessment centres and work samples (Anderson and Shackleton, 1993). Situational questions have also demonstrated high validity and in some cases more so than past behaviour questions (Latham and Saari, 1984; Maurer and Fay, 1988; McDaniel *et al.*, 1994) although the behaviour questions used in some of these studies tended to be broad enquiries about past experiences rather than specific questions requiring specific examples of past behaviour.

Whilst the evidence is not clear about which questioning approach is superior in terms of validity, other factors make the past behaviour approach the more appealing of the two.

Advantages of behavioural interviewing

Flexibility

Some structured interviews have been criticised as being inflexible (Anderson, 1992), using a list of prepared questions for all candidates, and these are found most often in the public sector (Goodale, 1989). This approach, which is usual with situational questions, can reduce the role of the interviewer to a mere administrator of standard questions, which can feel like an oral test to the candidate, and is likely to be resented by interviewers. This is contrary to the espoused advantages of interviewing: that it is a two-way, social exchange between the parties and not just a neutral measuring instrument.

Behavioural questioning, however, is more flexible than situational questioning. It allows candidates to explain their skills in real events from their own experience rather than having to imagine hypothetical situations which may be outside their experience, and probing questions can be used as appropriate to each candidate. "The flexibility to tailor behavioural questions to particular candidates is why it has sometimes been referred to as a 'patterned' interview; the interviewer follows a pattern of questions rather than asking identical questions" (Taylor and O'Driscoll, 1995).

Equal opportunities

Good interviews focus on job related criteria, so reducing the likelihood of bias due to superficial and personal characteristics, and increasing fairness in selection (Cooper and Robertson, 1995). With behavioural questions, although the focus is on criteria necessary to the job, candidates need not be restricted to work experience to describe their skills. Examples of this would be where a woman returning from a career break describes skills in running a children's play group, or where a recent graduate discusses skills developed from a group project at university. In considering sources of information outside the workplace this approach gives the widest possible opportunity to candidates to demonstrate their suitability for the job.

Avoiding faking by candidates

Questions based on past behaviour are more likely to elicit more truthful responses from candidates for two reasons: detail of evidence and verifiability. When the candidate describes a specific situation, detailed probing is then used to determine the candidate's actions, thoughts, feelings and words at the time. It therefore elicits detailed, in-depth evidence about actual behaviour, which makes "faking" by candidates less likely and the quality of evidence more robust. This evidence of performance can also be verified with former employers.

Evidence for decisions

Behavioural interviewing can also be helpful when interviewers are asked to justify their decision or give feedback to an unsuccessful candidate. The interviewer can point to the evidence given, or lack of it, of persuasiveness, decisiveness, planning, or whatever skills are required for effective job performance.

Cost

Behavioural interviewing elicits evidence from candidates about their actual behaviour. In this respect it is similar to the type of evidence gathered in an assessment centre. The difference is that in the assessment centre the assessor observes the behaviour, and in the interview the candidate describes the behaviour. However, assessment centres are very time consuming and costly to design and run and so behavioural interviews present a quicker and cheaper option (Taylor and O'Driscoll, 1995).

Previous research

As noted, studies have demonstrated the potential of behavioural interviewing over more traditional interviews. These studies, however, have tended to use an experimental approach, with interviewers following the researcher's specific instructions, and the interview is evaluated mainly in terms of reliability and validity. Less is known about the use of this technique in practice by organisations, and this is the focus of the present study. Research by Di Milia

and Gorodecki (1997) has already demonstrated that the reliability of a structured interviewing system based on past behaviour was lower when applied in practice in a real situation by real interviewers. As noted by Harris (1989), researchers should study actual interviewers in actual interview contexts, and more research is needed on a variety of practical issues relevant to structured interviews in particular.

The author had previously conducted a study to identify organisations which were using situational and behavioural interviewing techniques (Barclay, 1999). This is the second stage of that research and reports on a more detailed investigation into behavioural interviewing by those organisations using it. In particular, it explores the reasons why organisations have adopted the technique, training provided, changes made since its introduction, and benefits and problems in practice. Links with wider use of competencies in HRM are examined as well as links with other selection methods such as tests and assessment centres. It also considers the acceptability of the technique to both interviewers and candidates.

The investigation

Behavioural interviewing is not common practice, and so the author conducted an initial survey to identify organisations using behavioural interviewing as well as those using situational questioning. This identified 174 organisations who were using behavioural interviewing systematically (Barclay, 1999). These 174 organisations were used as the basis for the present study. Valid contact details were available for 163 of these, and a questionnaire was sent in June 1997 (mainly to human resource managers); 49 useable replies were received, representing a 30 per cent response rate, which is not untypical for postal questionnaires.

Respondents represented all organisation sizes, ranging from 19 to over 10,000 employees, as shown in Table II.

Almost half the respondents are organisations with fewer than 500 employees, indicating that behavioural interviewing is not just the preserve of large organisations.

Of the responses, 59 per cent were from private sector organisations, 26 per cent from the public sector and 6 per cent from the voluntary sector (a further 8 per cent did not identify themselves).

Most of the public sector respondents were local authorities in Scotland and England, with two universities, one NHS Trust and two other public bodies. Of

Table II. Respondents by organisation size

Number of employees in organisation	Percentage of respondents
0-100	10
101-500	34
501-1,000	17
1,001-5,000	24
Over 5,000	15

those in the private sector, half were providers of financial, legal, training or other consultancy services. The other half were mainly from sales, manufacturing and hotel sectors. The respondents are not typical of UK organisations generally. Whilst including a range of sizes and sectors, and covering organisations employing over 100,000 employees in total, they have a strong professional service sector bias, and feature many blue chip organisations. These include, for example, Deloitte & Touche, Abbey National, Lloyds Bank, Britannia Life, Ashridge Management College, Marks & Spencer, Yellow Pages, Mitsubishi, The Hilton, Lufthansa and Shell International. It is not possible to say that these are typical of organisations which use behavioural interviewing: this may be due to the original survey sample used.

The survey questions asked about:

- the introduction of behavioural interviewing, when and why it had been introduced, changes made since initial introduction and training provided;
- competencies used for selection, and use of these in other areas of human resource management;
- approach to scoring and evaluation of evidence in decision making;
- candidates' and interviewers' reactions to behavioural interviewing;
- benefits and limitations experienced.

Results

Introduction of behavioural interviewing

Most respondents, 44 per cent, had been using behavioural interviewing for more than five years, 35 per cent had been using it for between two and five years. However, 21 per cent had only introduced behavioural interviewing in the previous two years, indicating that this is a selection technique which seems to be growing in popularity.

Since its introduction, many organisations had also extended the use of behavioural interviewing throughout the organisation:

> originally used only by experienced interviewers and human resource professionals, but all staff interviewing are now using this technique.

Of all respondents, 83 per cent are now using the technique in selection for all posts in the organisation. Where its use is more limited, this tends to be for mainly management and senior positions.

All respondents in the present survey had indicated previously that they were using behavioural interviewing (Barclay, 1999). In addition to this, respondents were given a detailed explanation of behavioural type interview questions, so that their responses would be related to the same approach. About half (47 per cent) of the respondents refer to this type of interviewing technique as "behavioural" interviewing, whilst others (29 per cent) refer to it as "competency based" interviewing, and yet others as "criterion based", (20 per cent). Further names mentioned were "skills based" interviewing, "life

questioning" and "behavioural event" interviewing. Several respondents indicated that they used more than one name for the technique, suggesting that these differences may reflect a variety in labels, rather than differences in actual practice. However, it may also be the case that there are differences in the approach used in practice. If so then these cannot be detected by survey but may be explored in future case studies. Indeed, there may well be variations in approach between individuals or departments within organisations as well as between organisations, and this issue is discussed later, in relation to training and practice for interviewers.

The main reason quoted for its introduction was to improve selection decisions (67 per cent of responses). The second most important reason given was to improve selection processes and skills (43 per cent of respondents gave this as the second reason and 20 per cent gave this as the main reason). Interestingly, equal opportunities were not a main consideration, and were mentioned by only 12 per cent as a secondary reason.

Almost all respondents (92 per cent) felt that behavioural interviewing had improved the selection process and decisions, with most of these saying it had improved a lot, rather than just a little. Of these assertions 60 per cent were supported by the fact that the organisation carried out some form of monitoring or evaluation of selection decisions, e.g. "since introduction, turnover has decreased to 6 per cent".

Benefits

The particular benefits quoted by respondents are summarised in Table III.

Limitations

The main limitations found with behavioural interviewing are summarised in Table IV, although it should be noted that almost 20 per cent of respondents quoted no problems with the technique.

These benefits and limitations are discussed below.

Benefit	Percentage of responses
Better quality of information gathered	53
More fairness/objectivity/consistency	30
Better decisions made	29
More focus on relevant criteria	16
Improves skills of interviewers	10
Allows candidates better opportunity to explain their skills	12
Allows candidate to "self assess"	10
Provides a link with references	6

Table III.
Benefits of behavioural interviewing

Note: Percentages total more than 100 as some respondents mentioned more than one benefit

Issue	Percentage of responses
Training and practice required	26
Time consuming	18
More preparation required	12
Ensuring managers use it	10
Still wish to use some form of test	8
Less useful for younger candidates/graduates	6
Some candidates "clam up"	6
Some candidates still "spin a yarn"	6
Evaluation of information still difficult	4
Other	8

Note: Percentages do not total 100 because some respondents mentioned several problems, while others mentioned none

Table IV. Problems with behavioural interviewing

Improved processes and decisions

The main benefits mentioned by respondents were improvements in the quality of information gained, leading to better selection decisions:

> Getting candidates to cite real life situations which can be probed further.

> It's a means of finding out how someone did cope, not how they think they would cope.

Second, respondents felt that use of the technique reduced subjectivity in interviewing, and improved consistency. It also helped interviewers to improve their skills in questioning and focus more on the relevant criteria for the job:

> It gets away from the "cosy chat" syndrome.

> Line managers are better focused on the requirements of the job.

Goodale (1989) has mentioned that two of the most common problems experienced by interviewers, even trained and experienced interviewers, are "quiet, evasive and polished candidates" and "lack of skill in breaking through the applicant's facade and prepared answers". Candidates are often well trained and rehearsed in "how to pass an employment interview", and most interviewers are poorly prepared to deal with the increasingly sophisticated applicants they face. Behavioural interviewing can be very useful in overcoming these problems, as reported by several respondents:

> Candidates are less likely to produce rehearsed answers.

> It cuts out the bullshit !

Whilst behavioural interviewing is no guarantee of success, very few were concerned that professional interviewees could still "spin a yarn".

Interviewer reactions

Overall, most interviewers (80 per cent) were reported to be positive about the behavioural interviewing technique, with the remainder being neutral, apprehensive or mixed in views.

The main three problems for interviewers were not unexpected: the importance of training and practice, preparation required and the time required to carry out behavioural interviews effectively. Respondents were not unhappy with these issues, rather they were concerned that it was important to recognise that these were necessary investments to ensure the effectiveness of the process:

> Interviewers need lots of experience and training to gain confidence.
>
> It requires time, careful thought about what skills and abilities are required, and development of the right questions to use.
>
> It takes time to do properly.

Training provided

An important determinant of success of this interviewing technique, as with all interviewing, is the skill of the interviewers. Training is therefore an important requirement. Most organisations provided training in behavioural interviewing ranging from one to three days, mostly provided by internal training and/or human resource staff. Where external consultants were used, in 80 per cent of these cases, these were employed in conjunction with internal staff. Such high use of internal trainers in behavioural interviewing allows a stronger focus on the organisations' own competency lists and definitions, making the training more relevant to the organisation's own competency framework.

It is a concern, however, that 14 per cent of respondents provided no training in behavioural interviewing. It was these organisations who also expressed concern about possible poor handling of interviews:

> It can be handled badly by an untrained interviewer.
>
> Some managers don't give the time for preparation, or fool themselves into thinking they've done this when they haven't.

Some respondents also seem to have issues in persuading line managers to adopt this style of interviewing, and to persevere with it:

> Persuading selectors to develop good practice.
>
> Ensuring that line managers stick with it and do not revert to a more self indulgent, "within their comfort zone" style.

It seems that whilst behavioural interviewing has many potential benefits for interviewers, this is not a quick and easy procedure, but requires willingness and persistence.

Impact on candidates

Some research has shown that candidates seem to prefer the interview as a selection method, believing that it allows them to present themselves more favourably than psychometric testing (Silvester and Brown, 1993). Candidates' reactions to selection processes are important because these can influence the attractiveness of the job (Rynes 1989), whether a job offer is accepted (Taylor

and Bergmann, 1987), the image of the organisation (Mabey and Iles, 1991) and commitment to the organisation (Iles and Robertson, 1989).

Respondents felt that behavioural interviewing helped candidates to have a full hearing at interview:

> Individuals are more relaxed talking about actual experiences.
>
> It helps the candidate go into more detail.

It was also felt that this encouraged candidates to think about the particular skills required, emphasising the two-way aspect of interviews:

> It forces the candidate to self-assess against job criteria.
>
> It challenges people to think about the relevance of their experience.

Respondents are therefore conscious of the need for a reciprocal approach to employment decision making, emphasised by Torrington and Hall (1998). If behavioural interviews help to provide candidates with a more "realistic job preview" in terms of the skills required in the job (Wanous, 1975; Makin and Robertson, 1983), then this will allow them to make more informed decisions about whether the job matches their aspirations, perhaps avoiding disappointments later on.

Behavioural interviewing is still less prevalent than more traditional, biographical interviews, and some candidates may be taken by surprise in its approach. They are required to think of specific examples where they demonstrate particular behaviour, and explain this in detail. Candidates can be "put on the spot" and find it difficult to think of specific events. For this reason, some organisations give some advance warning of what to expect by way of this questioning technique. This allows candidates to come to terms with this approach and provide the sort of specific information requested. On the other hand, it may be argued that such advance warning merely allows candidates to provide rehearsed answers.

A third of respondents do indeed provide some advance warning to candidates of the type of interview approach to expect, and a third give information on the particular criteria or competencies to be explored. However, only very few (10 per cent) give both advance warning of the approach as well as the particular criteria to be explored.

Most respondents considered that candidates reactions to this type of interview were positive. None thought that candidates reacted negatively, although some said candidates were "neutral" about it, "apprehensive", or "mixed" in their reactions, and some didn't know.

Candidates' reactions to behavioural interviewing, as reported by organisations, are summarised in Table V.

Of those who considered that candidates were "apprehensive", all of these were organisations which provided prior information about the technique but not about the specific competencies. Of those which said that candidates were "mixed" in their reactions, most of these also provided at least some information in advance. It therefore seems that some prior warning may be

worrying for candidates – providing some information may be enough to generate anxiety, without removing uncertainty. It seems that a little information is a worrying (if not a dangerous) thing!

Some respondents indicated that they had found behavioural interviewing less useful with certain candidates, especially younger ones who had less work experience to draw on:

> Some candidates do clam up and find it difficult to think of situations.

> Does not test potential for younger candidates.

This supports research by Rynes (1993) that students believed that their school based examples of experience would not "measure up" to employment related examples. Di Milia and Gorodecki (1997) also found evidence that interviewers may not attach as much importance to school based examples of behaviour as employment related examples. Whilst this may be justifiable with older, experienced candidates, this could well disadvantage younger ones.

Competency approach

Of the respondents, 45 per cent said that they had made a significant change to the way the behavioural interviewing technique was used since its initial introduction. Almost half of these changes related to the use and definition of the competencies used for selection:

> Now based on specific competencies since the introduction of a competency framework.

Whilst half of the organisations determine the competencies for each job as it arises, a further 30 per cent have already defined competencies for jobs or job families (20 per cent use a bit of both approaches, with some competencies already defined for some jobs but not all).

Also, 70 per cent of respondents use competencies as a basis for appraisal and/or for training and development. There was a strong link between these organisations and those where competencies have been already defined, suggesting a systematic use of a competency approach across the HR activities of selection, training/development and appraisal (although this does not extend to salary decisions).

In addition, many organisations (45 per cent) find that the behavioural interviewing technique is useful for other purposes besides selection: namely

Table V. Candidates' reactions to behavioural interviewing, as reported by organisations

Candidates' usual reaction	Percentage of responses
Positive	57
Apprehensive	8
Neutral	14
Negative	–
Very mixed	12
Don't know	6

appraisal, counselling and disciplinary interviewing. Selection of consultants and sub-contractors was also mentioned.

However, a surprising finding is that the organisations who are using competencies in a systematic way are often not the ones applying the behavioural interviewing technique in other areas besides selection. This may be due to which was introduced first: the competencies or the interviewing technique. It is likely that organisations developing competency frameworks have then applied this to appraisal and development issues, whereas other organisations may have learned about behavioural interviewing to improve selection, and then applied this technique to other situations.

Fewer than 20 per cent of respondents have developed a competency framework and apply this to other performance issues with staff as well as applying the behavioural interviewing technique to other situations. It would appear that there is still much scope to realise fully the benefits of the behavioural interviewing technique, even in those organisations which are using it already.

Link with other selection methods

Many respondents (65 per cent) had also introduced or increased the use of tests and/or assessment centres in the past five years, suggesting that organisations using a structured interviewing approach do not rely on this alone, but prefer to adopt a range of approaches to gathering information about candidates. Nevertheless, a third of respondents rely on the interview alone when reaching selection decisions, and of the remainder, 75 per cent weight the interview more than or at least as much as test or assessment centres. This highlights the continued reliance on the interview as the most preferred method for selection decision making, reinforcing the need to improve interviewing skills and techniques.

A few respondents also mentioned the potential link of behavioural interviewing with references:

> A good tie in should you choose to take up references – does the last employer support/agree with the candidate?

Such a link can therefore contribute to the quality of reference checking, thus improving this aspect of information for the selection decision.

Scoring

One of the ways that structure can improve interviews, as noted by Campion *et al.* (1997), is the use of rating scales for "scoring" or evaluating candidates' answers, thus reducing subjectivity and "gut feeling" in decision making.

Of the respondents, 63 per cent claim to have a scoring or evaluation form to help the decision process. This leaves some doubt as to how the remaining 37 per cent reach their decisions. Of those using a scoring form, only half were able or willing to supply a copy of this, and two of these were not really score sheets, but were merely pages to record evidence, or the source of evidence (e.g.

from application form, interview, reference, etc.). Again this leaves doubt about the nature of the "scoring" actually used by organisations.

The scoring forms which were supplied by public sector respondents indicated a simple three-category approach for each element: "fully meets requirement", "partially meets requirement" or "does not meet requirement". Private sector respondents had more detailed instructions and five-point rating scales, some with relative weightings of competencies clearly indicated. A five-point scale is not necessarily better in this matter; indeed, it is questionable how many distinctions can be made when assessing competencies. What is important is that there is clarity about the competencies to be assessed, about what constitutes "acceptable" evidence, and consistency in assessment. Very few respondents have been able to demonstrate this, although this may be partly due to sensitivity of such information and unwillingness to make it known.

A few organisations were exceptions to this. These have detailed explanations of competency definitions, examples of questions to use and behavioural examples or "anchors" related to each level of scoring. An example is shown in Table VI.

The clarity and detail of guidance in these few examples serves to highlight the apparent lack of structure in evaluation used by other organisations. Some respondents noted that behavioural interviewing was not a guarantee of the right decision and identified that managers may find it difficult to make the final choice:

> Managers want a fail safe decision. Past behaviour only gives an indication of future behaviour – they still have to evaluate.

It seems that line manager interviewers need help in evaluation, yet want to retain ownership of selection decisions, and may fear loss of discretion in using a scoring system. A structured scoring strategy does not eliminate personal judgement, however, but it does increase consistency and help to base decisions on job related criteria.

Discussion

This investigation has shown that behavioural interviewing has many advantages over traditional interviewing; it can be used by small or large organisations; those organisations using it are doing so more extensively as time goes on. By concentrating on key competencies required for successful

Table VI. Example of competency definition and performance levels

Competency	"Quality conscious"
Good	Aims for high standards in own and others' work, irritated by silly mistakes. Will take initiative to correct mistakes
Average	Notices mistakes and points them out, leaves others to decide what action to take
Poor	No evidence of concern in a practical sense

performance, using detailed and probing questions to elicit specific evidence of these competencies from candidates' actual behaviour, the quality of information gathered is improved and so better selection decisions can be made.

Training and practice for interviewers

Whatever the validity of a selection technique, this is of little value unless it is felt to be acceptable to those using it. Respondents in this survey said that interviewers were very positive about this technique, and their skills were improved. In spite of this some managers need encouragement to "stick with it" and "old habits die hard". Good training and the opportunity for practice are therefore crucial in developing expertise and confidence, as well as commitment and resources from senior management.

Behavioural interviewing seems to be considered a more "advanced" skill: it is taught to those who have already had interviewing experience or human resource staff who are involved more frequently in selection. However, if overcoming (bad) habits is a concern, then perhaps it should be part of basic interview training to all interviewers. There is no reason why not – this technique is not more difficult than more traditional interviewing, though it is more focused and more thorough. The author has several years' experience of delivering training in behavioural interviewing, often to inexperienced and untrained interviewers. These learners have reported no particular difficulty with it either during or after training.

Advance warning to candidates

From the candidates' perspective, behavioural interviews are still relatively novel, and some may be surprised at being required to discuss actual past events in detail. For this reason, organisations should consider providing candidates with a clear explanation about what to expect in advance of the interview. For example, some organisations prepare candidates by using behavioural questions on the application form. It is important that explanations are clear because too little can be confusing, raising anxiety in candidates.

Even without detailed warnings, however, candidates do not seem to be put off by this approach and many respondents believe that it allows the candidate more opportunity to present themselves better than traditional interviews. At the same time, behavioural interviews seem to discourage "rehearsed" answers from evasive or polished candidates. Two possible reasons for this are suggested: first, it may be that the level of detailed probing precludes candidates from supplying "rehearsed" answers; alternatively, it may be due to the relative novelty and rarity of behavioural interviews: perhaps if these become more common practice candidates may learn to supply "socially desirable" answers (Harris, 1989). This should be monitored over time.

A further issue which must be considered is that some people will have a more powerful recall of events and are therefore more likely to score highly. Organisations need to consider whether it may be "recall facility" which is

being measured rather than what is being recalled! In this case it may be preferable to measure skills more directly using assessment centre exercises.

Younger candidates

One limitation is in respect of younger candidates with less work experience, and fewer life experiences to draw on. For such candidates it is even more important to give clear guidance in advance about the questioning techniques used and the level of detail required in response, as well as emphasising that they can use examples of behaviour from outside work. Interviewers should also remember that work based examples of behaviour are not the only source of evidence and not necessarily more significant than other examples.

Behavioural interviews, being focused on past behaviour, also tend to negate the possibility of the candidate acquiring new skills and knowledge, the "potential" mentioned by some respondents. This is also likely to disadvantage younger candidates. For such candidates it may be useful to include situational questions or use assessment centres to consider candidates' potential in addition to the behavioural interview.

Structure in scoring

Whilst respondents clearly affirm that better information is obtained by behavioural interviewing, what is less clear is how organisations use the information to reach decisions. Many organisations seem to have no structure when it comes to the evaluation process, and this leaves room for subjectivity and inconsistency in decision making. Experimental research has demonstrated that selection decisions are improved by the use of an answer scoring strategy, which focuses on job relevant information and reduces "personal" judgement (Wiesner and Oppenheimer, 1990). It is in this area, in the evaluation of information obtained in interviews, that organisations need to invest more effort in order to provide more structure and consistency. Such answer scoring systems require time and effort to devise. This tends to be an initial, one-off cost however, and benefits then accrue from better selection decisions. However, without such structure in scoring, there is a danger that much of the benefit of behavioural questioning may be forfeited.

Conclusions

In today's lean and quality conscious organisations, where human resources are important in achieving "quality" objectives, employee selection is an important issue. Investing in techniques and skills which improve selection decisions is essential for organisational success.

Behavioural interviewing suggests that interviewers should measure candidates' competencies based on their past experience. This is based on two assumptions: that behaviour patterns are consistent over time; and that candidates can be compared fairly in this way. Whilst there is some evidence to support the first assumption, past behaviour does not give a complete guide to future behaviour. It tends to deny the possibility that people's behaviour may

change and develop over time, indeed that people can learn from past mistakes. On the second assumption, that all candidates can be measured using past behaviour as a guide, if some candidates have only limited experience then they are unlikely to compare favourably to others. Additionally, if some candidates have poor recall of past events, then they too may not compare favourably with others.

So behavioural interviewing may be criticised as somewhat "pastist", in its approach. However, other selection methods also have their limitations:

(1) Situational interviews, where candidates are asked to say how they would behave in certain hypothetical situations, assume that actual behaviour is in line with intentions. Whilst there is some support for this assumption, this is not always the case.

(2) Ability tests assume that the test relates to the job, which in fact is usually much more complex than any test can represent.

(3) Personality tests assume that personality is a stable concept, and that there are certain personality characteristics which are suited to certain jobs: both of these are questionable assumptions.

(4) Group exercises, such as those used in assessment centres, assume that:

- the tasks represent the tasks required in the job;
- the group of people participating in the exercise are similar to the real work group;
- the snapshot of behaviour observed in the exercise is representative of candidates' behaviour.

Again, all of these premises are questionable.

So all selection methods have limitations. Behavioural interviewing is not perfect, but nor is any method. It is important, however, to bear in mind the historical slant of behavioural interviewing.

Accepting the possibility that people's reactions and behaviour may change over time and that they can learn from experience, it is important for interviewers to gather several examples of behaviour and to seek evidence of trends or patterns rather than relying on a single example, especially if this is a weak or negative example.

Impact on candidates and equal opportunities

Organisations should give more consideration to impact on candidates and equal opportunities issues in this technique. They should give clear advance notice to candidates that they will be required to describe in detail specific events and behaviour. This will help to elicit full details from each candidate and make for fairer comparisons, otherwise it may be just those with better recall who do well at the interview and get the job. This is likely to become less of an issue over time as behavioural interviewing becomes more popular and applicants come to realise that such responses may be expected of them.

In terms of equal opportunities, it is necessary to ensure that certain candidates are not disadvantaged by the use of behavioural interviewing, especially younger candidates and those with a career break or career change. Interviewers may need to be more patient, and give more encouragement to such candidates, as the questions may not "fit" readily with their background. Interviewers are also likely to "underscore" the evidence from such candidates – they need to be aware of this risk – another issue to be incorporated into training sessions and reinforced in scoring guides for selectors.

Structure in decision making

In order to properly benefit from behavioural interviewing, organisations also need to apply more structure to the decision making part of the selection process. This is especially important where several interviewers are involved, such as in graduate recruitment. Organisations should introduce and maintain a structured approach to scoring and ensure that this is included in training for interviewers. Managers may be initially resistant to structured scoring systems, fearing that it may reduce the flexibility, and their "ownership" of decisions, which are the very advantages which behavioural interviewing has over more "technological" approaches to selection such as psychometric testing and assessment centres. However, even with a precise scoring guide, the interviewer has to use discretion in terms of weighing up evidence about the type of behaviour described, the number and strength of examples cited, the recency of behaviour and any trends or patterns in behaviour. Weighing up the evidence will always require good judgement.

Benefits

The evidence from this survey suggests that many organisations could benefit from the use of behavioural interviewing, if they are prepared to invest in training, and if interviewers are prepared to take time to use it carefully. It is likely to improve selection decisions, and improve the process of interviewing, so that interviewers feel more confident that they are making the right choice and candidates get a better insight into the job and its requirements, thus allowing them to make more informed choices too. All this must also improve the public image of the organisation, since the selection process is often the first (and sometimes the only) point of contact between the organisation and people outside. It is an improvement on more basic, traditional interviewing, and although it requires more skill and practice, it need not be the preserve of the few. Organisations would reap more benefit if they used the technique more extensively, and adopted this approach in selection interview training for all interviewers.

Other interviewing situations

The focus of this study is employee selection. However, there are many other situations in employment where interviewing is used, such as appraisal, discipline, grievance and accident investigations, where it is important to get

detailed evidence about specific events and make an evaluation of past performance. Whilst some of the organisations in this study are benefiting from the application of behavioural questioning techniques in these areas, there is clear potential to develop its use in other organisations and across other areas. So whilst most managers are trained in interviewing techniques as part of recruitment and selection programmes, it should be emphasised in these training events that behavioural interviewing can be applied to appraisal, discipline or grievance interviews, or when making selection decisions about consultants: "Tell me about a situation where you have designed and implemented a new computer system for a client . . .". Managers often find it difficult to develop their expertise in interviewing because of lack of regular practice, perhaps due to infrequent recruitment, so practising their questioning skills by applying them in these areas will increase their confidence as well as their skill.

There are also other professions where interviewing is an important skill, e.g. doctors and health care workers gathering information from patients, social workers interviewing children and other clients, police interviewing witnesses or suspects. These latter situations in particular have been the subject of recent media criticism. Whilst different interviews have different objectives, they all have one thing in common: to gather information. The behavioural interviewing technique can be applied in these other situations too, with the potential to improve the quality of information gathering and decision making.

Further research

This study has identified some aspects of how and why behavioural interviewing is used by some organisations, and its benefits and problems in practice. Further research is required to find out more about how best to use it. For example, in relation to competencies, is behavioural interviewing more appropriate to some types of competency assessment than others, e.g. are interpersonal competencies more readily judged this way than, say, cognitive competencies? More information is needed about organisations' "scoring" systems for interviews, what training underpins these, and how interviewers apply these and feel about them. How is information from interviews combined with other sources of information when reaching a selection decision? Case studies will investigate these issues and explore the differences in approach between different organisations.

As for candidates' reactions, this study asked organisations to assess these. It would be useful to assess candidates' reactions directly, and compare reactions of:

- those who receive prior information about the approach, with those who do not;
- younger candidates with more experienced candidates;
- candidates who have more experience of behavioural interviews, with those who have only a little.

Good quality staff with the right skills are crucial to the achievement of organisational objectives. Changing requirements of the workforce and skill shortages mean that attracting and selecting these employees is an ongoing quest. Interviews are the most popular method of selection, and they are here to stay, so the challenge is to maximise their value. Behavioural interviewing offers a way to maximise that value. It requires an investment of time and effort, but this will be repaid with better decisions, ensuring that the right people are selected to achieve organisational success.

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