Interview Theory

By definition, the employment interview is a two-way discussion between a job applicant and a prospective employer with the objective of exploring the probable compatibility between the applicant’s qualifications and the needs of the employer, for the purpose of making an employment decision. It is the intent of both parties during this discussion to gain as much relevant information as possible on which to base this decision. Further, it is their intent to use the information obtained during the interview process to predict, with some level of accuracy, the probability for a successful match.

Modern interview theory subscribes to a single, universal theory around which almost all employment selection processes are designed. This theory is as follows:

Past performance and behavior are the most reliable factors known in predicting future performance and behavior.

With this theory in mind, it is important for the interviewee to know that the employer’s basic interview strategy will be to use the interview discussion to uncover past performance and behavioral evidence in those areas that the employer considers important to successful job performance. These important areas are commonly known as selection criteria. It is against these criteria that the employer will be comparing the qualifications of prospective candidates, and eventually arriving at a final employment decision.

It should be evident that, as the candidate, it will be necessary for you to get some definition of these selection criteria if you expect to be successful in developing an effective counter strategy. The key to accomplishing this is to force yourself to think as the employer does. Specifically, the question to ask is, "How does the employer go about developing candidate selection criteria?"

Developing the Candidate Specification

The first step used by the employer in structuring an interview strategy is usually development of what is commonly known in professional employment circles as the candidate specification. This document typically describes the candidate sought by the employer in terms of such qualifications as knowledge, skills, experience, and other dimensions thought to be necessary to successful job performance. The candidate specification is normally prepared by the hiring manager, with occasional assistance provided by other department managers and/or the human resources department.

When well-prepared and carefully thought out, this specification can be a very valuable document. It frequently serves as the focal point for the employer’s entire interview strategy. Advance knowledge of the contents of the document could prove equally as valuable to the interviewee, since it could be used as the basis for formulating an effective counter strategy. Since this is not a practical consideration, the candidate must go through the same process as the employer in attempting to construct this specification.

When preparing the candidate specification, most hiring managers will review such things as the position description, current year’s objectives, business plans, and so on. In essence, the manager is reviewing the general responsibilities of the position in an effort to determine the kind of person needed to meet these requirements. Such review typically results in a candidate specification that includes the following general categories: (1) education, (2) knowledge, (3) experience, (4) skills, and (5) personal attributes.

A typical candidate specification would probably read as follows:

Education: BS degree in mechanical engineering preferred; degree in chemical engineering acceptable.

Knowledge: Paper machine project engineering; wet end sheet formation.

Experience: Two plus years in design, installation, and start-up of tissue and/or towel machines; twin wire-forming machine experience helpful.

Skills: Solid engineering skills in mechanical design; project leadership of contractor personnel.

Personal Attributes: Intelligent, articulate; able to work effectively in fast-paced construction/start-up environment; willing to work long hours, including frequent evenings and weekends; willing to travel at least 40 percent of the time, including weekend travel.
Although admittedly a fairly abbreviated description, this candidate specification is very similar to those used by most organizations.

The employer’s strategy now becomes one of interviewing to determine how well the prospective candidate meets this specification. In my example, some of the candidate’s qualifications for the position will be evident from a quick review of the applicant’s resume. However, such areas as “level of engineering knowledge” and “level of intelligence” cannot be measured by using the applicant’s resume. These can only be ascertained through the interview process.

Interviewee Strategy

Considering the employer’s interview strategy, as defined earlier, how can the interviewee formulate a meaningful counter strategy? What steps can the interviewee take to maximize the potential for a favorable interview outcome?

In my judgment, there are a number of things you can do to duplicate fairly accurately the employer’s thinking process, thereby allowing yourself to plan an effective counter strategy that will allow you to “stack the deck” in your favor. Here are some of them:

Advance Information

You will want to obtain as much information as possible about the position, prior to the actual interview. Although much of this information is readily available just for the asking, it has always amazed me how few employment candidates ever bother to request it.

Don’t be shy about requesting this information since many employers are willing to provide it to you if it is available. The strategic advantage of acquiring this information in advance of the interview far outweighs the risks of an employer politely declining your request.

Where available without too much difficulty, you should request the following in advance of your visit:

1. Position job description
2. Job objectives--current year
3. Department objectives--current year
4. Departmental or functional business plan
5. Annual report

Candidate Specification

During your initial telephone conversation with the employer, you should make it a point to ask for a verbal description of the kind of person they are seeking. Ask the employer to tell you not only what qualifications they are seeking, but also which of these qualifications they consider to be the most important. If time allows, and you can avoid sounding pushy, ask why these factors are considered to be important.

If the employer begins to balk, suggest that you need this information to determine whether or not you are interested in the position and whether you feel you have sufficient qualifications to warrant investing your time in further discussions. This should seem a reasonable request at this stage of the relationship and you will usually get what you want.

It is best to request answers to these questions at the beginning of your discussions, since you will lose considerable leverage once the employer has ascertained that you are interested in the position and are prepared to go to the next step.

Position Analysis

As with the employer, one of your first steps in formulating your interview strategy is to conduct an analysis of the position for which you will be interviewing. This procedure is similar to the employers’ when they form the candidate specification. You will need to review the key responsibilities of the position in an effort to translate these into probable candidate selection criteria. The advance documents that you have collected from the employer should prove very helpful at this point.
The following set of questions should help you to walk through this process in a logical and thorough fashion. Space is provided for you to fill in your answers as you go along.

1. What are the key ongoing responsibilities of this position? (Job description should prove helpful here.)

2. What are the key technical problems to be solved, and challenges to be met, in satisfying these ongoing responsibilities?

3. What technical and/or professional knowledge does this suggest that a person must have in order to successfully solve these problems and meet these challenges?

4. What are the specific objectives for this position for the current year?

5. What are the key technical challenges that must be met and problems that must be solved if these objectives are to be successfully achieved?

6. What technical and/or professional knowledge does this suggest that a person must have in order to successfully solve these problems and accomplish these objectives?

**Combined Candidate Specification**

You now have two sources from which to construct a candidate specification. The first is the initial telephone conversation with the prospective employer, and the second is the position analysis that you have just completed.

Chances are if you have done a particularly thorough job with your position analysis, you may well have given more thought to the qualifications necessary to successful job performance than has the employer with whom you will be interviewing. This could serve to place you at a decided strategic advantage during the interview, allowing you to highlight important aspects of your background that are critical to achievement of desired organizational results.

Be careful not to get carried away with your newfound power, however, since this could serve to alienate the interviewer and cause you to be labeled as a show-off or "know-it-all."

Now, pause for a moment to review the overall candidate requirements as defined by both you and the employer. With these requirements in mind, use the following set of questions to help you to translate these overall requirements into a combined candidate specification.

1. Formal Education: Considering the technical challenges of this position and the knowledge required, what formal education/training should the ideal candidate have (degree level and major)? Why?

2. Training: What informal education (training courses, seminars, etc.) would likely provide the required knowledge?

3. Experience: What level (number of years) and kind of experience would likely yield the depth and breadth of knowledge necessary for successful performance in this position?

4. Related Experience: What related or similar kinds of experience might yield the same kind of knowledge, and would therefore be an acceptable alternative?

5. Skills: What specific skills are required by the position, and how might these be acquired?

6. Personal Attributes: What personal attributes and characteristics are probably important for successful performance of this position?

**See the following articles for more information:**

- 21 Major Interview Mistakes to Avoid at All Costs
- The Best Way to Prepare for a Job Search and Interviews
- How to Talk About Other Interviews in Your Interviews
How to Answer the Tell Me About Yourself Interview Question

How to Answer the Do You Have Any Questions for Me Interview Question