Five simple steps to make your interviews work

Author: Keith McNulty . October 2021

The job interview has been getting some pretty rough treatment recently. Whether it's a chatbot, a game or an algorithm, pretty much everything in the HR tech world has been picking on the good old-fashioned job interview and suggesting that its days are numbered.

What a load of rubbish, quite frankly. If you look at the most reliable studies out there – the ones that cover very large datasets and multiple contexts, like this one for example – they conclude without a doubt that, done the right way, the job interview can be one of the most effective tools available to recruiters.

All these negative vibes against the job interview rely on one key assumption – that the interview is not done right. And that's fair enough because too many companies and organizations out there are still not taking on board some pretty clear advice from the experts on how best to run job interviews. The logic nowadays seems to be: 'you can't do an interview properly, so try this random another idea'.

Instead, maybe we should think about doing job interviews properly. Here are five ways you can get started.

Step 1: Divide your interview into strictly timed, focused segments

Get some incumbents and managers to define what skill groups are most important in the job and then split the interview up in a way that targets very different skill groups in different ways – that way you can get independent reads on each skill group and you avoid a 'halo effect' where interviewers can't tell the difference.

For example, dealing with a difficult customer needs a very different skill set to cashing up at the closing time. So set out a clear plan to spend, say, 15 minutes understanding how someone could deal with a difficult customer and a separate 15 minutes setting a cashing up test.

Even better, don't ignore social time which is very important in the interview interaction. Make sure there is carved out time for unstructured conversation and interaction – just be clear with interviewers that this time is not intended to be evaluative, and don't include it in evaluation forms.

Step 2: Ask job-related questions

Always relate evaluative questions to the job. For example, if I was interviewing for a hospitality role, I would almost certainly ask this question.

> Working in hospitality, you will sometimes deal with upset or dissatisfied individuals, who do not always respond rationally in a discussion. Has there been a time in the past where you have had to deal with an upset or irrational person? Please tell me what happened.

If the question involves a task, explain to the interviewee why you are asking them to do this task. For example: "As an executive assistant, accurate diary management is important. I am now going to ask you to create some diary entries.

By being transparent in highlighting the link between the question and the job, you achieve three important goals. First, you help the candidate understand why you are asking the question. Second, you create a forcing device to ensure the questions you ask are fair and related to the job. Finally, you reduce the risk of claims of unfair treatment from interviewees and rightly enhance your reputation as a fair and transparent employer.

Step 3: Understand how interviewees think

Interviewers should draw out how interviewees think. Often, interview questions are just a starting point and interviewers should dig deeper. In my interviews, for example, I frequently ask interviewees to do mini-analyses on paper. Some are tempted to do them quietly and give me a final answer, but I don't let them. I will interrupt after a period of time and ask them to tell me what they are thinking.

Interviewers should not be afraid to interrupt at the right points and to ask interviewees to talk them through their thought processes – it is here where the best hiring evidence is to be found.

Step 4: Design your evaluation forms well

Evaluation form structure should encourage systematic, unbiased thinking.

First, force interviewers to think about the details by asking them to rate specific competencies. When they deal with that difficult customer, what capabilities do you want to see? List them out on the form and get interviewers to score them independently.

Second, create a logical flow between the details and the decision. At a minimum, make sure that the evaluation form is ordered in a way that makes interviewers enter the detailed competency rating *before* they take an overall point of view on the interviewee. Setting rules on the evaluation form can also help, in order to ensure that the interviewer follows some prescribed logic in relating their overall point of view to the detailed competency ratings.

Step 5: Utilize analytics and peer feedback

Interviewers are humans, and so they don't always follow the rules.

If you are lucky enough to capture the data from interviews in a system, feed that data back to interviewers. Design some analysis that shows them if they are easy or hard graders, or if they have strong preferences – this helps them self-correct their behaviors.

With or without data, I have found peer observation to be very effective. Have interviewers 'shadowed' by colleagues. They can sit out of view of the interviewee, observe the interview, learn about new positive behaviors or provide constructive feedback. If you are worried about the interviewee's reaction to this idea, don't be. I have only heard positive reactions from interviewees when you do this. It reflects an open, conscientious, and feedback-oriented culture.

With a little effort, job interviews are extremely powerful tools. Don't be seduced into replacing them with the latest cool technology. Sometimes old school is a good school.

*The post "*Five simple steps to make your interviews work" *was first published by Keith McNulty here* https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/five-simple-steps-make-your-interviews-work-keith-mcnulty/

About Keith McNulty

I lead McKinsey's internal People Analytics and Measurement function. Originally I was a Pure Mathematician, then I became a Psychometrician. I am passionate about applying the rigor of both those disciplines to complex people questions.

All opinions expressed are my own and not to be associated with my employer or any other organization I am connected with.

https://thehumancapitalhub.com/articles/five-simple-steps-to-make-your-interviews-work