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Interviewing Training for Both Applicant and Interviewer

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The purpose of this chapter is to investigate interview training from the perspectives of both interviewers and applicants. Is the focus of one perspective interchangeable with the other, or are there subtle differences that could meaningfully inform research and practice?

It is recognized that the interview can serve many purposes, including both selection and recruitment (Dipboye, 1992). The interview is a dynamic interaction in which both the interviewer and the applicant often fulfill multiple roles simultaneously (e.g., information gatherer, evaluator, presenter). Training can be directed at enhancing the performance of any one or more of these roles and their associated behaviors. Sackett, Burris, and Ryan (1989) have envisioned three possible outcomes of interview training: (a) the reduction of error through the elimination of some sources of deficiency, such as test anxiety; (b) the improvement of the underlying characteristic being tested without affecting the test's construct

or predictive validity; and (c) an increase in the test taker's score without improvement on the underlying characteristic or construct. The first two outcomes are positive for both the interviewer and the applicant, whereas the latter is positive only for the applicant. Regarding subsequent good performers, there may be a decision to accept ("hit") or reject ("miss"). Regarding subsequent poor performers, there may be a decision to accept ("false positive") or reject ("correct rejection"). Interviewers are striving to achieve hits and correct rejections, whereas applicants are striving to elicit job offers, both hits and false positives.

The literature on interview training can be categorized according to its focus on either the interviewer (organizational perspective) or the applicant (individual job seeker's perspective). There is some identifiable academic research literature on both interviewer training and applicant training. There is also a practitioner-oriented literature concerned with both. Furthermore, there is a large industry devoted to providing training and consulting on these topics, but it is proprietary and not in the public domain. Thus, we focus in this chapter only on published books and articles.

Interviewer Training

Training is probably the most common technique used by organizations to improve their interviewing (Dipboye, 1992). Indeed, an appreciation of the importance of training for interview success is not new (e.g., Wonderlic, 1942). Training is integral to improving the structuring of interviews, and hence their psychometric properties (Campion, Palmer, & Campion, 1997). Howard, Dailey, and Gulanick (1979) note that aspects of interviewing structure can be easily taught. Additionally, Eder and Buckley (1988) state that training can improve the selection interview through situational factors (e.g., increased interviewer role clarity).

Training is indeed a key component and represents one of the most offered courses in organizations today, with an estimated 65% of organizations providing some sort of interview training ("Who's Learning What?" 1996). These surveys reveal that 32% provide training that is designed and delivered only by in-house staff, 8% use only external sources for interview training, and 25% use a combination of internal and external sources ("Who's Learning What?" 1996). Although some of this training is conducted by consultants, there are a number of popular press books and guides that can supplement training with self-initiated study.

Research

The main emphasis of research on interview training has been on improving the selection function of the employment interview. The focus

has been on the interviewer's ability to gather and evaluate information within the context of the employment decision. However, training is generally incidental in many studies; very few researchers have examined interview training as their primary research question. Instead, most have focused on testing the validity of structured interviewing; they have included training only to prepare interviewers to implement the system correctly. Reports of research of this type usually mention the kind of training used only in passing, making no effort to assess its effectiveness and offering no discussion as to why a certain form of training was chosen over others. An interesting aspect of much research has been the dearth of explicit integration of the training literature and theory (e.g., Goldstein, 1991).

However, a few researchers have directly addressed interviewer training. Many of these have attempted to improve interviewer judgments by improving the quality of observation and evaluation (e.g., Dougherty, Ebert, & Callender, 1986; Maurer & Fay, 1988; Vance, Kuhnert, & Farr, 1978). The results of these studies have been ambiguous. The training employed by Vance et al. (1978) in a lab study (e.g., informing subjects of the types of rating errors and admonishing them to use the full scale) had no positive effect on rating accuracy. However, Dougherty et al. (1986) found that more extensive training involving job-related questions, rating scales, and practice interviews with feedback improved the interviewers' predictive validities. Likewise, Pulakos, Nee, and Kolmstetter (1995) found that an extensive interviewer training program improved rating accuracy.

Research concerning the effects of different types of training is rare. The studies reported by Gatewood, Lahiff, Deter, and Hargrove (1989) are an exception. In the first of two studies, Gatewood et al. investigated whether trained interviewers would use different characteristics of applicants when making decisions about acceptability for a position than would untrained interviewers. They found no difference between the trained and untrained interviewers in their sample of 23 recruiters. The trained/untrained status of the interviewers was assessed with self-report measures. In a second study, Gatewood et al. attempted to determine if different types of training would influence subsequent interviewer behaviors. Three different training approaches were used: One focused on the establishment of a warm and positive atmosphere for the interview, another focused on the development of better questions, and the final approach focused on the reduction of rating errors. The only difference among the different training conditions was in the manner in which interviewers trained to avoid rater errors conducted the interview. These interviewers asked more questions, talked more, and conducted longer interviews, all in an attempt to gather more information. Gatewood et al. suggest that this type of behavior, because it is generally unnatural in everyday interactions but specific to and crucial for interviews (i.e., direct and continued questioning of one party by another), is more easily changed than other interview

behaviors that are not interview specific but common to other inter-personal interactions (e.g., developing rapport, evaluating others).

Generally, interviewer training research has not attended to the recruitment function, in which the interviewer presents information to the applicant so as to influence his or her job choice decision. Minor exceptions include some studies that have addressed interviewer behaviors that may be positively received by candidates, such as building rapport and the use of "icebreakers" (e.g., Motowidlo et al., 1992; Robertson, Gratton, & Rout, 1990; Roth & Campion, 1992). Barber, Hollenbeck, Tower, and Phillips (1994) found evidence that candidates are able to gather more information from single-purpose recruitment interviews than from interviews explicitly combining the selection and recruitment functions. However, the conduct of the selection interview itself can serve as an influence/recruitment tactic (Harris & Fink, 1987; Rynes, 1991). Further research is necessary to elaborate this issue fully and to investigate the interplay of the various "recruitment" and "selection" behaviors in the interview.

Some issues noted by Arvey and Campion (1982) and Dipboye (1992) remain unexplored. For example, what are the broader effects of interview training on interviewer behavior, and how does interviewer behavior influence candidate behavior? Gatewood et al. (1989) suggest that it may be necessary to differentiate among those behaviors peculiar to interviews and those common to many other interpersonal activities. What are the best training methods and techniques? What is the long-term effectiveness of interview training? Do gains from training decay over time? Additionally, do interviewers maintain the new skills or modify them over time to adapt to changing demands (e.g., changes in the quality of the applicant pool) or to alleviate personal boredom (Dipboye, 1994)?

Practice

Practitioner-focused books do offer some evidence of the conflict in outcome agenda engendered by Sackett et al.'s (1989) discussion, in that interviewers and applicants may not necessarily wish to achieve the same outcomes. A palatable sense of a conflict with applicants, especially trained applicants, comes through in some of these books. A theme running throughout many of these books is the necessity for the interviewer to keep control of the interview. Pinkster (1991) notes that "once the interview starts, some candidates will immediately try to take control of the process. . . . you cannot lose control of the interview or else you will not find out the information you are seeking" (p. 91). This sentiment is echoed by Yate (1987), who describes the interview as a conversation and notes that "the person asking the questions in any conversation controls and directs its flow. As the interviewer . . . you should establish that control now" (p. 71). According to Yate, when applicants attempt to take control, it may be because they want to find "ways to hide vital information you [the

interviewer] need or to direct the conversation away from your aims" (p. 71). There is an implied sense that the interviewer should not be outmaneuvered, because this may lead to a "false positive" decision desired by some applicants. As Bell (1989) comments, "What adds zest to the process, of course, is that a double game is being played" between interviewer and applicant (p. 12).

Many practitioner-oriented volumes take this sense of conflict a step further and explicitly acknowledge that interviewers may be dealing with trained applicants who are attempting to subvert the interview process and advance their own agendas. Fear (1984) notes that "trained applicants will make a subtle but immediate attempt to take charge of the interview" (p. 37), and the interviewer must recognize and resist such attempts. Smart (1989) has explicitly designed a program to thwart trained applicants by countering "canned" answers—answers that have been prepared in advance and that may allow the applicant to avoid disclosing negative information.

In summary, some general characterizations of the interviewer training literature are possible. For example, relatively few studies have directly addressed interview training, although it has been addressed tangentially in a number of studies. The selection function, as opposed to the recruitment function, is the primary emphasis of most of the extant research. The theories and research issues discussed in the training literature have not been explicitly integrated into the interviewing training literature. Finally, an investigation of the practice literature underscores an inherent conflict between interviewers and applicants as they struggle to gain control of the interview. This conflict has not been addressed by research.

Applicant Training

It is difficult to estimate the number of individuals who seek out training to improve their interview skills. One indication comes from a U.S. Department of Labor study that identified 8.4 million people who were displaced from their jobs between January 1993 and December 1995 (Gardner, 1996). Although it is impossible to be precise about how many people can be regarded as job applicants who might benefit from interview training, it is reasonable to say that there are large numbers of persons on a continuous basis who are potential beneficiaries of training.

Research

Campion and Campion (1987), Dipboye (1992), and Sackett et al. (1989) provide brief reviews of the literature in which the focus of interview training is on the applicant. By and large, applicant training research has dealt with very specialized and narrowly defined populations

(e.g., the chronically unemployed/disadvantaged, substance abusers, prison inmates, the mentally or physically impaired, college and high school students). The generalizability of many of the findings of this research is a concern, given its reliance on specialized and narrowly defined populations. These are populations that may be lacking in job interview experience, knowledge, and past success, and that may be burdened by characteristics negatively valued by employers (e.g., record of drug abuse, prison record; Speas, 1979) but that must be overcome to achieve success in the employment interview. The emphasis has been on the acquisition of behaviors considered appropriate for the interview and the workplace. Many of these studies have also focused on appropriate nonverbal behaviors in the interview (Sigelman & Davis, 1978; Trent, 1987). Very few studies have investigated interview training for more mainstream applicants. This leads to uncertainties regarding the generalizability of these research findings to the broader job-seeking population.

Overall, applicant training has been studied in relatively few of the populations that could potentially benefit. Several other populations may benefit from further study; we note some of these below.

New entrants. The research literature addressing the population of new entrants to the workforce—those with very little work experience or interviewing experience (e.g., high school or college students)—has been limited (e.g., Hollandsworth, Dressel, & Stevens, 1977).

Homemakers. This group may consist of individuals returning to the workforce after absences of many years or entering the workforce essentially for the first time. Little of the interview training research has addressed this group specifically. An interesting possible line of research would be to investigate training that facilitates the translation of homemaking skills (e.g., time management, budgeting, conflict resolution) into terms that interviewers would readily recognize as applicable to the needs of their organizations.

Special needs populations. Special needs individuals may include potential applicants who in the past have been excluded from consideration due to various disabilities; the Americans With Disabilities Act of 1990 may facilitate the integration of some of these individuals into the workplace. Hayes, Citera, Brady, and Jenkins (1995) found that persons with disabilities perceived structured interviews to be less fair than did nondisabled individuals. They suggest that because structured interviews are built around job analyses for fully able incumbents and do not take into account applicant answers built around possible reasonable accommodation, structured interviews place disabled applicants at a disadvantage. Training of interviewers to appreciate a fuller range of appropriate responses may be warranted. Additionally, research is needed to guide applicant training so as to best prepare applicants for structured interview situ-

ations where their special needs may not have been accounted for in the development of questions and rating scales.

Experienced workers. Generally, experienced workers have not been studied, although the work of Campion and Campion (1987) represents a rare exception. They examined a mainstream work population (i.e., current employees eligible for internal transfer). Although the majority of subjects taking training indicated positive responses to it, and test scores indicated that they learned the training material, they did not receive more offers than those who did not participate in the training. It is possible that the actual work experiences of the candidates were much more important than interview performance as a factor in subsequent job offers.

In line with an emphasis on selection, the focus of much of this research is often upon improving some set of interview behaviors (e.g., head nods and voice quality), with the (presumed) goal of improving the likelihood of a job offer. Generally, this stream of research has assumed that these behaviors lead to interview success, although this has rarely been tested, and interview success has rarely been used as a direct criterion. The link between training and the acquisition of certain interview behaviors is well established (e.g., Dipboye, 1992; Sackett et al., 1989); however, the link between those behaviors and subsequent measures of interview success (e.g., job offers) has not been explored extensively. However, in practitioner-oriented books, the linkage between training and behavior acquisition, and between behavior acquisition and interview success, defined as job offers, is made more explicit. Job offers and employment are the criteria for practitioner-oriented books, as opposed to academic research, where the criterion is the acquisition of interviewing behaviors assumed to be of positive value.

Additionally, from the applicant's perspective, the information-gathering and evaluation function of the interview has not been addressed. Schwab, Rynes, and Aldag (1987) note that the broad job search process includes an evaluation component. However, there is little evidence that the development of analytic skills for evaluating prospective employers and job offers is emphasized in applicant interview training. Little attention has been given to the process whereby the applicant must gather information and evaluate the merits of a job offer and then decide to either accept or reject it. Eliciting job offers is seen as an end in itself and not as a means to an end. Perhaps research should examine the relative merits of training applicants to make better job choice decisions.

Practice

Although research has generally been concerned only with the applicant's ability to acquire certain behaviors presumed to lead to the narrow

criterion of job offers, the practice literature does offer some emphasis on a broader range of job search imperatives. Many job seekers use how-to books to train themselves in interview preparation. The primary emphasis of this literature is on the applicant's presenting information, responding, and selling, as it relates to the interview's selection function. However, there is a subset of this literature, employing insights from career planning, personal development, and counseling, that also informs the applicant's ability to make job choices by addressing information-gathering and evaluation skills. Therefore, this literature can be partitioned into two distinct groups: answer-driven books and preparation-driven books.

Answer-driven books. Typically, answer-driven books provide general information on interviewing along with lists of interview questions and suggested answers. They are prescriptive, providing advice on how to answer specific interview questions and what to avoid saying (e.g., Allen, 1988; Camden, 1990; Hirsch, 1994; Kaufman & Corrigan, 1988; Komar, 1979; Medley, 1984; Morin & Cabrera, 1982; Ryan, 1994; Washington, 1995). They usually take a short-term approach (e.g., get a job now). To some extent it is unclear what these books have to say regarding interview score improvement, error reduction, and construct improvement (Sackett et al., 1989). Additionally, they raise very real concerns as to how poor performers are being trained—are they being trained to become good performers (a potentially win-win situation, with both the individual and the organization benefiting) or simply to be selected ("false positive"; a potentially long-term lose-lose situation)? Although none of the books sampled endorses lying, an ethical issue is raised. What is the best way to train and prepare poor performers? Underlying that question is a need to explore the reasons for poor performance and whether or not interview training is the most appropriate vehicle for addressing performance deficiencies.

Preparation-driven books. In contrast to answer-driven books, preparation-driven books encourage candidates to conduct self-assessment and then identify ways to answer interview questions. Some of these books should be described as career guides rather than interview training handbooks. Not only do they offer advice and training on how to get a job (e.g., preparing the best answers for expected questions), they take a more career-oriented approach, giving candidates guidance on self-assessment that can lead to the identification of appropriate career paths and the development of strategies to achieve their career goals, supplemented by training in the interview and other job search skills (e.g., Azrin & Besalel, 1982; Beatty, 1986; Caple, 1991; Green, 1996; Nadler, 1994). Preparation-driven books encourage candidates to provide honest, insightful answers to interview questions. More so than answer-driven books, they attempt to help candidates develop the skills necessary for a lifelong series of career progressions.

Both approaches attempt to help those with the potential for satisfactory job performance achieve "hits" and avoid "misses." The difference between the two may lie in the advice offered to applicants who may ultimately be evaluated as poor performers once they are on the job. The answer-driven books may be attempting to increase "false positives" and decrease "correct rejections," whereas the preparation-driven books may be attempting to change candidates fundamentally from poor performers to good performers, thus transforming a "correct rejection" into a "hit." Additionally, and somewhat paradoxically, the preparation-driven books may also be attempting to increase correct rejections. Although this may appear to be at odds with the criterion of getting the candidate a job offer, it makes sense if one considers the focus to be on getting the "right" job offer. These two approaches may have differential impacts on the validity of subsequent interviews (Sackett et al., 1989). The answer-driven approach may have a negative impact on the interview's validity (e.g., through impression management tactics that mask job deficiencies), whereas the preparation-driven approach may improve validity by training candidates in career-relevant skills and helping them achieve person-job and person-career fit (Holland, 1985; Kristof, 1996).

There is some confusion in the literature as to the purpose of applicant training. Is the intent to reduce error of measurement, or to produce false positive selection decisions? Stevens and Kristof (1995) examined the impression management tactics of candidates and their impact on interview success. In part, their study was motivated by a desire to test the advice of popular press books that suggest various impression management techniques (e.g., Medley, 1984). They found some evidence to support the generalizability of earlier laboratory studies (e.g., Gilmore & Ferris, 1989): Such impression management tactics may be influencing interview validity, possibly producing false positive selection decisions.

Finally, although it is often more muted than depicted in the practitioner-oriented interviewer training books, there is still a sense of a fundamental conflict between interviewers and applicants. Figler (1988) notes that there may even be a danger in the applicant's approaching the interview as a contest as opposed to a problem-solving conversation conducted with a prospective employer and aimed at achieving a mutually satisfying outcome. Medley (1984) emphasizes the need for applicant honesty and candor. However, Faux (1985), in her advice to applicants for executive positions, explicitly acknowledges the role of conflict and the need to control the interview. She notes that "the success of the executive interview depends upon your ability to psych out the person interviewing you" (p. 83).

In summary, some general characterizations of the applicant training literature are possible. For example, most of the extant research has investigated narrowly defined populations of job seekers, which calls into

question the generalizability of much of the research. The major focus of research is upon the selection function and the acquisition of behaviors that will enhance the applicant's chances of being selected. The importance of certain interview behaviors is generally assumed, but more needs to be done to establish the relationship between applicant behaviors and interviewer reactions and subsequent decisions. A subset of the practice literature (i.e., preparation-driven books) attempts to integrate interview training into the broader areas of job search and career development. Finally, a sense of inherent conflict between interviewers and applicants is evident in the practice literature, although it is generally downplayed or ignored in the extant research.

Recommendations for Future Research

There does appear to be an inherent conflict in the interview between the agendas of the interviewer and the applicant. This conflict is most explicitly addressed in the practitioner literature. Research is needed to examine how this inherent conflict influences the value of the interview as a selection device and recruiting tool, and whether it is in the best interest of the applicant's job search process.

Much of the research to date has been concerned primarily with the selection function of the employment interview, where the influence and information path moves from the candidate to the interviewer. The emphasis has been upon the applicant's presenting information and the interviewer's gathering and evaluating information. In the strict sense of a structured selection interview, the interviewer is trying to gather the most reliable and valid information. At the same time, the applicant is attempting to influence the interviewer's information-gathering and decision-making process. The key notion is that *when the interviewer is trying to evaluate objectively, the applicant is trying to sell; and when the applicant is trying to evaluate objectively, the interviewer is trying to sell.* This essential conflict is not removed when organizations explicitly separate the interview process into a recruitment phase (e.g., initial campus visit, job fairs) and a selection phase (e.g., plant visits). If anything, the conflict is set in stark relief because all that remains is either one or the other path of potential conflict (i.e., either the interviewer is selling or the applicant is selling).

It is clear that interviewers and applicants have different goals, motivations, and approaches to the selection interview. As such, it is possible that the training of interviewers and applicants to improve performance in the interview may have different emphases. For example, interviewers may be trained to be objective, whereas applicants may be trained in how best to present themselves. This asymmetrical dynamic implicit in the interview

process is reflected to some degree in the practitioner literature, but it is ignored in the academic literature.

Is there a fundamental ethical issue that needs to be addressed, or does this simply reflect the give-and-take of a buyer-seller relationship, where both parties need to be prepared to exercise due caution as each attempts to maximize his or her outcomes? Bostwick (1981) notes that "the interviewer/applicant relationship is like a looking glass showing the reverse image of the same subject" (p. 220). We have found no studies that have specifically examined the interaction of applicant and interviewer training. Do they cancel each other out, or do they lead to a more reliable, valid, acceptable, and successful interview for both parties?

Additionally, the purpose of the interview and potentially of interview training need not be limited to a selection or a recruitment function. Not only do interviews serve the potentially conflicting purposes of selection and recruitment, they may also be used by organizations as a form of socialization, as opportunities to advise job candidates, and for internal political reasons (Dipboye, 1992, 1994). Taking a broader perspective may illuminate other areas of potential synergy and conflict in training agendas and objectives.

Further, there should be a recruiting- or persuasion-oriented component to interviewer training. This notion is suggested by the thrust of the applicant training literature and is thus an example of one literature informing another. This has been neglected in the past; the sole emphasis has been on increasing validity. This is especially important given the tightening job market and the demonstrated utility of having the "best" candidate actually accept the job offer (Murphy, 1986). Research is needed to determine if this should be part of the training and whether it would actually increase job acceptance rates.

We also need to know more about the effectiveness of applicant training. Regarding the interviewer, research has shown that training can improve the implementation of interview structure, which in turn improves the reliability and validity of the interview (Campion et al., 1997). However, no corresponding claims can be made for applicant training, for two reasons. First, the findings from past studies on special populations may not generalize to mainstream or experienced candidates. Second, more thought needs to be given to criteria used to measure effectiveness. Research has shown that candidates can readily be trained to acquire certain behaviors (e.g., Sackett et al., 1989); however, measures of these same behaviors are then typically used as surrogates for interview effectiveness. The criteria of interview success need to be reevaluated and their linkages to trainable behaviors investigated. Regarding behaviors, we also need to know more about what behaviors are positively and negatively interpreted by interviewers and applicants within the context of the employment interview. For example, do more appropriate nonverbal behaviors (e.g., eye

Table 19.1   Criteria for the Evaluation of Commercially Available Training Programs

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1. Was a needs analysis conducted?
2. Is the content of the training driven by learning objectives?
3. Do course contents reflect the components of a good selection system?
   Job analysis
   Legal guidelines
   Use of structured interviews
   Instruction on rating
   Modeling followed by skill demonstration
   Tests of learning
4. Are course contents based on research?
5. Does the provider furnish evidence of validity?
6. Is there evidence of training effectiveness?
7. Does the program contribute to broad organizational objectives?

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contact) translate into more job offers? Also, research is needed to examine what kinds of training are most effective (e.g., answer-driven training versus preparation-driven training).

Finally, more research is needed that integrates the interview training literature and the broader training literature. As we have noted, very little of the interviewer training research has addressed the issue of identifying the effectiveness of a training intervention. However, the application of mainstream training research may, for example, help in identifying important professional criteria for the evaluation of commercially available programs. Such criteria are listed in Table 19.1, which incorporates insights from the training literature (e.g., Kirkpatrick, 1983; Leibler & Parkman, 1992; Mager, 1984; Robinson & Robinson, 1989; Stolovitch & Keeps, 1992). Given the number of potential users of interview training and the vast array of training options available, paying greater attention to the evaluation of training effectiveness appears warranted. The integration of training theories and methodologies should inform future interview training research and designs.

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