

Structured Interview Guides

The interview is the most commonly used tool in selection systems, regardless of whatever other assessments or tools are used. In fact, it is very rare that companies would hire people without conducting at least one interview at some point in the process, and many companies rely only on interviews.

In spite of their widespread use, research consistently shows that most interviews don't work very well in terms of their ability to predict job-related behaviors (e.g., performance, retention). Causes of this include the following:

- The questions interviewers ask don't elicit valid data about the knowledge, skills, abilities or personal attributes important to high job performance or retention.
- Even if appropriate questions are asked, the interviewers don't know how to accurately and consistently score the candidates' responses.
- When multiple interviewers are involved, they end up asking redundant questions, and there isn't a good process for integrating the data collected and making optimal selection decisions.
- People haven't been trained in how to conduct effective interviews and they rely more on "gut feel" than on objective data.
- The interviews aren't properly positioned in the whole selection process (e.g., interviewers' time is wasted on candidates who should have been screened out earlier with less costly tools).

Structured interviews can help overcome these problems and lead to better selection decisions. This factsheet describes Censeo's consulting services in this area, but first we will provide a little background to put things in context.

What are Structured Interviews?

As the name implies, structured interviews are those where structure is provided, and a plan is in place for what questions to ask, who will ask which questions, how candidate responses will be evaluated, how data from different interviewers will be integrated, and so forth. In other words, it is the opposite of the tendency for many interviewers, in the absence of structure, to just "wing it."

An important part of the structure are the interview guides themselves. They can take many different shapes, but they normally include things like the competencies being

measured, interview questions (and sometimes follow-up probes), some kind of guidelines to use in evaluating candidates' responses, places for notes, and a rating scale. The rating scale is sometimes combined with the evaluation guidelines to form what is called a "behavioral anchored rating scale." There may or may not be an overall rating for the interview, but there is usually at least some type of summary evaluation capturing the interviewer's overall assessment.

At the heart of what makes structured interviews effective is a clear understanding of the competencies being assessed – the knowledge, skills, abilities and personal attributes one should select for (versus train for after hire). When structured interview guides are written, it's frequently necessary to first develop, or update, competency models for the job(s) for which the guides will be used.

As a final background comment, structured interviews can contain two main types of questions. First, there are past experience questions where the interviewer asks the candidate to describe his/her past experience relative to a particular competency area. In general, these kinds of questions are preferable, based on the principle that "the best predictor of future performance is past performance." Second, there are situational questions where the interviewer asks the candidate how he/she would respond when confronted with a particular situation. These questions are most appropriate when the candidate may not have had past experience that is relevant to the competency being assessed. Good structured interviews usually include a combination of both types of questions.

Typical Project Steps

The scope of Censeo's consulting services in this area range from critiquing interview guides developed by clients internally, to taking the lead role in preparing new interview guides. Regardless of who completes which tasks, the typical steps are listed below.

1. *Determine how the interviews will fit into the overall selection process.* One way to do this is to list all the steps planned for the selection process (e.g., initial screening for minimum qualifications, assessments, interviews, realistic job preview, reference check, background check) and ensure the interviews are properly sequenced. For example, a logical sequence might be: (a) initial screen, (b) HR interview, (c) assessments, and (d) manager interview. In general, the less expensive steps should occur early in the process.

2. *Identify the competencies and key behaviors to be measured in the interviews.* It's useful to think about this step in three phases.
 - First, identify those competencies that are critical for candidates to have before they're hired, versus those that can be developed later.
 - Second, identify those competencies that should be measured via interviews versus other selection tools. For example, résumés and other background materials may be a more efficient way of getting at basic qualifications, and assessments may be a more accurate way to measure certain skills.
 - Third, pare down the remaining list to those competencies that are most critical. While you want to collect as much valid data as possible, some kind of reasonable balance must be struck between data collection and the costs associated with collecting the data. It's better to measure the most critical skills in more depth than to measure a lot of skills more shallowly.
3. *Draft interview questions for each area.* The objective here is to develop a pool of questions to measure the competencies and key behaviors identified in Step 2. It is beyond the scope of this document to discuss the science of how to construct good interview questions, but we do point out that Censeo consultants have in-depth expertise in this area – taking the lead in writing the questions, or critiquing questions written by client personnel.
4. *Organize the questions in terms of who will ask them.* The pool of interview questions is then allocated across the different interviewer roles – HR, hiring manager, next level manager, peers, etc. – based on the most appropriate perspective for asking each question, and making sure that all the areas are well covered. Many of the key competencies will have multiple measures, but the questions won't be redundant. (As a side comment, we note that our bias is to get more, rather than fewer, "eyes on each candidate," tempered with the practical need to keep the process streamlined and time-efficient.)
5. *Prepare evaluation guidelines for questions.* As mentioned earlier, the evaluation guidelines can take many forms. Censeo's general advice is to keep the guidelines as simple to construct and use as possible, versus getting into the complexities of behavioral anchored rating scales. However, these more complex rating guidelines do have their place in certain situations.
6. *Prepare structured guides for each interviewer role.* This step involves drafting the complete interview guides in whatever format and structure has been agreed to with the client, including instructions, questions, evaluation guidelines, and method of arriving at some kind of summary assessment of the candidate's capabilities for the job being filled.
7. *"Reality test" the interview guides.* When new interview guides are developed, Censeo recommends a fairly high degree of involvement on the part of selected stakeholders who will eventually use the guides. This step simply entails running the drafts by a few of those users for their comments before the guides are finalized.
8. *Implement the new process.* This step is critical and is where many organizations fall short. Effective implementation requires that the interviewers understand how to use the guides in the prescribed manner, have the skills to do so, and are held accountable for consistent use in a way that is helpful, rather than being bureaucratic and time consuming. Projects typically include carefully planned communications and a training program for launching the new interview guides.

Legal concerns have dominated the attention companies have paid to interviews over the past several years – companies want to avoid being challenged that their selection process is biased or used inconsistently. In one sense this has not been beneficial insofar as managers have been schooled more in what not to do (i.e., inappropriate questions to ask) than what they should do.

On the other hand, the focus on asking only job-related questions (i.e., those important to success on the job), and emphasizing consistent application, have been very beneficial. Censeo helps clients develop selection systems that will withstand legal scrutiny, in addition to selecting the best possible talent for open positions.

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