

INTRODUCTION

Several decades ago, Walter Bingham and Bruce Moore defined the interview as a “conversation with a purpose.”¹ The clarity of their vision affords us a good starting point even today. “Conversation” suggests a friendly, collegial exchange, and the purpose is clear: to select a candidate who can perform well in a job. Both individual respect and prediction of performance are standards for effective selection—a perspective that is reflected in every chapter that follows.

This is not to say that selection interviewing can be fully defined by such a short, simple description. Interviewers must be able to measure a candidate’s job skills, build rapport, resist stereotypes, minimize biases, avoid snap judgments, predict job performance, and minimize legal problems—all, typically, within the space of an hour. Effective interviewing is a complex and valuable skill that justifies a commitment to continuous learning and skill building.

But selection interviewing involves more than technique; there is a human side to it. Job candidates have hopes, fears, joy, and pain. Their families and friends love them and want the best for them. The same goes for their co-workers, who need effective

people around them, not laggards, stress carriers, and incompetents. Organizations need performers, and customers need people who know their jobs, who get results, and who care. Effective interviews deliver on all of these needs.

Unfortunately, many interviewers make hiring decisions based on their first impressions and unproven theories of success. All of these practices point to the need to support the human side of interviewing by applying interview research. But an exaggerated focus on human values will not improve the performance of new hires; nor will a disproportionate emphasis on interview science advance respect and dignity. What is needed is a balanced approach.

Get Talent! reflects selection science as developed in decades of research on the interview. I have cited only studies that could be directly translated into practical applications. Many of these will help readers become more familiar with the research, but no one should think this book is a comprehensive review of the literature. My objective was to selectively combine science, practicality, and readability to give value to the reader.

This book is no substitute for getting competent legal advice, particularly in light of the ever-changing nature and number of federal, state, and municipal laws governing employment selection. However, I must say that these laws have raised the standards on how to do an interview. It is both good interviewing and good legal defense to perform a work analysis, ask job-related questions on a structured interview, and treat candidates with respect and equivalence. Much of today's law does not hobble interviewers; instead, it encourages the use of a disciplined, science-based approach.

Interviewing has also been influenced by the emphasis on work systems seen in the quality movement,² business process engineering,³ and the learning organization.⁴ This understanding has migrated into the use of interviewing systems to guide effective practice in organizations. A well-designed interviewing system merges valid selection with the organization's overall objectives. This minimizes the role of the individual interviewer, reduces errors, and enhances defensible selection.

All of these considerations are reflected in this book. Part one focuses on managing your approach to interviewing. Chapter 1 asks you to question your reactions to candidates, show humility, and harvest the benefits of a disciplined, structured approach. Chapter 2 takes a practical look at the "improvables"—habits to unlearn, questions to avoid, biases to understand, and so forth. Interview style is assessed in chapter 3; here you can evaluate your own tendencies to use a gut-feel, conversational, trait, or behavior-based approach. These chapters point to the value of minimizing your feelings and maximizing information in conducting interviews.

Part two shows how to use a practical, research-based interviewing system. The system begins with stage I, which is about developing a job-related, structured approach. You will see how to conduct an analysis of the work to be done (chapter 4), develop interview questions (chapter 5), and structure your interviews (chapter 6).

Stage II of the system covers how to conduct a behavior-based interview.⁵ It deals with guiding the interview (chapter 7), getting specifics (chapter 8), and probing to clarify answers (chapter 9).

Stage III deals with the assessment and selection of candidates. First, chapter 10 shows how to use rating and scoring systems to evaluate answers. Then chapter 11 suggests that there is a credible way to combine behavioral observations and intuition in sound decision making, using a process of informed judgment.

Stage IV recognizes the need to monitor and adjust the process and to keep the human element in perspective. Chapter 12 is about the feedback loop—monitoring and adapting the system to correct and improve the process. Chapter 13 deals with the human dimension and the fact that every decision you make has long-range effects on many other people.

In a broad sense, this is a book that was written to protect candidates. I have always felt a need to stand up for people who are getting pushed around, especially by someone with more power. I believe that interviewers who use unreliable methods that won't produce valid predictions are thwarting opportunities—perhaps with the best of intentions. They can hurt managers, investors, co-workers, and candidates—especially the capable candidate who was unjustly passed over by a misguided interviewer.

Finally, there is something I need to confess. This may sound a little corny, but I've had a lifetime passion for doing selection interviews. Many of these interviews were for lofty positions such as corporate presidents, executives, and municipal leaders. Others were for hands-on workers—drivers, telemarketers, real estate agents. The real story here is about the candidates who tolerated me, the associates who were smarter than I, and the employers who trusted me. This was not a chore. For the most part, I loved the experience. I hope you do too.

QUESTION YOUR REACTIONS

There was a history professor at Lambuth College who had a profound effect on my life. Dr. Eagle would talk about a historical event and then apply the information to current situations. I suspect that his mission was to keep history from repeating itself.

In every class, Dr. Eagle linked a moment in history to wisdom for the day. Beyond the specific applications, he instilled a principle in my thinking about how to get rewards in life. He did this by talking about what I came to know as the “give to get” principle:

“This bit of history shows that . . .

- when you give persistence, you get results;
- when you give honesty, you get truth;
- when you give focus, you get solutions;
- when you give credit, you get recognition.”

Now it would be easy for us to nitpick these ideas, but the basic concept of give-to-get can serve us well. Everything has a price and some sort of payback.

Sometimes I have to criticize myself because I want the “get” without putting the “give” in front of it. Every time I go through this routine, I realize that give-to-get is a powerful way to keep myself from going astray. The good life is a pay-as-you-go plan, with early investments generating nice paydays.

The same is true for selection interviews. Your investment in using a disciplined, job-related, structured approach will help you feel confident, retain talent, improve performance, plan for talent succession, and minimize liability. There is a lot to get for what you give.

GIVE HUMILITY AND GET MORE EFFECTIVE

This chapter will ask you to suspend your beliefs about how you should do an interview. You don’t have to shove them aside, repress them, or pretend they don’t exist. Just put them on a shelf so you can take them down and examine them as you read.

I would never say that you are all wrong in the way you interview. You may have learned valuable skills from life’s experiences, from a top manager, or from a strong teacher. But you may also have developed some bad habits along the way.

Like most people, you probably adopted interviewing theories, biases, and stereotypes that can interfere with your assessment of candidates. Some of this learning, good and bad, may also get in the way of developing new skills. Just like renovating your kitchen, you get the best results if you rip everything out and start new.

Substantial improvement is not easy. You have to start with an open, inquiring mind and mix in an active learning strategy. Read the whole book, profile your interviewing style, and highlight the key points. Be an active learner. Talk back to the book. When you disagree, be specific about what doesn’t work for you. Then try to find some of my words that will help you reexamine and modify your opinions. Contact me with your questions.¹ Interacting with the ideas will give you deeper learning.

QUESTION YOUR IMPRESSIONS

Your reactions to a candidate probably say more about you and your experiences than they do about the person you’re interviewing. The candidate you don’t like may remind you of a speech teacher, an ex-boss, or a bill collector. The candidate you like may remind you of a top performer, a giving person, or your favorite coach. Either way, you lose. Feelings about a person in your past won’t predict the future performance of a person you meet today. Question your reactions—and gather reliable information to measure the candidate’s skills for a job.

A tougher challenge is to question your snap judgments. It's healthy to doubt yourself here. Ask yourself how many mistakes you've made in life because you misread a person. When did you pay too much and get too little? What about that bad loan you made? How many spouses have you had? Admittedly, you may not have a horrible track record, but it certainly is not perfect.

With interviews, perception is not reality. Yes, you do have experiences that are valid, because you are a human being. But honest or not, perceptions don't cut it when you're interviewing. As you will see later, there is a way to feed your intuitions and make effective decisions, but you must have the right foundation to build on. This begins with going beyond your initial impressions of a candidate and getting information to predict job performance. The content of an answer is king. Your impressions of a candidate are suspect.

We know that, in practice, interview procedure will not eliminate feelings about a candidate. But remember: information about skills is the best predictor of job performance. Recognize your reactions to people and ask job-related questions to test them, but don't let them get in the way of gathering information. What's important is to discover what the candidate will be able to do in the job.

I'm not asking you to do anything I haven't done myself. I conducted several thousand interviews over thirty-five years for every kind of job imaginable. When I started interviewing, the only advice I got was "Just listen to your gut." Using this approach, I made just about every kind of mistake imaginable—many of them over and over again.

I identified some of my mistakes because I read the research on interviewing and the law. Other mistakes were unveiled as a client would verbally beat me up. Now you are the one to benefit from my experiences. If you will give humility, be open to learning, and discover reliable information on job skills, then you will get better at recognizing talent and predicting job performance.

Give-to-get works again!

DISCIPLINE NOW, BENEFIT LATER

A disciplined interviewing approach will make you more likely to select people who are capable and motivated to do a job well. The discipline comes from doing a work analysis to define what the candidate will need to do, developing questions to measure those skills, and evaluating answers in a systematic way. Discipline will also limit casual conversation and help you focus on the skills a candidate needs to be effective in the job.

Another benefit of a disciplined approach is that you can select and work with a team of strong performers without having to act as an arbitrator, counselor, or political consultant. "Benefit" does not mean short hours or

easy work; it means that you can shift your attention away from personality conflicts and incompetence and work with talented professionals who are self-directing performers.

I recall working in an abusive environment with marginally competent people. It was an unpleasant experience, but it later gave me an appreciation of what it was like to work with a high-performance team. It was the difference

POOR INTERVIEWING IS EXPENSIVE

If you think it costs too much time and energy to have a disciplined interview approach, think about how much it costs to manage someone who can't or won't do the job.

atives—all are selected by interviews. Even a presidential candidate's "town hall" meeting is a type of panel interview; the voters are the interviewers, all present at the same time, asking questions and evaluating the answers.

Because interviews are used so much, it's easy to assume that anyone can do them.

- A new supervisor with no interviewing experience is told to hire replacements.
- A successful physician believes that he can interview effectively, because he does everything else well.
- A chairman of a huge business empire personally interviews and selects a replacement, even though he has never had interview training.

I once heard a manager say that if you have good people skills you will be a good interviewer—"It's all a matter of reading people." But in my experience, interviewing is a skill that is learned through instruction, reading, and practice.

INTERVIEWS—THE #1 SELECTION TOOL

A mid-size city of a million people has about 60,000 businesses and government facilities that interview people for jobs. Assuming that each business does only ten initial and follow-up interviews every twelve months, there are about 600,000 interviews done in a 255-workday year—2,353 interviews every day. That's about one interview every twelve seconds in an eight-hour workday.

Doing interviews well is also more than using common sense or street smarts. There is a well-defined subject matter of how to do an interview. It includes procedures to follow, things to say or not say, special ways to word questions, guidelines on how to probe for information, and more. In fact, there is so much to learn you could feel a little intimidated. A new interviewer with good training is like a new pilot: she may have gone through a lot of instruction, but she still has a lot to learn after she solos.

There's no reason to feel insecure. This book is your friend, and I'm your coach. I am going to be with you along the way. I hope I will be with you throughout your career. Of course, I can't be physically there when you conduct interviews, but I can anticipate your questions and give you tips on how to deal with different challenges you will experience.

INTERVIEW DISCIPLINE BEGINS WITH A STRUCTURED APPROACH

At its most basic level, a structured approach to interviewing involves asking prepared, job-related questions of job candidates. The approach may vary in the types of questions asked, how closely they link to a specific job, and what types of guidelines are given for evaluating answers. For example, structured interviews typically give the interviewer discretion as to what questions to ask or whether probing is allowed. Highly structured interviews, by contrast, require that *every* question be read to the candidate and do not allow follow-up probes. For examples, look at the structured and highly structured interviews on pages 233–253 in the Resources section.

Although you have leeway in deciding how much structure you want in your interviews, some level of structure is essential for reliable measurement of a candidate's skills and valid prediction of performance. Interview structure also helps you discipline your reactions to a candidate, and it helps you in case you have to defend your interviews. You know what to ask, because the questions are in front of you. You know how to take notes to document answers. You know how to evaluate answers by following a set procedure. With all of this working for you, you can also expect to feel objective and professional.

THE INTERVIEW IS A YARDSTICK

If you were installing carpet, you would need to measure the dimensions of the room. The most precise measure would be a laser ruler, followed by a tape measure, a yardstick, a 12-inch ruler, and finally, pacing it off. Each has a different level of measurement effectiveness. You would never consider just estimating the area and making a purchase. The same goes for interviewing. An eyeball estimate is not enough; the standard for measuring a candidate's skills is a structured approach with evaluation guidelines.

BENEFITS OF STRUCTURED INTERVIEWING

Interviews can be just as stressful for the interviewer as for the candidate. If you do interviews well, you may eventually get some recognition—but I’ve never seen an interviewer come up and get recognized at an awards banquet. On the other hand, doing interviews poorly will get you blame and pain. You may have to

- train and retrain a bad hire,
- do the job of a “mistake” you hired,
- reduce performance expectations, or
- be accountable in a lawsuit.

The bigger question is this: What’s in it for you? What do you get for using a structured approach? What do you get for what you give?

Good questions. A structured approach will give you greater confidence, increased retention, improved performance, effective talent management, and reduced liability. Learning how to be a top interviewer also will serve you well throughout your career. No matter what job you aspire to, effective interviewing is a key skill in your future workplace.

Feel confident. There’s a lot riding on every interview you do. The risk is that one hiring mistake can cost thousands in poor performance and lead to one hassle after another. The reward is that one hiring success can generate thousands in high performance and make life easy for you. Risk makes you cautious; reward makes you hopeful.

Over the years I found that having a structured interview gave me confidence. Job-related questions helped me feel I was effective with my phrasing. I felt that I was being fair by treating all candidates comparably. Most of all, I avoided asking off-the-wall questions that didn’t link to the job. I had a solid foundation for balancing risk and reward.

My confidence was tested over and over again by candidates, employers, attorneys, and human resource managers. I was

- in court to explain why a candidate was not recommended.
- yelled at by the friend of a candidate because he didn’t get the job.
- harshly criticized by an entrepreneur who made snap judgments.
- pressured to make a positive recommendation on a celebrity’s son.
- maligned by a manager who wanted to hire only white males.

Most of these experiences caused me discomfort, but I always fell back on the give-to-get principle. If I gave commitment to using a structured approach, delivered with respect, then I would get confidence, security, and a good night's sleep. Beyond these good feelings, you will get talent.

New challenges to confidence come from the diversification of our workforce. The odds are that many of the candidates you interview will be different from you.² Non-Hispanic whites will continue to be the largest single group in the workforce. However, their numbers will fall from 70.0 percent in 2004 to 65.6 percent in 2014. By 2014, African Americans will increase from 11.3 to 12.0 percent, but Hispanics will become a larger proportion of the labor force. Asians will continue to be the fastest growing of the four groups.³

A structured approach will help you feel confident and comfortable interviewing diverse people. Research repeatedly says that the best strategy to use is a job-related, structured approach that is administered in a reasonably consistent way. When you have this level of preparation behind you, your confidence will grow, along with your ability to pick the right person for the job.

Retain talent. It is valuable to have a stable workforce who know their jobs and perform well. At one time this was described as a process of reducing turnover, but today it's more common to hear about increasing employee retention through the assessment and management of talent. This is now a critical agenda for human resource management in any organization.

Effective interviews can raise the retention rates of talented workers and minimize costs due to turnover. Just think of a hiring mistake that you had to work with. What was the cost of lower performance, extra training, and stress? Consider the replacement costs, such as recruiting, travel, interview time, training a new hire, and part-time staffing—not to mention the enormous cost of replacing the critical talents and skills of a departing performer. Structured interviews will help you minimize these problems.

PAY NOW—OR PAY LATER!

There's an old saying: "Pay now, or pay later. Just know you are going to pay." A disciplined approach to interviewing requires effort. You have to define competencies, train interviewers, develop structured interviews, and give equivalent treatment. But the cost is much bigger when you hire problem employees who underperform and make you pay, and pay, and pay! The one-time cost of getting ready to hire is minor compared with getting ready to fire.

An Internet search on the words “turnover” and “costs” yields a broad range of estimates, but for our purposes, I will suggest that it typically costs 150–200 percent of salary and benefits to replace a manager. It costs less to lose an hourly employee, but the volume can be a killer. For example, the cost of 75 percent of the annual salary of a person making \$30,000 a year is \$22,500. But if you replace 100 hourly workers a year, the cost is \$2,250,000.⁴ The high cost of turnover and low retention can take a huge bite out of profits. Effective interviewing can reduce these costs substantially.

Part of the problem is that turnover costs are found in different expense categories. Expenses come from a manager’s budget, recruiting costs, consultant fees, travel, and lower performance. The expense is also difficult to measure because these costs accumulate across more than one year. Then there are hidden costs: What’s the cost of work that wasn’t done well before a poor performer was asked to leave? What’s the cost of your stress when you do two jobs at once?

All of this is to say that there are financial benefits for doing effective interviews. An interviewing system that gives even a 20 percent improvement in costs and performance can generate a big payoff.

WHAT’S THE COST OF LOSING TALENT?

Turnover can be very expensive. Here’s an estimate of the average expense of losing a performer earning \$80,000 a year.

Factor	% of Salary	Est. Cost
De-hiring or outplacement	10%	\$ 8,000
Continued benefits or unemployment	30%	24,000
Recruiting a replacement	20%	16,000
Hiring a replacement	20%	16,000
New-hire orientation and training	20%	16,000
Legal fees or consulting	10%	8,000
Stress on the manager	5%	4,000
Losing specialized job knowledge	30%	24,000
Performance loss	20%	16,000
Reduced manpower reserves	30%	24,000
	Estimated total cost:	\$156,000

In the case of an executive, scientist, or key performer, the estimate would be considerably higher.

Improve performance. Over time you can expect to improve overall performance by hiring more talented people. Although work situations and recruiting opportunities differ, a substantial amount of research shows that structured interviews are effective in delivering performance benefits.⁵

The benefits of hiring top performers are not the same for different types of work. You can expect some performance improvement for routine work and substantial improvement for highly complex work. It is estimated that effective selection can improve performance by 19 percent in blue-collar and routine clerical jobs, 32 percent for skilled crafts and administrative jobs involving decision making, 48 percent for sales other than insurance, and 120 percent for life insurance sales.⁶

Ask yourself these questions:

- What would things be like if every job in my organization were staffed by a top performer? How much more productive would we be?
- How much could we reduce costs if we didn't have to fix mistakes? Would less time be spent dealing with personnel problems? Would it be easier to recruit? Could we get results with fewer managers?

Even small improvements in selection can generate substantial results. Disciplined, structured interviews will help get you there.

Plan for talent succession. The oncoming wave of baby-boomer retirements is eroding the number of experienced managers and contributors available for work, while education is not delivering as many competent new hires as it once did. The fast-growing economy means fewer candidates competing for more jobs in many sectors. To some extent, computers and digital communication have kept productivity high, but retention of workforce talent is becoming increasingly important. The war for talent is still being fought. Consider these statistics:

- The annual growth rate of the 55-and-older group is projected to be four times the growth rate of the overall workforce.
- The annual growth rate for the 25–54 age group will be 0.3 percent. This talent pool for future executives, managers, and individual

PROMOTION MISTAKES LOWER PERFORMANCE

Can you think of someone who was promoted based on likeability but couldn't do the job? How expensive was that mistake? How many benefits would have come from a good hire?

contributors is not expected to keep up with the growth of the economy.

- The demographic gap between older, experienced workers, and younger, developing workers is expected to cause a “brain drain,” particularly with engineers, key account sales representatives, and senior managers.⁷

Although technology and efficient work processing can help with the manpower gap, the problem still exists. The United States will be dealing with a talent shortage well into the twenty-first century, with the demand for talent outpacing the supply.

An acquaintance of mine describes this as the “leaky bucket problem”: recruiters are busy ladling talent into the organization, but it leaks out faster than it can be ladled in. Organizations adapt by getting more recruiters with bigger ladles. But more and more recruiters are dipping their ladles into the talent pool—and the quality of the water is declining, too. Even worse, some of your best talent is leaking out to competitors.

EEOC LITIGATION

In 2005, a total of 417 lawsuits were filed with the EEOC, of which 370 were resolved.⁸ Monetary benefits of \$107.7 million were awarded—an average settlement of \$291,000. Legal fees and lost time can easily double that amount, and the cases with no monetary settlement were probably just as expensive.

Talent management is one solution to this problem. Its mission is to identify and retain strong talent within and recruit strong talent from without.

The interview is the most-used selection tool in this process. Being a good interviewer means that you can be a long-term influence on the talent management in your organization. You benefit personally from your own career development, and all can benefit by working with capable “keepers” instead of “hangers on.”

Minimize liability. You can incur substantial penalties if you violate one of the many federal, state, and local laws about selection, not to mention the legal precedents set by judges who interpret these statutes. Of course, you can avoid these penalties by winning your court case, but you’ll still pay enormous costs in terms of legal defense, time, and reputation.

Wouldn’t it be nice to feel that your interviewing approach was defensible? Being confident that you’re not only following the law but selecting high performers would allow you to be more thorough in your interviewing, with less anxiety.

A study of judges' rulings between 1972 and 1995 in 99 federal district court cases involving discrimination in an employment interview showed that many of the components of interview structure enhanced interview reliability and validity, and thereby contributed to successful defense in litigation.⁹ Objective, job-related interviews, with specific criteria, trained interviewers, and validation evidence, were largely upheld. It was also beneficial to have standardized administration, with guidelines for the interviewers, minimal discretion on questioning, common questions, and consistency. There were mixed results on the benefits of using multiple interviewers, panel interviews, and decision review.

AVOID HIGH-RISK QUESTIONS

You can also reduce your risk by avoiding high-risk questions that can be linked to race, color, gender, religion, national origin, age, or disabilities.¹⁰ Low-risk questions can be directly related to doing a particular job.

SUMMARY AND PREVIEW

Avoid relying on your reactions to candidates. Instead, use a disciplined approach with job-related, structured interviews. This helps you open the door for getting more information about a candidate's job skills, and it will help you feel confident, retain talent, improve performance, plan for talent succession, and minimize liability. In the bigger picture, a disciplined approach will help you staff your organization with talented performers.

In the next chapter we will explore your "improvables"—the things you can do to improve your interview discipline and enhance your ability to predict a candidate's job performance. Once you identify and address your areas for improvement, you will have a stronger foundation for building interviewing skills that help you predict job performance.