Improving Screening Interviews: Several Suggestions

First published as Improving Screening Interviews: Several suggestions, AASPA Perspective, American Association of School Personnel Administrators, Fall 2002.

Howard Ebmeier
409 Pearson Hall
University of Kansas
Lawrence, KS 66045
howard@ku.edu

The selection of staff members is one of the most important decisions made by an administrator. Indeed, no other single activity is as critical to operating an efficient and effective school. Errors made in the selection process have direct impact on the school and have far-reaching consequences for students, administrators, other teachers, and the functioning of the school as a whole. Thus, this initial evaluation is probably the most important of all evaluations. Historically, the mainstay of the staff selection process has been the interview. For example, more than 85 per cent of educational administrators regard the interview process as a vital factor in the selection of teachers (Vornberg & Liles, 1983). However, research conducted over the past twenty years does not favorably reflect on either the accuracy or the reliability of the typical employment interview. Common criticisms are often reported in terms of biases in information gathering, judgment, and decision making caused by drawing inferences from limited data obtained in artificial situations by untrained interviewers (Thayer, 1978). Over the last few years several suggestions have been mentioned in the literature as potential ways to improve the interview process (See Dipboye, R., 1994 and Eder, R. and Ferris, G., 1989 for a more complete discussion). Some of these suggestions are discussed below.

1. Base interview questions on an analysis of the job

Almost without exception, experts in personnel administration advise that questions selected for inclusion in the interview process should be derived from actual job descriptions. School districts frequently violate this common sense recommendation, however, by selecting their interview questions to measure high inference personality variables such as trust, rapport, drive, warmth, humor, and other characteristics. While these factors are certainly important and moderately predictive of future teacher performance, they are extremely subject to rater bias and thus generally not well received by EEOC and the courts. Clearly a more defensible policy is to base interview questions on job skills demonstrated by research to directly relate to student learning. Two good sources for potential questions are the ASCD publication Enhancing Professional Practice: A Framework for Teaching (www.ascd.org) and the Praxis III Classroom Observational System (www.teachingandlearning.org). Both sources are well documented and have repeatedly been shown to influence student learning.

A second related problem is employing a singular set of questions for all candidates regardless of the position they seek. Typically, districts use the same set of questions asked in the same order for elementary teachers and secondary science teachers. Clearly, there is some overlap in their job skills but conducting identical interviews for individuals seeking very different jobs seems inappropriate.

2. Include well-defined rubrics

Although it is important to base the interview questions on the job description,
equally important is that each interview question be accompanied by a detailed scoring rubric. If a 5-point rating scale is associated with the question, then each of the point values should be defined. Without this scoring rubric, principals are left free to interpret the value of the candidate’s answer. This only leads to lower inter-rater reliability and ultimately results in useless scores gathered via the screening instrument. As much care should be given to the scoring rubric as the questions themselves.

3. Use structured interviews

Based on the research over the last twenty years, structured interviews seem to be about twice as predictive as unstructured interview. This does not mean that the questions asked of each candidate need be identical, only that each candidate for the same position be asked questions that are similar or drawn randomly from a larger pool of applicable questions. To avoid disclosure of the interview questions, school districts should probably have a bank of 200 or more questions of which a set number are randomly drawn for each interview session. Constructing these questions is time consuming, but having a district’s interview questions posted on an Internet site (as some school districts have experienced) or distributed in pre-service education classes can cause major problems.

4. Use multiple interviewers

Just as multiple judges are employed to evaluate athletic performances in the Olympics, it makes sense in school districts to employ several individuals to evaluate the responses from a single interview. Such a practice increases the reliability of the process and helps avoid selection errors. While it may be impractical to have several principals observe the same live interview, video or audiotapes can be employed to capture the questions asked and the responses given. This practice has several advantages. First, several trained administrators (or other district employees) can independently score the interview and compare their evaluations. If wide differences in scores are discovered, other individuals can be brought in to help resolve the discrepancies. Second, in larger districts, one individual may be called by different principals to interview for vacancies in several buildings. Often this means that one individual may be asked to answer the same set of interview questions multiple times. Candidates get very tired of interviewing several times in the same district especially if a job offer is not forthcoming. By recording one interview, multiple principals can hear or view the candidate without obtrusively asking them to make yet one more trip to the district. Tape recordings can be reviewed at any time and potentially could be posted on the Internet within a secure site for principals to view or hear from their offices. Lastly, should a candidate charge the district with illegal discrimination, tape-recorded records would afford the district some hard evidence to use in their defense.

5. Use only trained and certified interviewers

Elaborate sets of questions and scoring rubrics will never overcome poorly trained administrators. If the administrative staff cannot view the same interview and score the session approximately the same way, the whole goal of the interview system is lost. Training is essential and must be done on a continual basis to ensure a high degree of inter-rater reliability. Administrators who cannot be brought up to the district standard (90% agreement with known responses to standard questions is generally considered acceptable) should not be employed as interviewers—no exceptions!

6. Use combination scores of individual questions

One of the advantage of using carefully designed rubrics for each interview question is that it forces the administrator to make a series of independent judgments about the quality of the candidate as the interview progresses. Measurement theorists would support this practice as being superior to single, general impressions judgments at the end. These series of independent evaluations can be summed to produce an average score, or some questions can be weighted more than others to produce a weighted average score. In addition, if the interview questions were designed to measure relative independent themes (for example, knowledge of instruction, knowledge of instructional
planning, knowledge of assessment and testing) then scores for separate theme areas can be devised. Some job descriptions may call for relatively higher scores in some areas than others. Examination of the scores across theme areas might help better assess the quality of a candidate for a specific job.

7. Avoid contamination of the interview with ancillary data

To avoid bias in the interview ratings, careful attempts should be made to shield the interviewer from prior knowledge of the candidate being interviewed. This means that the interviewer should not take part in the initial paper screening of the candidate. A more effective practice is to have another team of administrators conduct the initial examination of the credential file and make recommendations about who should be interviewed.

Research from the fields of human resource management and psychological measurement suggests that if the above practices were implemented, the predictive power of the initial employment interview would go up almost 100% compared to typical unstructured interviews present in many school districts' selection practices.


