



# The future of the selection interview:

## Key Words

Talent management; assessment, interviewing, validity; emerging trends; technology; efficiency

## competency, puzzles and scenarios

*"The interview is the most flawed process in business"*

Larry Bossidy,  
former CEO of Allied Signal

# The selection interview: overview



- talent management starts with the flow of talent into your organisation and is dependent in large measure on the effectiveness of your recruitment and selection processes
  - exceptional talent makes an exceptional impact<sup>1</sup>
  - and it's easier to hire good performers than fire under-performers
- despite the take up of objective assessment methods, there are good reasons to doubt how well this data is integrated within selection decision making
  - the investment in psychometric testing and assessment centres is not being translated fully into final decision making
- the interview remains the dominant assessment method, with most influence in selection decision making

## The challenge:

- how to improve the effectiveness of a selection method with modest predictive power
- how to utilise technology to optimise the efficiency of the interview process

<sup>1</sup> "The Extraordinary Leader" Zenger

# The impact of recruitment



Effective recruitment is a key driver in talent management. If talent management is the game plan to deploy, develop and retain high performing employees with the potential to progress in future, then recruitment is the start point.

Recruitment is the opportunity for an organisation to:

- raise its game through the intake of higher calibre individuals
- reposition itself through a shift in the skills and values it needs for future challenges
- or, damage its capability for the long-term through the lowering of standards

*“Shell’s recent leadership problems go back to the 1970s when we took our eye of the ball of graduate recruitment.”*

Former Shell recruitment manager

**Robust recruitment practice emerges as one of the success stories of the Human Resources function. Recruitment consistently appears in the research as an important driver of organisational effectiveness.<sup>1</sup>**

**Key factors that make the difference:**

- **a large applicant pool.** Selective hiring to get the best available people requires choice. If you’re stuck with a 1 in 2 selection ratio, it will be difficult to raise the calibre of the intake.
- **clear and focused recruitment criteria** based on the organisation’s competitive position. There are no all-time “brightest and best”. There are candidates that are right for your organisation, its culture and customers.
- an emphasis on **values and talent<sup>2</sup>**. Specific skills can be acquired relatively easily with intensive training. The character, motivation and fundamental capability that drives exceptional performance can’t.
- **rigorous selection** that makes recruitment a demanding challenge for candidates. This isn’t the lengthy and protracted process that is the result of organisational inefficiency. It is an exacting standard based on in-depth interviews, reference checks and other assessment exercises.

<sup>1</sup> “The Human Equation” J Pfeffer

<sup>2</sup> “First Break All the Rules” Coffee & Buckingham

**Despite the emergence of other assessment methods – biodata, psychometric tests, assessment centres - with established validity - the interview continues to be the moment of recruitment truth.**

**So where does interviewing go wrong?**

# Where does interviewing go wrong?

## rejecting excellent candidates for the wrong reasons

- “excellence” may not interview like excellence
- some recruiting managers may dislike excellence, and the implications for the management and retention of exceptional performers

## accepting “capable” people who aren’t motivated

- too much attention is paid to past accomplishments rather than fit to future challenge
- impression management skills in the interview are no substitute for hard work in the role

## accepting partial capability

- the “halo effect” that globalises strengths and weaknesses and allows one strength to dominate the interview evaluation
- under-estimating the “get up to speed” factor

## recruiting incompetency that interviews well

- being overly impressed by “credibility” from career resume or social poise in an interview setting and failing to identify the fundamentals of capability and character

*“The fact is that some people interview well and some people don’t. And a person who doesn’t interview well may be the best choice for the job.”*

Larry Bossidy

# Solutions: better interviewer training?



**If selection interviewing is problematic, maybe the solution lies in the training of interviewers.**

## **The Fifteen Second Interview<sup>1</sup>**

Interviewers were trained for six weeks in selection interviewing techniques. They then interviewed 98 individuals. Each interview was 15-20 minutes and captured on tape. After the interview, the interviewers rated the candidates.

The tapes were then edited down to 15 seconds. Each 15 second clip showed the candidate entering the room, shaking hands with the interviewer and sitting down.

When another group rated the candidates, based only on the 15 second clip, their views correlated strongly with the two trained interviewers, who had the full interview on which to make their evaluations.

This is akin to Malcolm Gladwell's [Blink Thinking](#), evaluations based on immediate instinct and intuition. But whilst intuition might work for some decisions, they don't support the kind of choices that need to be made in the assessment of those individuals who will contribute, perform and progress.

The selection interview is a social game in which interviewees "walk the tightrope between concealment and disclosure". Too much candour from interviewees can be risky, but excessive concealment appears evasive. And in this game interviewers form judgements very quickly. Maybe it's looks, body language, or communication style<sup>2</sup>. Whatever the reason, judgements are made with modest predictive power of future effectiveness.

<sup>1</sup> "How Would You Move Mount Fuji?" William Poundstone

<sup>2</sup> See "You Tube" for examples of interview-interviewee interaction.

## A short history lesson<sup>1</sup>

In the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, initial research indicated low levels of reliability for interviews. This analysis provided the impetus for ways in which to improve interview practice. Ghiselli as far back as 1945 recommended interview questions focusing only on past experience relevant to the role. This saw the design of the Past Behavioural Interview (PBI) and the more recent emergence of competency based interviews:

- a set of standard questions to establish consistency around capability requirements
- based on an interview approach that explores for evidence of competency in action
  - describe a time when you...
  - can you give me an example of ...

An improvement on traditional interviewing techniques that drew on the old chestnuts of:

- where do you see yourself in 5 years time?
- what makes you most proud?
- how would you describe your shortcomings?

And competency based interview methodology saw improvements in predictive power (10-15%) and came to dominate recruitment practice.

**But the cracks began to appear**

<sup>1</sup> See "Executive Intelligence" by Justin Menkes, 2005 for an excellent overview of interview research.

# Competency based interviewing: the cracks begin to appear



## Competency interviews don't measure competency

Interview evaluations seem to be based on little more than a combination of experience, job knowledge and social skill.<sup>1</sup> Competency based interviews despite the claim to pinpoint different skills and provide a detailed profile of interviewee strengths and limitations, don't. Instead the research indicates they measure only three themes:

- how much work experience the interviewee has
- whether the individual has done this kind of job before
- how socially poised the interviewee is in managing the interview situation

## The Predictive Problem

Perhaps this doesn't matter, as long as competency based interviews "work", i.e. they predict something important about future work effectiveness. Do they? Unfortunately **validity remains a problem**<sup>2</sup>. An improvement from a low base rate to modest validity is not a breakthrough in recruitment effectiveness.

<sup>1</sup> Salgado "Comprehensive Meta analysis of the Construct Validity of the Employment Interview", European Journal of Work & Organisational Psychology, 2002

<sup>2</sup> Motowidlo found that the average correlation between Competency Based Interview evaluations and performance to be .22; i.e. explaining less than 5% of future work effectiveness; Journal of Applied Psychology, 1992

# Competency based interviewing: the cracks begin to appear



## Missing the Mark

Competency based interviews **don't do a good job of assessing cognitive capability<sup>1</sup>**, the driver of judgement, decision making and strategic thinking and the skills that are increasingly important components of work effectiveness, particularly at senior levels. Competency based interviews excel where the candidate past is very similar to current role requirements. But when role challenges are shifting and problem solving skills are at a premium, competency based evaluations struggle.

## Interviewees now know the Drill

Competency based interviewing remains a social game of “show and tell”. Armed with responses from the hundreds of web sites providing “solutions” to standard competency based questions, interviewees understand the rules. Busy recruiting managers find themselves less well prepared for the interview than the candidate who has spent the previous evening rehearsing responses to predictable questions.

<sup>1</sup> Huffet found that the overlap between competency based interviews and aptitude test data is almost zero; Journal of Applied Psychology, 1996

# Competency based interviewing: a summary



- competency based interviews have established a level of consistency that has made modest gains in predicting future effectiveness.
- but this gain runs the risk of narrowing the pool of available talent.
- the competency based methodology seems to work best when faced with candidates whose past experience is very similar to the target role. It also seems to play to the “show and tell” candidate, with talents in impression management skills.
- competency based interviewing is less effective in spotting the kind of talent without the conventional career resume, or that talent with the flexibility of problem solving skills that are critical to roles that are changing.

# Alternatives to competency based interviews: the emergence of the puzzle



Puzzles, logical games and downright impossible questions have a long history, from the riddle of the Sphinx to the impenetrable challenges of the Japanese Zen masters. But it was the early days of Silicon Valley and the emergence of the technological revolution in the 1970s that saw the first practical use of the puzzle interview in recruitment.

In their search for that combination of logical rigour and creative flair, hi tech companies saw puzzles as a revealing insight into candidate thinking, initiative and resourcefulness. Candidates could be faced with such brain teasers as:

- how many piano tuners are there in the world?
- how would you weigh a jet plane without a set of scales?
- how many times a day do a clock's hands overlap?
- why are beer cans tapered at the top and bottom?

For some puzzle interview questions there is a “correct answer”. For most, there is an approximation based on a combination of logical analysis and flexible thinking. And for some there is no correct answer. Here the interview seems less about mental agility and more about the tolerance of ambiguity and stress management.

It wasn't long before this peculiar style of interviewing filtered from software houses through to professional services, the media, banking and even the military.

Interviewers loved this approach. Interviews became fun and interesting, not least because they put interviewers in the powerful position of having candidates squirm a bit rather than listen to well-spun accounts of past accomplishments.

# Do puzzle interviews represent the future?



At best, puzzle interviews are a spot light on the thought processes of candidates to identify the cognitive patterns indicative of effectiveness within a role. They move from the conventional conversational style to a more exacting examination of candidate capability. And in an organisational world requiring greater problem solving flexibility, puzzle interview questions at first sight seem to tap into something important.

Puzzle interviews also seemed to provide an alternative to aptitude testing. Psychometric testing may have established predictive validity but it has other problems.

Tests are unpopular, particularly at senior levels, where the leadership challenge is less about ticking the correct solution than in identifying what the fundamental problem is in the first place.

In the real world, problems don't get solved in a multiple choice format. Standardised tests may be objective but they largely fail to grapple with the realities of the tasks most senior professionals and managers now face.

# The problems with the puzzle style interview



## Are puzzle interviews the new interview methodology? Probably not.

First they seem to assess a very **narrow kind of cognitive capability**. Logic is important but the logic that solves puzzle problems is a very distinctive skill set. Evaluations from puzzle interview questions may provide a lopsided judgement of candidate talents.

There are probably only 25-30 “puzzle scripts”, recurring story lines requiring the same logical approach. And in the world of the Internet, success in a puzzle interview may owe less to critical thinking and creative flair than to an obsession with puzzle answers and endless hours researching puzzle questions and the classic responses.

If competency based interviews allow the social skills of talking about the past to dominate, then **puzzle interviews over-play the one-track logician** who may not get things done in the real world.

*“Puzzles are good at one thing, determining how well a person is able to solve a logic puzzle.”*

Chris Sells

Thirdly, they **don't seem quite “fair”**. Although it is difficult to work out which interview question is more or less fair:

- what has been your most creative idea?
- how would you go about designing a spice rack for a blind person?

for some reason, puzzle style interviews don't quite seem to “play the game”. They put interviewees on the back foot and disrupt the normal conversational tone of the interview. For that candidate with the expectation of “show and tell” the best moments from their career history, a series of tough puzzles can become a difficult and potentially embarrassing experience.

# Puzzles become scenarios



Puzzle style interviews have their problems. But they did set the scene for a shift in interview approach, one that moved away from a reliance on past experience, and the rehearsal of positive anecdotes of previous achievements, to one that looked more at the future challenges faced by the role holder.

Situational or scenario based interviews are the presentation of a series of challenges, outlining a vignette of working life to explore with the interviewee “what would you do? And why?”

Scenarios come in all sizes and shapes:

- the tough choices and conflicts of professional and management life
- strategic hypotheticals and options
- commercial and ethical dilemmas and trade-offs
- decision making in the face of competing stake holder expectations

Scenario questions - based on the current and emerging challenges facing your organisation and the problems your managers and professionals need to tackle - reveal important candidate talents. They go beyond the narrow cognitive skill set of logical puzzles. A well presented scenario also moves away from the “show and tell” of competency based questions to reveal how candidates:

- define problems; narrowly or broadly? short-term or long-term
- manage uncertainty and what additional data is needed to provide a robust response
- think imaginatively about different options
- evaluate the pros and cons of different potential solutions
- deploy wisdom to know what is “black-and-white” and what falls into the grey zone
- commit to closure and go beyond possibilities to decide on a course of action

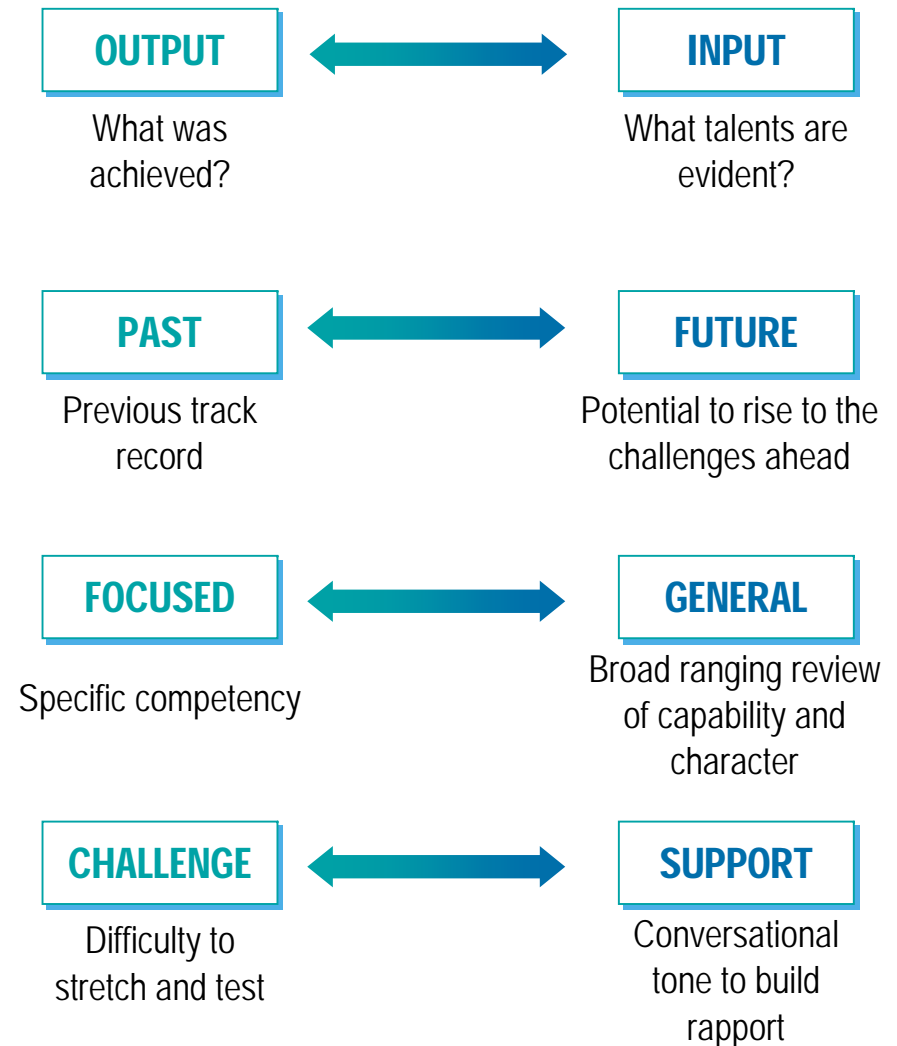
# The power of dynamic interviews



The future of the selection interview lies in **dynamic flexibility**, not bound by any one interview format. Asking every interviewee exactly the same question in the same way might improve consistency. It might also make for dull and predictable interviews biased towards “show and tell” candidates.

Dynamic interviews draw on a mix of interview questions, based on an insight into:

- the target role and how similar or different it is to current roles and the likelihood that the role might change in future
- the candidate short-list and how past experience is more or less relevant to future requirements
- your organisation's resourcing philosophy; is interview evaluation largely about short-term fit or longer-term progression to bigger roles?



# Dynamic interviewing and on line technology



**The move away from check-list interview protocols requires a shift in interview design and planning:**

## **Establish a consistent framework but allow interviewer flexibility**

Standardised interviews may make for consistency, but don't turn the interview into an exercise that could be more efficiently conducted through a written examination. The strength (and weakness) of the interview is the dynamic interaction between interviewer and interviewee.

## **Develop an on line interview database to keep the interviews fresh and challenging**

Don't fall back on a handful of stock questions. And discourage the "killer" question. There is no one question or response that can determine the overall evaluation.

Provide an on line database of interview questions that your recruiting managers can draw on based on their analysis of role priorities, the experience base of the candidates, as well as their own operating approach.

**On line technology for dynamic interviews**

# On line interview toolkits



Our on line interview tool kits help recruiting managers:

- speed up the preparation process to create flexible interview plans
- choose the balance of interview time based on role requirements, and the mix of technical know-how, management capability, operating approach and aspirations
- navigate quickly to powerful interview questions, selecting from a variety of formats from a database of over 1000 questions
- download a comprehensive interview protocol for candidate evaluation

The screenshots illustrate the Interview Toolkit interface, which includes:

- Interview Timings & Coverage:** A screen for configuring interview duration and content. It features a pie chart showing the distribution of time across sections: Introduction (blue), Capability (green), Character (yellow), Career Management (orange), and Conclusion (red). Below the chart, users can set time allocations for each section (e.g., Introduction: 25 minutes, Capability: 33 minutes).
- Prioritising Capability:** A screen where users select skills to focus on. It includes a list of skills with checkboxes and a 'Next' button.
- Seeing the Future - Overview:** A screen for selecting strategic questions. It includes a list of questions with checkboxes and a 'Next' button.
- Generate Interview Plan:** A screen for generating a report. It includes a 'Summary Interview Plan' button and a 'Full Interview Plan' button.

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If you are interested in our approach to selection interviewing and our supporting technology, call us on 44 (0) 1608 654007 or email [admin@amazureconsulting.com](mailto:admin@amazureconsulting.com)

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- **we design but we also implement.** Our content, design and technology can build cost effective solutions quickly. Over-engineered consultancy solutions don't interest us, and they are bad for organisations. Our consultancy experience of "real world" implementation will move things forward from initial concept to results rapidly.
- **we start things to build momentum but we also follow through.** Results come from the discipline of "making it stick", of evaluation, learning and continual improvement. And we maintain ongoing relationships with our clients to keep achieving positive outcomes.