



COMPETENCY BASED INTERVIEWING SKILLS

TRAINER

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SITUATION

This training course is part of a larger program to ensure that all recruitment, selection and promotion practices are fair. Apart from enhancing interviewing skills, based on the competency model of NATO, attention will also be given to techniques and skills to avoid unfair discrimination or bias, which discourage diversity.

OBJECTIVES

This training course will focus on the following points of attention:

- ◆ Better understanding of and insight in participants own interviewing style.
- ◆ Reinforcement of their basic interviewing skills.
- ◆ Designing the selection process based on the Nato HQ Competency Model.
- ◆ How to translate competencies to behavioural examples and experience.
- ◆ Formulating the right questions.
 - Probe beyond superficial answers.
 - Spot "red flags" indicating evasions or untruths.
- ◆ Reading non-verbal behaviour.
- ◆ Exercising emotional control.
- ◆ Becoming aware of personal bias and stereotyping and developing ways to ensure fairness throughout the interview and the decision-making process.

INTRODUCTION

Hiring is too important to leave to chance

If you want to hire superior people, you need a system designed to hire superior people, not one designed to fill jobs. The emphasis of too many hiring processes is to reduce costs and fill jobs as quickly as possible. Somehow the idea of hiring the best is an afterthought. However, hiring the best must dominate every aspect of your hiring process.

Frequently, a selection interview is considered to be an inconvenient if necessary claim on our time. Emotions, biases, chemistry and stereotypes play too big a role. Some candidates give misleading information because they are not asked the appropriate questions.

The number one cause of hiring mistakes is over-reliance on the interaction between the candidate and the interviewer(s) and too little on the candidate's ability and motivation to do the job.

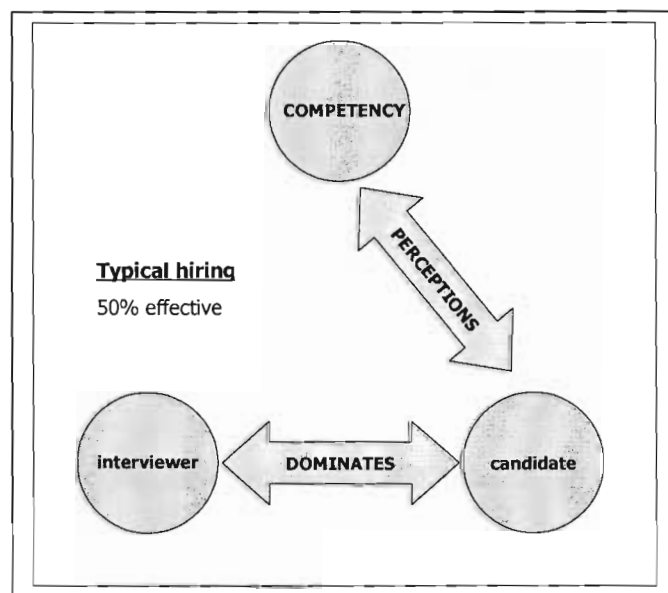


Figure 1: hiring accuracy is low.

Most of the hiring decision is influenced by the interpersonal relationship developed early in the interview between the applicant and the hiring manager. Sometimes this can happen in just a few minutes. It has to do with chemistry, first impressions, biases, stereotypes, the "halo" effect (globalizing a few strengths) and the tendency to hire in our own image.

In most cases, the real job needs are poorly understood and even if they are, they are filtered through these interpersonal relationship and biases. At that moment the hiring process starts to be random. If we like the candidate, we tend to go into chat mode, ask easier questions and look for information that confirms our initial impression. If we don't like the candidate, we put up a defence shield, ask tougher questions and try to end the interview quickly. We go out of our way to find information to prove our initial impression that the candidate is incompetent. All this of course with the best intentions and without being aware of what is happening.

In both cases, the hiring assessment is inaccurate, because the wrong things are assessed. **What is really being measured is the candidate's ability to get the job, not to do the job properly.** Presentation is more important than substance. Ability to get the job includes things like personality, handshake, affability, social confidence, assertiveness, appearance, extroversion and verbal communication. Doing the job will also include initiative, team skills, achieving objectives, technical competence, management and organizational skills, intelligence, etc. Most of us over-emphasize the "getting the job" part when assessing a candidate.

When the hiring decision is based more on a candidate's ability to get the job rather than to do the job, two bad things happen. One, we frequently hire people who fall short of expectations. These are the people who are good interviewees, but weak performers. Second, we don't hire the people who are strong candidates, but weaker interviewees. Sometimes we get lucky of course and find people who are good at both, but we cannot depend on this. Indeed, "even a blind squirrel finds a nut every now and then"....

Substitute "Competencies" as the dominant selection criteria.

When the hiring decision is based primarily on the candidate's ability to do the work, i.e. on his "competencies", everything changes. However, moving the decision-making process from "getting" to "doing" is hard work and mentally challenging. We need to counteract our natural tendency to judge people based on first impression and a few select traits. If we want to be successful in hiring the people we really need for the job, we must have the ability to suspend our emotional reaction until we have determined competency. Therefore, we must know exactly what competency

looks like and only when we have found out that the candidate possesses this competency, find out whether this particular person can fit in.

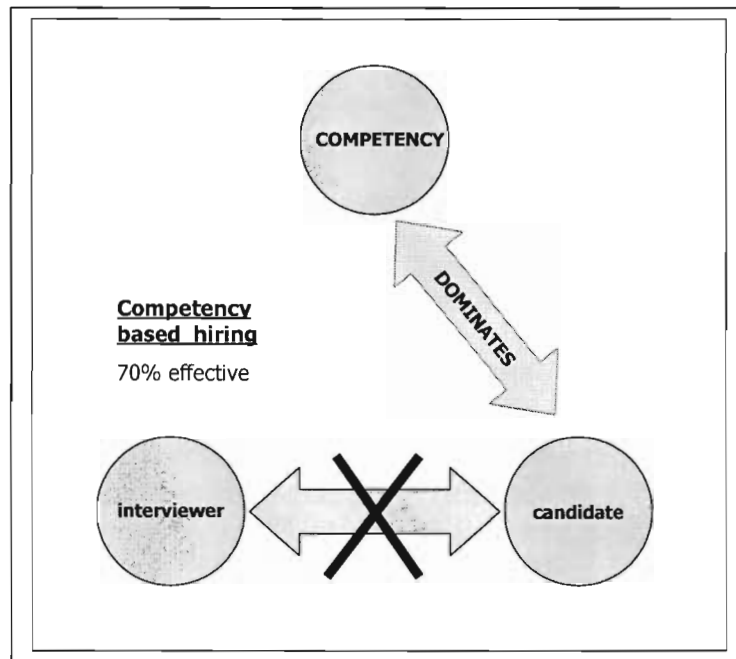


Figure 2: increasing hiring accuracy.

Studies and research over more than 1.000 hiring interviews¹ have shown no correlation at all between interviewee skills and job competency. The best candidates aren't generally the smoothest interviewees and the smoothest interviewees aren't generally the best candidates. Interviewers need to proactively take responsibility for obtaining complete information about job competency from each candidate. They need to "coach" candidates to give complete information. If you leave it up to candidates to provide this information on their own, you are measuring interviewing ability, not job competency.

The "how to" is what we are going to work on during this training course.

¹ Hire with your head, Lou Adler. 2002 John Wiley & Sons, New Jersey.

COMPETENCIES

The key question: what do we measure?

What is it about people that we want to investigate? Against what criteria can we evaluate candidates? The most recent and favourite answer to this question is: "competencies".

Even given the impending and ongoing changes and the need for adaptability and learning, it is still essential to know what we are looking for. Without clear criteria we are left to our own devices and we tend to hire people we like. People we like are people who are like us, in background, personality, appearance and style. This maintenance of status quo or "cloning" will lead to a reduction in diversity and a loss of innovation potential within the organization. Any organization that reproduces itself runs the risk of becoming stale and arid. Not only that, but without clear criteria, it is impossible to defend selection decisions against the claims of unfair discrimination.

Definition of Competencies in NATO.

Competencies in a modern organization are primarily used to align the organization's strategic objectives and the human capabilities needed to attain those objectives. Consequently, competencies help staff and organizations focus on developing and maintaining the knowledge, skills, attitudes and personal characteristics, which are critical to achieving performance excellence and top quality results.

Competencies are a mix of knowledge, skills, attitudes and personal characteristics required to achieve performance excellence and quality results. Competencies are demonstrated through **defined behaviours**; therefore they are observable and measurable.

Competencies are important for the NATO HQ organization for many reasons. They provide staff members with a clear understanding of HOW the organization expects them to work. Competencies empower staff members and allow them to take their own initiative in order to develop their own careers. They also enable staff to take ownership of their individual development. They equip managers with a pragmatic and easy-to-use tool that facilitates people management and can be used as a transparent "standard" against which the staff can be assessed and developed. They help NATO HQ with bottom-up developmental initiatives, define future development needs for the Organization as a whole and enable to better focus its recruitment and personnel management planning.

In NATO HQ competencies are described with three elements:

1. **Competency title:** describes the main topic area or a theme of a competency.
2. **Definition:** one or two lines that provide a general explanation of the competency.
3. **Behaviours:** answers the question "how can one see that someone is performing exceptionally well in a given competency area"? They provide standards, which are observable, measurable and assessable.

Competencies add another dimension to job activities and individual performance objectives set for the staff.

- ◆ Job activities and performance objectives are focused on **WHAT** the staff should do.
- ◆ Competencies put emphasis on and explain **HOW** the staff should do it.

The NATO Competency model shows three categories of competencies:

Core competencies

There are five core competencies at NATO HQ that are applicable to all NATO IS/IMS civilian staff regardless of the job. They constitute a common basis of skills, attitudes and personal characteristics for all of these staff members.

Professional competencies

These are related to the professional groups in NATO HQ. There is a maximum of five competencies in each of the professional groups. This allows the staff to focus on the most important aspects of their jobs.

Managerial competencies

The management group is distinct and applies to all jobs that involve "people management" responsibility. In other words, these are jobs in NATO HQ whose holders directly manage/supervise other staff members. There are five managerial competencies defined for the NATO HQ civilian staff.

To every civilian staff member apply:

- ◆ The five core competencies
- ◆ The competencies (max. 5) of the relevant professional group to which his/her job belongs.

To all staff members who hold a managerial or supervisory job apply:

- ◆ The abovementioned competencies
- ◆ The five managerial competencies.

CHALLENGES TO COMPETENCY-BASED INTERVIEWING

Let's look at three frequently made assumptions and see if they hold up under challenge.

Observable behaviour is all that is important – feelings and emotions are not important.

Competencies have become over simplified sometimes. Of course, observable behaviours are very important, but they are not everything. How we feel when faced with a setback, the state of our motivation when faced with two competing tasks... We cannot necessarily observe these things but they are important. Therefore our questions should always revolve around three aspects:

- ◆ Doing or acting
 - Planning and organizing
 - Achievement drive
- ◆ Thinking
 - Analysis
 - Learning ability
- ◆ Feeling
 - Influencing
 - Interpersonal skills

Competencies are not compensatory – to succeed in organizations, a person should have them all.

It is sometimes supposed that, to be successful, a candidate must demonstrate competence throughout the framework. This is almost certainly naïve. Occasionally someone will come along who seems to score uniformly high but even they will have some strengths and some weaknesses. Therefore it is important that we know exactly how to rate the competencies and how to decide which competencies have priority over which.

It is possible to distinguish an individual's contribution from that of the team.

How many times have you stopped an interviewee to ask the question: "You said 'we' made the decision. Who is 'we' and what was your role?"; only to get the answer: "It was a team decision, we all contributed". So much of our work in organizations today is conducted in teams that it may no longer be possible to assess individual skills or abilities. It is not just the individual's characteristics, which determine how well they perform, but also the environment in which they work, the opportunities they are given and the way they are rewarded and managed. So we should always keep in mind in which team the individual will have to perform, when assessing their suitability.

CONDUCTING THE INTERVIEW

The basics: the interview script

Preparing	Gathering information	<ul style="list-style-type: none">♦ About the vacancy♦ About the candidates
During the interview	Introduction	<ul style="list-style-type: none">♦ Who are you: names, functions, and capacity...♦ Breaking the ice: informal chat♦ Informing the candidate about the agenda of the interview<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ What are you going to do○ Stressing the importance of the candidate's own contribution○ If you take notes, tell the candidate why you do this.
	Information gathering	<ul style="list-style-type: none">♦ The opening questions♦ Discussion of the c.v.<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Questions about previous achievements and experience○ Questions to challenge candidates to assess themselves♦ Asking carefully prepared competency based questions♦ Coaching the candidate to give behaviour specific answers♦ Probing beyond superficial answers
	Information giving	<ul style="list-style-type: none">♦ Inform the candidate about the job expectations and career development.♦ Invite the candidate to ask questions♦ Answer questions about wages, procedures, working conditions, etc. (as much as you want to disclose at this stage)
	Closing	<ul style="list-style-type: none">♦ Inform the candidate of further procedures♦ When and how will you come back to him/her?
After the interview	Assessment Decision making (in your committee)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">♦ Discussing and balancing the strengths and weaknesses of the candidate♦ Decision about hiring♦ Decision about further action.

ASKING THE RIGHT QUESTIONS

For openers: five traditional interview questions and their interpretations.

Let's start by examining the most often-used interview questions and putting a new spin on their interpretations. These questions have stood the test of time and we should consequently recognize their value in the assessment process. Their inherent weakness, of course, lies in their overuse. Most of us can remember being asked these very questions during our past interviews. Job-finding books and career magazines abound with suggested responses to help candidates "steer clear of the interview questioning snare".

Our exercise in this first topic, however, is not to use questions just because they have been around for a long time. And it is certainly not to offer candidates an opportunity to practice their well-rehearsed lines! Let us look at these questions and find new ways of interpreting the candidate's responses.

Question n° One

Tell me about your greatest strength. What is the greatest asset you will bring to our organization?

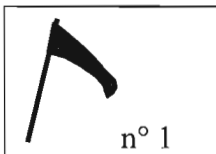
Why ask the question?

The "greatest strength" question works well as an icebreaker because most people are fairly comfortable talking about what makes them special and what they like. Every job candidate is ready for this one because it gets so much attention in the career press. Job candidates are also aware that this query is used as a lead-in to a natural follow-up question, which is much tougher to answer: "what is your greatest weakness". Still, the "greatest strength" question isn't a throwaway because it can reveal a lot about an individual's self-perception.

Analyzing the response.

There are two issues to watch out for:

1. Candidates often give lofty answers with lists of adjectives they think you want to hear and which actually add very little value to your interview
2. Candidates' strengths may fail to match your needs and as such can weigh as a negative factor in the selection process.



Watch out for people who give long inventories of "fluff adjectives" regarding their nobler traits, such as hard working, intelligent, loyal, committed... Adjectives are nothing but unproven claims. You want concrete proof of how the candidate will fit in and contribute to the organization. Consequently you will want to keep the candidate on track by following up on these adjective lists with requests for practical applications.

Example:

Candidate: "I am hard-working."

Interviewer:

"Hard workers are always good to find. Give me an example of how hard you work relative to your peers".

or

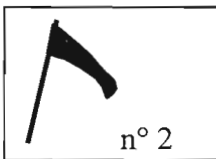
"Hard work usually results in above-average achievements. How has your hard work paid off in terms of the quantity of your output or the quality of your work product?"

or

"Hard work in our organization boils down to working late hours fairly often and occasionally coming in on Saturdays. How does your present company define hard work?"

or

"How has your boss recognized your hard work? How do you feel about working smarter instead of harder?"



The candidate's greatest strength fails to match your organizational needs.

Example:

Candidate: I am proudest of my progression through the ranks in my previous company. I was promoted four times in as many years. I feel happy when people recognize my value and reward me via promotions and on-going training.

That is an excellent response, except when the position your filling offers very few vertical growth opportunities and a lot of repetitive work. This is a classic case of "right person, wrong opportunity". The question will have done its job of identifying the candidate's motives and expectations.

Question n° Two

What is your greatest weakness?

Or

What would you consider as an occasional fault or "over-strength"?

Or

Of your past managers, who would give you the weakest reference and why?

Or

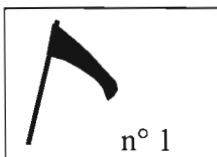
What one area do you really need to work on to become more effective on a day-to-day basis?

Why ask the question?

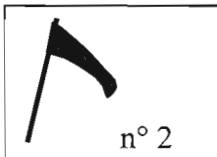
One would think that most job candidates have preplanned responses to these often-asked questions. That is not, however, always the case. Some people give very little advance thought to this common self-evaluation query. You could use this element of surprise to your advantage.

Analyzing the response.

This question is somewhat unnerving, because it causes discomfort. After all, no one wants to discuss his own shortcomings. But after all, interviewing, to a large extent, is to find out how deftly a person lands on her feet.



Watch out for people who respond that they have no weaknesses. By admitting no weaknesses, the person refuses "to play the game". In that case, you will need to provide a gentle nudging along the lines of: "well, Mr X, everyone has his weaknesses, what should I expect to be your shortcomings if we work together on a day-to-day basis? If this fails to produce a response, beware of poor communication and lack of openness.



Also watch out for people who respond by "coming clean" or baring their souls to you. They may be people with a low self-image and with a need of lots of support, appreciation and encouragement. Always check whether they would get this in the job you want them to perform.



In contrast, what are acceptable responses that place a candidate in a favourable light? Look for replies that centre on the person's impatience with her own performance, inclination toward being a perfectionist (but not too much, as this can be very limiting on the performance if quick decisions and output are required). In short, the wisest weaknesses are strengths taken to an extreme. Once again, check that these hidden strengths correspond to the competencies you need.

How to get more mileage out of this question?

The key to adding a broader dimension to the candidate's response lies in employing a behavioural interviewing format. Try looking for contrary evidence that focuses on the negative impact of the person's actions.

Example of a response: "I have problems in delegating work to other people because I find that the result does not meet my expectations".

Possible follow-up questions:

'Tell me about last time you didn't delegate work and you were left handling a disproportionate workload. How did you feel about that? How did you or would you handle that situation differently next time?

'Share with me a situation where you were frustrated because your boss could not or would not delegate work to you. How did you eventually gain that person's trust?

The variations are without limits. The beauty of this sort of questions is that the candidate cannot have "canned responses".

Question n° Three

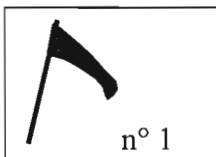
What was your favourite position and what role did your boss play in making it so unique?

Why ask the question?

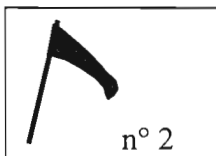
Much like the "greatest strength" question, this query invites the interviewee to reflect on positive and comfortable emotions. There are certainly telling cues in the individual's response.

Analysing the response.

Human resources professionals and executive recruiters will attest to how warm and cosy this query generally makes candidates feel. Their body language often will totally relax and warm smiles will appear. Their responses, however, could knock them out of consideration for a job, when they sell a love for a particular aspect of a past position that you are not offering.



Take the case of a marketing representative called Joan. When this question came her way, she mentioned a past job that was extremely creative, got her out of the office a few days a week and brought her in contact with foreign dignitaries. But she had applied for a nine to five job that wouldn't offer her the glamour and variety she aspired to. Therefore she weakened her own position.



Note that statistically the majority of people leave their present job because of personal conflicts with their boss. Hence, you want to connect what role a boss played in making a favourite position, and to see whether this ties in with what you can offer.

Question n° Four

What was your least favourite position and what role did your boss play in your career at that point?

Why ask the question?

The body language changes very quickly when candidates are presented with an invitation to criticize or censure a former boss or company. After all, this query baits individuals to complain about the people to whom they should be most loyal.

Analyzing the response.

The ideal candidate's response avoids subjective, personal interpretations. Instead, a solid response will address objective issues that place an impersonal distance between the candidate and the external factors that interfered with his reaching his personal best. In short, look for job candidates' abilities to objectively evaluate a situation rather than irrationally reacting to it.



Little needs said about candidates who shoot down past bosses. These people automatically place themselves in a victim position by assigning blame to others. The boss is not there to defend himself, so why should the interviewer be forced to sympathize with one instead of the other.



What I disliked most about my former boss is the fact that he allowed little risk taking and change. He was preparing to retire and we were not expected to "step outside of the box". Although I respect the maturity and longstanding reputation of the company, it was not a type of corporate culture that I wanted and could thrive in.

Question n° Five

Where do you see yourself in five years

Why ask the question?

This question is very tricky because it triggers a candidate's 'wishful response' mechanism. You will hear about people who want to be retired on a desert isle. Those who want your job five years from now may even make you nervous. And what about candidates who say that, five years from now, they want to be holding the job they apply to. So much for healthy career ambition!

Analyzing the response.

When candidates respond with a far-out answer, always bring them back on track by requesting them to stay within the scope of the business world. When candidates name a title or promotional opportunities within your organization, question: "how long would you expect to have to work in our organization to reach that goal? "what skills and experiences would you need to master in order to make that five-year dream a reality?"



A realistic response will typically show that a candidate's long-term goal will only be attainable after three or four years. This will minimize premature turnover due to "lack of sufficient growth opportunities". The proper response will place more emphasis on the assumption of broadened responsibilities at the current position than naming higher job titles.

An example:

'I believe I can make the greatest contribution to your organization by focusing on my general accounting skills. Where it leads me in five years, I hope you will eventually tell me. But I want you to know that I'll be open to adding value to your organization in whatever way you see fit.

Achievement-anchored questions: measuring individual's awareness of their accomplishments.

No issue is more telling in the selection process than measuring individuals' assessments of their own achievements. Therefore the career introspection may help you assess what, how and where they can be a contribution to your organization.

Some typical questions you can ask:

- ◆ What makes you stand out among your peers?
- ◆ What have you done in your last/present position to increase your organization's revenues/reduce your department's operation costs or save time?
- ◆ What has been your most creative achievement at work?
- ◆ What would your current supervisors say makes you most valuable to them?

Very important:

Always clarify the responses by follow-up questions to focus on behaviour examples.

Competency-anchored questions: matching candidates' competencies with the NATO Competency Model.

(refer to the questions produced by the exercise in the Workbook on pages 11-13).

Holistic Interview Queries

Holistic questions assess how individuals see themselves fitting into your corporate team. They attempt to measure the whole person: work patterns, career goals, ability to see the global impact of her actions, etc.

They are usually very broad, open-ended questions that the candidates find challenging to answer on the spot. They successfully measure people's broad perceptions of their self-worth, self-esteem and potential abilities to contribute.

Some useful questions

- ◆ What are the broad responsibilities of a (job title)?
- ◆ What aspects of your job do you consider most crucial?
- ◆ What are your areas of interest outside your job?
- ◆ How do you balance your career with your personal life?
- ◆ How would you define the amount of structure, direction and feedback that you need in order to excel?
- ◆ How do you feel about interruptions, last-minute changes, working under pressure?

Caution:

Always follow-up the responses by asking behavioural examples.

Pressure-cooked interview questions: assessing grace under fire.

One of the more common methods for measuring candidates' abilities to land on their feet is to challenge their assumptions and beliefs during the interview. Stress interviews per se intimidate candidates, squelch their spontaneity and allow for little bonding and insight. The "carrot and stick" approach will do little in the way of making the position or your organization appear especially attractive.

Then why this topic in this course?

There is a big difference between "stress interviews" and "stress interview questions". Whereas we find "stress interviews" a waste of time and a very inefficient way of obtaining information, every interviewer should be able to apply a pressure question when the need arises. This is e.g. the case when the position you have to fill has a lot of high pressure situations in which it is vital that the job holder can remain graceful even under extreme pressure.

Also, when you find a candidate a little 'cocky', a skilfully placed question could help humble him somewhat.

Some more effective "stress queries":

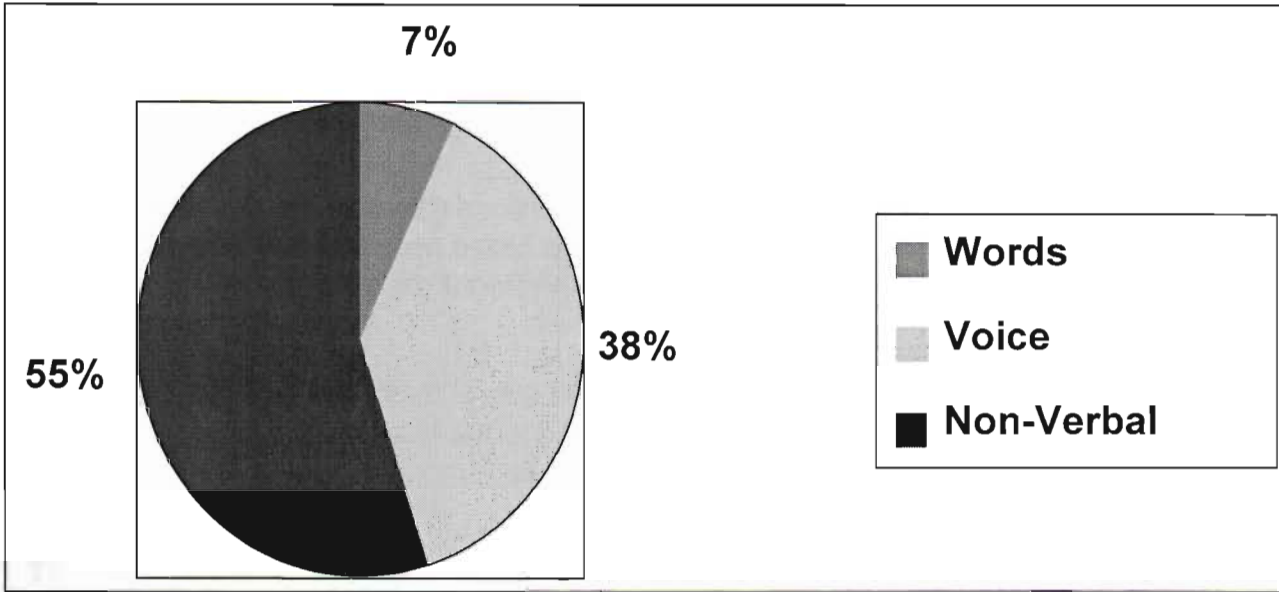
- ◆ Tell me about your last performance appraisal. In which area where you most disappointed?
- ◆ Looking back, how could you have improved your performance at your last position?
- ◆ Where do you disagree with your boss most often? How did you handle the last time she was wrong and you were right?
- ◆ Tell me about the last time you felt as if you were over your head?

Caution:

Remember that an entire interview composed of such challenging questions will only cause ill will on the part of the candidate. So use them sparingly.

OBSERVATIONAL SKILLS

Reading non-verbal signs



The body says it all

Human beings communicate always: it is impossible not to communicate. Even when we do not say anything, our body language gives a powerful message. Our hands, attitude, eye contact, the expression of our face, the intonation of our voice, even our breathing gives away what we really feel inside. Congruency between our words and our non-verbal message is an essential element of effective communication.

More than words

Body language and voice tone are the music behind the words. They say something about our relationship. The words convey the message; the music conveys the intent and the feelings.

Eyes that speak

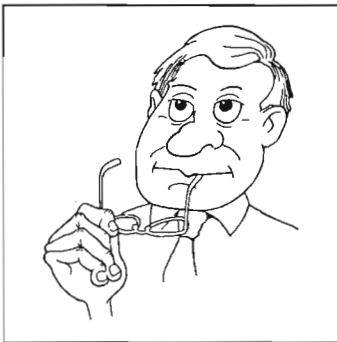
The eyes are said to be the "windows of the soul". The expressions "shifty eyes", "give one the beady eye" or "eyes of steel" demonstrate the awareness people have for this area of the body. It is long-held belief that the honest person looks you straight in the eye. More recent work in this area shows that people look up or down to reflect and search their memory.



People avoid eye contact with another person when they feel uncomfortable. This can be when a question has been asked or a matter discussed that makes them uneasy, or it can be when people are together in a confined space, like an elevator or before an intimidating assembly.

Never forget that eye contact is also determined culturally. In some cultures it is not polite to look into the eyes of a more important person.

The face



The face is one of the most reliable indicators of a person's attitudes, emotions and feelings. Facial expressions sometimes betray emotions and states of mind. By analysing them, we can obtain useful feedback. Sometimes facial expressions are guarded; the term poker face describes an attempt to keep others from knowing our true emotions. Common facial expressions are frowns (unhappiness, anger, impatience), smiles (happiness), sneers (dislike, disgust), clenched jaws (tension, anger) and pouting lips (sadness).

Hands

Tightly clenched or wringing hands usually indicate that the person is experiencing undue pressure. "Steeple fingers", joining the fingertips together indicates smugness and great self-confidence.



Figure 42 The raised steeple

A number of attitudes and emotions can be conveyed by what a person does with his hands around the face or head. For example, rubbing gently behind or beside the ear with the index finger generally shows signs of doubt. Of course, it may also indicate that the other person has an "itch". Rubbing the back of the head or palming the nape of the neck usually indicates frustration with the other person or the situation. Putting your hand to your cheek or stroking your chin generally means thinking, interest or consideration. On the other hand, pinching the bridge of your nose with your eyes closed or placing your forefinger near your nose with your chin resting in the palm of your hand most often shows that critical evaluation is taking place.



Arms and legs.

Crossed arms tend to signal defensiveness. They seemingly act as a protective guard against anticipated attack or fixed position. Crossed legs tend to signal disagreement. If people have tightly crossed legs and tightly crossed arms, their inner attitude is negative towards what is going on around them. As long as they are in this position, it is unlikely that you will get full cooperation or information.



Posture: sitting and walking



People sitting in their chair in a hunched position don't convey an image of energy and interest. By sitting straight you show respect and you feel more confident yourself. People who are feeling dejected will often walk head down, hands in the pocket and shoulders hunched over.

People removing imaginary bits of fluff from their clothes are certainly feeling uncomfortable.

Listening skills

1. Listen with a purpose.

What is your purpose, when you listen to someone? Here's a little practical exercise to play with.

In your very next conversation, try to become aware of your internal monologue. Interrupt it, and ask yourself: "What's my purpose in listening right now?" Listen to what your internal voice says back. Don't be dismayed if the internal voice has some other, less than noble, purpose like: "My purpose right now is to get them to hurry up and stop talking," or "Right now, all I want is get out of this conversation," or "My only purpose in listening is so that I can show them how wrong they are when it's my turn."

Don't be too hard on yourself, we all do it; it's called "the human condition".

Now just ask yourself if this attitude is really giving you what you want to achieve. Then just pretend that you want to connect in a meaningful way with the other person. If you pretend long enough, it becomes a habit, and you will be astonished about the outcomes of this habit.

2. Be aware of words, phrases and behaviours that distract you and make you defensive in order to exercise emotional control even though you disagree.

The fastest way to get aware of those words, phrases and behaviours is to keep an "upset log" in which you jot down each and every "hot button" that you have as it gets pushed. Maybe it's being called stupid, or perhaps it's that adolescent "eye-rolling" behaviour that gets to you. How about certain curse words?

How much energy have you spent trying to get all those other people to stop pushing your buttons? That is the worst possible investment of your energy. Instead, invest your energy in reconfiguring your wiring so that you can exercise emotional control. Practice. Notice what is going on inside you and get some perspective.

Four Listening styles

- **Nobody home: the passive approach.**

Passive listening is a very common way of listening. Some people are convinced they are good listeners, when they shut up and let the other person talk. The listener is present non-verbally but he/she does not offer any feedback to the speaker. Some characteristics:

- Eye contact with the speaker
- Not very lively facial expression
- Slight nodding from time to time
- Hm hm, yes yes, aha...

As one can see, the listener is in some way involved in the communication, but does not contribute to it. It is a rather frustrating and lonely situation for the speaker.

- **I only listen to what I want to hear. The selective approach.**

Selective listening is as common as passive listening. Whenever the message is one that we want to hear, we turn on our radio, but as from the moment that the message does not suit us, we quit. Some characteristics:

- Looking uninterested
- Looking at objects: watch, papers, etc.
- All of a sudden out of the blue an emotional reaction
- Interrupting the speaker and taking over the direction of the communication
- Change the subject.

- **What is going on? The evaluative approach.**

This is a more productive listening attitude than the passive or the selective attitudes. You are really involved in the communication. However, where the message consists of two parts: the facts and the emotions behind the facts, an evaluative listener will be concentrating on the facts, the information, the rational part of the communication. If the message contains only factual information, the communication goes well; if, however, emotions are involved, chances are that the evaluative listener does not hear them and only picks up part of the communication. Some characteristics:

- Good eye contact
- Looking interested with an honest facial expression

- Nodding his/her understanding
- Giving short verbal agreements
- Asking factual questions.

▪ **I want to understand. The active listening approach.**

Active listening is the most effective way of listening. An active listener receives the message with respect and care and always checks if he/she has understood what the speaker meant.

The active listener gets the complete message: facts and emotions. Some characteristics:

- Showing patience
- Verbal feedback to check understanding
- Confirming underlying emotions
- Clarifying with questions.

Active listening in practice: The CARESS MODEL

- Concentrate
 - Eliminate external and internal listening barriers
 - Focus on the speaker
 - Be interested
 - Don't judge
- Acknowledge
 - Eye contact
 - Vocal prompts: hmm, really, go on...
 - Smiling
 - Open posture
- Research
 - Empathy statements
 - Clarifying questions
 - Feedback statements
- Exercise emotional control
 - Recognize your own emotional reactions
 - Redirect your negative emotional reactions
- Sense the non-verbal message
 - Listen with your eyes
- Structure
 - Summarize what you understood
 - Put things into their situational context

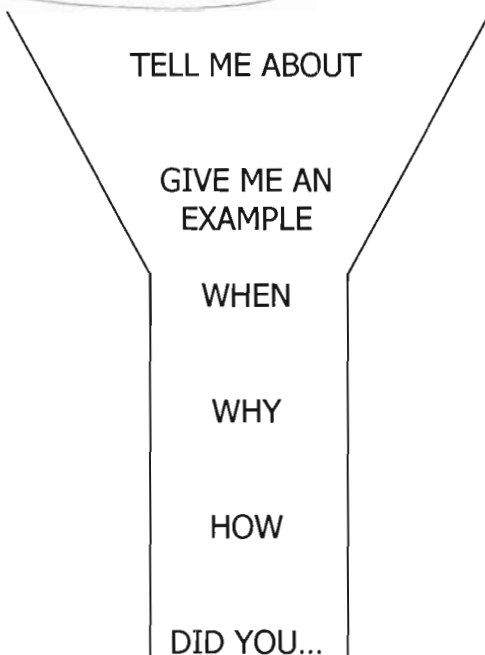
Backtracking

"Backtracking" is one of the most powerful techniques to show the other person that you are really listening and understand what he means.

There are different ways to backtrack:

- By just repeating the last part of the sentence with the same intonation or with a question mark attached to it: it invites the other person to give more information.
- By summarizing in your own words what you understood: no interpretation, no judgement (verbal or non-verbal), no "but" attached. Always check if your understanding is correct.
- By repeating keywords: it gives the other person the impression that you really understood what she was talking about.

Probing questions: the funnel technique.



It is not enough just to ask open questions. The answer to open questions will give you some information but it will not be enough to make an assessment of a candidate. What is needed are further follow-up questions to probe a particular area in more depth. One of the techniques to do this is the funnel technique.

Verbal cues

Reflecting back

This is where the interviewer asks a question relating to something the candidate has said earlier.

"You mentioned just now that you enjoyed geography at college. Why was that?"

Making links

This is similar but used more to link one aspect to the other.

"You mentioned just now that you enjoyed geography at college. In what way could this help you in your job?"

INTERVIEWING STYLES

The emotional style

If you're emotional, you tend to globalize competency or the lack of it, based on just a few superficial traits. You make judgments within a few minutes based on first impressions, personality and appearance. Emotional interviewers have the most random results and make more hiring mistakes than any other style. To overcome this problem, you need to work hard to delay any instant judgment. Change your frame of reference. Be tougher on those you like. Obtain lots of examples, facts and details to validate your initial first impression. If you don't like the candidate, give her the benefit of the doubt. This will make you a more technical fact finder. Become analytical. Keep written notes. This is tough, but if you are making a purely emotional decision, you are short-circuiting the rational decision-making process in the first minutes of the interview. It is a fundamental problem that affects most of us at some time.

The intuitive style

If you're intuitive, you tend to globalize strengths and weaknesses, based on only a few, normally important traits. This takes about 5 to 15 minutes. Not surprisingly, sometimes these traits are very similar to those that have made you personally successful. This is where the "hiring in your image" problem comes into play. Whilst these traits might be important, you still need a more balanced and complete perspective. Intuitive interviewers often hire some stars, but just as frequently hire those who can't meet all the needs of the job. We call these "the partially competent". They usually can talk very well but often can't execute. The key here is not to overvalue a few traits such as intelligence or assertiveness at the expense of others. Neutralize your biases and conduct a complete assessment. You need to be more analytical in collecting relevant data. Candidates don't need to be like you to be successful. In the long run it is probably better if they are not. Look for complementarity instead of similarity.

The technical style

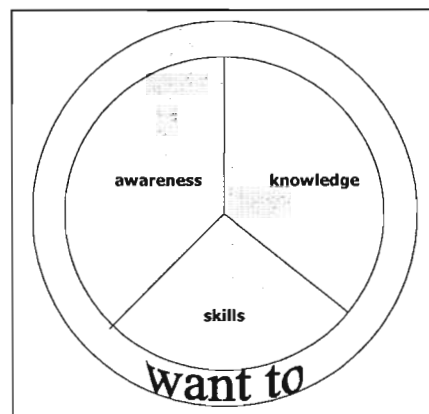
If you are a TECHNICAL interviewer, you are too conservative and check too many boxes. It takes you at least one or two hours to come to a favourable decision. You tend to overvalue years of specific experience, degrees held, specific areas of technical competence and thinking skills. Technical interviewers have the ability to build solid, if unspectacular teams with few mistakes. Unfortunately, this approach often excludes from consideration the high-potential candidates who don't yet have the required level of experience. Whilst this analytical style is good for data collection it is not good for hiring high potentials, because the wrong data are collected. The hiring decision should be based on traits that predict performance, not on an absolute level of skills, education and experience. Don't immediately dismiss a candidate who lacks some of the prerequisites. Find out what he accomplished without much experience to determine motivation and ability to learn. You will find out that it is a much better predictor of success than identical experience.

FAIRNESS IN THE RECRUITMENT PROCESS: Avoiding bias and stereotyping

Even if we improve the validity of our interviews by concentrating on competencies, we must not delude ourselves that all problems of prejudice and bias have gone away.

Stereotypes are a major barrier. We try to fit people into patterns based on our previous experience. We see pretty much what we want or expect to see and reject the possible interpretations that don't fit with what we expect. If we expect people from country X to be unfriendly with strangers, we probably will interpret their behaviour in that way.

Ways to cross this barrier are the familiar 'awareness, knowledge, skills' triad:



1. Become **aware** that we differ from many others in social behaviour and assumptions.
2. Learn to **know** exactly what these differences are
3. Learn the **skills** necessary to communicate effectively with people who are different.
4. Needed all throughout the process: **want to** treat others like they want to be treated.

Judging: evaluating the behaviour as good or bad.

We readily make a judgment based on our own cultural bias. Observation and interpretation lead to evaluation. Different attitudes about e.g. food and drink can cause misunderstandings as we judge them.

Ways to decrease the tendency this tendency are:

- Maintain appropriate perspective
- Don't judge someone from another culture by your own cultural values until you have first come to know them and their values.

The first impression

Most of us have in our memories a number of templates of sharply defined caricatures. These are deeply rooted clichés that link certain non-verbal behaviours with certain types of characters. These links have been created by the social environment in which we grew up and by those who took care of our education. It is really very simple. These images have been presented to us by someone we trusted completely and we have never questioned them, nor asked for facts. Stereotypes are facts in our mind.

A candidate coming to an interview in jeans and open shirt, nicely tanned and with a tattoo on the arm, will immediately be associated to a non-conformist adventurous type. There are stereotypes about Belgians, Dutch, Italians, Turks; about men with moustaches and people driving a Volvo. Also our own positive or negative experiences with certain people in our past are generalised and form our frame of reference when meeting people for the first time. At a glance we size up the person, make an association with our previous experience, get hold of our imaginary pair of scales and find her or him ok or not OK.

This judgment is very subjective and based on prejudice. The interviewer will have several flashes of these associations during the first phase of the interview. If the candidate gives a fine first impression he already has built up some credit; on the other hand, a candidate who cuts no ice with the interviewer will have to build a strong case in order to reverse the impression. Sometimes this can even work as a negative filter on the communication. The interviewer selectively hears only the unfavourable information and filters away everything that is positive.

From in-depth research we know that most interviewers make up their mind during the first stage of the interview about:

- ◆ The general abilities of the candidate
- ◆ Her interactive and social skills
- ◆ Her potential for learning.

Positive or negative, it is important to bring this emotional reaction to the conscious level. It is known that about one third to half of the candidates who make strong first impressions are really just average performers. You will discover this only by using the fact-finding approach introduced in the previous chapters.

To make matters worse, many candidates get nervous and make weak first impressions. For a candidate, the emotional reaction to an interview is equivalent to making a public speech, asking someone for a date, asking for a raise, firing someone or engaging in some unusual new activity. We have all faced this type of semi-panic situation at some time. When the ego is on the line, this type of nervousness leads to dry mouth, constricted voice patterns, shallow answers, forgetfulness and an increased level of perspiration. Even smooth salespeople can fall prey to these unkind effects. If it is a temporary condition, these physical effects will disappear in about 10 to 20 minutes. That is why it is important to allow sufficient time to the first interview, so that people can fall on their feet.

Here is how typical interviewers judge these nervous reactions of candidates:

Nervous trait	Likely (incorrect) interpretation
Sweaty palms and/or brow	Weak, too soft, nerdy, couldn't make a presentation to a customer or executive
Twitching	Uncomfortable with people, not a team player
Too chatty	Dumb and superficial
No eye contact	Untrustworthy
Dry throat, strained voice, coughing	Lacks confidence, no insight, unprepared

These conclusions may be totally wrong. Yet, once they have been drawn, it's easy to find facts to support them. If you can get past these superficial and temporary conditions, you will find some great candidates sitting across the desk from you.

Gender issues

What is gender? Gender is a relational concept; it is how we think about femininity and masculinity.

- ♦ Male/female: biological sex
- ♦ Masculinity/femininity: gender.

In that context, we see that there are not so many stereotypes on typical "biological sex determined roles" but most stereotypes are on "gender roles and qualities", i.e. associations made by our culture to define roles and qualities that are feminine and others that are masculine.

Some typical gender stereotypes:

Masculine	Feminine
Public	Private
Objective	Subjective
Power	Love
Looking	Touching
Autonomy	Dependence
Rationality	Emotionality
Intellect	Practice
Mind	Body
Active	Passive
Solutions	Dialogue
Status	Togetherness
Competition	Cooperation
Sharing information	Sharing emotions

We see gender influences in recruitment when traditional norms about the place, nature of the job and functions are taken for granted. We then talk about gender norming. This is a situation where the norms have typically been set by men and the evaluation system based on these norms. They can be very indirect and invisible, e.g. "commitment" is measured by making long office hours.

On the other hand, it is a common idea that attractive women and handsome men have more chance to be selected. But research has proven that attractive women, selected by men for a typical "men"-job stand less chance to get the job than less attractive women.

Influence of the previous functions

A candidate who has previously occupied a totally irrelevant but impressive position, e.g. television newsreader or president of an association, will automatically be supposed to be more successful. This is generalised and has an influence when scoring the real qualifications needed to perform well in the function.

Projection of the model of the world of the interviewer.

When a candidate presents a CV that has a lot in common with the one of the interviewer, e.g. same school, same specialisations, same neighbourhood, same hobbies... this often leads to an overestimation of her possibilities.

Halo effect and horn effect

When a candidate has a very special positive or negative point in his CV, this point stands out and can influence the whole selection process. If a candidate has been during his studies the perpetual *primus inter pares*, this will act as a shining sun putting an aura around the person in question. We call this the "halo" effect. On the other hand, a candidate having been convicted for driving under influence of alcohol, or having occupied a lot of posts in a short time, could suffer from the fact that this pollutes all other elements of his CV and that he is put into a negative light, however qualified he may be for the job. This is called the "horn" effect.

Tips to avoid bias during the interview

Interviewers should:

- ◆ not only know how to collect information but also how to evaluate it.
- ◆ clarify the objectives to be achieved in the interview
- ◆ see to it that as much information as possible about the vacancy is collected before the interview
- ◆ ensure that as much information as possible about the candidate is collected before the interview
- ◆ try to collect information about the candidate by as much different means as possible, e.g. tests, assessments...
- ◆ take notes during the interview
- ◆ use a structure or checklist during the interview
- ◆ monitor how their behaviour may affect the candidates
- ◆ avoid reaching conclusions before all the information can be evaluated after the interview
- ◆ have a simple form for rating applicants
- ◆ develop systems to get feedback on their interview behaviour and on the decisions they have made.

TAKING NOTES

It is very important to take notes. Do not rely on memory, however good you think it is. Remember: "a short pencil is more effective than a long memory".

There are a number of points to bear in mind when taking notes:

- ◆ Do not take notes furtively – be open about it. Tell the candidate you will be taking notes, but don't do it in such a way that the candidate may see what is written.
- ◆ Take as full a note as you can without letting the note-taking process interfere with your interviewing technique.
- ◆ Be careful about when you write something down. Highly personal or adverse information should be noted when the conversation has moved on.
- ◆ Your notes will be the only source of evidence that will enable you to justify your rating and ultimately the selection decision. They may even be requisitioned in case of litigation.

Marking then interview

The key steps are:

- ◆ Wait until the interview is completed
- ◆ Read all of the notes
- ◆ Take the first competency and compare evidence given to the behavioural indicators
- ◆ Write down your evidence on the summary rating form
- ◆ Refer to the rating scale and rate the candidate on the competency
- ◆ Repeat the process for the next competency.

MORE PRACTICAL TIPS

- ◆ Introduce the members of the interviewing committee
- ◆ The interview environment
 - Create a positive and professional environment
 - Don't play judge and jury, choose appropriate seating and if possible a round table
 - Make sure there are no interruptions
 - Offer them a coffee or a soft drink
- ◆ Explain to the candidate how you will conduct the interview (agenda)
- ◆ Don't give too much away too soon
 - Explain the details/specifics of the job at the end of the interview
- ◆ Make a realistic planning and take short breaks between candidates
 - During the breaks you can check the notes you made
 - You can prepare for the next candidate
 - Taking a short break (have a cup of coffee,...) helps you to stay focused
- ◆ Give the candidate the opportunity to ask questions at the end of the interview
- ◆ Explain to the candidate that you will be taking notes
 - Use a standardised form to write your remarks on
 - Write down key-words (so you can keep eye-contact)
- ◆ If you have (too) many candidates you might consider a first screening by phone
- ◆ Inform the candidate at the end of the interview about the next steps and the timing
- ◆ Not selected candidates need to be informed as soon as possible after the interview or within the communicated time-frame
 - Start the letter with a positive comment
 - End the letter by thanking the candidate and wishing him all the best in his further career