

# 5 Tips for a Successful Interview Assessment

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In this article, I would like to share my thoughts on talent assessment, having been a candidate, assessor and user of several such tools over the years.

Over 30 years ago when I applied to be a naval officer with the Republic of Singapore Navy, I completed competency assessments, a personality instrument, and sat through challenging interview sessions before getting selected for the midshipman programme, after which I went through over nine months of gruelling training while being assessed continually for both cognitive abilities through exams, and leadership qualities through observation and peer assessment. It was only after the nine months that the selection of naval officers was carried out.

How do we compare the rigour of assessment conducted by the military against the private sector, where at worst an unstructured interview is conducted and at the best a candidate is put through an assessment centre?

I was trained in behavioural interviewing techniques, as an assessor for assessment centres, and certified in using ability, behavioural and personality instruments. I have conducted many interviews across the globe, taken part in various assessment and development centres, and written candidate reports for hiring managers. I will thus discuss the conduct of interviews in greater depth as it is still a predominant method used to assess talent, before touching upon other methods and instruments.

## Five tips for more effective interviews

An interview is typically a conversation between an employer and a candidate where information is exchanged to help the employer decide if the candidate is suitable for the position. Here are five observations and tips for effective interviews.

### 1. Identify specific skills and competencies required for the position

The number one flaw I have observed is the lack of preparation for the interview. The first step is to identify the specific skills and competencies required for the position. Most managers depend on an outdated job description or what they believe they know about the expectations for the role. However, most of these expectations are in the form of traits, for example, hardworking, enthusiastic, reliable, etc., instead of skills and competencies. The more specific recruiters are about measurable or observable skills and competencies, the better they can assess the candidate.

### 2. Structure the interview

Secondly, a structured interview questionnaire has to be prepared. We need to use the same questionnaire for each candidate. Asking candidates questions on different competencies lends itself to unfair comparison. Consistency is key to ensuring we mitigate any interview bias, conscious or unconscious, that clouds our evaluation of the candidate. Given the time constraint, we should limit questions to identifying the key competencies required for the role.

### **3. Read the resume before the interview**

Familiarise yourself with the candidate's experiences and the profiles of the companies they have worked in. Often, I have seen managers picking up the resume from the printer just before stepping into the interview room. As a manager, hiring is probably one of the most important tasks and it should be given the attention it deserves.

### **4. Hold a panel interview**

Fourthly, do not interview alone unless it is a pre-screening. If you are going to hire based on the interview, I highly recommend you to have at least one and preferably two more people in the panel. I typically would not recommend more than three members in a panel. The panel could comprise a member from your team, a representative from HR or a key stakeholder. Often when I check to see what the other panellists have heard and interpreted, I find there are differing opinions. Sometimes we hear and see what we want to hear and see. This is the interview bias I had alluded to before. Having more interviewers help to mitigate the bias.

### **5. Take comprehensive interview notes**

Ensure you take down comprehensive notes during the interview so it helps in the decision-making later. Most managers take notes of their interpretation of the session rather than the evidence the candidate has provided. For example, a manager may note down "hardworking" when a candidate mentions coming in an hour early to work to get ready for the day. This is an interpretation by the manager, whereas a second interviewer may perceive this reported behaviour as indicative of a slow worker since he or she needs an hour to prepare for the day. As such, interviewers should make it a point to note evidence rather than interpretations.

Secondly, the decision to select a candidate should be made after all candidates have been interviewed. The panel should then review the notes for each competency and rate to what extent it was observed and present. When all competencies are rated, a comparison could be made among candidates and a decision be made by consensus. I would not suggest voting to select the best candidate. Coming to a consensus requires discussion which helps validate the reasons for the choice.

## **Personality, ability and behavioural assessment**

I am a fan of ability assessments; typically verbal, numerical and spatial reasoning assessments. I have used them often in graduate recruitments and these are good tools for shortlisting candidates. As they are now mostly administered online, they are efficient for recruiters and also provide candidates with valuable insights.

However, such tools come with their own limits and challenges. For example, most recently I was asked by a talent manager how to manage a high potential whose personality profile did not fit that of a senior leader. I cringe when people believe that personality profile alone suffices in decision-making. It shows their lack of understanding of a personality instrument.

With digitalisation, I have witnessed more companies offering personality tools or assessment tools that promise to predict future performance. In my 30 years, I have seen successful leaders with different personalities. Their styles may differ, but they are excellent in providing vision, assembling resources, managing priorities and influencing others. While I prefer to use personality instruments in development programmes, I highly recommend that hiring or selection decisions should not be made based on personality instruments alone.

There is also a recent trend where companies focused on providing a greater candidate experience are requiring selection assessments which take up less time. Vendors who wish to please these companies claim their assessments are shorter and yet reliable, something which I find to be questionable. Additionally, many companies do not have trained HR personnel or managers to use or interpret these assessments. Companies wishing to use assessment tools must ensure that they understand the science behind these instruments and that they have trained employees to administer them.

## Assessment centres

Though expensive and time consuming, I do believe a rigorous and professionally conducted assessment centre improves reliability of the selection decision. Whether used in external hiring or for internal development of high potential personnel (in which case it is called a development centre), I believe assessment centres provide the hiring manager with the relevant information to make the best decision.

An assessment centre provides opportunities to observe a candidate's behavioural competencies in the context of a business scenario. The combination of cognitive and personality instruments and a structured behavioural interview provides various anchor points to assess a candidate's competencies and fit for the role. In most cases, professionally trained assessors observe the behaviours and provide a comprehensive report on the candidate.

As mentioned, assessment centres are costly and time consuming. That is why progressive companies use them for key and senior roles. At the least, I highly recommend incorporating some form of an exercise together with the behavioural interview to improve the reliability of the decision. For example, one could simply have the candidate present a relevant past project or share his or her plans for the first 90 days in the company. This allows assessors to review various competencies from forward-thinking to presentation skills.

### There is no guarantee

Whichever tools you use, there is no guarantee that you are making the right hiring decision. By using the different tools, we are only increasing the probability of making the right decision. Finally, my advice to hiring managers is to consider all areas, including the fit of the candidate within the team and the company, before making an informed decision. Ultimately, your final hiring decision should only take place after the probation period.

Do not make a mistake there.

## About the Author



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