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Employment & Promotional Interviews: Structure vs Unstructured

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Abstract

The employment interview screening process is the most widely used process to screen employment and promotional candidates. The purpose of this article was to explore the employment and promotional screening process with a focus on structured and unstructured interviews; steps to conducting employment screening training for public sector organizations. The article is based on current literature on employment and promotional screening procedures. By sharing this content, public sector organizations are better prepared to take the necessary steps to minimize legal challenges to the employment interview process, increase process validity and credibility, and show the need for interview individual rating scales. The article calls for agencies to move towards a formal training program that an individual must take to participate as an employment & promotional interviewer.

Key Words: Structure Interview, Employment, Screening, Promotion

Introduction

Public sector agencies will be faced with conducting some form of employment interview with perspective candidates for employment or conducting promotional interviews. Public and private sector agencies know that in today's litigation society, they need to follow the laws and regulations when it comes to employment and promotional interviews to prevent legal action (Russo, 2009; Walsh, 2015). How agencies conduct employment or promotional interviews are diverse with each agency claiming their process is the best. The interview process for employment candidates and promotional candidates may be impacted by other key factors such as the involvement of labor unions, Federal laws, state laws, agency regulations, and the human resource management department requirements. Before conducting interviews, it is recommended that the agency have the proposed procedure reviewed by the legal department and human resource management department to ensure that laws and regulations are not being violated and to reduce the risk of a legal challenge to the process. The intent of this article will be to show the importance of conducting structured interviews and the importance of providing some level of interview training for the interviewer's conducting the interview to reduce the risk of a legal challenge.

In the public sector, hiring committee members seldom receiving formal employment/promotional interview training or interview ratings. The employment screening committee members are often not held accountable for their selection decisions or ratings. The employment/promotional screening process can have long term positive or negative impacts on the organization and may end in a prolonged legal challenge for each side. The poorly executed interview can result in the public sector agency trying to defend the procedure, steps taken to screen candidates, interview question selection, how search committee members rated individual

questions, and the written notes provided by each committee member during the process (Williamson, Campion, Malos, Roehling, Campion, 2007; Terpstra, Mohamed, & Kethley, 1999). In one research study, they found that 90% of the legal challenges for employment screening go against the employer (Williams, Schaffer, & Ellis, 2013). In an effort to reduce this level of risk to the organization, the following article will provide possible steps that an organization can implement in their employment/promotional process. The organization should be taking necessary steps to reduce the possibility of a legal challenge to the employment screening process. As reported, the majority of legal cases are going against the employer, it is recommended that the employers focus additional attention on the procedures utilized for screening candidates.

Interview Types

The employment screening and promotional process utilizes candidate interviews as the most widely used screening tool today, next to the resume review (Macan, 2009). The employment interview may play a central role in the employment or promotional screening process in an effort to identify a suitable candidate for the position. The interview procedure used to screen candidates can be in the form of a highly structured process when all candidates are asked the same questions, same follow up questions, same assessment committee individuals, each question is provided a rating scale for the answer provided, written narratives are provided for each answer the candidates provides, and allowed the same time limits; or the interview procedure can be an unstructured interview, when the set of questions may or may not be asked of each candidate, the range of questions are prompted by the candidates' responses to prior questions and the procedure has no set timeframe. In addition, screening committee members may not provide any interview notes, the interview procedure will lack rating for each response

and may just rely on one rating for the entire interview, and the candidates may not be interviewed by the same interviewer (Huffcutt, 2011; Levashina, Hartwell, Morgeson, & Campion, 2014). In an effort to better understand the two forms of interviewing, we will break down each one further to reveal the strengths and weaknesses of each type.

Unstructured Interview

In the field of recruitment, the unstructured interview is the most widely used procedure (Rudin & Gover, 2007). In part, interviewers conducting employment and promotion interviews enjoy the freedom to ask questions that they like, allowed to have a casual conversation with the candidate, less time is spent preparing for the unstructured interviews, lack of a timeframe for conducting the interviews, and the lack of any formal scoring or notetaking assessment for the process. Interviewers feel that they are free to conduct the interview as they feel fit and are not restricted by a set guideline. The unstructured interview format places the agency at a greater risk of a legal challenge and a decreased opportunity for providing a solid legal defense for the interview process.

Despite being widely used in the employment interview process; organizations today need to move away from the unstructured interview process. The fact that candidates for employment or for promotion are not asked the same questions may provide an unfair advantage to a candidate. The lack of formal questions and consistent scoring scales can create an environment that may provide an adverse impact on candidates and opens the organization up to a legal challenge. Unstructured interviews have been shown to have poor statistical validity, however most people think they can hire the best person from this process (Alder & Gilbert, 2006). Candidates tend to like the unstructured interview because they feel they are allowed a greater opportunity to present information that they feel is relevant. In this case, the interviewer

or committee cannot be assured that the interview will gain insightful content about the job or if they will gain useful information. The level of interviewer bias may be increased with this interview format and there is potential for an Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) claim against the agency.

Structured Interview

The term structured interview is used for the purpose of this paper; however other terms like “standardized,” “guided,” “planned,” or “uniform” interviews may be used to indicate a structured interview. The structured interview ensures that all of the candidates are asked the same set of performance-based questions including the same set of prompting questions used for each question. The performance-based questions may be constructed with the use of the job analysis. The structured interview process uses the same assessing and scoring of each individual interview question asked of the candidate, this process requires the evaluators to assess and score each question being asked. The general practice is to ask the candidates to wait until the end of the interview process to ask any questions to the interviewer or the panel (Huffcutt, Culbertson, & Weyhrauch, 2013; Klehe, König, Richter, Kleinmann, & Melcher, 2008). It is essential to have the same person or people perform the interview to ensure that each candidate is equally assessed by the same interviewer; doing so will ensure that the interview process is reliable and valid. When all candidates are assessed by the same person or people while using performance-based questions, the screening procedure becomes legally defensible for the agency when the agency can link the questions to the job analysis (Antonellis & Flam, 2016). Using the same questions and interview format for all candidates will reduce the risk of interviewer bias while increasing the reliability and validity of the process.

Candidates report that they felt the level of fairness was highest when a structured interview format was used with each candidate. When a candidate feels that the interview process was fair and transparent; this feeling becomes a positive reflection on the agency. Candidates not hired or promoted during this fair and transparent process may be more inclined to apply again based on this feeling and observation (Chinomona, Dhurup, & Chinomona, 2013). The employment/promotion interview process is a reflection of the agency and may be the first impression of the agency, care should be considered not only for the individual hired/promoted but also the candidates not selected.

Structured Interview Techniques

The structured interview requires advance planning to determine what set of questions will be asked of all candidates and what prompting questions will be used in an effort to seek additional information based on the original question. For each interview question, it is recommended to have two prompting questions to gain clarification of the candidates' original response or if the candidates do not understand the question as it was asked. It is recommended that each question have its own scoring scale, each individual interviewer can score the response given and if they would like to provide any notes on each response to support the score provided. It is recommended that the candidate hold his/her questions until the end of the interview to allow for ample time for the interviewers to ask the standard questions. Inform the candidate at the start of the interview how many questions will be asked and the projected timeframe they will be asked; this will allow the candidate to decide if the responses they are providing to the questions are too long or too short given the timeframe provided; candidates are better prepared to self-manage their time. The predetermined performance-based questions will reduce the chance for personal bias with the evaluators based on appearance, body language, disabilities,

accent, etc. (Bye, & Sandal, 2015; Chen, Tsai, & Hu, 2008; Deprez-Sims & Morris, 2010; Dipboye, 1992; Huffcutt, 2011). Deprez-Sims & Morris (2010) emphasized that “Ethnicity refers to a social group with a shared heritage or culture...an accent may serve to trigger stereotypes and biases associated with an ethnic group or country” (p.418). The interviewers should openly discuss personal bias during the interviewer training session to minimize the risk of a negative influence on the process.

If an interview committee is being used, each of the members should rate the question response individually and not communicate with the other members of the panel to ensure a level of consistency and to minimize bias and undue influence from others on the committee during the original assessment rating (Deprez-Sims & Morris, 2010). Structured interviews conducted in a committee format or individually should score all the candidates without sharing scores or narrative comments with others until all the candidates in the pool have been interviewed (Roach, 2015; Tran & Blackman, 2006). The sharing of information between committee members before rating the candidate may bias the other evaluators or provide undue influence in the rating process.

Interviewers score each candidate and may take individual notes during or after the interview on the scoring sheet or a notepad. Any notes or scoring scales performed during the interview process should be considered as part of the procedure and should be retained by the agency in an individual employment folder. Each candidate should have an employment folder that contains all documents, notes, resumes, letters of recommendations, references checks, etc (Curran, & Quinn, 2012). Based on case law (City of Canton v. Harris, 1989), law enforcement agencies are held responsible for hiring and training officers to perform the duties and responsibilities of the position (Stickle, 2016). Regardless of the size of the agency, creating and

maintaining such documents will provide beneficial in the event of litigation. Williams, Schaffer, and Ellis (2013) reported “...employers lose employment discrimination cases at a rate nearing 90 % and suffer an average payout of over \$1.5 million per case” (p. 406). Based on these findings, the employer should be taking extra care to ensure that the employment screening process will withstand a legal challenge.

The employment screening procedure should have multiple assessment options and the interview is only one of the assessment options used to determine who the best candidate is for the position. When a screening procedure has multiple assessment steps the procedure will yield a more comprehensive screening procedure and will decrease adverse impact of a candidate compared to a one screening procedure (Piotrowski & Armstrong, 2006).

Before the interview process starts and until the final decision, interviewers should treat each candidate with dignity, respect, and politeness. Candidates should be told in advance how the procedure will take place and projected timelines for the next screening selection deadline. Never lose sight that the candidate is also interviewing the agency to decide if the agency is a place they want to work or be promoted; employment selection and promotion is always a two-way street (Antonellis, 2015).

Interview Training

During the interview process a myriad of content will be shared by the candidate with the interviewer(s). The interviewer(s) will be responsible for interpreting the content and evaluating the content to allow the interviewer(s) to properly score the candidate. Most organizations do not provide any type of interview training to the interviewer(s) who will be responsible for selecting the next employee or selecting the next promotion for the agency (McCarthy, Van Iddekinge, &

Campion, 2010; Terpstra, & Rozell, 1997). Given the importance, why are so few agencies unwilling to provide such critical training?

My research and other researchers reveal that most interviewers feel they do a great job at screening employment candidates. They don't feel they need training, they lack the time to participate in training, interviewers are not held accountable for their decisions, and all people tend to overestimate how much they know about interviewing (Antonellis & Flam, 2016; Camp, Schulz, Vielhaber, & Wagner-March, 2011). The reality is that most employees lack the advanced skills and knowledge to conduct interviews. A number of research studies have shown that providing interviewer training significantly increases the quality of the final selection (McCarthy, Van Iddekinge, & Campion, 2010; Terpstra, & Rozell, 1997; Woehr, & Huffcutt, 1994).

Interview training can be conducted using the lecture and discussion process and you can also incorporate the use of sample interview responses via a video, roleplaying process, or practice interviews. Some agencies not providing training have opted to develop a training manual to allow trainees to review and study the content on their own schedules. Recommended interview training may include some of the following topics:

- Note taking
- Interview bias
- Question scoring/rating
- Structured interview procedure
- Ethical decision making
- Legal requirements and considerations
- Hiring discrimination

- Use of behavior information rather than subjective impression
- Favoritism through coaching when asking questions
- Uncontrolled use of ancillary information (you should not be Googling, reviewing LinkedIn or Facebook for the candidates)
- Interview content/information management
- Steps to writing interview questions and prompting questions
- How to use interview questions already prepared
- Benefits of multiple interviewers
- Rapport building
- Discussion of job requirements
- Steps to avoid rating errors (Antonellis, 2015; Cook, 2016; König, Klehe, Berchtold, & Kleinmann, 2010).

One example could be to have a short video to show a hypothetical response to an interview question and have the trainees take notes and score the response to the question. Once all of the trainees have scored the question, an open discussion can take place as to what the trainees picked up from the response and why they felt it was important to how they scored the answer. In addition, a review of the note taking that was performed can be discussed in an open forum to ensure that the trainees are collecting and writing down the correct content during the interview while monitoring their own opinions and attitudes. The benefit of providing interview training will increase interviewer's skills and ability to elicit more critical information in an effort to make an accurate judgment who is the best candidate for the position.

Conclusion

The interview procedure for hiring new employees or promoting employees is a key organizational decision and if done poorly can have long-term negative results for the organization and the employees. A poorly conducted employment screening process places the employer at a greater risk for a legal challenge and given the majority of employment legal challenges go against the employer (Williams, Schaffer, & Ellis, 2013) it is suggested that the employer invest the time and resources into reviewing and improving the employment screening procedure. The goal of this article was to examine and consider the steps that an agency can take to improve their interview procedures to demonstrate a transparent, professional, structured, and fair process with the end result of selecting the best candidate for the position. The structured interview procedure has been shown to provide favorable results at predicting future job performance of candidates over the unstructured interview. The structured interview process has been shown to reduce legal challenges to the employment screening process.

Using the same set of questions, asked in the same sequence, better prepared interview questions with probing questions appear to be more important than other aspects of the interview process. It is recommended that providing interview training is the “gold standard” and that training provided to interviewers can reduce legal liability and improve selection reliability of the best candidate. Providing some level of employment screening training will also reduce the risk of personal bias negatively impacting the screening process. If we claim that our employees are the agencies most important resources, then we need to do a far better job at the front end during the interview and promotional interview by providing interview training. For additional information on the topics covered in this article, readers can use the list of references as a starting point.

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Author Biography

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Dr. Antonellis has more than 20 years of fire/EMS experience, holding various positions including Chief of Department. In addition, he has more than 11 years of law enforcement experience in the State of Massachusetts as a police officer (part-time). Dr. Antonellis has a blend of experience working with union and management dealing with labor negotiations, contract administration, grievance management, and presenting testimony at legal proceedings. Dr. Antonellis has served on the faculty at 3 colleges teaching at the undergraduate and graduate level in addition to working in the curriculum development division. He has been teaching online for 10 years and more than 15 years in the traditional classroom. Dr. Antonellis has taught more than 100 graduate and undergraduate courses over the past 10 years. He has lectured to emergency service providers nationally and internationally.

Dr. Antonellis has served as a freelance curriculum developer for American Heat Video out of Texas; he has also appeared in several training videos as a subject matter expert. He has authored and published more than 35 articles and three books. Dr. Antonellis authored a text book with PennWell Publishing, "Labor Relations for the Fire Service". He also co-authored a book, "Post Traumatic Stress Disorder in Firefighters. The calls that stick with you." Dr. Antonellis serves on the Editorial Board for Human Resource Research Journal, International Journal of Learning and Development, and Journal of Public Management Research. Dr. Antonellis holds a MA degree in Labor and Policy Studies with a concentration in Human Resource Management, BS in Fire Science Administration, AS in Fire Science, and a AS in Criminal Justice.



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