

Structured interviews 101

*How to make the most effective interview process
work for your hiring team*



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Introduction

Research has consistently found that structured interviews are much more reliable and valid than traditional, unstructured interviews. In fact, some research has shown they're almost twice as effective in predicting job performance.

What is structure?

Structure has been shown to influence interview validity more than anything else. But what makes an interview 'structured'?

Huffcutt & Arthur (1994) propose a "sophisticated framework for classifying interview structure." This framework has two dimensions:

- ✓ **Standardizing interview questions**
- ✓ **Standardizing response scoring**

These dimensions form a continuum. On one side, there are structured interviews where both dimensions are highly standardized. On the other end, there are unstructured interviews, which have no standardization at all.



Interviewers ask random questions



Interviewers are given topics to explore



Interviewers have lists of questions to choose from



Interviewers ask the same predetermined questions in a particular order to all candidates

So, in **structured interviews**, hiring managers ask a set of predetermined questions in a specific order. These questions are carefully created and linked to job-relevant criteria based on job analysis. All responses are scored with the same rating system using scorecards.

Unstructured interviews, on the other hand, flow like a friendly and spontaneous conversation. Their difficulty level follows interviewers' moods. External factors and new information could derail the process. Rating systems are implicit.

Why does structure make interviews more effective?

The more unstructured, the less job-related. Random and spontaneous questions don't necessarily predict job performance. And, without a pre-determined scoring system, biases could run loose; interviewers could end up evaluating based on gender, race, physical attractiveness or, most commonly, [how similar a candidate is to them](#).

Structured interviews are job-related and allow for greater objectivity. They work well in team hiring environments where individual biases are less likely to interfere.

Companies that use structured interviews can also defend themselves better in court. Research has shown that the amount of interview structure is [strongly linked to litigation outcomes](#). Unstructured interviews are challenged more often in courts. They're also more likely to be found discriminatory since employers can't prove they give everyone the same opportunity to succeed.

Structured interviews combat the problems that unstructured interviews pose. Granted, they might appear strict and impersonal for not allowing participants to digress from established processes. They also take time to prepare since interviewers need to develop interview questions and rating scales with care.

Despite some drawbacks, structured interviews can systematically predict job performance, especially when used alongside tests and work samples. Once interviewers have prepared their questions, defined their rating scales and established their processes, hiring can become easier and more effective for every future position.



How to develop a structured interview process

Select the right requirements

Interviewers often have a vague picture of their ideal candidate in mind. But, they can't consciously ask the right questions, unless they make a concise list of all the important traits they're looking for.

The first step is job analysis. It's useful because it has been found to [increase the validity of interviews](#). It identifies the qualifications a person needs to be successful in the job. This information may already be available, if the position isn't new. Template [job descriptions](#) can also help identify common qualifications for each job. Results from a thorough job analysis will later help interviewers develop interview questions and rating scales.

Then, interviewers identify general qualities that all employees should share. What will help a new hire fit in? Intelligence is a given in most cases, while integrity and dependability are common requirements. Employee and senior management surveys can help identify shared values. The human resources (HR) department is more likely to take responsibility for defining these qualities to ensure consistency across teams.

Although companies vary, here are some common requirements:

- ✓ **Communication skills**
- ✓ **Ethical maturity**
- ✓ **Dependability**
- ✓ **Initiative**
- ✓ **Willingness to learn**

Once interviewers have the complete list, it's time for them to trim it. Interviews shouldn't assess too many qualifications, or they risk exhausting candidates and dedicating too much time to collect adequate information.

Decide which requirements to keep by answering three questions:

- ✓ **Could this requirement be reliably assessed through another method?**
Interviews needn't stand alone in the hiring process. Use tests, work samples or background checks when possible.

- ✓ **Is this requirement a must-have?**
It's unlikely interviewers will hire a candidate who lacks leadership skills to manage a large team. But, their decision might be different if they found that a candidate in an accounting position lacked social skills. Focus on the 'must-haves.' Assess secondary qualifications in an additional round of interviews with comparable candidates.

- ✓ **Could the candidate acquire this requirement on the job?**
This usually refers to specific knowledge rather than personality factors. Avoid rejecting candidates for not having easily taught skills or knowledge. Look for potential instead.

It's useful to provide a definition for each important requirement. For example, what does "excellent coding skills" mean? Which coding languages does it refer to and what does it entail?

Abstract soft skills might need a definition too. For example, what are interpersonal skills? An example of the US. Department of Personnel Management (OPM) defines them as:

"Shows understanding, friendliness, courtesy, tact, empathy, concern and politeness to others; develops and maintains effective relationships with others; may include effectively dealing with individuals who are difficult, hostile or distressed; relates well to people from varied backgrounds and different situations; is sensitive to cultural diversity, race, gender, disabilities and other individual differences."

Interviewers needn't go into so much detail or invent new definitions. But, it's important for hiring teams to agree on what each requirement stands for.

Develop interview questions

Construct the main interview questions

Interview questions should be job-related. Interviewers can choose interview questions from [online libraries](#) or they can develop their own with the help of HR professionals. Each question should link to a specific job requirement.

There are many different interview question types and categories. This table represents one way to think about them with examples:

QUESTION TYPE	Role specific		General	
	Job knowledge	Soft skills	Company knowledge	Soft skills/ Culture fit
Generic	<i>How would you rate your knowledge of Excel?</i>	<i>What's your leadership style?</i>	<i>Who are our competitors?</i>	<i>Do you prefer working as a team or autonomously?</i>
Behavioral	<i>Tell me about a time you used Six Sigma for a project.</i>	<i>Tell me about a time you had to deal with a difficult customer.</i>	<i>N/A</i>	<i>Tell me about a time someone criticized your work and how you responded.</i>
Situational	<i>If I told you to make some predictions based on this case study, which metrics would you use?</i>	<i>If you had two important deadlines coming up, how would you prioritize your tasks?</i>	<i>If our competitor, X, released a new product, Y, how would you advise our team to respond?</i>	<i>If you discovered your supervisor was breaking the company's code of conduct, what would you do?</i>

Role-specific interview questions depend on the position. Developing role-specific questions is usually each hiring manager's responsibility.

General questions assess general requirements that all company employees should have. It'd be best if HR developed general questions, for consistency.

Job knowledge questions usually evaluate hard skills like knowledge of relevant concepts, legislation or tools. Interviewers can also ask candidates to complete mini-assignments on a whiteboard or piece of paper. It's best to avoid stuffing too many of these questions into an interview. Job knowledge can be assessed through tests and work samples. Tests are a better way to see if a candidate has enough theoretical knowledge to do the job.

Company/Industry knowledge questions refer to how well candidates know the company.

Soft skills interview questions measure personality traits or abstract skills. They could be framed in an abstract way, e.g. *"Tell me about a time you had to explain a difficult concept to a team member"* or in a specific way, e.g. *"How would you explain the term 'capital structure' to a non-finance manager?"*

Behavioral and situational interview questions have been found to be generally valid in predicting job performance, with [behavioral questions being slightly better](#). Behavioral interview questions explore candidates' past experiences related to specific requirements. Situational questions are hypothetical but always job related. Both are good options when you want to hear longer answers and get more information about candidates. They should be based on real situations that crop up often in candidates' professions.

Situational questions make candidates' answers easier to compare and don't usually need follow up questions. To reduce the possibility of faking the right answer, situational questions should [pose a dilemma, when possible](#). Behavioral questions are better when candidates have comparable experience.

You can use the **STAR approach (Situation-Task-Action-Result)** to frame your behavioral interview questions, along with any follow up questions. For example:

“Tell me about a time you failed at a project (Situation/Task). How did you try to avoid failure? (Action). What did that experience teach you? (Result).”

General guidelines for writing interview questions:

- ✓ **Develop a set of questions for each requirement**
- ✓ **Use real-life situations**
- ✓ **Be clear and concise**
- ✓ **Avoid jargon**
- ✓ **Ensure questions can't be answered with a simple 'yes' or 'no'**
- ✓ **Avoid questions that point to a right answer**
- ✓ **Avoid adding excessive detail**
- ✓ **Don't try to assess anything non-job related (especially protected characteristics)**
- ✓ **Ask someone who wasn't involved in writing questions to review them**

Learn to use follow up questions

Structured interviews don't leave much room for improvising questions. But follow up (or probing) questions can help interviewers if candidates give unclear answers.

The way interviewers frame these questions matters. If they're framed in a way that reveals what interviewers expect, they can increase the [probability of a candidate faking the right answer](#). For example, imagine interviewers asking candidates how they would handle a difficult colleague. Follow up questions like "would you get angry after a confrontation and tell your boss" give candidates pointers as to what they should say.

But, probing questions [could have the opposite effect](#), if they merely encourage candidates to share more details without pointing to a right answer. For this reason, probing questions should be asked with caution.

Here's an example of an exchange between a candidate and an interviewer:

Tell me about a time you successfully managed a team for a project.

I was working on a software development project and I was put in charge of an engineering team. We managed to finish on time and with great success.

How many members were on your team and what were their responsibilities? What were your team's deliverables?

The first follow up question is meant to verify the candidate's claims by asking for more detail. The second question is a tweaked version of a general STAR question, "What was the result?" Interviewers often need to paraphrase the question to clarify a point.

Interviewers could also create a list of probing questions that fit every situation like:

- ✓ **Who was involved?**
- ✓ **Where did that happen?**
- ✓ **What was your specific role?**
- ✓ **What would you do if that action didn't work?**

Ask an appropriate number of questions

It'd be a good idea to ask more than one interview question for each requirement. Some researchers advise to use more than three. It all depends on time constraints. Some requirements are more important than others so interviewers might use more questions for them. Probing questions should be limited. Ask only a couple when needed.

Order questions

The questions' order depends on which skills should be assessed first. Hard skills are usually assessed through other reliable means like tests, work samples or assignments. If not, start with hard skills interview questions to make sure candidates can do the job - cultural fit would be irrelevant if they couldn't. Then, ask soft skills questions. One way would be to begin with role-specific questions and then general ones. It'd be a good idea to start positive: ask first about candidates' successes and interests, instead of mistakes and failures.

Craft useful rating scales

Develop a scoring system

A scoring system is very important to ensure objective decisions. Most interviewers choose the common scale of five or seven points. The key here is to accurately define the scoring levels. Research shows that defining all levels [makes scoring more resilient against disability bias](#) because interviewers have clear job-relevant criteria in front of them when assigning any score. It's possible that defining all scores will have the same effect on other types of biases too.

Definitions can vary from unsatisfactory to satisfactory or low to high. It depends on how interviewers would like to evaluate candidates' answers. They could also develop general definitions of each level. For example, 'unsatisfactory' could mean:

- ✓ **Never or rarely demonstrates the skill**
- ✓ **Demands very close supervision to meet minimum criteria of the skill**

It's often useful to develop more detailed scales for certain skills. According to the example from Office for Personnel Management (OPM) for interpersonal skills mentioned above, the grading scale can look like this:

Level 1 - Low: Handles interpersonal situations involving little or no tension or discomfort and requires close guidance

Level 3 - Average: Handles interpersonal situations involving a moderate degree of tension or discomfort and requires occasional guidance

Level 5 - Outstanding: Handles interpersonal situations involving a high degree of tension or discomfort and advises others

This is an example of “[behaviorally anchored rating scales \(BARS\)](#).” All points are accompanied by descriptions of behaviors. These descriptions are called “behavioral indicators.” They give interviewers an idea of how to score candidates. They could either be intuitively defined, or modeled after real employee behaviors using the [Critical Incident Technique \(CIT\)](#).

Of course, it’s impossible to make an exhaustive list of behaviors for each point of the scale. For example, when evaluating teamwork, interviewers could use information from job analysis to develop many behavioral indicators for low teamwork skills and high teamwork skills:

Low teamwork skills:

- ✗ **Talks about their previous teams in a hostile and aggressive way**
- ✗ **Only cares about completing their own tasks and fails to acknowledge the team’s effort**

High teamwork skills:

- ✓ **Praises their team’s collective effort and success in front of others**
- ✓ **Takes initiative to resolve team conflicts**

Interviewers could also define unacceptable answers. For example, if they want to ask candidates about a time they made a mistake, they could define the following unacceptable answers:

- ✘ **What do you care?**
- ✘ **I don't make mistakes**
- ✘ **It's top secret**

Or veiled variants:

"I'm always very careful when doing things. I use my great intelligence and attention to detail to avoid mistakes that could harm my performance. To this day, I've managed to do everything as it should be done."

Choose a rating scale

Interviewers could practically choose any rating system they want. Pass/fail or positive/negative systems make more sense for yes/no questions.



How to prepare interviewers



Assemble a hiring team

It's best to use multiple interviewers to temper individual biases and cancel out random errors. And it's better when all candidates meet the same interviewers.

Hiring teams usually include two or more of the following:

- ✓ **The position's direct supervisor**
- ✓ **An HR professional**
- ✓ **A team member**
- ✓ **The previous incumbent**
- ✓ **The department's director**

Direct supervisors and previous employees who did this job (if they're still around) are good choices. Hiring teams should also be as diverse as possible to reduce gender, race and similarity biases.

How will interviews be held?

There are two ways that multiple interviewers can interview candidates:

1. An interview panel

In this format, all interviewers hear the same answers so they can more easily discuss their ratings afterwards. They're also more likely to catch all relevant information.

Interview panels make candidates more uncomfortable than usual so avoid turning the panel into a firing squad. Try to help candidates relax and leave enough time between questions. It's also best not to make candidates sit on a chair facing an interview panel. Opt for a round table instead.

2. A series of 1:1 interviews

In this format, interviewers have access to more information since each one asks different questions to evaluate predetermined traits. That way they can evaluate candidates from a broader perspective. There's indication that this format makes [interviewers' ratings more independent and reliable](#).

Prepare the hiring team

Most interviewers like relaxed conversations with candidates. It might be difficult to persuade them that this approach isn't very effective. It could be even harder to ensure they won't stray from predetermined interview questions to explore other interesting topics.

A good way to start is by helping interviewers:

- ✓ **Understand the merits of structured interviews**
- ✓ **Become more aware of hiring objectives**
- ✓ **Understand and use processes correctly**
- ✓ **Learn how to minimize biases**

Train interviewers

Training should include many elements. First, interviewers should understand the process of structuring interviews. They'll often have to craft their own interview questions for a position. Present the process of defining requirements and creating interview questions. Companies might use one universal rating scale or leave it to each hiring manager to decide which one to use. In both cases, interviewers need to understand how to use/create a rating scale. These training sessions only need to be done once, if planned correctly.

Educating interviewers about how to make candidates feel comfortable is a good idea. Needless to say, they should be trained in preserving legality during interviews (e.g. avoiding illegal interview questions).

Interviewers should also be trained in note-taking, regardless of the interview format. Taking notes is important because interviewers can remember answers and justify their ratings.

Note-taking can take many different forms. [Research shows](#) that the most structured form of note-taking results from:

- ✓ Extensive notes instead of brief notes
- ✓ Mandatory note-taking instead of optional note-taking
- ✓ Recording answers or facts instead of evaluations or judgements
- ✓ Note-taking during the interview instead of after the interview

Whatever the format, interviewers should take notes about:

- ✓ Important parts of answers that will help them remember what candidates said
- ✓ Concerns about job-related criteria
- ✓ Extreme behaviors

Interviewers shouldn't take notes about:

- ✘ Protected characteristics, like race and gender
- ✘ Subjective criteria, like “we went to the same school”
- ✘ Traits that aren't job related, like physical attractiveness
- ✘ Excusable behaviors, like nervousness

Note that video interviews with a recording function can eliminate the need for note-taking.

Combat biases

This may be the most difficult part of interviewing. Combating biases means interviewers have to work against their inherent tendencies. It takes time and conscious effort. Training can certainly help, if only to make interviewers aware that these biases actually exist. For example, taking an [Implicit Association Test](#) (IAT) can help people identify any unconscious preferences for specific races, religions etc. Educate interviewers in [equal opportunity practices](#). Give interviewers guidance on how to minimize the effects of their biases. One way is to teach interviewers about how to spot their subtle expressions. Another way is to encourage interviewers to practice slowing down their judgement and decision making process.



How to conduct & evaluate interviews



Last minute tips

- ✓ **Read candidates' resumes.** You can only fully understand their answers if you know their background. And, it can help you ask relevant probing questions.
- ✓ **Prepare to take your time.** Don't schedule meetings right after interviews. Sometimes you need more time and it'd be rude to rush candidates.
- ✓ **Break the ice.** Spend the first two minutes of interviews in pleasant unstructured talk with candidates. This can soften the impersonal side of structured interviews. Don't get carried away though, limiting extraneous information can increase interview validity, by keeping judgements job-related. Keep it brief and simple, and avoid evaluating candidates during this time.
- ✓ **Show you care.** Having predetermined questions doesn't mean you have to act like a machine. Show interest in the candidate and listen carefully.
- ✓ **Make eye contact.** Even if interviewers are taking extensive notes, they should minimize the time spent looking at their notebooks or laptop screens.
- ✓ **Offer to answer questions.** Candidates usually want additional information during their interview. When following a structured interview format, it's best to ask candidates to ask questions after the structured portion of the interview ends. Candidate questions during the interview could lead the discussion away from its structured path.

Evaluate candidates

After interviews, interviewers should evaluate each answer. It's better for interviewers to do this after they've seen all candidates, so they can rate all of them in one question first, before moving on to the next question.

This is a way to lessen the 'halo effect.' When a candidate shows exceptional skills in one area, interviewers can be tempted to rate them favorably in other areas where they mightn't be as strong. Interviewers can reduce the 'halo effect' by rating candidates horizontally, based on a single question.

After interviewers have rated all questions, they could rate candidates according to predetermined traits. Interviewers will evaluate each trait by using the ratings of questions that measure that trait. For example, imagine that three questions were designed to measure one specific trait. A candidate's overall score for that trait will be the average of their score in each of these three questions. Panel interviewers could do this together since they've all heard and scored the same responses.

If interviewers used the interview series format, they'll have probably asked different questions evaluating each trait. So, they could rate predetermined traits individually, based on how they rated candidates' responses. Then, interviewers can present these scores to their team and compare them. A discussion where all interviewers consult notes and explain their ratings is a good idea.

After their discussion, interviewers can decide on their final ratings for each candidate (with or without input from other selection methods, e.g. test scores). Different interviewers' scores can have different weights. For example, hiring managers' scores could weigh more than team members' scores.

Measure results

How can you measure the success of your structured interview process?

A good hire is a good indication. But, it's best if you systematically track recruitment data to ensure you're getting the most out of structured interviews. For example, structured interviews are meant to increase diversity. If your recruitment data suggests that you hire homogeneously, then you might need to rethink interviewers' training or the hiring process.

It's a good idea to include recruiting metrics when evaluating interviews.

They give quantitative data that will help you decide if your process works or if it's cost-effective. Examples of recruiting metrics include:

- ✓ **Quality of hire**
- ✓ **Time-to-hire**
- ✓ **Time-to-fill**
- ✓ **Interviews per hire**



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