Public Personnel Management

10.

Objective Pre-Employment Interviewing:

Balancing Recruitment, Selection and Retention Goals

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Not that many years ago, while designing the on-campus recruitment interview for one of the larger federal agencies, I discovered that nearly 90 percent of the candidates recruited for positions as chemists, physicists and electrical engineers were being disqualified during the selection process. The average agency evaluation cost was $34,000 per candidate. Oddly enough, neither the cost nor the high rejection rate were perceived as serious problems. Rather, the fact that it was taking three to six months to discover the 10 percent who met the organization's high standards, and the reality that these coveted applicants were not willing to wait months for the government to make a job offer, finally caused the agency to change its recruitment and selection methods. In short, the recruiters felt that their mission had been accomplished when they found candidates whose professed skills, knowledge and abilities - on paper - met the organization's requirements.

T he sad truth was that most of their candidates were being disqualified for misrepresentation about drug, integrity and disciplinary problems, which had nothing to do with their skills, knowledge or abilities, and the entire system was being overwhelmed by applicants who were unqualified due to counterproductive but work-related behaviors. The evaluation and selection time problem was solved by having the recruiters incorporate some of the selection function elements into their mission in the form of a modified on-campus recruitment interview. Since the single most common reason for qualified applicants to pick one employer over another is which employer makes the first job offer, the agency was able to gain a significant advantage over both its public and private competition, in addition to saving enormous amounts of money and better utilizing recruiter time.

Conversely, I have worked with thousands of background investigators, human resource interviewers, and oral board panelists who have become_ so focused on the selection and credential verification process, that applicants often report that they felt like criminal suspects in a police interrogation! Even when this type of intimidation is

successful in correctly identifying qualified candidates, the "best of the best" frequently select alternative employment, commenting that they were alienated by the techniques, and were never told one good reason why they should have considered, or waited for, a possible offer.

In addition, there are specific predictors that can be discussed during both recruitment and selection that can have a direct effect on resolving retention problems. In essence, recruiting, selection and retention issues can be managed effectively by correctly targeting the information that predicts hiring mistakes and high turnover while encouraging candidates with potential to view the employer and possible job offer favorably.

There are three basic components to Objective Pre-employment Interviewing: identifying, defining and quantifying information targets; the interpretation of applicant behavior during the interview; and interviewing techniques to encourage more accurate information, even when applicants perceive that accurate information will result in disqualification. Objective Pre-employment Interviewing first determines that each information target being considered for the interview is, in fact, a bona fide occupational qualification and/or essential job function (see Table 1).

Table 1. Sample Objective pre·employment Information Targets

1. Biographical data
2. Employment history and discipline
3. Relocation attitude and commitment
4. Shift attitude, availability and commitment
5. Retention and permanency
6. Financial responsibility
7. Integrity
8. Drug behaviors
9. Alcohol behaviors
11. Criminal activities
12. Military history and discipline
13. Driving history
14. Reliability
15. Service attitude and response
16. Certification/education history
17. Perjury/falsification of official reports/records
18. Bribes and gratuities
19. Excessive force/violence
20. Child abuse

In identifying information targets to consider, employers sometimes fail to include the activities and behaviors that actually predict hiring failures. For any given

industry or profession, historically, why have some employees been disciplined or fired? If you'd like to reduce these failures in the future, this author feels that you need to realize, for many government positions, employees are seldom dismissed for incompetence, which is traditionally evaluated by exploring the applicants' skills, knowledge, abilities and experience. Rather, many employees are disciplined, and eventually dismissed, for excessive absenteeism, unacceptable service attitudes, abuse of authority, integrity problems, ete., which, of course, do not correlate with skills, knowledge, abilities or experience. Almost by definition, a confident man will score above average on the traditional skills/abilities attributes - as well as in the categories of team player, communicates well, and intelligence - and may have other desirable traits that have nothing to do with honesty. In the same vein, while excessive absenteeism or tardiness could be the result of poor work habits, child care, and/or transportation problems, they may be symptoms of more entrenched alcohol or drug abuse problem - problems that many charged with recruitment or selection would rather not address. The important point is to evaluate all of these relevant items - not just competency issues - and be sure to cover the most likely possibilities, when there are multiple, unrelated causes of various symptoms. Not surprisingly, applicants with problems are highly motivated to misrepresent the truth about their problems. Incorporating interviewing techniques that deal effectively with applicant misrepresentation is just as important as identifying the correct information targets that actually predict the problem.

Once the information targets have been identified for possible inclusion in any given interview, Objective Pre-employment Interviewing then catalogs the information targets into three groups: Category I includes the traditional skills, knowledge, abilities, and experiences the assessment has determined to be appropriate for the position being sought. Category II covers the organization's interests and requirements, such as shift requirements, conflicts of interests, etc. Category III addresses the various counterproductive activities, such as substance abuse, workplace violence, lack of integrity, etc., that historically have been problems for the jobs in question. No matter which interview format is being used (Recruitment, Background, Oral Board, ete.), we recommend always starting with the traditional, or Category I, targets. Applicants expect to be questioned about their employment, education and military histories, and, with few exceptions, questions regarding these targets are not considered sensitive by either the employer or the applicant. Obviously, if the applicant discloses that he/she does not meet the minimum qualifications regarding these topics, there is no legal or ethical reason to discuss the more sensitive Category II and III information targets. Do not confuse the consistency guideline that employers use to treat applicants equally - without regard to gender, race, ethnic group, etc. - with any mandate requiring employers to cover all of the exact same inf-ormation targets. While "checklist interviewing" (asking all applicants exactly the same questions without regard to the applicants' backgrounds or answers) may be a fast, inexpensive way to teach newly designated interviewers - and may even be essential to some subjective interviewing programs, such as BARS - it is completely ineffective in dealing with applicant misrep-

resentation, a leading cause of hiring mistakes and unacceptable turnover. By definition, disqualifiers are disqualifiers. If the applicant, for example, does not possess the minimum education requirements determined to be bona fides for the position, it is a complete waste of resources and a dishonest practice to continue the selection process, thus giving false hope to people who are not going to be selected - no matter how many, or what, additional interviews, tests or steps follow.

Mter the information targets are identified and categorized, they should then be defined with respect to any legal restrictions, time-to-interview limitations, and organization philosophies concerning each target. In simple terms, how "deep" and how "wide" to you want to go into each area? Do you just want to know about using illegal drugs, or are you equally concerned about buying? Selling? Manufacturing? Do you want to make distinctions between using illegal drugs and using drugs illegally? On a job or off a job? Obviously, in defining each information target, the desire to be thorough must be balanced against the time available to interview. Job fair and on-campus settings seldom allow interviewers to cover very many information targets, and those that are addressed cannot be explored very deeply.

In addition, each employer may have certain philosophical preferences with regard to both the information targeted and the depth to which each target is explored - all of which should be discussed and formalized, so all those participating in the selection process will be operating off the same page of the game book. The agencies' operational restrictions will clearly have a bearing in defining the limits under which each information target can be explored. In customizing Objective Pre-employment Interviewing, one should consider such factors as the location of the interviews. Do they take place at a central location where, presumably, the pool of qualified and experienced interviewers might be expected to be larger, or in the field where interviewers are more likely to be widely dispersed and, perhaps, not as well practiced? The availability of staff and the effect of different interview format options, specifically, one-on-one versus group or panel interviews, must also be incorporated into an effective interview design.

It has been my experience that one format is not better or worse than the other, but, clearly, one is more effective than the other, depending upon the type of information being sought. In general, when seeking critical selection information that applicants with problems are motivated to misrepresent or may be embarrassed to discuss (past work disciplinary problems, absenteeism, substance abuse, etc.), the one-on-one format, coupled with appropriate techniques for discussing sensitive but work-related activities, is the only time-effective method. Who wants to admit to something that, not only might disqualify them from a job, but simultaneously might make them look foolish or "bad" in front of a panel of judgmental strangers? On the other hand, when evaluating attributes, skills, characteristics, and experiences that cannot be easily quantified (Why do you want to work here? ... relocate to this area? ... become a [position]?), the consensus evaluation of a panel, using validated scoring techniques necessary for all subjective procedures, often proves more effective than the single-interviewer option.

The last cornerstone foundation issue in Objective Pre-employment Interviewing is the creation of information qualifiers and disqualifiers in advance of whatever means is used to collect the relevant information. In other words, interviewing should be viewed as one of several information-generating methodologies employers use - not as an entity unto itself - when it comes to evaluating the information generated. This idea of pre-establishing objective standards is common practice, when it comes to the traditional skills, knowledge, experience and ability requirements: If the job requires high school or GED as educational minimums, whether the employer discovers that the applicant does not have these minimums on the printed Personnel History Statement, at the pre-employment interview, or through an academic record check, is irrelevant to the disqualification decision - but very relevant to time/cost considerations. The same holds true with regard to Category II and III information targets: How much drug abuse is too much drug abuse; how much theft is too much theft; how many days missed are too many days missed should be known to all involved in the selection process, and applied to all information-generating tools, so all candidates applying for the same position can truly be judged equally (objectively) and on a work-related basis. Many public employers have, by default, decided to evaluate Category II and III information on a "case-by-case" basis, which in today's litigation-happy world is almost an invitation to "sue me," and prima facie evidence that the employer is not using objective, recent, work-related criteria in making hiring decisions. Of course, there are bureaucracies, entrenched practices and political traditions that resist pre-establishing objective qualifiers and disqualifiers for anything other than the most elementary qualifications.

In addition to the possible racist and sexist motives that not having standards infers, there are some political realities - often unspoken - that encourage the defeat of formalized disqualifiers. What will the ultimate decision-maker do, if the son/daughter of the city councilwoman, county commissioner or largest employer/taxpayer admits to a disqualifier? What will you say to the ultimate decision makers, when they demand to know why you don't want to use the same system (no formalized disqualifiers) that has "been used just fine, thank you," for the last 20, 25, or 30 years? The reality is that, when the organization fails to create formalized standards for all information targets - not just skills, knowledge, and abilities - hiring decisions become inconsistent, in the worst legal sense of the term, among different interviewers, and even within the same interviewer. Ultimately, someone - perhaps a federal district judge who either doesn't want to understand the unique operational and philosophical culture of your organization or, perhaps for unfair but political reasons, wants to use your organization to send a message - will formalize your standards by edict. This would hardly be the most desirable approach considering the options that were available to the organization's options prior to litigation.

Depending upon the information target being discussed, there may be four criteria the agency can consider in quantifying disqualifiers or Acceptance Guidelines: time, frequency, quantity and circumstances. Time refers to the periods of accountability attached to each information target, i.e., how far back in time, from the time

of the interview, should you (and can you) hold the applicant accountable? In some cases, by statute, the time periods are absolutes: "Did you ever in your whole life," as is the case with police applicants and felony criminal convictions. More recently, it appears (contrary to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission's interpretation of the Americans with Disabilities Act) that rehabilitating alcoholics and drug addicts applying for safety-related positions may also be absolutely and forever disqualified if the employer so chooses. For information targets not specifically addressed by statute, the employer can consider its own operations, hiring demands and philosophies regarding the information being evaluated.

Most public employers using Objective Pre-employment Interviewing hold applicants accountable for three to five years for integrity, minor drug and absenteeism targets, while using seven to ten years for the more serious issues, if they are not already absolute disqualifiers. Historically, of course, employers have not concerned themselves with periods of accountability. Since all pre-employment systems attempt to predict future performance on the job, when using actual past performance (as opposed to profiling, probability estimates or other predictors not based on what the applicant has actually done), employers can be challenged as to the validity of the prediction, when it is based on a past life period, e.g., adolescence, that may not be a valid predictor of future adult performance.

Also, for most activities, at some point in time, the direction of the prediction changes. In other words, the absence of a problem eventually becomes the predictor of the absence of a problem, rather than an indication of greater risk. For many of the information targets selected by employers using Objective Pre-employment Interviewing, seven years, according to statistical mathematics, is the point when the direction of prediction reverses and, therefore, the point where employers might begin to consider excusing some, but not all, past activities.

Once the periods of accountability have been determined for each information target, the employer should then determine the frequency or "how many times" the applicant can have engaged in the activity within the period of accountability before it becomes a disqualifier. In some cases, the frequency may be set at zero - as in how many serious and work-related crimes the applicant can admit to in the last seven years. In other cases, particularly if the employer is already having a difficult time meeting hiring goals, the employer may be willing to overlook some, but not all, activities. For example, under the scope of the Driving History information target, most employers are willing to overlook one or two minor traffic convictions (Not DUIs or Hit-and-Runs) in the last three years, provided the applicant's license is still valid for the job being considered.

However, no matter how desperate the employer may be to meet hiring needs, there should always be a floor for some information targets, below which the consideration never drops. A quick review of the events that occurred with the MetrolDade and Washington, D. C. Police Departments[1] demonstrates the far more serious problems that occur when standards are relaxed to meet other goals without taking into account the need for standards in the first place.

In some cases, it may be easier to implement the Acceptance Guidelines by using quantity standards rather than frequency, as in theft from previous employers. Here, "not more than $100/$200 in money or merchandise from jobs in the last three/five years" works more effectively than, "How many times did you take something you shouldn't have from a past employer?" As is the case for most information targets, employers need to balance their desire for high standards of conduct against the realities of people and society. Just because someone takes small amounts of minor office supplies from recent past jobs or tries marijuana during high school doesn't necessarily mean they will steal or have significant drug-related performance problems with current employers. In these cases, I believe overlooking minor indiscretions is not negligent hiring or being "soft" on misconduct. Of course, for some information targets, as is the case with many of the subjective attributes employers feel are worthy of evaluation, there may not be empirical proof dictating a specific standard: How much education is enough? Why high school? 60 credit hours? A four-year degree? Nevertheless, when the absence of any standard is worse than even a somewhat arbitrary standard, the employer should quantify a standard (Acceptance Guidelines), so all applicants can be treated equally and objectively on a performance basis.

The final element in pre-establishing Acceptance Guidelines used to evaluate information generated by Objective Pre-employment Interviewing has to do with the consideration of mitigating circumstances and the possibility of granting exceptions to the pre-established Acceptance Guidelines. Normally, an applicant who admits to recently arriving for work under the influence of alcohol might be disqualified, if the number of occasions exceeds the employer's standard. However, what if the applicant went on to explain that some, or all, of the occasions occurred when the applicant was called in on his/her day off and was not on any kind of "no alcohol" standby status? Under these circumstances, the employer might consider an exception to the standard of arriving at work after having recently consumed alcohol. However, a word of caution: Whenever exceptions are made, they must be granted to any future applicant who meets the same set of circumstances.

For this reason, it is recommended that individual interviewers not grant exceptions themselves, but instead make a request for an exception to either a committee created for this purpose or the ultimate decision-maker. One federal agency currently using Objective Pre-employment Interviewing conducts nearly 55,000 interviews of this type each year at 172 sites around the country, but only receives about 16 requests for exceptions per year at its Washington headquarters - and usually grants them all. No ethical interviewer is going to go to bat for an applicant and request an exception to a disqualifier, unless unusual circumstances beg for consideration. However, some interviewers, due to fatigue and desperate to meet recruiting goals, may try to negotiate away disqualifiers when left to their own devices. When the organization requires some independent review before exceptions are granted, the agency can then maintain an objective, consistent basis for future decisions while meeting its internal qualitycontrol requirements. After all, an exception for one changes the standard, so that it, in effect, becomes an exception for all.

Interpreting Applicant Interview Behaviors

There are two general categories of verbal and nonbehavior commonly used in Objective Pre-employment Interviewing: Navigating and Diagnostic. Navigating behaviors are those exhibited by the applicant and used by the interviewer to navigate through the endless maze of possibilities present during a "blind" interview. Unlike internal investigations or criminal investigative interviews - where there's at least a victim/complainant and, quite possibly, witnesses, evidence and other factual information from which the interview questions can spring - at the beginning of a preemployment interview, the interviewer seldom has any reason to believe that a problem even exists, until the applicant says or does something that indicates a problem. In addition, the interviewer almost never knows if even the suspicion of a problem is valid or invalid, until the applicant volunteers an admission that can be sustained. Therefore, under these circumstances, interviewers might offer up menus of possibilities for each information target and watch for three possible navigating behaviors: Acceptance, Rejection or Relief.

Acceptance behavior often is demonstrated by the applicant sitting upright and frontally to the interviewer. The applicant will have a clear, alert, attentive look in the eyes, clearly indicating that he/she is paying attention and understands completely what the interviewer is saying. Perhaps the easiest behaviors to recognize are the nodding of the head, coupled with some vocal acknowledgment of agreement. In the context of a blind interview, when offering suggestions or possibilities, Acceptance behavior is a pretty good sign that the interviewer is heading down the right - path and/or the applicant likes what the interviewer is saying. On the other hand, if the interviewer suggests something, and the applicant slouches back in the chair, turns away, has a disinterested or impatient expression on his;her face and/or shakes the head, coupled with some negative vocal sound, the interviewer might begin to consider the possibility that the applicant has not done what the interviewer is suggesting. Rejection behavior, therefore, in a blind interview, might indicate that the interviewer is headed down the wrong trail. Relief behavior is sometimes exhibited by a sud0en slump in the chair or dramatic relaxation of both facial and armi1eg muscles, combined with a breaking of eye contact and the vocal expression, "Whew!" One of several things Relief behavior might indicate in a blind interview is a sudden drop in the overall interview stress level, which in turn could be symptomatic of someone who thought he/she had successfully weathered a series of interviewer questions - as when either an applicant misrepresenting something thinks he/she has just "beaten" the interviewer, or when the interviewer has given the applicant some positive feedback as to his or her qualifications for the job.

To recap, during a blind pre-employment interview, Objective Pre-employment Interviewing uses Acceptance, Rejection and Relief behaviors to navigate through a maze of possibilities, offered from menus of probabilities suggested by the interviewer to validate suspicions of a problem, by having the applicant identify and substantiate the interviewer's suspicions with recent, work-related admissions that either exceed

the employer's Acceptance Guidelines (disqualifiers), or fall within the permissible range, to allow for the continued consideration of the applicant. Acceptance behaviors would indicate that the interviewer should continue the line of questioning; Rejection behavior might indicate that the interviewer should change a line of questioning and try something different; and Relief behavior could indicate that the interviewer has just missed a significant misrepresentation and should back up and go over the information target again.

Diagnostic behaviors are used to address the problem of applicant misrepresentation. 80 percent of all job applications contain inaccurate information, and some applicants lie about anything - including the most critical qualifications and disqualifiers - to get the job. It, therefore, should not be surprising that applicant misrepresentation is a leading cause of hiring mistakes.

Diagnostic behaviors can be categorized into three groups, Verbal, Vocal and Visual, and are far more difficult to discusses in the limited space this article allows. Diagnostic behaviors are used primarily to make an initial determination as to the veracity of the applicant's responses to certain pre-employment questions. In other words, there is a body of observable and recordable verbal and nonverbal responses that can fairly accurately distinguish truth tellers from liars and, in the context of the pre-employment setting, identify applicants who exaggerate, fabricate, minimize and deceptively deny in their responses to critical information needs. However, even under the best of circumstances, with an experienced interviewer using valid diagnostic interviewing techniques, the reading of human behavior in the determination of truthfulness, at best, is an art, not a science. Therefore, Objective Pre-employment Interviewing never uses subjective, unsubstantiated opinions of applicant veracity in determining the applicant's suitability for employment. However, with applicants who perceive negative consequences to truthfulness, the interviewer's opinions of applicant statement accuracy may be used to identify areas that might be explored using special techniques to encourage truthfulness and to obtain recent work-related factual admissions. These admissions can then be compared objectively to the employer's Acceptance Guidelines to determine the applicant's suitability for employment. Ironically, the behaviors of which I speak are, in fact, the same used by courts and juries throughout the country to determine the veracity of both prosecution and defense witnesses, with the result being findings of guilt or innocence - consequences even more significant than pre-employment hiring decisions.

The secret to making more accurate evaluations of applicant behavior with regard to truthfulness is to make intra-applicant comparisons: Compare the answer you're trying to analyze to something else that same applicant has said or done earlier in the interview, where you knew with reasonable degrees of certainty that the applicant either was, or was not, telling the truth. The most common mistake in verbal and nonverbal behavioral interpretations is sometimes called the projection error, i.e., trying to put yourself in the applicant's shoes, as in, "If I were truthful, and they asked me that, I'd say/do this; and if I were untruthful, and they asked me this, I'd say/do that." Since the interviewer is neither actually applying for a job nor lying, putting

himself in someone else's shoes is an intellectual contrivance and not representative of the real behaviors, based on emotions, that actual applicants exhibit when they attempt to lie during the interview. It is fairly easy to capture each applicant's truth pattern by asking simple, nonsensitive questions, where a high probability exists that nearly all applicants will tell the truth. For example, the applicant's responses to, "Could you spell your last name?" or, "Where are you living right now?" might establish the applicant's truthful norm - how they look, talk and act when they're probably telling the truth - which can be used for comparisons to later questions in the interview that the interviewer might try to analyze. Obviously, this is an art, not a science, so don't try to attribute the same level of accuracy to behavioral comparisons that fingerprinting or DNA analysis might be accorded.

Nevertheless, people tend to be pattern responders: Once you've captured either their truth or lie pattern, watch for the same thing occurring again and again - only now you have the key for correctly interpreting the pattern. We don't recommend actively provoking the applicant's "lie" pattern, but some applicants will give this to you without asking, as in, "Have you ever had any alcohol to drink during working hours?" "Nooooo ... does that mean during break and lunch too?" All the interviewer has to do from this point on in the interview is watch for the same kind of "Noooo ... " - only now the interviewer can reasonably interpret this as the applicant's "lie" pattern, as revealed by the clarifier, "Does that mean during lunch and break too?" Another simple intra-applicant behavioral comparison that can be made is to offer up menus of possibilities for each information target and watch for a significant change in the applicant's behavioral pattern.

These menus of possibilities can be equally weighted or based on some graduated scale (big to little, serious to minor, unlikely to likely, etc.). When trying to evaluate which, if any, serious crimes the applicant may have actually committed, it is useful to know (and then suggest) the five or ten most common felonies committed by males, or the five or ten most common felonies committed by females (they're significantly different). Likewise, in a blind pre-employment interview, when exploring which illegal drugs, if any, the applicant may be abusing, it is effective to suggest the five or ten most commonly abused drugs and to begin by suggesting the more serious, though unlikely, and work your way down the list to the less serious, but more likely, as in heroin to marijuana. A sudden, dramatic change in behavior could be a sign that truthful denials have just changed to deceptive denials. Again, reading behavior during an interview is an art, not mathematics. Nevertheless, the most accurate way to interpret a person's behavior with regard to misrepresentation, or any other communication issue, is to compare the applicant to himself/herself, specifically, evaluating the response to an appropriate previous response where the interviewer knew the meaning of the behavior. With this in mind, the following are some of the more common verbal (words), vocal (speech rate, volume, etc.), and visual (body language) behaviors that often distinguish a truthful applicant response from intentional misrepresentation.

Verbal Behaviors. It is more typical for applicants misrepresenting the truth to respond to a short, simple, easy-to-understand question with a confused answer, i.e.,

an answer that just doesn't make any sense. For example, if the question is, "Have you ever been told or asked to leave a job?" a confused answer might be, "You know, just because a person leaves doesn't mean they don't dress for success!" In other words, lies can become a tangled web of words. However, if interviewers ask confusing questions, or the applicant is either unintelligent or doesn't understand English, then truthful applicants may also respond with a confused answer. Untruthful applicants also frequently stall before answering a simple question with a misrepresentation, while truth tellers tend to give direct, spontaneous answers. In this example, liars hesitate and delay before lying, not because they don't understand the question, but because they debate their options (Should I lie or tell the truth?), and, if they choose to lie, they have to think of what to say, and what the interviewer will "buy." Again, however, confusing questions, multiple-part questions, questions open to a wide variety of interpretations, and applicant comprehension are a few of the truthful exceptions to this one general principle.

Continuing along this line of thought, repeating a simple question, or asking for clarification to questions that don't need clarification, are both examples of how some applicants misrepresent during pre-employment interviews. Examples might include, "Let's see now, have I ever been fired? Urn, no, not that I can think of," and, "What do you mean by 'illegal' drugs?" Complaints, challenges to the interviewers right to ask any, or a given question, objections, evasive responses, self-serving responses, being too respectful or overly polite, using "soft" words ("I had a misunderstanding with the police," vs. "I was arrested and found guilty."), and excuses ("Nobody saiJ I couldn't take property home without asking.") are just a few of the answers more typical of misrepresentation that Objective Pre-employment Interviewing procedures and techniques make easier to identify and correctly interpret, so that the exceptions from truth tellers are not misread.

Vocal Behaviors. In general, an applicant's speech rhythm or "beat" is erratic when misrepresenting and smooth when being truthful. Lies are not loud or soft, per se, but watch for a dramatic or pronounced change in the speech volume towards either the loud (seems to be shouting at the interviewer but does not seem angry) or the soft (whispering or not being audible as on previous answers). With males, the voice pitch tends to rise when lying, and with both male and female applicants, articulation or the clarity of the voice deteriorates. This last phenomenon is the result of stress caused by lying (fear of detection with negative consequences and/or conflict within the liar who believes that lying is wrong), which in turn causes the speech error rate (the "duh,""um,"ers" we throw in between words) to rise, and the interviewer's ability to clearly understand the applicant to decline. Speech rate (speaking faster or slower) can go both ways when applicants misrepresent, so watch for a big change either way: Some people start talking a mile a minute when they lie, while others slow way down and become very cautious about what they're saying. In all of the examples listed above (there are many more), the observations are all relative to a given applicant and his or her normative behaviors. Exceptions exist contrary to every one of the general principles.

Visual Behaviors. When applicants are telling the truth and using words describing strong emotions (anger, fear, happiness, etc.), their facial expressions tend to mirror the emotion being described but, since they are not actually feeling the emotion, at a significantly subdued level. When people lie, the face tends to be almost blank or - as is often the case with the voice - flat, as in, "This is my story, and I'm sticking to it." The eyes, it has often been said, are the window of the soul, and this principle seems to hold up pretty well for most, but not all, applicants. Therefore, truth tellers tend to look the interviewer in the eye when answering and hold the gaze for the whole answer, while it is more typical for applicants misrepresenting the truth to engage in a fair amount of eye avoidance. Of course, if you ask questions that call for a narrative answer (Why do you want to work here? Tell me your strengths/weaknesses, etc.), the principles of eye behavior do not work: Both liars and truth tellers look away and go blank, because they are recalling, not creating, information. Also, sociopaths and professional liars have no problem with eye avoidance and, in fact, may go too far the other way - never taking the gaze off the interviewer, either as an intimidation challenge, or because they are too intent on reading the interviewer - specifically, seeing if he/she "bought" the lie. With regard to body postures, truth telling applicants tend to sit up straight; liars slouch. Untruthful applicants tend to be rigid and inflexible, while truthful applicants make smooth, not jerky, posture shifts and changes. In more serious cases, for example, bus driver and teacher applicants lying about pedophilia - which might result in negative legal consequences, not just employment disqualifications - interviewers might see facial tics, the cords of the neck bulging, spasmodic movements, a bobbing Adam's Apple in males, etc., all of which could be symptomatic of a very high level of stress caused by the applicant's freewill choice to lie to the interviewer - NOT the normal applicant nervousness that should be anticipated in all pre-employment interviews.

I know that some interviewers feel that there is no place for the interpretation of any applicant_behavior - especially with regard to misrepresentations of the truth - in a pre-employment interview. There are, of course, others who feel that their "gut feeling," "sixth sense" or "intuition" should be the primary factor in making all hiring decisions. Objective Pre-employment Interviewing takes the best of both schools by using the interpretations of behavior to alert the interviewer to a possible problem then, using special non-accusatory techniques to encourage candor, obtain admissions that either fall within or exceed the employer's pre-established Acceptance Guidelines for work-related information targets. Even when the interviewer feels strongly that the applicant is not being truthful, he/she should never use an unsubstantiated opinion as a disqualifier of record, but rely instead on recent, objective, work-related facts.

Objective Pre-employment Interviewing Techniques

At the risk of violating the dictum, a little bit of knowledge is a dangerous thing, I will briefly highlight some of the procedures and techniques that are significantly different in Objective Pre-employment Interviewing compared to subjective or other inter-

viewing techniques. The basic steps are The Opening, Orientation to Sensitive Topics, Asking the Initial Question, Analyzing the Initial Answer, Follow-up Questions, Transitions to New Topics, and The Close.

Obviously, there are many issues that need to be discussed and taken care of before the interview actually begins that the length of this article does not allow. Organizing the structure of the interview; reviewing the application or any other information the interviewer may have before the interview; determining that all information targets to which questions are attached address only bona fide occupational qualifications or essential job functions (legal issues); and, most importantly, creating the qualifiers and disqualifiers - policies and contingencies for the admissions and other information that will come out of the interview - should all be taken care of before the interview begins. It is impossible to treat applicants equally, objectively, in a legally consistent manner and also maintain uniform quality control throughout the organization, if the Acceptance Guidelines have not been put in place - and made known to every interviewer - in advance of the interview.

In the Opening, it is suggested that the interviewer let the applicant know the basic purpose of the interview, establish a tone of cooperation, and confirm any assumptions he/she may have about the applicant (his/her identity and the position being applied for). The interviewer may indicate that people are not expected to be perfect - giving "good" applicants permission to admit to minor things (such as taking minor office supplies from previous jobs) that are not disqualifiers - but applicants are expected to be complete and accurate in their answers. Then, begin the interview by capturing the applicant's truthful norm - how he/she looks, acts and talks when there is a high probability that the applicant is telling the truth. Ask simple, nonsensitive questions, such as the applicant's name, address, etc., and observe the applicant's verbal and nonverbal behavior. This norm will be used to make comparisons to other questions later in the interview.

The Orientation is probably the most important and unique procedure to Objective Pre-employment Interviewing, for it is here that we change the mindset of some applicants from, "I've got to lie to get this job," to "Maybe I can take a chance and tell her/him some of the truth." While question formulation is important in encouraging the truth, just asking questions without first preparing the applicant will almost always result in deceptive denials from applicants with problems. The purposes, therefore, of Orientation are to bring up sensitive topics in ways that do not offend or alienate people, and to encourage applicants with problems to admit to the problems even when they perceive that truthfulness will result in disqualification.

Start by raising sensitive topics as subtly as possible. "We realize that many people have picked up things from their jobs that they shouldn't have ... " is a soft way to get the applicant's mindset focused on a sensitive information target, like theft from previous jobs, without accusing the applicant of having the problem. For young-looking interviewers interviewing significantly older applicants, or for those new to issues of counterproductive activities or other topics that people with problems tend to lie about, there may be the need to establish credibility with the applicant before asking questions. The

interviewer can do this by telling the applicant (if it is true) of the many interviews he/she has conducted (wise beyond one's years), or by telling of the many applications the organization processes annually - the implication being that, though the interviewer may appear inexperienced, there are others within his/her wonderful group with the experience to provide a safety net. In general, this author has experienced that older people are reluctant to trust young-looking people with their problems, based solely on the perception that young people do not know how to handle older people's problems or, at the very least, wouldn't understand them, since they haven't been around long enough. While I know people who have been interviewing for over thirty years and are just as incompetent today as the day they started - and young interviewers who are naturals and highly competent from the very start - the problem lies in the perception of the person being interviewed: "Do you know what you're doing, and can you understand why I did what I did?" On the other hand, I would suggest that older-looking interviewers say nothing - just nod wisely - and most applicants will just assume he/she is highly experienced and has heard everything before.

At this point, it is important to indicate that mostly things are relative. "We realize that there's a big difference between trying marijuana to see what it's like and a $500a-day heroin habit," makes the more commonly abused marijuana look minor compared to the extreme of heroin use. In effect, this relativity statement allows people with some of the more common problems and disqualifiers to save face, i.e., they can truthfully acknowledge that they are not as bad as someone doing something far worse. "We know that there's a difference between picking up minor office supplies from a job and walking off with a computer," is sometimes called a "nice guy" approach, when compared to the more common "parental" method of just asking questions and demanding the truth.

When discussing sensitive information topics or events that applicants are embarrassed to acknowledge, it is useful to repeat a phrase from the Opening - specifically, that the interviewer is not looking for perfect people. There are many intelligent, well-educated applicants who really do believe employers are looking for perfect people, and that if they admit to anything, they will be disqualified. The problem for the interviewer is that applicant misrepresentations to minor matters or serious matters look and sound virtually the same. Assuming that the goal is to find qualified applicants based upon truthful answers to recent, work-related activities, Objective Pre-employment Interviewing attempts to encourage admissions, rather than force applicants into untruthful, defensive denials.

Depending upon the applicant and the problem the applicant is considering misrepresenting, there may be other reasons, besides not getting the job, that would motivate some applicants to lie to the interviewer. If the problem could lead toa criminal investigation, the applicant is probably worried that the interviewer might tell the police. Applicants who have stolen significant amounts of money or merchandise from previous employers are usually afraid that the interviewer is going to report their admissions to the employer from which they stole. Some applicants are worried that the interviewer might discuss statements and admissions with their parents. All of

these concerns act as barriers to the truth, which can be eliminated by merely telling the applicant in the Orientation, that what's discussed is confidential. In the event that the applicant then admits to something that the interviewer would like to report (child abuse, harm to another, etc.), there is a legal and ethical way to get out of this promise, based on the ethical principle of proportionality: Would more harm result by keeping certain admissions confidential or breaking the promise of confidentiality? Failing to offer pre-employment confidentiality is almost a guarantee that applicants with the most serious disqualifiers will resort to deceptive denials. In a blind interview addressing information concerns that are impossible to evaluate by other means, inter-/~ewers should direct applicants away from deceptive denials and toward at least considering telling some of the truth.

In addition to all of the above, some interviews find it useful to include mention, before the questions, of a means of verifying the truth that will/might be employed following the interview. If the organization plans to conduct some kind of record check (credit, academic, criminal, motor vehicle, etc.), contact previous employers, administer a drug test, conduct polygraph examinations, etc., let the applicant know what's coming should he/she choose to misrepresent. However, do not mention a means of verifying truthfulness that the organization does not actually use, as in using a false threat of polygraph to coerce the truth. The principle here, of course, is that people are less inclined to misrepresent when they even think that it's possible the employer will discover the truth anyway. There are many other ways to conduct an Orientation, but the idea of getting applicants to rethink their intuitive game plan to misrepresent before they actually commit to a lie goes a long way to encouraging truthful admissions.

Objective Pre-employment Interviewing, as the name implies, recommends questions that are purposefully designed to be direct and objective, and works best when accurate information is desired, time to interview limited, and/or a large number of applicants need to be properly evaluated in a relatively short period of time. Since the information targets are predetermined to be BFOQs or Essential Job Functions in advance, there is no interviewer scoring system to validate - substantiated admissions are just compared to the Acceptance Guideline. If the applicant's admissions exceed the Guidelines, the applicant is disqualified from further consideration in the process. Subjective interviewing techniques, often used in a panel or oral board setting, have advantages in the evaluation of information needs that cannot be defined or quantified, typically where there is a range of acceptable or unacceptable answers to ability scenarios - "why do you ... " questions or the evaluation of abstract characteristics. However, all subjective questions and scenarios need to be validated in terms of both discriminatory impact and predictive accuracy: Do high, passing or good scores actually predict successful performance in the field, and do low, failing or poor scores actually predict poor performance in the field, post-hire.

Objective questions should be as direct, specific and precise as possible, allowing no room for either misinterpretation or "rewriting" in the applicant's mind. "In the last 12 months, have you arrived at work under the influence of alcohol?" is much more difficult to effectively misrepresent than, "Do you have a problem with drinking?" or, "Has

alcohol ever effected your performance at work?" both of which even a moderate alcoholic can rationalize away. Interviewers should avoid multiple-issue questions ("Have you ever been fired for missing too much work?"). This should be approached as two different information targets - being fired and excessive absenteeism - and not combined into the same question. Likewise, compound questions ("Have you ever missed worked, reported late or left early?") can be very confusing, depending upon what part or parts the applicant has problems with. Break this into three short, simple, but separate questions. Leading questions ("You've never been fired, have you?") and questions open to completely different interpretations ("Is there anything about your past we should worry about?") should be avoided altogether when using objective procedures and techniques. Wherever possible, try to use the applicant's preferred terminology. Speed, ice, crank, meth, black beauties, and white crosses may all refer to amphetamines but, depending upon the age and background of the applicant, will either be understood and more freely discussed or lead to confusion and deceptive denials.

Following the initial question for each information target, interviewers can analyze the answer in two simple steps: Is the answer, at face value, an admission that appears to exceed the employer's Acceptance Guidelines? If so, substantiate and disqualify. Is the answer unclear or an admission that, at face value, appears within the employer's Acceptance Guidelines? If so, clarify or probe with appropriate follow-up questions and techniques. Substantiating an apparent disqualifier simply means making sure that what the disqualifier thought was a disqualifier, is a disqualifier, by detailing what, when, with whom, how much or any other factual information needed to eliminate doubt. Follow-ups to clarify and probe, including answers that the interviewer suspects are misrepresentations, might include silence, repeating/rewording the question, testing for certainty ("Are you sure?" "What if. .. ?"), and suggesting possibilities from menus of probabilities, as in suggesting the most commonly abused drugs, reasons for missing work, crimes men commit, ete.

Finally, the Close recommended for Objective Pre-employment Interviewing is the same noncommittal Close used for most other pre-employment interviewing techniques: "Thank you for your time and cooperation. As you know, many others are being considered for this position. You will receive a letter within the next 10 working days notifying you of the organization's decision." For a wide variety of outcomes and difficulties, the noncommittal close provides the interviewer with the greatest number of options.

Objective Pre-employment Interviewing saves time and valuable staff and financial resources by encouraging applicants to provide accurate hiring information to critical information targets that applicants with problems tend to misrepresent, thereby eliminating the need for the more extensive and expensive steps in the selection process. In this author's experience, it is fast, legal, acceptable to both applicants and employers and, best of all, uses the applicant's own recent, work-related admissions as the basis for disqualification. Objective Pre-employment Interviewing is a unique interviewing approach that can reduce turnover, find qualified applicants, and treat applicants fairly and professionally in ways that can be quantified in teal, measurable terms.

Note

1 Bradford, David, "Police Officer Candidate Background Investigation," *Public Personnel Management,* Vol. 27, No.4, Winter 1998

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