

Hiring the Best: Preparing an Effective, Structured Interview

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Editor's note: This is Part I in a periodic series on the HIM hiring environment and how to hire the most qualified candidates.

Early in my managerial career, I supervised a small department in which turnover was infrequent and I seldom needed to hire. When I had to fill a position, the candidates had already been tested by the state of Washington, and I was provided a list of the top five scorers from which I was to hire. During interviews, I asked candidates the kinds of questions I was asked when I interviewed for a position. These included

- How do you describe your present position?
- What responsibilities do you most enjoy and why?
- What responsibilities do you least enjoy and why?
- Why do you wish to leave your present position?
- What are your work-related strengths?
- What do you perceive as your work-related weaknesses?
- Why do you want to work here?
- What are your goals?

If I could, I hired people who graduated from the same technical college that I did, so I was familiar with their education. I hired people whose personality I liked and I believed that if I liked them, I could teach them the technical skills needed to do the job. This worked earlier in my career because I was often filling a position I helped create, enjoyed, thrived in, and was leaving to take on something new.

Looking back, I realize I committed some of 'The Twelve Deadly Sins of Hiring,' as described by author Kenneth R. Cohen. I hired based on my subjective reactions to the candidate, making my decision within the first four minutes of the interview and spending the next 56 minutes trying to gather information to support my decision.

As my career progressed, I was given opportunities to manage larger and more diverse groups. It soon became clear that the hiring process that worked in the past would not work in the future. When I needed to fill a computer programmer position, for example, I realized that the candidate's educational background and personality did not need to match my own. Additionally, when I took a position outside of the state of Washington system, I became responsible for testing the candidates. Finally, I wanted to be sure I was giving each candidate the same opportunity to sell him/herself.

Over the years, I've tried various types of interview questions and tests in an attempt to select the best candidate for any given position. Although I have not yet perfected the process, I'm confident that my interviews have become more objective and better predictors of a candidate's likelihood of success. What makes the difference? I rely heavily on the recommendations made by management expert Michael Mercer.

In his book *Hire the Best...and Avoid the Rest*, Mercer says that most interviews result in inaccurate predictions of job performance because many interviewers do not know how to interview or how to make valid or accurate predictions based on their interviews. He suggests that when a structured interview is used in combination with valid, reliable testing and reference checks, there is a high correlation between a candidate's scores and his or her actual performance.

So how does one prepare and perform an effective, structured interview?

First, identify the job title for which the structured interview is being developed. Next, list the job-related criteria the applicant must meet to succeed. Mercer provides a helpful checklist for getting started. "Job-Related Criteria Template," below, is a template of potential criteria that I completed for an HIM clerk position in a large ambulatory care clinic.

job-related criteria template

Sample for health information management clerk

A. Job Title for Which Structured Interview Is Being Created:

Health Information Clerk (Ambulatory Setting)

B. Job Criteria Applicant Must Meet to Succeed in Job:

Knowledge of: Medical terminology and abbreviations, medical record content, terminal digit filing, legal aspects of patient records

Skill in doing: Prioritizing, filing quickly and accurately, organizing documents in patient charts according to standard

Type of thinking required (detailed, whole picture, objective, intuitive): detailed, organized, objective

Interpersonal skills (friendly, assertive, likes working alone, prefers teamwork, persuasiveness, tact, candidness, verbal skills): ability to work alone and as part of a team

Motivations (achievement-oriented, desire for higher earnings, desire to help people, desire for creative work, desire for power, desire for increased knowledge): achievement-oriented and desire to help people

Management and leadership skills (planning, organizing, delegating, controlling, motivating others): ability to plan and organize own work and assist others

Mental abilities (reasoning and problem solving ability, vocabulary, spelling and correct word usage, computations and arithmetic ability, ability to handle details with speed and accuracy):

- 1) ability to prioritize chart requests using standards for acceptable turn-around time;
- 2) ability to initiate or respond politely and effectively to telephone requests for patient records;
- 3) ability to initiate and send understandable electronic messages relative to chart location or requests to transfer records
- 4) ability to juggle numerous tasks
- 5) ability to work quickly and accurately

Narrow down the criteria to the six to nine most crucial points. Then, design interview questions that will allow you to assess the candidate's characteristics relative to the most important job-related criteria. For each question, identify the desired response. Mercer includes sample questions and responses in his book, many of which I used in the interview guide below.

health information management clerk interview guide

Candidate Name: _____

Interview Date: _____

Interviewer: _____

Characteristic Sought	Question	Looking for	Candidate Response	Rating: ↑ Positive → Neutral or Average ↓ Negative
Knowledge of medical terminology and abbreviations	Tell me about any education or experience that you have relative to medical terminology and abbreviations.	A college course or experience that exposed the candidate to medical terminology, particularly form and text names and abbreviations.		
Knowledge of record content	Tell me about any education or experience that you have relative to patient records or charts.	A college course or experience that exposed the candidate to the content and use of patient health records.		
Knowledge of terminal digit filing	Tell me about any education or experience that you have relative to terminal digit filing.	Terminal digit filing experience.		
Organized thinking	Tell me about your work history.	Ordered phrasing, logical sequencing, lists steps.		
Objectivity in decision making	When you must make a choice between two ways of doing something, how do you make your decision? Give me an example.	Relies on investigation, information or evidence rather than emotion in decision making.		
Detailed thinking	Tell me about a big assignment you handled recently. How did you tackle it?	Mentions many details. Tells how the project was conducted, not just the results.		
Ability to initiate or respond politely and effectively to telephone requests for patient records	No specific questions. Listen throughout the interview.	Gives straightforward, easy-to-understand answers. Uses words correctly. Speaks intelligibly.		
Achievement-oriented	Overall, when you come to work each day, what gives you the greatest satisfaction?	Is enthusiastic about getting things done. Focuses on results.		
Desires to help people		Enjoys helping others.		
OVERALL RATING OF THIS CANDIDATE: ↑ → ↓				

Next, develop a job-specific interview form that includes:

- job title
- candidate name
- date of interview
- interviewer name
- the six to nine crucial job-related criteria
- questions aimed at assessing the candidate against the criteria and the responses desired
- a place for taking notes and rating

Use this form to guide the interview. Ask the candidate for examples of his/her projects or tasks and a detailed explanation of how they were completed. Allow the candidate to talk 80 to 90 percent of the time, because the more he/she talks, the more you can learn about his/her job-related skills.

Look for patterns. Mercer suggests that "past behavior is the best predictor of future behavior." Observe the candidate's nonverbal behavior. Does the body language match the words, or does the candidate who claims to enjoy working with people avoid eye contact?

Take notes on the candidate's response to each question. After the interview, rate the candidate's response to each question, and overall, using arrows. Use an upward arrow ▲ for a positive rating, a sideward arrow ► for an average or neutral rating, and downward arrow ▼ for a negative rating. If others are to interview the candidate separately, they need not ask the same questions, but should use the same criteria and rating system.

Remember that the candidate is on his/her best behavior during the interview. It's possible that a candidate might be impressive during the interview, but unpleasant with people he or she interacted with before or after the interview. Ask other people who talked to the candidate about his/her behavior.

Combine the interview scores with the results of reference checks and test results. Hire only those candidates who receive all positive ratings.

By applying Mercer's suggestions, my interviews have become more fair, more job-related, and, when combined with tests and reference checks, more likely to result in selection of the best candidate. Take advantage of these and other resources to develop your skills. Ultimately, the entire HIM department will benefit.

Note: In the health information management clerk example I used, I would also develop and conduct a test for each candidate to assess their ability to compose e-mail, prioritize assignments, and quickly and accurately file in terminal digit order. I'll talk about testing candidates in a future issue of the *Journal*.

References

Cohen, Kenneth R. "The 12 Deadly Sins of Hiring." *Nursing Homes* 45, no. 3 (1996): 11-13.

Mercer, Michael. *Hire the Best...and Avoid the Rest*. New York: American Management Association, 1993.

How to prepare and perform an effective structured interview

1. Identify the job title.
2. Identify the job-related criteria the applicant must meet to succeed in the job.
3. Narrow down the list to the most crucial six to nine criteria.
4. Identify questions aimed at measuring the candidate against the six to nine criteria.
5. Identify desired responses to each question.
6. Develop an interview guide form.
7. Use the interview form to guide the interview.
8. Take notes of the candidate's responses during the interview.
9. Ask for examples of how the candidate went about his/her work.
10. Look for nonverbal communication.
11. Ask others about their observations.
12. Keep in mind that past behavior is the best predictor of future behavior.
13. Rate the candidate's responses using arrows.
14. Give the candidate an overall rating using arrows.
15. Hire only candidates with upward arrows on tests, interview(s), and reference checks.

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